Sexting: A New Route to Sexual Coercion?

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Unwanted yet consensual sex (i.e., consenting to sex even if you do not want to) is a relatively common phenomenon. In a study by O’Sullivan and Allgeier (1998), more than one third of their sample (college students in committed relationships) reported engaging in unwanted yet consensual sex in a two-week time period. Although common, unwanted yet consensual sex is more prevalent within certain types of relationships. For example, women who are anxiously attached are more likely to engage in unwanted yet consensual sex (e.g., Impett & Peplau, 2002). Additionally, unwanted sex (both consensual and nonconsensual) is also fairly common among women who have been physically abused (Katz, Moore, & May, 2008). This has increased researchers’ interests in covictimization, or physical and sexual victimization (broadly defined) that occurs within the same time period (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003).

To date, face-to-face unwanted sexual behaviors have been the primary focus of sexual coercion and covictimization literature; however, sexting (i.e., transmission of sexually-explicit pictures and videos via text message) is now quite prevalent, especially among those in committed relationships (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Drouin, Vogel, Suyber, & Still, 2013). Therefore, we hypothesized that coercive sexual behavior may now be occurring via electronic mediums. Hence, the research questions for this study were:

**RQ1:** What is the prevalence of unwanted yet consensual sexting, and how does it relate to the prevalence of other types of sexual coercion?

**RQ2:** To what extent does unwanted yet consensual sexting relate to attachment anxiety and physical abuse?

### Results

#### As previous researchers have examined coercive sexual behavior for men and women separately or for women only, we conducted separate analyses for men and women.

**RQ1:** As shown in Figure 1, approximately 60% of women and 45% of men had consented to sexting when they did not want to. These percentages are somewhat high; however, fewer people reported being talked into sexting than other types of sexual behaviors (e.g., sex).

Figure 1. Percentage of Men and Women Who Reported Having Been Talked into Various Sexual Behaviors

#### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Physical Abuse</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiously Attached</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F²</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; † < .10

As with unwanted yet consensual sexting, unwanted yet consensual sex is also fairly prevalent within certain types of relationships. For example, women who are anxious attached are more likely to engage in unwanted yet consensual sex, unwanted sexting may produce more long-lasting repercussions, at least in terms of tangible evidence. Once transmitted, text, images, and videos can be shared and forwarded indefinitely through cyberspace, and this occurs even within committed relationships (Drouin et al., 2013).

In our sample, unwanted yet consensual sexting related to physical abuse from a romantic partner and among women, anxious attachment. Thus, there is some similarity in the personal and relationship characteristics that account for variance in both types of coerced sexual behaviors (face-to-face and digital). This suggests that sexting is now within the repertoire of sexual behaviors of young adults, and considering its relation with physical abuse in both sexes, that sexting could be a new route to covictimization.

### Conclusion and Future Directions

As with unwanted yet consensual sex, unwanted yet consensual sexting is somewhat common among committed relationship partners. Approximately half the sample indicated that they had consented to sexting with a committed relationship partner when they did not want to. Although less frequently occurring than unwanted yet consensual sex, unwanted sexting may produce more long-lasting repercussions, at least in terms of tangible evidence. Once transmitted, text, images, and videos can be shared and forwarded indefinitely through cyberspace, and this occurs even within committed relationships (Drouin et al., 2013).

In our sample, unwanted yet consensual sexting related to physical abuse from a romantic partner and among women, anxious attachment. Thus, there is some similarity in the personal and relationship characteristics that account for variance in both types of coerced sexual behaviors (face-to-face and digital). This suggests that sexting is now within the repertoire of sexual behaviors of young adults, and considering its relation with physical abuse in both sexes, that sexting could be a new route to covictimization.

As this study was part of a larger study with a slightly different aim, the limitations of the present work relate mostly to its measures. Therefore, to explore these relationships more directly, we are currently developing a follow-up study that will include commonly-used measures of physical abuse and sexual coercion.
References