# Sexting: Understanding Personality and Mental Health of Young Adults

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Abstract

Relationships have certainly bowed down to the digital influence. Sexting is an outcome of this platform and a new phenomenon of dating for cyberspace generation. On the surface sexting may be perceived as tempting and tantalizing by young adults but at the core it is a quagmire which holds up the devastating vicious circle of mental health insinuations especially when it comes to sext to unknown people. The present study aims to explore the relationship between personality dimension i.e., Neuroticism, Extraversion, openness to experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and mental health variables i.e. depression, anxiety and stress. A sample size of 100 participants was selected. Nonprobability purposive, snowball sampling technique was employed. Semi structure questionnaire was administered on participants in order to have in-depth understanding of the sexting behavior and how it is encouraged. Results indicated that Neuroticism, Openness to experience, agreeableness are correlated with depression. Moreover, Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, agreeableness was found to be related with anxiety. The results further revealed that only Neuroticism and extraversion are associated with stress.

Keywords: Sexting, relationships, personality traits , mental health variables .

## Introduction

The exponential growth of the new age trend of attaining pleasure turns out be sexting. Sexting, a portmanteau term, is a blend of two words sex and texting. The phenomena of creating, dispensing, forwarding self-produced sexual provocative content is termed as sexting. This entails sending sexually evocative messages, naked or semi naked photos or videos electronically. Sexting has become a norm that partners follow to convey that they are still interested in each other. Various ways to initiate, enhance, or terminate intimate relationships (Huntley, 2006) nowadays happening through the medium of text messaging, social networking, emailing, instant messaging (IM), and video chatting (e.g., Skype, FaceTime and WhatsApp video call) . These platforms have been considered an outlet for sexual exploration (Lenhart, 2009) and has led to the trend of sending sexually suggestive or explicit texts, photo, or video messages via computers or mobile devices (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013).

To sustain relationships young adults may resort to sexting to gain trust and feel close. They assume that sharing sexual images would sustain their relationship. Technology has drastically affected lives of individuals and every individual responds uniquely to dynamic situations. The traits that they exhibit are a mechanism to cope with the situation and these traits constitute one's personality. Every individual possesses individual differences. Allport (1961), defined personality as “the dynamic organization within the individual, of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behavior and thought”. Personality could be classified into broad dimension namely: Neuroticism v/s emotional stability and Extraversion vs introversion. Further Paul Costa and Robert McCrae examined five-dimension factors with the help of H.J Eysenck theory. They are often called the Big Five Factors. The most common acronym used to denote this is O.C.E.A.N. These dimensions are Neuroticism, conscientiousness, Extraversion , Agreeableness , Openness to experience .

Personality and social interaction are associated with one another. Traits of an individual reflects how the individual would interact with its surrounding. An individual's most influential social interaction is peer group. Most of the learning is accumulated from one's peers which help young adults develop their own identity. Peers have the propensity to flatter that encourages the individuals to be influenced by the hype and perpetrate an act to imitate what their peers are doing. (Gordon,1996). Sharing information and experience circulated in the peer group and raises the competition. In this process of accepting challenges and proving that they have power and can do anything opens gateway to lies. Individuals tend to lie over sexts to flaunt and dupe the person. Young adults can use sexting as a form of currency to circulate in their peer group for entertainment, revenge or to feel cool in their group (lenhart,2009; Chalfen 2010). Some of the scholars have assert that sexting can be considered as a subsist of deviant behavior (Reyns et al., 2014; Wolfe et al., 2016, Ricketts et al., 2014) because sexting ''generally is not an approved social behavior by most people" (Reyns et al., 2014). Deviant behavior can be studied with the help of Akers' social learning theory. This theory states that deviant behavior is learned when there is a positive consequence to it. It attempts to explain that deviant behavior is learned through family and peers. Akers explained this theory in relation to how criminals learn behavior.

Young adults have found novel ways to sustain relationships, there has been gradual shift from face-to-face relationships to technological relationships. Nowadays more than emotional connect, physical connect is perceived as the main pillar for successful and long-lasting relationships. There are different kinds of sexters classified by Alberta university, Canada (2014). Frequent sexters those who send at least three to four racy messages a week. Hyper-sexters those who send at least one racy or naughty photo or message a day. Non-sexters those who send no racy messages to their partner. Word-only sexters those who only send sexually explicit worded messages to their partner. The dynamic trends followed by the young adults is to send sext whenever they have an argument so that they can revamp the situation by escaping the convoluted conversations. Living up to the partner's expectation can engender a person to send sexts in pressure to satisfy the partner's need in shade of love and care. Relationships have been pornified and now primary interests are now based on sexual satisfaction. Venturing out to find the perfect partner, individual indulge in online dating, hook-ups, lying and cheating. It is increasingly difficult for individuals to stick around only with one partner because of the change of interest influenced by peers and internet. Young adults in the wave of experimenting novel of idiosyncrasies to attain sexual satisfaction, they tend to blow up out of all proportion. To dominate and show exercise power they sext to people who are unknown. Taking out number of a person whom one is attracted is an effortless task in the advanced digital age.

Sexting may yield short term happiness to individuals but the after math is neglected which results in victimization and can further entail worsen effects such as suicide. Threatening texts, cyber-bullying are the potential risks associated with sexting. Sexting has become a defeatist psychological epidemic. With all the short-term satisfaction, there comes long term detrimental effects. Indian society doesn't approve of sexual contact in any from digitally or physically before, but young adults have defied it in every way possible. This deviant behavior is termed as immoral. The immoral behavior is discouraged and if caught it leads to image damage in the society and various mental health consequences are accompanied. Sexting is found to be related with mental health issues.

Depression is the existence of intense symptoms that include a constant feeling of worthlessness and sadness. Sexting somewhere might help them feel valuable and acceptable. They are depended on others and need constant validation from others. Medrano, Rosales & Guadix (2017) assessed the links of sexting, depression, cybervictimization and suicidal tendencies among students in universities. The study reported that sexting was linked with cyberbullying lead to the symptoms of depression. It was further reported that the depressive symptoms were positively associated with the suicidal tendencies.

Another potential risk associated with sexting is anxiety. Anxiety is a characterized by increased apprehension, fear, worry and bodily changes such as blood pressure. Delevi and Weisskirch (2011) speculated that individuals who have increased levels of anxiety are more likely to send sexual messages because they pre-empt that it will ameliorate their relationships. The individuals assume that it would please their partner and an attempt to eliminate the fear temporarily that they might end up leaving them.

Stress is one of the factors that impair an individual's mental health which is linked with sexting. Stress is characterized by the burden that an individual faces by the external environment that hinder their psychological capabilities which renders to the inability to cope with it (McCrae 1990). Hulland et al. (2014) which posits that greater stress in an individual leads to greater sexual activity which reduces the use of protection.

Sexting has become an epidemic and young adult are falling in this trap at its face value i.e. sexual satisfaction and they don't pay attention to its dark psychological consequences. The focus of the present study is to reduce the dearth of research in sexting behavior and to identify which personality dimensions is significantly related to mental health issues when young adults indulge in sexting with their romantic partners, secondary partners, and unknown people. To achieve the main purpose of the study, the following hypotheses were formulated:

## Materials and Method

### Objectives

The following objectives were proposed:

1. To study the relationship between the personality dimension Neuroticism and depression, anxiety, and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior
2. To study the relationship between the personality dimension Extraversion and depression, anxiety, and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior
3. To study the relationship between the personality dimension Openness, depression, anxiety and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior
4. To study the relationship between the personality dimension Agreeableness, and depression, anxiety, and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior
5. To study the relationship between the personality dimension conscientiousness, and depression, anxiety, and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior

### Hypothesis

Based on the objectives of the study following hypotheses were formulated:

$H_{01:}$ There will be a significant relationship between the personality dimension Neuroticism and depression, anxiety and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior

$H_{02:}$ There will be a significant relationship between the personality dimension Extraversion and depression, anxiety and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior.

$H_{03:}$ There will be a significant relationship between the personality dimensions Openness and depression, anxiety and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior

$H_{04:}$ There will be a significant relationship between the personality dimensions i.e. Agreeableness and depression , anxiety and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior

$H_{05:}$ There will be a significant relationship between the personality dimensions i.e. Conscientiousness and depression , anxiety and stress in young adults involved in sexting behavior.

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 100 participants including both male and female with in the age range of 18-24. Purposive and snowball sampling technique was used for data collection. A purposive sampling is a non-probability sample that is selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. Snowball sampling is also a non-probability sampling technique where the researchers ask the participants to assist in determining the required sample.

**Tools used**

NEO- Five Factor inventory

It is a personality inventory consisting of 60 items which measures five major dimensions or domains of personality which are neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience ,agreeableness ,conscientiousness.

The reliability of NEO-FFI had been established by evaluating the Cronbach's-alpha reliability coefficient. The values of the coefficient are 0.90, 0.78, 0.76, 0.86 and 0.90 for the dimensions of neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, respectively. These values are high enough to reflect on the reliability of the inventory.

These coefficients of correlation reflect on the positive and significant relationship between two measures, thereby giving evidence on both convergent and discriminant validity.

Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale

Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond. It is a quantitative measure of distress. It is not a categorical measure of clinical diagnoses. DASS- 21 is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 21 items which is divided into three subscales, 7 items per subscale: depression, anxiety, and stress. It is a 4-point Likert scale. The Depression subscale weighs hopelessness, lack of interest, dysmorphia, vulnerability to sadness and negative emotions and pessimistic outlook on life and relationships. The anxiety scale weighs the degree of tension that an individual stimulates which lead to short tempered behavior and lack of patience, panicky, breathing difficulty, sweaty hands. The stress scale weighs the extent to which an individual overthinks, inability to relax, constant worry about the future, easily irritated, lack of sleep , overly aroused , nervous almost all the time.

The DASS-21 has adequate and high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .88 for the Depression subscale, .82 for the Anxiety subscale and .90 for the Stress subscale (Henry & Crawford, 2005). When compared to other measures of depression and anxiety, the DASS-21 has good convergent and discriminant validity (Henry & Crawford, 2005)

**Procedure**

The purpose of the present study is to explore the relationship between personality and mental health of young adults involved in sexting behavior. A cross sectional correlational study will be carried out for this purpose and the sample will be assessed using the NEO-FFI inventory developed by Costa and Mc-Crae and DASS-21 was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond. The sampling technique will be purposive and snowball sampling. The sample selected will be within the age range of 18-24. After scoring and compiling the data, bi-variate correlation analysis will be carried out using The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

## Results

Results indicated that Neuroticism, Openness to experience, agreeableness are correlated with depression . Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, agreeableness show correlation with anxiety. The results further revealed that only Neuroticism and extraversion are associated with stress.

Table 1 Mean and standard scores of young adults on various variables.

| Dimensions | Mean scores | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Neuroticism | 51.58 | 14.34 |
| Extraversion | 52.26 | 13.45 |
| Openness | 49.33 | 15.62 |
| Agreeableness | 51.61 | 14.28 |
| Conscientiousness | 43.33 | 11.88 |
| Depression | 11.17 | 5.98 |
| Anxiety | 23.41 | 2.71 |
| Stress | 26.92 | 9.89 |

Table 2 Correlation between personality traits and anxiety, depression and stress

| | Depression | anxiety | stress |
|---|---|---|---|
| Neuroticism | 0.71* | 0.21* | 0.22* |
| Extraversion | 0.34 | 0.42* | 0.23* |
| openness | 0.10* | 0.78* | 0.15 |
| agreeableness | 0.50* | 0.21* | 0.28 |
| conscientiousness | 0.16 | 0.61 | 0.36 |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
*P≤0.05

## Discussion

The aim of present study is to assess the relationship between personality and mental of young adults who indulge in sexting.

Results supports the hypothesis as Neuroticism is found to be positively significantly correlated with depression, anxiety and stress.

Neuroticism (N) contrasts emotional stability with emotional reactivity. It is marked by the intensity and frequency of negative emotions.

Depression is the existence of intense symptoms that include a constant feeling of worthlessness and sadness, lack of enthusiasm in everyday activities, low mood and energy, insomnia, suicidal tendencies . Neuroticism is significantly correlated with depression for individuals who engage in sexting. This indicates that people who score high on neuroticism have a high tendency to feel depressive symptoms. Neuroticism is a potent

prognosticator of the pernicious state of emerging depressive disorders (Zinbarg 2002). Ybarra & Mitchell (2013) reported a positive relation between sexting and depressive symptoms, in a sample of young people ranging in the age range of 19 to 23 years. Jerinic (2019) indicates that at late adolescence sexting might be more likely to be associated with depression.

Anxiety is a characterized by increased apprehension, fear, worry and bodily changes such as blood pressure. Neuroticism is significantly correlated with anxiety. Unstable pessimistic behavior is accompanied by feeling of apprehension. The tendency to sext to respond to stressor may lead to constant worriedness about the future. Weisskirch (2011) indicated that individuals who have high levels of anxiety are more likely to send sexual provocative messages because they anticipate that it will ameliorate their relationships. In case of known people young adults might assume that it would please their partner and for them sexting is an attempt to eliminate the fear temporarily that their partner might end up leaving them.

Stress is characterized by the burden that an individual faces by the external environment that hinder their psychological capabilities, which in turn, renders to the inability to cope with problems ( McCrae 1990). Stress is further categorized into eustress and distress. There is a significant positive correlation obtained for Neuroticism and stress of individuals who engage in sexting. An individual with neurotic trait tends to underestimate themselves and have pessimistic outlook which renders them to indulge in activities that might lift their mood temporarily; leading them to indulge in even immoral activities.

A study by Pipanmekaporn(2020) reported that Neuroticism exhibited a significant indirect effect on perceived stress cognition. Due to lack of experience young adults may fail to judge between the appropriate or inappropriate and they rather go by their impulse to achieve instant gratification.

Results are supported in context that Extraversion is significantly correlated with anxiety and stress. Extraversion (E), characterized by sociability, assertiveness, talkativeness, and excitability. Extraversion and depression are not significantly correlated for individuals who engage in sexting. Extroverted people have a wide social circle who accompany where they share their problems which can be a reason that they don't feel lonely. Self-developed semi-structured questionnaire revealed that various participants responded that they have been exposed to sexting by their peers because of their social circle. It can be inferred that a social circle exists when an individuals interacts with the outer environment. The peers can influence young people only when they feel that peer defines their existence. Hence, it is a motivator behind their engagement in sexting

There are various reasons of positive relationship between extraversion and anxiety among young adults who engage in sexting. Social interaction, the efforts to keep up to the status with other peers might make it difficult for an individual to maintain the level in group and can cause anxiety. In the study various participants responded that they have been exposed to sexting by their peers. Peers are the paramount in an individual's life. Peers predominate the way an individual perceives and processes surroundings. Several studies have also suggested that individuals who indulge in sexting are influenced by their immediate peer group and further it was reported that peers who exhibit positive justification for sexting behavior tend to influence more individuals around due to peer pressure. (Campbell and Lippman, 2014; Walker et al., 2013; Ringrose et al., 2013;).

The correlation obtained for Extraversion and stress is positively correlated of individuals who engage in sexting. It can be deduced that a socially interactive young adults who engages in sexting renders to stress. The pressure to maintain a social status amongst peers or to fit in a group might create a sense of competition which motivates young adults to experiment and flaunt about the pleasure they attained from sexting to unknown people. Sexting is an orthodox perspective in the Indian society. People who encounter intense stress levels are more prone to sext. They perceive sext as an escapade to escape stress for short term, ignoring intense effects in long run ( Ethier 2006).

Further, Results found that the hypothesis is supported in context of depression and anxiety.

Openness to experience is significantly correlated with depression of individuals who engage in sexting. It can be inferred that young adults who venture out of their comfort zone and are willing to try unconventional and unfamiliar experience which they haven't done before might be high in depressive feelings also. They stay in their imaginative world and don't focus on practicality. Trull and Wolfstein (2012) examined the relationship

between openness to experience and depression. It was reported that depressed participants exhibited significantly higher scores than non-depressed on two facets of Openness (Aesthetics and Feelings). Openness to Experience was also found to account for a significant proportion of the variance in depression scores, beyond the variance accounted for by Neuroticism and Extraversion. The facet of Openness to Aesthetics appeared to be most strongly related to depression scores, and the facet of Openness to Fantasy was implicated as a moderator of the relation between Extraversion and depression.

The correlation between openness to experience and anxiety is positively significant of individuals who engage in sexting. Sexting behavior may be result of openness personality where they undergo risky behavior and are known for their creativity and experimentation spirit. They can even go to the extent of sexting to unknown people to spice up their romantic life. Nekljudova (2019) reported that openness to experience is often associated with extensive experience of anxiety and neuroticism.

The correlation between openness to experience and stress was insignificant of individuals who engage in sexting. It is deduced that exploring the unfamiliar aspects of life doesn't create stress in life. Tendency of focusing more on pleasure and less on consequences might reduce their stress level at least in short run. Being open to people, widens the social circle, sharing issues with peers and increases the source of pleasure so they might feel less stress.

With respect to hypothesis 4, Results found that the hypothesis is supported in context of depression and anxiety.

There is positive correlation between Agreeableness and depression of individuals who engage in sexting. Individuals high on agreeableness trait keep their interest aside for others. Agreeable people thrive during conflicts, people who are agreeable try to avoid or resolve such situations. Young adults in order to dismiss arguments may resort to sexting but actually end up giving rise to internal frustration (Drouin and Tobin 2015). Study further indicated that participants who agreed to their partners to avoid tension in their relationship sexted to maintain their relationship.

There is a positive correlation between agreeableness and anxiety of individuals who engage in sexting. It can be inferred that individuals who are kind and cooperative tend to have anxiety. Keeping other's ahead of oneself may lead to frustration because a heap of unfulfilled wishes and desires leads to fading of oneself in a relationship.

No correlation is found between agreeableness and stress of individuals who engage in sexting. It can be inferred that altruistic and cooperative young adults don't experience stress that hinders their daily routine. They can maintain their social and personal life which helps them to be organized and sorted. The short-term pleasure that young adults get from sexting might relieve them from stress. They can focus on exploring their own sexuality and understand their preferences.

Further, Conscientiousness is insignificantly correlated with depression , anxiety and stress. It is inferred that young adults exhibiting Conscientiousness are organized and have impulse control and have no link associated with depression, anxiety, and stress. Young adults who can control their impulse have an ability to judge between appropriate and inappropriate decisions. This leads to young adults being less influenced from peers. The controlled impulse leads to lesser experience of guilt and there is no fear of societal adverse reaction which might saves them from getting into the dark side of pleasure.

## Conclusion

Results of the present study demonstrate that Neuroticism, Openness to experience, agreeableness are correlated with depression. Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, agreeableness was found to be related with anxiety. The results further demonstrated that only Neuroticism and extraversion are associated with stress. Conscientiousness did not reveal any significant correlation with depression, anxiety, and stress.

There were certain limitations to the study. Due to paucity of time, the sample was limited to Delhi NCR which is a relatively urban population and the results, can, therefore not be generalized to other parts of the country. The sample size was not large enough to draw appropriate inferences about the target population. Additionally, the environmental factors including temperature, noise etc which might have affected the respondents were not accounted. As data was collected online, the participants might have given socially desirable responses.

### *Conflict of Interest*

The authors declared no conflict of interests.

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