



“Sexting” and adult romantic attachment

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ABSTRACT

“Sexting” refers to sending and receiving sexually suggestive images, videos, or texts on cell phones. As a means for maintaining or initiating a relationship, sexting behavior and attitudes may be understood through adult attachment theory. One hundred and twenty-eight participants ($M = 22$ and $F = 106$), aged 18–30 years, completed an online questionnaire about their adult attachment styles and sexting behavior and attitudes. Attachment anxiety predicted sending texts that solicit sexual activity for those individuals in relationships. Attachment anxiety also predicted positive attitudes towards sexting such as accepting it as normal, that it will enhance the relationship, and that partners will expect sexting. Sexting may be a novel form for expressing attachment anxiety.

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1. Introduction

The infusion of technology into romantic relationships has become endemic. The Internet affords opportunities for relationship formation, sexual encounters (long term and brief), interaction with partners at a distance (e.g. through chat or webcam), virtual relationships (e.g., in Second Life, one’s avatar may have relationships with other avatars), relationship termination (e.g. IDump4U.com) among others. These types of interactions may have evolved because individuals are using the technology to supplant or augment face-to-face interactions. For example, the ability to chat/instant message may be used to supplement and maintain relationships (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009). Recently, the media has directed a great deal of attention to “sexting,” where individuals create, send, and receive sexually suggestive or nude images and/or sexually suggestive text messages using their cell phones (Lenhart, 2009; “Sex and Tech,” 2008). Although sending and receiving sexually-laden images and messages are not new behaviors, what is novel is the use of the cell phone to do so and the ease with which one can engage in sexting with a cell phone.

Many individuals, particularly youth, readily utilize the features of cell phones in order to engage in sexting. Most cell phones now have the capability to capture images and attach these to text messages that can be sent and received from practically anywhere. For example, an application for smart phones allows users to exchange photos by simply “bumping” cell phones together. One survey of youth 13–26 years old indicated that 20% of teens and 33% of young adults had sent or posted nude or semi-nude images of

themselves (“Sex and Tech,” 2008). In contrast, Lenhart (2009) noted that, among cell phone-owning teens in her sample, 4% had sent a sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo of themselves. Even among the oldest teens in the sample, 17 year olds, only 8% had sent a sexual image. Nonetheless, there has been legal intervention and media attention, particularly for youth engaging in sexting; however, little attention has been paid to psychological issues underlying engagement in sexting.

For some youth, the images and text are sent in the context of a relationship or prelude to a relationship. Sexting could be part of regular sexual activity, an extension of an existing sexual relationship, or in lieu of face-to-face contact for sexually inexperienced youth (Lenhart, 2009). The “Sex and Tech” (2008) survey indicates that the majority of the sexually suggestive images are sent to boyfriends and girlfriends, others are sent to casual partners (i.e., those with whom they want to “hook up”), and some are sent to people they only know online. The question remains of how sexting functions in the context of relationships.

Adult attachment theory has emerged as a tool to understand individual interactions and the formation of romantic relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Attachment theory has proposed that the attachment one forms in infancy to a caregiver may form a basis for the attachment one forms later with a romantic partner. That is, an individual may form an attachment to a romantic partner much in the same pattern that the individual formed an attachment to his/her caregiver as an infant. In addition, the adult romantic attachment literature has supported similar patterns of security and insecurity as measured in infancy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These patterns of attachment have been postulated as representing dimensions of anxiety and avoidance individuals experience in relationships with others. For a review, see Rhoads and Simpson (2004).

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In general, those who are secure (low on attachment anxiety and on attachment avoidance) have more positive and trusting relationships than those who are insecure (Guerrero, Farinelli, & McEwan, 2009; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Attachment anxiety may relate to those seeking information from their romantic partner about intimacy, their partner, and the future of the relationship (Rholes, Simpson, Tran, Martin, & Friedman, 2007) as well as engaging in sex to reduce feelings of insecurity about a relationship and to get emotionally close to the partner (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004). Those who are preoccupied (high on anxiety and low on avoidance) may express more anger and passive aggression (Guerrero et al., 2009), may cling to relationships, feel lost when not in a relationship (Domingue & Mollen, 2009), and may look to others for self-validation and reassurance (Brennan & Bosson, 1998). Those who are fearful-avoidant (high on anxiety and high on avoidance) want closeness with others but anticipate rejection and therefore maintain a protective distance from partners (Bartholomew, 1990). Those who have dismissing-avoidant attachment styles (low on anxiety and high on avoidance) eschew closeness in relationships in favor of independence and autonomy (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998) and may have limited interest in knowing their romantic partner's thoughts and feelings (Rholes et al., 2007).

1.1. The present study

The present study was designed to investigate how adult romantic attachment styles relate to sexting behavior and attitudes. As in face-to-face communication, attachment patterns may relate to communication via technology. For example, Jin and Peña (2010) found that attachment avoidance related to lower duration and frequency of cell phone calls to romantic partners. Relatedly, Ramirez and Broneck (2009) found that romantic partners used instant messaging to convey relationship maintenance strategies of assurance and positivity. Given that previous literature has indicated that attachment anxiety results in more information-seeking and assurance about the relationship, we hypothesize that those high on anxiety will demonstrate more positive attitudes toward sexting and more engagement in sexting than those low on anxiety. Attachment avoidance is hypothesized to be related to more cautious views of sexting and less participation in sexting because sexting may indicate a level of investment in a relationship that may not exist for those high on avoidance.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedures

We recruited students enrolled in human development and family studies classes from two public, state universities to participate in an online questionnaire about technology and relationships. Once students provided consent, they were directed to the questionnaire and received extra credit in their class for participation. The Institutional Review Boards of both campuses approved this protocol.

2.2. Sample

One hundred and twenty-eight participants (Males = 22 and Females = 106) completed the online questionnaire. Their ages ranged from 18 to 30 years ($M = 22.77$, $SD = 2.80$), and the ethnic composition of the sample was 4% African American/Black, 9% Asian American, 27% Euroamerican/White, 55% Latino, and 6% Other. Fifty-eight percent of the individuals indicated that they

were in a relationship and 42% indicated they were single at the time of data collection.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Demographics

Participants indicated their age, gender, race/ethnicity, indication of whether they were in a relationship, duration of the relationship, co-habitation status, and city of residence for the romantic partner.

2.3.2. Adult attachment

Participants rated 36 items using a scale of 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree* from Fraley, Waller, and Brennan's (2000) Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised measure (ECR-R). The measure yields dimensional scores on attachment anxiety and avoidance. Examples of some items are "I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love" and "I am nervous when partners get too close to me." Cronbach's alpha for anxiety was .92 and for avoidance was .93.

2.3.3. Sexting behavior

We created five items specifically for this study on sexting behavior. Although some might think sexting may occur through a computer, we focused the participants on sexting behaviors via cell phone only. Participants rated five items on how often (1 = *Never* to 5 = *Frequently*) they have sent a sexually suggestive photo or video of themselves, a photo or video of themselves in underwear or in lingerie, a nude photo or video of themselves, a sexually suggestive text, and a text message propositioning sexual activity via their cell phones.

2.3.4. Sexting attitudes

Prior to answering this measure, the following definition of sexting appeared on the screen: "Sexting is a term commonly applied to sending or receiving sexually-laden text messages, sexually suggestive photos or videos, or partially nude or nude photos or videos via cell phone." Participants rated 19 items specially-designed for this study on attitudes towards sexting. Since this is a new measure, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis to ascertain the underlying constructs. An initial solution indicated that the items loaded onto three factors, accounting for 56.76% of the variance. We, therefore, conducted a second principle components factor analysis with Varimax rotation for the three factors to extract subscales, retaining items that loaded greater than .40. See Table 1. We called the three subscales Fun and Carefree, Perceived Risk, and Relational Expectations, which account for 23.55%, 17.43%, and 15.79%, respectively, of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha for each of the subscales was .89, .82, and .78, respectively.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive analysis

Table 2 provides detail on the demographic variables and the sexting behavior items and the sexting attitudes subscales. Table 3 provides the intercorrelations among the sexting behavior items and the sexting attitude subscales.

3.2. Attachment dimensions and demographic variables

First, we checked to see if attachment anxiety and avoidance were related to demographic variables. There were no differences on anxiety and avoidance by age, gender, ethnicity, or relationship status (i.e., whether or not they are in a relationship or single).

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