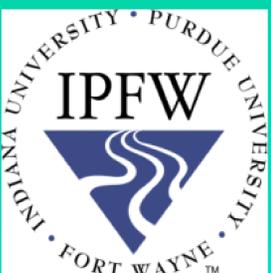


Sexting: A Possible Route to Physical and Sexual Covictimization?

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Introduction

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, Surbey, & Stills, 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?

Methods

Participants

Participants were 155 undergraduate students (62 men and 93 women) from a mid-sized Midwestern US university. Participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes and received a research credit for participation. From a larger sample, only those who had been in a committed relationship were retained. The sample was mostly Caucasian (77%), and the average age was 21.64 years ($SD = 4.41$).

Procedure

Participants completed an anonymous online survey. The survey items were part of a larger study examining the phenomenon and consisted of demographic questions and the following:

--Sexting Behaviors Survey: Participants were asked, among other questions, questions about:

Unwanted yet consensual sexting – “How often have you consented to sexting with a committed relationship partner when you actually did not want to sext?” [6-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 6 = *very frequently*)]

Other coerced sexual behaviors – “How often have you been talked into doing the following behaviors: foreplay, sexual intercourse, masturbation, and kissing?” [6-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 6 = *very frequently*)].

Methods Continued

Physical abuse in a romantic relationship—“How often have you been the victim of physical abuse from a romantic relationship partner?” on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *four or more times*).

--Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Wei et al., 2007): Participants rated their level of agreement with statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxious or avoidant attachment in close relationships (Anxious alpha: .77; Avoidant alpha: .85).

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

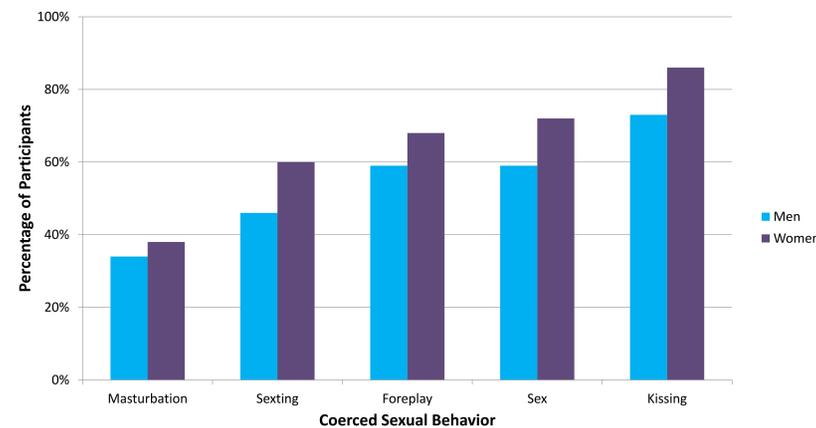


Table 1

Relationships Between Unwanted but Consensual Sexting, Frequency of Physical Abuse, Anxious Attachment, and Avoidant Attachment for Men and Women

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Unwanted but Consensual Sexting	--	.25*	.22	-.03†
2. Frequency of Physical Abuse	.25*	--	.12	.07†
3. Avoidant Attachment	.19	.32**	--	.27**
4. Anxious Attachment	.24*	.23*	.40**	--
Females (n = 62)				
<i>M</i>	2.17	1.45	2.67	3.89
<i>SD</i>	1.33	0.84	1.33	1.3
Males (n = 93)				
<i>M</i>	2.13	1.07	2.51	3.63
<i>SD</i>	1.36	0.25	1.04	1.23

Note. Men's correlations are displayed above diagonal; women's are below diagonal. *p < .05 level. **p < .01 level. †p < .10 level.

Results Continued

RQ2: Table 1 shows that in women, both anxious attachment and frequency of physical abuse were significantly related to the frequency of unwanted yet consensual sexting. Meanwhile, in men, only physical abuse was related to unwanted yet consensual sexting.

Next, we conducted regression analyses to determine whether physical abuse by a romantic partner and anxious attachment were unique of unwanted yet consensual sexting in men and women. Table 2 shows that although they explain little of the variance in unwanted yet consensual sexting, physical abuse was a unique predictor of this behavior for both men and women, and anxious attachment just missed significance for being a predictor of unwanted yet consensual sexting among women.

Table 2

Predictors of Unwanted Yet Consensual Sexting

Variable	Men			Women		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Frequency of Physical Abuse	1.57	0.71	0.28*	0.33	0.16	0.2*
Anxiously Attached	0.28	0.14	0.82	0.20	0.11	0.19†
<i>R</i> ²	0.08			0.01		
<i>F</i>	2.47			4.91		

*p < .05. †p < .10

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 relations 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.

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