

Motives Behind Sexting and Their Impact on Body Satisfaction Among University Students in Romantic Relationships

Kainat*, Adnan Adil**, Anam Khan***, Sultan Shujja*, & Saba Ghayas*

*Department of Psychology, University of Sargodha

**Department of Psychology, Government College Women University Sialkot

***Department of Psychology, Rawalpindi Women University Rawalpindi

Corresponding Author: Adnan Adil, PhD, Professor of Psychology, Chairperson Department of Psychology, Government College Women University Sialkot. Email: livespirit786@yahoo.com Contact: +923216036747

Abstract

Background:

Sexting, the exchange of explicit messages or images via digital platforms, is common among university students. While research often examines the immediate consequences of sexting, this study focuses on the underlying motives, particularly related to body esteem, among Pakistani students in romantic relationships.

Method:

A purposive sample of full-time students aged 18–30 ($M = 34.39$, $SD = 6.57$) from the University of Sargodha, who had been engaged or dating for at least six months and participated in sexting, was studied. The Body Esteem Scale (Mendelson et al., 2001), Sexting Behaviors Scale (Dir et al., 2011), and Sexting Motivations Scale (Bianchi et al., 2016) were used to measure key variables.

Results:

Hierarchical regression analyses showed that sexual and body image motives positively predicted sexting and body esteem, while instrumental motives did not. Sexual and body image motives also indirectly influenced body esteem through sexting.

Conclusion:

The study underscores the role of sexual and body image-related motives in sexting behavior and body satisfaction, offering insights for understanding sexting's psychological impacts.

Keywords: sexting, motives of sexting, body esteem

Introduction

Sexting refers to sharing sexually explicit content via texts, smartphones, or social networking sites (Ringrose et al., 2012). While research often examines sexting's immediate consequences, its underlying motives, particularly related to body esteem, remain underexplored. This study focuses on how sexting motives influence body esteem among Pakistani university students in romantic relationships.

Sexting motives impact relationships in diverse ways. Sexting for enjoyment may signal indifference, whereas in long-distance relationships, it fosters commitment (Drouin et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2013). Partner sexting is seen as less harmful by young people, with fewer negative expectations in romantic contexts (Dir et al., 2013). Consensual sexting is considered a modern form of intimacy (Doring, 2014), though coercion or blackmail can severely harm mental health, increasing anxiety and substance abuse risks (Gasso et al., 2019).

Motives for sexting often relate to self-expression, such as flaunting appearance, identity exploration (Kopecky, 2012; Van Maanen, 2010), or gaining attention and acceptance (Walker et al., 2013). Those struggling with body image may sext for reassurance or support (Bianchi et al., 2017). Social media exacerbates body image concerns through idealized self-presentation, with image-sharing activities often reducing satisfaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Tamplin et al., 2018). Sexting is linked to body image reinforcement as individuals seek validation for their attractiveness. This highlights the complex interplay between sexting motives and body esteem.

Method

Objectives

- To examine sexting motivation as a predictor of sexting behavior and body satisfaction.
- To explore sexting's mediating role between sexting motivation and body satisfaction.

Hypotheses

- Sexting motivation will positively predict sexting and body satisfaction.
- Sexting will positively predict body satisfaction.
- Sexting will mediate the relationship between sexting motivation and body satisfaction.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Board of Studies and necessary permissions were secured. Data collection involved online and paper-pencil surveys, with confidentiality assured to participants. Building rapport was challenging due to participants' hesitation and preconceived notions about psychology. Despite these obstacles, data was successfully gathered, and participants were thanked for their contributions.

Sample

The study targeted university students ($N = 300$) from the University of Sargodha, aged 18–30 ($M = 34.39$, $SD = 6.57$), who were engaged or dating for at least six months and confirmed engaging in sexting.

Instruments

The Body Satisfaction Scale (Mendelson et al., 2001), Sexting Behaviors Scale (Dir et al., 2011), and Sexting Motivations Scale (Bianchi et al., 2016) were used.

Discussion

Sexting behavior is often driven by body image reinforcement, where individuals seek validation of their physical appearance. Those who are content with their bodies are more likely to engage in sexting, as it boosts self-esteem and provides a means of self-expression and identity construction. Conversely, individuals dissatisfied with their bodies are less inclined to engage in sexting. Body satisfaction, which encompasses biological, psychological, and social aspects, influences the likelihood of sexting as people seek approval for their attractiveness. Sexting can be motivated by desires for social approval, self-expression, or improving body image. People who align their bodies with societal norms are more likely to sext, as it enhances body image and relationship satisfaction. Physical attractiveness plays a key role in romantic relationships, with individuals who dislike their appearance reporting lower relationship satisfaction. However, sexting for instrumental reasons, such as money or peer pressure, can have negative psychological effects and harm relationships. While sexting may strengthen body esteem in some, it also negatively impacts relationship quality when used for sexual purposes. Sexting's role in romantic relationships is complex, where it can enhance emotional connections but also lead to dissatisfaction if motivated by sexual or instrumental reasons. The study suggests that motivations related to body image and sexual purposes positively predict sexting behavior and body esteem, but instrumental motivations correlate with lower relationship quality and higher psychological distress.

Results

Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha confirmed normal distribution and internal consistency, with correlations aligning with hypotheses (see Table 1). Hierarchical regression analyses showed that after controlling demographics, sexual motives and body image concerns were significant positive predictors of sexting behavior and body satisfaction. However, instrumental motives did not predict these outcomes. Additionally, sexual motives and body image concerns indirectly influenced body satisfaction through sexting (see Table 2 to 4).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Sexual Purpose	12.84	2.97	-	.32***	.45***	.45***	.27***
2. Instrumental Reason	12.86	3.11		-	.30***	.20**	.04
3. Body Image Concern	7.59	2.33			-	.40***	.25***
4. Sexting Behavior	28.41	8.28				-	.24***
5. Body Satisfaction	70.93	8.85					-

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

Sexing Behavior as Mediator between Sexting Motives and Body							
95% CI for B							
Paths	B	SE	β	LL	UL	ΔR^2	
Direct Sexual Purpose \rightarrow Sexting	1.25**	.14	.45	.96	1.53	.20**	
Direct Sexting \rightarrow Body Satisfaction	.16*	.06	.15	.03	.29	.10***	
Direct Sexual Purpose \rightarrow Body Satisfaction	.60**	.18	.20	.24	.96		
Indirect Sexual Purpose \rightarrow Body Satisfaction	.20	.09	.07	.03	.42		
Total Sexual Purpose \rightarrow Body Satisfaction	.80**	.17	.27	.47	1.13	.07***	
Direct Body Image \rightarrow Sexting	1.28***	.19	.36	.90	1.66	.3***	
Direct Sexting \rightarrow Body Satisfaction	.19**	.06	.18	.06	.31		
Direct Body Image \rightarrow Body Satisfaction	.69***	.23	.18	.25	1.14	.09***	
Indirect Body Image \rightarrow Body Satisfaction	.24	.10	.06	.05	.45		
Total Body Image \rightarrow Body Satisfaction	.93***	.21	.25	.51	1.35	.06***	

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

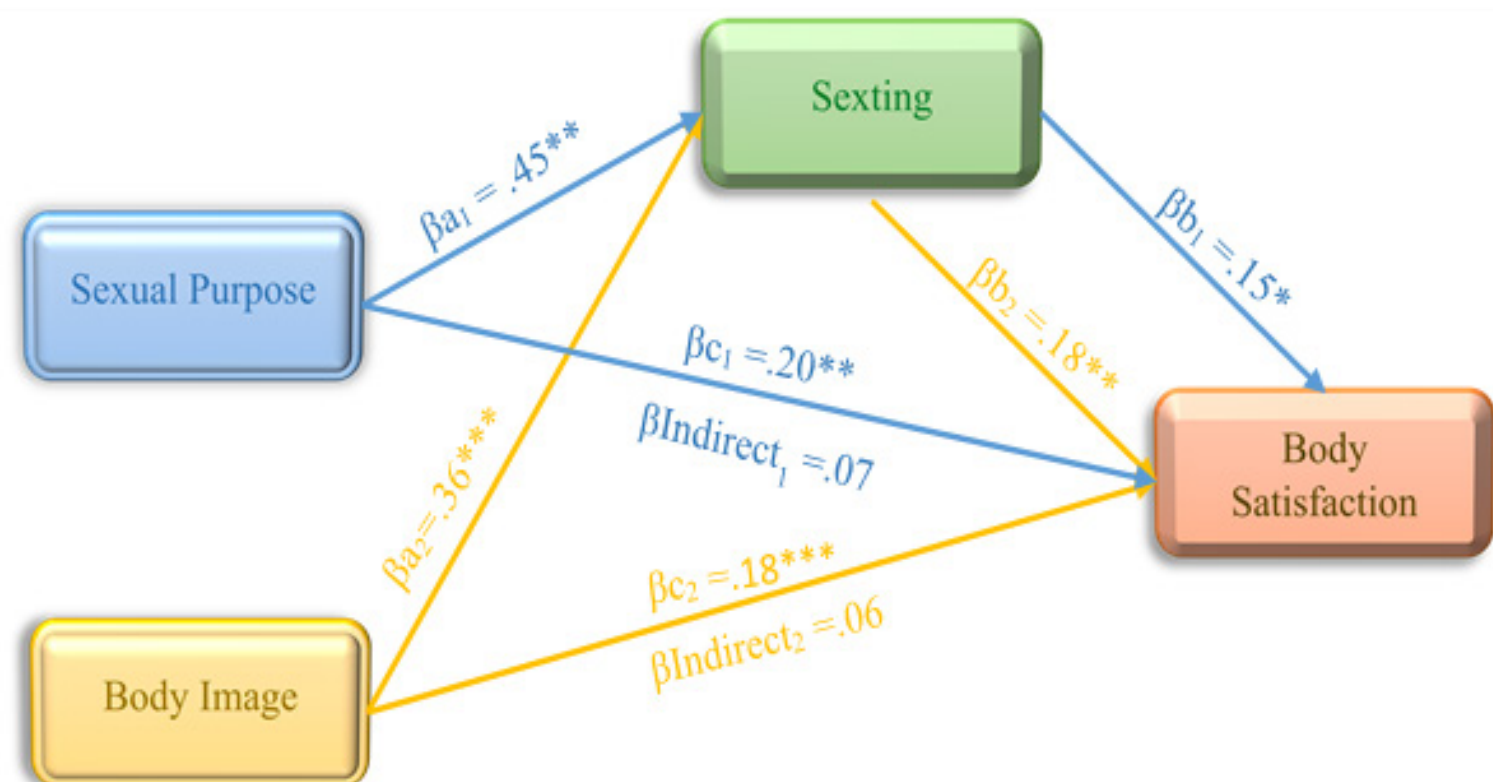
Motives of Sexting as Predictors of Body Satisfaction ($N = 300$)						
Model	B	SE	β	LL	UL	ΔR^2
1 Status of Relationship	-.096	.941	-.006	-1.949	1.756	
Duration of Relationship	-.707	.429	-.093	-1.552	.138	
Age	.816	.335	.181	.156	1.475	
Gender	-2.893	.951	-.175	-4.766	-1.021	.08**
Family System	-2.133	.968	-.127	-4.039	-.226	
Family Background	-.766	.950	-.046	-2.635	1.103	
Education	.202	1.417	.011	-2.587	2.990	
Residence Status	-.940	.948	-.057	-2.806	.926	
2 Status of Relationship	-1.814	1.018	-.103	-3.818	1.89	
Duration of Relationship	.673	.446	.083	-2.051	.551	
Age	-.355	.347	-.074	-1.037	.328	
Gender	-2.512*	.984	-.142	-.576	4.449	
Family System	-1.162	.993	-.065	-3.118	.793	
Family Background	.393	.993	.022	-1.562	2.349	.10***
Education	-2.366	1.468	-.115	-5.256	.523	
Residence Status	-1.912	.989	-.108	-3.858	.034	
Sexual Purpose	.781***	.188	.263	.410	1.151	
Instrumental Reason	-.313	.176	-.110	-.660	.033	
Body Image Concern	.590*	.237	.155	.123	1.056	

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

Motives of Sexting as Predictors of Sexting Behavior							
Model	Predictors	B	SE	β	LL	UL	ΔR^2
1 Status of Relationship		-.096	.941	-.006	-1.949	1.756	
Duration of Relationship		-.707	.429	-.093	-1.552	.138	
Age		.816*	.335	.181	.156	1.475	
Gender		-2.893**	.951	-.175	-4.766	-1.021	.09**
Family System		-2.133*	.968	-.127	-4.039	-.226	
Family Background		-.766	.950	-.046	-2.635	1.103	
Education		.202	1.417	.011	-2.587	2.990	
Residence Status		-.940*	.948	-.057	-2.806	.926	
2 Status of Relationship		1.047	.881	.063	-.6872	.781	
Duration of Relationship		-.109	.386	-.014	-.869	.651	
Age		.687*	.300	.153	.096	1.278	
Gender		-2.678**	.852	-.162	-4.354	-1.002	.20***
Family System		-1.657	.860	-.099	-3.349	.035	
Family Background		-1.971*	.860	-.117	-3.664	-.279	
Education		-1.261	1.271	-.066	-3.762	1.241	
Residence Status		-.531	.856	-.032	-2.215	1.154	
Sexual Purpose		1.007***	.163	.362	.686	1.327	
Instrumental Reason		-.122	.152	-.046	-.177	.422	
Body Image Concern		.595**	.205	.167	.191	.999	

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

Figure 1: Sexting as Mediator Between Sexting Motives and Body Satisfaction



Conclusion:

These findings highlight the significant role that motives related to sexual purposes and body image concerns play in influencing both sexting behavior and body satisfaction among university students. The study underscores the complex interplay between these motives and suggests that addressing these underlying motivations could be crucial in understanding and managing the impact of sexting on body esteem in romantic relationships.

Limitations of the Present Study

The study's limitations include non-probabilistic sampling, limiting generalizability, and a cross-sectional design, preventing causal conclusions. Data was collected from young adults using purposive sampling, and self-report inventories could have introduced bias, including social desirability and monomethod bias. Additionally, the study did not assess if sexting content was shared without consent, and the literature on same-sex relationships among young people is underrepresented.

Suggestions for Future Research

To better understand sexting behavior across age groups, future research should include diverse age ranges. A multimethod approach is recommended to reduce bias, and social desirability should be controlled. Future research could also explore gender disparities through qualitative methods. Online data collection could enhance anonymity and comfort, especially when addressing sensitive topics like sexting.

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