



Sexting: A new, digital vehicle for intimate partner aggression?



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined the relationships between sexting coercion, physical sex coercion, intimate partner violence, and mental health and trauma symptoms within a sample of 480 young adult undergraduates (160 men and 320 women). Approximately one fifth of the sample indicated that they had engaged in sexting when they did not want to. Those who had been coerced into sexting had usually been coerced by subtler tactics (e.g., repeated asking and being made to feel obligated) than more severe forms of coercion (e.g., physical threats). Nevertheless, the trauma related to these acts of coercion both at the time they occurred and now (looking back) were greater for sexting coercion than for physical sex coercion. Moreover, women noted significantly more trauma now (looking back) than at the time the events occurred for sexting coercion. Additionally, those who experienced more instances of sexting coercion also endorsed more symptoms of anxiety, depression, and generalized trauma. Finally, sexting coercion was related to both physical sex coercion and intimate partner violence, which suggests that sexting coercion may be a form of intimate partner violence, providing perpetrators with a new, digital route for physical and sexual covictimization.

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1. Introduction

During the last decade, we have witnessed a great surge in the use of technology to form and maintain interpersonal relationships. Not surprisingly, considering its role in interpersonal communication, digital technologies have also played a role in sexual communication, and the term ‘sexting’ has emerged to describe this phenomenon. Sexting refers to the “sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cell phone” (Sexting, n.d.). As evidence of its official standing in the English vernacular, the term “sexting” was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2012. However, it is still a relatively new phenomenon; thus, we are just beginning to examine how often, why, and under which conditions people sext.

One of the trends emerging from research on the topic is that sexting is a risky behavior, in that pictures can remain part of one’s digital footprint indefinitely and are sometimes shown to others or forwarded (e.g., Associated Press, 2009; Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). Moreover, it is associated with other types of risky behaviors, like problematic alcohol use (Dir, Cyders, & Coskunpinar, 2013), unprotected sex (Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014), sex with multiple

partners (Benotsch et al., 2013; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012), and chatting online with strangers (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014). Sexting has also been shown to be related to negative mental health symptoms, such as attempted suicide and feelings of sadness or hopelessness (Dake et al., 2012) and histrionic personality traits (Ferguson, 2011). Recent reviews on the topic (e.g., Drouin, 2015; Döring, 2014; Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014) have provided a comprehensive overview of the risk factors associated with sexting. However, one risk factor that has not yet been explored in the known literature is physical and sexual abuse by romantic partners and how it might contribute to or coexist with sexting in a relationship. This is a particularly pertinent topic of study considering that recent research showed that more than half of young adult college students have engaged in unwanted but consensual sexting—sexting when they did not want to (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). It is likely that at least some of these young adults had been coerced into this behavior by romantic partners. This forcing or coercion into sexting may be related to mental health or trauma symptoms, just like other types of sexual coercion are associated with these negative mental health outcomes (e.g., Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2008; Varma, Chandra, Thomas, & Carey 2007). Thus, the goal of the present study was to examine the extent to which sexting coercion is taking place, whether it relates to physical sex coercion, and the extent to which both are related to mental health (i.e., depression and anxiety) and trauma symptoms.

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1.1. Sexual coercion

Although the model of sexual wanting was once polarized into two distinct types of sexual activity—either wanted and consensual or unwanted and nonconsensual—we know now that sexual activity is more complex than this simple categorization (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). In fact, depending on the sample, approximately one third to one half of young adults reported engaging in *unwanted* but consensual sexual activity (e.g., Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998; Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994). Although unwanted sexual activity is not always a direct result of sexual coercion (for example, when a person has sexual intercourse with a partner out of a felt obligation when they are just not in the mood), unwanted sex is often linked, both anecdotally and in the literature, to sexually coercive tactics by a romantic partner (e.g., Santhya, Haberland, Ram, Sinha, & Mohanty, 2007).

When sexual coercion is considered broadly, the prevalence rates for both victimization and perpetration are quite high. For example, Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, and Anderson (2003) found that approximately 78% of women and 58% of men in their college sample had been victims of sexual coercion, while 40% of men and 26% of women reported using the various sexual coercion tactics they measured. Struckman-Johnson et al. (2003) categorized coercion tactics into four levels, including sexual arousal, emotional manipulation and lies, intoxication, and physical force. In proposing these different categories of sexual coercion, the authors showed clearly that there are various types of “postrefusal sexual persistence” (p. 78) that would not be classified as sexual assault. This is an important distinction, as not all categories of sexual coercion would include the use of threats or physical force, and the use of physical threats or harm is actually quite infrequent when compared to other, subtler types of sexual coercion (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). When a less inclusive definition of sexual coercion is used, as in Agardh, Tumwine, Asamoah, and Cantor-Graae (2012), the prevalence rates are lower. Agardh et al. (2012) found that 31% of their Ugandan college sample had been victims of sexual coercion, which they measured by asking participants to indicate whether they had been “forced to” perform various sexual acts (e.g., have sexual intercourse). One notable trend emerging from these studies is that both men and women had been victims and perpetrators of sexual coercion. Thus, sexual coercion is an issue that affects both sexes. However, there are certainly public perceptions that men are not usually the victims of such tactics (e.g., Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013; Struckman-Johnson, 1988). This may be because fewer men than women have reported experiencing sexual coercion (e.g., Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003), and/or that studies of sexual coercion and unwanted sex often focus on women only (e.g., Mechanic et al., 2008; Santhya et al., 2007).

There also appears to be a link between experiencing sexual coercion and experiencing threats or acts of violence, among both women and men. In Santhya et al.'s (2007) sample, married Indian women who had experienced unwanted sex (i.e., sex when the woman had indicated that she did not want to), were also much more likely to have experienced physical harassment in the last year than married women who had not experienced unwanted sex. Meanwhile, the college students in Agardh et al.'s (2012) sample who had been threatened with or been victims of physical violence were also more likely to have experienced sexual coercion. Moreover, among both men and women, the experience of sexual coercion and sexual or physical threats was related to mental health symptoms, (i.e., anxiety, depression, and psychoticism) (Agardh et al., 2012). Mechanic et al. (2008) found similar results in their sample of battered women: There were significant correlations between all four facets of intimate partner abuse they

measured (i.e., sexual coercion, physical abuse, psychological abuse, and stalking), and each of these types of abuse was significantly related to negative mental health symptoms (i.e., post-traumatic stress disorder and depression). Considered together, these studies show that various forms of intimate partner violence are interrelated, that people may be experiencing multiple types of abuse and coercion simultaneously (e.g., physical and sexual covictimization), and that each of these types of abuse is independently related to negative mental health symptoms.

1.2. Present study

Recent research has shown that unwanted, consensual sexual activity has extended to the virtual world: More than half of the young adults in Drouin and Tobin's (2014) sample stated that they had engaged in unwanted but consensual sexting with relationship partners. However, Drouin and Tobin (2014) measured unwanted sexting in a very general way, asking participants only if they had engaged in sexting when they did not want to. As reliable measures exist that include more nuanced forms of sexual coercion, like Goetz and Shackelford's (2010) Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationships Scale, this can be adapted to explore the topics of unwanted sexting and sexting coercion further. More specifically, we were interested in measuring the extent to which different types of sexting coercion occur among young adult women and men, how this relates to other forms of intimate partner abuse (i.e., physical sex coercion and intimate partner violence), and how all three types of abuse are related to mental health and trauma symptoms. Based on the extant literature, we expected that:

H1. Some young adults in intimate relationships would report that they had been victims of sexting coercion; (H1a) women would be more likely than men to report experiencing sexting coercion; and (H1b) subtler forms of sexting coercion (e.g., hints that the partner would leave) would be more commonly reported than threats or acts of violence.

Previous research has shown that both unwanted sexting (Drouin & Tobin, 2014) and sexual coercion (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003) are commonly reported among young adult undergraduates in intimate relationships, and that both of these are more commonly reported among women than men. Because we expected sexting coercion to be related to both unwanted sexting and physical sex coercion, we predicted that at least some of the young adults in our sample, more women than men, would report having experienced some form of sexting coercion. Moreover, in accordance with Struckman-Johnson et al. (2003), who found that subtler forms of sexual coercion were more common than more severe acts of violence or threats of harm, we expected that threats and acts of violence would be infrequent as compared to subtler forms of sexting coercion.

Additionally, based on studies that show that sexual coercion is related to other forms of partner abuse (e.g., Agardh et al., 2012; Mechanic et al., 2008; Santhya et al., 2007), we expected:

H2. Significant positive relationships between sexting coercion, sexual coercion, and intimate partner violence.

Finally, we expected that:

H3. Sexting coercion would be significantly related to trauma symptoms, anxiety, and depression in both men and women.

As past studies have shown that sexual coercion and other types of intimate partner violence are related to negative mental health and trauma symptoms (Agardh et al., 2012; Mechanic et al., 2008),

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