

Sexting and Substance Use among Women Arrested for Domestic Violence: A Brief Report

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Advances in technology provide opportunities for communication using electronic mediums. Sexting is one form of electronic communication and includes the sending of explicit sexual content (e.g., photos, text) through electronic mediums. Previous research demonstrated a positive association between sexting and behaviors such as substance use. Moreover, substance use increases the risk for intimate partner violence and is also associated with risky behaviors.

OBJECTIVES: The aim of the present study was to examine the prevalence of sexting in a sample of 84 women mandated to attend batterer intervention programs following arrest for domestic violence. The associations between sexting, substance use, and intimate partner violence were also examined.

METHOD: Participants completed self-report questionnaires that assessed sexting, intimate partner violence, and alcohol and drug use symptoms.

RESULTS: Fifty-four percent of participants reported being asked to send a sext, 35.1% reported sending a sext, and 32.0% reported requesting a sext. Drug use symptoms were positively associated with some forms of sexting and intimate partner violence. There was a significant difference in drug use symptoms, such that women who received a request to send a sext had significantly more symptoms relative to women who had not received a request to send a sext.

CONCLUSION: This is the first examination of sexting in a sample of women arrested for domestic violence. Findings indicate an association between drug use symptoms, sexting, and intimate partner violence, warranting continued research in this domain.

KEYWORDS: sexting, substance use, intimate partner violence, domestic violence

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Introduction

Alcohol and illicit substance use are linked to risky behaviors including some forms of sexting, broadly defined as the electronic transmission of sexually suggestive content (e.g., texts, videos, images).¹ Past research supported a positive association between substance use and sexting, as well as positive associations between substance use and intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetration and victimization.^{1–3} Such findings indicated that the use of alcohol and other substances is associated with both increased sexting and IPV.^{2,3} Furthermore, extant literature demonstrated a relation between digital forms of aggressive behavior (e.g., sexting coercion, sharing a sext with others without the sender's consent) and face-to-face IPV.^{4,5} Although consensual sexting can enhance relationship intimacy and may be used as a communication method among couples, sexting has been linked to negative consequences, such as IPV.^{4,6} Indeed, past year sexting was positively related to past year sexual IPV in a sample of men arrested for domestic violence.² Sexting coercion, then, may be more likely to occur among high-risk populations, such as individuals arrested for domestic violence. Although the present study did

not examine coercive forms of sexting, general sexting was examined in a high-risk population of women. That is, the present study expanded on the existing literature by examining the prevalence of sexting and its association with substance use and IPV among an adult sample of women arrested for domestic violence and mandated to attend batterer intervention programs (BIPs). This is the first examination of sexting within a sample of arrested women in BIPs.

Method

Participants

Data were collected between 2014 and 2015 from 84 women arrested for domestic violence and mandated to attend BIPs. Participants' average age was 36.04 years ($SD = 10.94$). Participants self-identified as White (75.0%), Other (e.g., Cape Verde, Mixed; 9.5%), Black (6.0%), Hispanic/Latino (4.8%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (3.6%), and Asian or Pacific Islander (1.2%). Participants' average reported income was \$19,732 ($SD = \$31,796$). At the time of data collection, participants had attended an average of 10.06 BIP sessions ($Md = 9.00$, $SD = 6.86$).



Measures

Intimate partner violence. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2)⁷ assessed psychological aggression and physical assault perpetration and victimization within the 12 months prior to BIP entry. Participants indicated the frequency of each behavior using a response scale ranging from 0 (*This never happened*) to 6 (*This happened 20 or more times*). The midpoint for each response (e.g., a “4” for the response option “3-5 times”) was taken and summed to calculate scores for each subscale. Higher scores indicate greater IPV perpetration and victimization.

Sexting. Sexting was assessed with three items used in prior research (e.g., have you ever sent, requested, or been asked to send a sext?).⁸ Participants responded on a binary scale (i.e., yes/no) to each question indicating if they engaged in sexting within the year prior to BIP entry.

Substance use. The alcohol abuse/dependence and drug abuse/dependence subscales of the Psychiatric Diagnostic Screening Questionnaire (PDSQ)⁹ assessed alcohol and drug use symptoms within the six months prior to BIP entry. Participants responded on a binary scale (i.e., yes/no) to each item, with possible scores ranging from 0 to 6. A probable alcohol or drug diagnosis is indicated by a cutoff score of 1 on the PDSQ.

Procedures

Research personnel attended sessions at multiple BIPs throughout the state of Rhode Island to recruit interested participants. Participation was voluntary and participants did not receive compensation for their participation. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Study questionnaires were administered to participants using a paper-and-pencil format during one of their routinely scheduled BIP sessions. Participants' responses were kept confidential and not communicated to BIP facilitators. Study procedures were approved by the Butler Hospital Institutional Review Board, the last author's institution.

Data analytic strategy

Analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 23.0. Descriptive statistics examined the prevalence of sexting and IPV within the sample. Correlational analyses were computed to examine relations between study variables. Differences in alcohol and drug use symptoms among women who did and did not engage in sexting were examined by conducting a series of independent samples *t*-tests. Psychological victimization, physical assault perpetration, and physical assault victimization scores were log transformed prior to analyses to address skewness and kurtosis.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Of the sample, 54.7% reported being asked to send a sext, 35.1% reported sending a sext, and 32.0% reported requesting a sext within the past year. The prevalence of a past 6 months probable alcohol diagnosis and drug diagnosis (i.e., a cutoff score of 1 on the PDSQ) in the sample was 38.5% and 26.6%, respectively. The prevalence rates of past year IPV were as follows: psychological aggression perpetration (87.9%), psychological aggression victimization (87.7%), physical assault perpetration (73.8%), and physical assault victimization (69.8%).

Correlations

Findings indicated no association between past year sexting and alcohol use symptoms over the past 6 months. Sending and being asked to send a sext positively related to past 6 months drug use symptoms, whereas requesting a sext did not relate to drug use symptoms. Past year psychological aggression perpetration positively related to drug use symptoms and requesting a sext. Being asked to send a sext positively related to psychological aggression perpetration, psychological aggression victimization, physical assault perpetration, and physical assault victimization within the past year. Results are displayed in Table 1.

Relations between sexting and substance use

There were no significant differences in alcohol use symptoms over the past 6 months between women who endorsed versus women who did not endorse any of the past year sexting items. There was no significant difference in drug use symptoms between women who did or did not request a sext. Women who received a request to send a sext ($M = 1.43$) had greater drug use symptoms than women who did not receive a request ($M = .36$; $t(53) = 2.54$, $P = .014$). There was a trend toward significance such that women who had sent a sext had greater drug use symptoms than women who had not ($M_{\text{yes}} = 1.67$, $M_{\text{no}} = .58$; $t(32) = 1.97$, $P = .057$).

Discussion

Findings from this preliminary investigation indicate that over half of a sample of women arrested for domestic violence and court-referred to BIPs received a request to send a sext, approximately one-third requested a sext from another person, and approximately one-third sent a sext message. There was a positive association between drug use symptoms and sexting. Specifically, drug use symptoms related to being asked to send and sending a sext. Women who were asked to send a sext had greater drug use symptoms compared to women who had not. Drug use symptoms also related to psychological aggression perpetration. It is important to consider how these findings

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Sent a sext	–	.64**	.51**	–.09	.28*	.23	.15	.16	.13
2. Requested a sext		–	.45**	–.02	.25	.27*	.20	.19	.22
3. Been asked to send a sext			–	–.03	.28*	.37**	.35**	.38**	.46**
4. Alcohol use symptoms				–	.23	.12	.04	.10	.20
5. Drug use symptoms					–	.39**	.21	.15	.23
6. Psychological perpetration						–	.79**	.56**	.62**
7. Psychological victimization							–	.62**	.67**
8. Physical assault perpetration								–	.78**
9. Physical assault victimization									–
Mean	-	-	-	1.43	.97	38.95	38.45	12.82	16.98
Standard deviation	-	-	-	2.20	1.90	34.41	34.41	16.56	24.51

** $P < .01$, * $P < .05$.

Note: Transformed CTS2 variables used in correlational analyses for psychological victimization, physical assault perpetration, and physical assault victimization; Means and SDs were calculated using raw data for ease of interpretation.

may inform clinical practice. For example, such findings may help identify behavioral targets in both the prevention and intervention of substance use and IPV. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine these constructs in a sample of women arrested for domestic violence, providing information on the prevalence and associations between sexting, substance use, and IPV.

Limitations

It is important to note limitations of the present study. First, our sample size was small, preventing the examination of complex associations between variables of interest. Second, the sexting measure utilized a binary response option which precluded an assessment of frequency of sexting. Additionally, our measure of sexting did not assess contextual factors, such as whether alcohol or drugs were used prior to sexting or whether participants felt pressured or coerced to send a sext. Finally, given the unique population of the present study, the results may not generalize to the broader population. Nonetheless, these findings provide important information about behaviors in higher risk populations.

Directions for future research

Given the findings of the present study, the association between drug use symptoms, sexting, and IPV warrant continued research. Future studies should consider contextual factors related to sexting to enhance our understanding of the relations between sexting, substance use, and IPV. Further, longitudinal study designs are needed to allow for the examination of

temporal associations between substance use, sexting, and IPV. Such data could provide specific targets for prevention and intervention programming.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed to the conception of this brief report and were involved in revisions and drafts of the manuscript. All authors approved of the final version for publication.

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