



Full length article

Insecure attachments: Attachment, emotional regulation, sexting and condomless sex among women in relationships[☆]Leora Trub^{a, *}, Tyrel J. Starks^{b, c, d}^a Department of Psychology, Pace University, 41 Park Row, New York, NY 10038, USA^b Department of Psychology, Hunter College of the City University of New York (CUNY), 695 Park Ave, New York, NY 10065, USA^c Health Psychology and Clinical Science Doctoral Program, Graduate Center, CUNY, 365 5th Ave, New York, NY 10034, USA^d Center for HIV/AIDS Educational Studies and Training (CHEST), 142 West 36th St, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10018, USA

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ABSTRACT

Associations have been found among sexting, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and sexual and risky sexual behavior in young adults. In a sample of 92 young adult women in romantic relationships, this study aimed to examine whether emotional regulation might constitute an indirect pathway linking attachment and sexting, and the potential implications for engaging in condomless sex. Findings revealed that in young adult women in romantic relationships, attachment anxiety was associated with sexting through difficulty controlling impulses during moments of emotional distress. Also, sexting directly predicted condomless sex. Attachment avoidance and anxiety were both associated with sexting in the bivariate correlations. Findings highlight the role of digital technology in understanding how people's negotiation of needs for attachment and emotional regulation might lead to risky sexual behavior. Interventions targeting the interplay of attachment, emotional regulation and technology use may positively impact relational and behavioral health outcomes.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Sexual risk in the digital age

Maintaining sexual health represents an ongoing challenge for young adult women in their late teens and twenties, who often experience a rapid escalation in risky sexual behavior, including sex with multiple partners, sex under the influence of alcohol, and sex without a condom (Caldeira, Arria, Zarate, Vincent & Bush, 2009). Condomless sex places a particular burden on females due to the increased risk of unintended pregnancy, with 83% of pregnancies in women ages 18–19 and 64% of pregnancies in women ages 20–24 being unplanned as of 2006 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015a). It also increases the likelihood of contracting various sexually transmitted diseases (CDC, 2015b; Winer et al., 2006).

The nature of interpersonal and specifically sexual communication and behavior has changed as a function of the pervasiveness of smartphones. This evolution in communication has profound implications for the sexual health of adolescent and young adult couples. Sexting, which refers to sending and/or receiving of sexually suggestive or explicit content through mobile phones (Lenhart, 2009), is quite common, with estimates suggesting that 50–60% of young adults (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013; Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014), and that two thirds of people in romantic relationships (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012) engage in sexting. Some studies suggest that sexting is equally common among young adults regardless of sexual orientation (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013), while other studies suggest it is more prevalent amongst LGB individuals (Dir, Coskunpinar, Steiner, & Cyders, 2013; Wysocki & Childers, 2011).

While some research has linked sexting to sexual and relationship satisfaction (McDaniel & Drouin, 2015; Parker, Blackburn, Perry, & Hawks, 2013), concerns have been raised about sexting that results from peer pressure (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Walker, Sancu, & Temple-Smith, 2013), and the unintended legal, social and emotional consequences that arise when someone decides to

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publically share sexually explicit photos of the sender (Döring, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Sexting has been associated with a proclivity for high-risk behaviors including risky sex and substance use (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011), and negative mental health outcomes including shame, guilt, depression, cyber-bullying and alienation (Ahern & Mechling, 2013). It has also been associated with increased sexual behavior, initiation of sexual activity with new partners, and engagement in risky sexual behavior in adolescents and young adults (eg. Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Houck et al., 2014).

1.2. Attachment, emotional regulation and sexual risk taking

Attachment theory (see Bowlby, 1973) is the study of how early caregiving relationships impact later patterns in close relationships. A main focus is on development of the capacity for distress tolerance and emotional regulation in moments of perceived danger or threat to the self or to the attachment bond. Early relationships set the groundwork for how a child learns to react to stressful situations and how to soothe him/herself (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Securely attached children perceive their caregivers as available and responsive to help regulate their distress, which the child internalizes to be better able to regulate his/her distress. Insecurely attached children perceive their caregivers as emotionally or physically unavailable, or inconsistently available, and therefore find themselves adopting alternative strategies to trigger a response from the caregiver that will restore a sense of security (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004). Later in development, during adulthood, insecure attachment manifests along two dimensions: attachment anxiety is the degree to which a person worries that a significant other will not be available or adequately responsive in times of need, while attachment avoidance is the degree to which a person mistrusts the significant other's willingness and/or ability to provide care, resulting in an attempt to remain autonomous and self-reliant (Cassidy, 2000).

As in childhood, each dimension is associated with the use of strategies to maintain a sense of security and elicit certain responses from a significant other. Hyperactivating strategies, characteristic of attachment anxiety, involve intensifying one's level of distress and need for assistance with the aim of getting a partner perceived as inconsistently responsive to provide protection and support while protecting oneself from rejection or abandonment. Deactivating strategies, characteristic of attachment avoidance, aim for self-reliance and control in close relationships by maintaining emotional distance from a partner perceived as unable to provide support. This strategy is a defensive stance intended to inhibit proximity-seeking actions and suppress threats that might activate the attachment system (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004). Evidence of these strategies has been found in research examining emotional regulation as a mediator between attachment and interpersonal problems: for attachment anxiety, these links are mediated by emotional reactivity, a hyperactivating strategy involving hypersensitivity or becoming consumed by emotions; for attachment avoidance, they are mediated by emotional cutoff, a deactivating strategy involving isolation from others and from one's own emotions when one's internal experience is too intense (Wei, Vogel, Ku, & Zakalik, 2005).

The interpersonal goals that result from these attachment strategies have been found to explain variations in romantic relationships and sexual interactions (Feeney & Noller, 2004). Higher levels of attachment avoidance and anxiety have been associated with more lifetime and casual partners, while attachment security has been associated with greater likelihood to use condoms

(Scharfe & Eldredge, 2001). For individuals with greater levels of attachment avoidance, sex can be used to avoid closeness and maximize control over intimate interactions (Birnbbaum, 2007), through abstaining from sexual activity altogether or engaging in emotionless sex and one-night stands (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, Noller, & Patty, 1993; Kalichman et al., 1994). They are also more likely to drink or use drugs prior to having sex (Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003) and more likely to endorse accepting attitudes towards, and engage in, casual sex, which puts them at greater risk for contracting and spreading sexually transmitted diseases (Schachner & Shaver, 2004). Individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety tend to become clingy and controlling over romantic partners, engaging in sex to fulfill unmet needs for security and love (Birnbbaum, 2007). They are more likely to engage in sex to avoid abandonment (Tracy et al., 2003), which, in turn, leads to more unwanted sexual behaviors (Feeney, Peterson, Gallois, & Terry, 2000). The desire for intimacy and acceptance that accompanies attachment anxiety may also lead to unsafe sexual behaviors (Schachner & Shaver, 2004), including decreased condom use and less communication with partners about risky sexual behaviors (Feeney et al., 2000).

Preliminary research on the link between attachment and sexting suggests that sexting is linked to interpersonal expectancies and both hyperactivating and deactivating emotional regulation strategies. Despite engaging in less texting in romantic relationships, individuals with higher levels of attachment avoidance are more likely to send sexual text messages and photos, suggesting that it may be easier to meet sexual intimacy needs through distanced communication (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). This is supported by associations found between sexting and relationship satisfaction in individuals with high levels of attachment avoidance (McDaniel & Drouin, 2015). Attachment anxiety has also been linked to sexting (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014), and to sending explicit pictures for women in committed relationships (McDaniel & Drouin, 2015). Individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety are more likely to proposition sexual activity through texts and perceive sexting as a normal and expected aspect of romantic relationships (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). Women with higher levels of attachment anxiety are more likely to consent to unwanted sexting, often out of loneliness or a desire to avoid an argument with a romantic partner (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). Emotional regulation has not been studied in conjunction with attachment avoidance or anxiety in predicting sexting. Only one study has found sexting to be associated with difficulties in emotional awareness and lower emotional self-efficacy in a sample of seventh graders (Houck et al., 2014).

1.3. The current study

The existing literature provides evidence that attachment, emotional regulation, sexual behavior and sexting are inter-related. While emotional regulation has been found to mediate attachment avoidance and anxiety and sexual behavior, no research has examined how these constructs interact to predict sexting, or how sexting may interact with these constructs to predict risky sex. Further, given the very preliminary state of research establishing a relationship between attachment avoidance and anxiety and sexting, examination of possible mediators of these associations will enable better understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Consistent with existing research on the role of emotional regulation and attachment, we hypothesized that attachment and sexting may be indirectly related through pathways involving emotional regulation. Specifically, attachment anxiety was expected to be indirectly related to sexting through difficulty controlling impulses when upset, and attachment avoidance was expected to be

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