

Texting Under the Influence: Emotional Regulation as a Moderator of the Association Between Binge Drinking and Drunk Texting

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Abstract

Texting and alcohol have each been noted to increase perceptions of control, decrease behavioral inhibition, and modulate unpleasant emotions. While drunk texting is a well-known cultural phenomenon, it has received almost no attention in research. In a sample of 211 young adult women, and using a new measure to operationalize drunk texting, difficulty accessing strategies during moments of distress moderated the relationship between binge drinking and drunk texting. Difficulties accessing emotion regulation strategies were associated with drunk texting among those who reported binge drinking. Among nonbinge drinkers, deficits in emotion regulation strategies were not associated with drunk texting. In addition, drunk texting was associated with sex in bivariate correlations. Given the lack of research on the antecedents and consequences of drunk texting, this study suggests that drunk texting may be used as a strategy for emotional regulation and may be predictive of sexual behavior. Results inform several avenues for further inquiry into the motivations and expectations underlying drunk texting and also imply potential routes for intervention.

Keywords: alcohol use, drunk texting, emotional regulation, sexual behavior, texting

Introduction

THE EVER-INCREASING CENTRALITY of the smartphone in people's lives has given rise to a paradoxical combination of increased reliance alongside a diminished sense of control over use.^{1,2} People who use their phones in a habitual, automatic fashion are more likely to develop addictive phone behaviors,³ text while driving, and have accidents while texting and walking.⁴ Furthermore, emotional regulation motives (e.g., use of the phone to distract oneself when feeling upset) have been associated with texting while driving,⁵ and poor emotional regulation has been found to predict increased sexting among teens.⁶ Deficits in emotional regulation are also present in symptoms of addictive or problematic smartphone use, including anxiety and depression, poor sleep, and impulse control difficulties.^{7,8} Increasing evidence suggests that young adults may use texting to regulate internal states or exert behavioral control, as suggested by findings that texting is motivated by inhibition reduction^{9,10}; diminishing of anxiety about expressing thoughts

and feelings¹¹ and managing relationship conflicts with greater ease.^{12,13}

States of intoxication are particularly likely to present a context for automatic, unconscious, and disinhibited uses of texting. For example, the term drunk dialing was coined to describe unintended phone calls resulting from the disinhibiting and socially lubricating effects of alcohol and feelings of decreased accountability for actions taken while intoxicated.¹⁴ The related phenomenon of drunk texting has received almost no attention in research, despite findings that almost half (43.6%) of college students report having sent a text while drinking that they later regretted within the past 3 months.¹⁵

The combination of alcohol use and emotional regulation is a well-studied phenomenon. One in four U.S. adults engages in binge drinking, or having five or more drinks in one sitting,¹⁶ which is associated with a host of adverse emotional, physical, and social outcomes.^{17,18} Difficulty regulating negative emotions is a primary predictor of alcohol use, as evidenced by deficits in emotional regulation

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