



# Unwanted but consensual sexting among young adults: Relations with attachment and sexual motivations



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## ABSTRACT

A wide body of research has examined unwanted but consensual sex in a face-to-face context, focusing on intercourse, petting, kissing, and other sexual activity that people consent to even though they do not want to. Recent research has shown many people engage in sexual interactions via computer-mediated mediums; yet, to date, there are no studies that have investigated whether unwanted but consensual sexual activity exists in these contexts. In this study, we examined the extent to which 93 women and 62 men had consented to unwanted sexting within committed relationships and the attachment characteristics and motivations that are associated with this behavior. Approximately one half of the sample (52.3%) had engaged in unwanted but consensual sexting with a committed partner, and most did so for flirtation, foreplay, to fulfill a partner's needs, or for intimacy. Among men, neither of the attachment dimensions was related to unwanted but consensual sexting. However, among women, anxious attachment was significantly related to frequency of consenting to unwanted sexting, and consenting to avoid an argument was a mediator in the relationship between anxious attachment and consenting to unwanted sexting. These results are compared to previous work on unwanted but consensual sex, and future directions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (e.g., texting and social networking) has become a popular means of interpersonal communication in the United States, especially among teens and young adults (Lenhart, 2012; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Madden et al., 2013; Smith, 2011). Considering its prominent role in interpersonal interactions, it is unsurprising that computer-mediated communication is also a vehicle for sexual interactions, usually in the form of sexually-explicit words, pictures, or videos. Termed 'sexting,' this phenomenon has gained the attention of communication and relationship researchers, who have examined the prevalence of sexting among young adults as well as the psychological and relationship characteristics that are associated with this behavior (e.g., Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013; Ferguson, 2011; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2012; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011; Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Sexting has also been the focus of media reports, usually highlighting

legal issues or cases involving minors who have sent or received sexually-explicit images (e.g., Pike, 2010; Pilkington, 2009; Valenzuela, 2013).

One type of sexting that has not had any empirical attention but may have possible legal implications is compliant sexting behavior or *unwanted but consensual sexting*, which can be defined as willingly engaging in unwanted sexual behavior via sexually explicit text, pictures, or video. Analogous terms already exist for face-to-face sexual behavior, and this topic has been explored for almost two decades in the sexual relationship literature (e.g., Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Impett & Peplau, 2002, 2003; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010). As studies have shown that prevalence rates are fairly high for both engaging in unwanted sexual activity (e.g., O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994) and sexting (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Drouin et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2011; Gordon-Messer et al., 2012; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008), it is likely that these compliant sexual behaviors have extended to the virtual world. However, there are also differences between the face-to-face and computer-mediated environments that may make it less or more likely for unwanted sexual activity to occur through computer-mediated communication (CMC). For example, there are risks in the transmission of sexually-explicit material because sex-

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ual words and images are sometimes forwarded (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Drouin et al., 2013); therefore, those who do not want to engage in sexting have an added incentive to abstain. Additionally, the CMC environment is more socially constrained than the face-to-face environment (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2002), so those wishing to engage another in sexual behavior online cannot use nonverbal cues or other types of social or personal cues to persuade their partner to engage. On the other hand, unlike face-to-face sexual activity, CMC sexual activity could be entirely fabricated; therefore, those consenting to unwanted sexting may do so with little commitment or consequence. Considering these differences, it is important to examine the frequency of and motivations for unwanted but consensual sexual activity via CMC environments.

Therefore, the goals of this study were to examine the prevalence of unwanted but consensual sexting as well as the motivations for and attachment patterns associated with this behavior. Our study focused on young adults, because this has been the primary sample utilized in past research on the topic, and relatively high rates of sexting and unwanted sexual activity have been found within this age group.

### 1.1. Unwanted but consensual sexual activity

According to Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007), the prevailing model of sexual wanting polarizes sexual activity into two varieties: wanted, consensual sexual activity and unwanted, nonconsensual sexual activity. However, this model confounds two concepts—wantedness and consent—that are actually distinct (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). According to these researchers, people also can and do engage in sexual activity that is nonconsensual but wanted, and more relevant to the current inquiry, sexual activity that is unwanted but consensual.

Research into the latter phenomenon has shown that engaging in unwanted sexual activity is fairly common among young adults (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Sprecher et al., 1994). As an example, more than one third of the college students in committed relationships in O'Sullivan and Allgeier's (1998) sample reported engaging in unwanted yet consensual sex at least once during a two-week time period. Additionally, in Sprecher et al.'s (1994) cross-cultural study, approximately one third to one half of nonvirgins in three different countries reported having engaged in unwanted but consensual sex (Japan, 27%; Russia, 34%; and the U.S. 47%).

In terms of gender differences in this behavior, some studies have shown that significantly more women than men engage in unwanted but consensual sexual activity. For example, in O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) 50% of women reported engaging in unwanted but consensual sexual activity during the past two weeks as opposed to only 26% of men. Meanwhile, 55% of the American women nonvirgins in Sprecher et al.'s (1994) study reported having ever consented to unwanted sex as opposed to 35% of the American men. Researchers have suggested a number of reasons why women would engage in unwanted but consensual sex more often than men, including sexual passivity, a felt responsibility for relationship maintenance, or perceptions that men's sexual urges are strong or uncontrollable, which makes refusal futile (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Impett & Peplau, 2002, 2003). However, there are also studies which have shown that men are just as likely to engage in unwanted sexual activity. For example, in Muehlenhard and Cook's (1988) college sample, the prevalence rates for unwanted intercourse or petting for men and women were relatively equivalent, and more men (62.7%) than women (46.3%) reported engaging in unwanted intercourse only. According to Muehlenhard and Cook (1988), their findings can be accounted for by the double standard—men feeling pressure to

consent to sex and women feeling pressure to abstain because of societal norms and sex-role expectations. Thus, the findings with regard to gender and frequency of unwanted but consensual sexual activity are somewhat mixed; however, there are strong theoretical arguments supporting each of the findings.

### 1.2. Attachment style, sex motives, and sexual compliance

Although attachment research was originally focused on children and the attachments they make with their caregivers (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), researchers soon became interested in attachment styles within adult relationships (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007). The prevailing model of adult attachment consists of two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). Within romantic relationships, adults who are high in attachment anxiety have an intense desire to be connected to their partners, and they fear that their partners might abandon them (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In effort to keep their partners or draw them nearer, they tend to use hyperactivating strategies to keep their interest (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007). Adults high in avoidant attachment, on the other hand, are independent and self-reliant with a fear of becoming too dependent or intimate with even close relationship partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). So that they are not relied upon, those high in avoidant attachment use deactivating strategies, in attempt to distance themselves from their partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007).

A number of researchers have examined the attachment characteristics that are associated with different types of sexual activity in relationships, and a subset of these researchers have focused specifically on sexual compliance. With regard to sexual activity generally, researchers have found that those high in attachment anxiety tend to be motivated towards sex for emotional closeness and intimacy; and those high in attachment avoidance tend to have more casual sex and do not have motivations for emotional closeness or intimacy (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004; Schachner & Shaver, 2004). With regard to sexual compliance, researchers have provided evidence that both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are positively related to unwanted but consensual sexual activity. Again, gender appears to play a role in these interactions (see Impett & Peplau, 2003, for review). For example, Gentzler and Kerns (2004) found that among women, both anxious and avoidant attachment were related to a greater number of unwanted but consensual sexual experiences; however, among men, only avoidant attachment was related to a greater number of unwanted but consensual sexual experiences. Meanwhile, in Impett and Peplau's (2002) sample of college women, only anxious attachment was related to consenting to unwanted sex in a hypothetical scenario.

The relationship becomes even more complex when one considers the motivations for engaging in unwanted but consensual sex. O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) found that people in general consented to unwanted sex to promote intimacy, satisfy their partner's needs, and to avoid tension. However, Muehlenhard and Cook (1988) found that men and women cited different motivations for engaging in unwanted sex: women were more likely to consent to unwanted sexual activity out of altruism (e.g., fulfilling partner's needs) and fears of the relationship ending, whereas men were more likely to consent for popularity or because of peer pressure. This pattern of results suggests that women's consent to unwanted sex may relate more to attachment or relationship maintenance, and men's consent may relate more to gender-role expectations. In a study that examined how motivations relate to attachment style among women only, Impett and Peplau (2002) found that those high in anxious attachment were more likely to cite avoiding

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