

Sexting a sign of a Committed Relationship?

Why do people sext? Why do they send racy or naked photos or videos and sexually loaded texts?

For a short-term hookup, sexting might seem like a direct way to get what you want – or at least try to. But according to my research, sexting is actually most likely to occur within [a committed relationship](#). Some research suggests that people [often engage in sexting](#) after being coerced by romantic partners or to avoid an argument with their romantic partner. So perhaps anxiety and concern about what your romantic partner thinks about you promote behaviors like sexting.

As a human development researcher who studies [how technology influences relationships](#), I wanted to understand if people who are anxious about dating or about what their partner thinks of them are more likely to sext.

So where does this relationship anxiety come from?

One of the major theories regarding relationships is called [attachment theory](#). It suggests that the way you related to your caregiver as an infant (and vice versa) shapes how you come to view relationships later in life.

If your caregiver was attuned to your needs and responsive, you will develop a secure attachment. That means you are comfortable with close relationships because your experience paid off – Mom or Dad was there when you were distressed or hungry or cold. From that experience, you learned that relationships are safe and reciprocal, and your attachment anxiety is low.

But if your caregiver was not so attuned to your needs, was intrusive or inattentive, you might develop what is called an insecure attachment. If something you wanted emotionally or physically (like comfort) went unfulfilled, you might end up anxious about relationships as an adult. You might realize that relationships may not be trustworthy, not invest in close relationships, and avoid intimacy all together.

Do people sext because of relational anxiety?

My colleagues, Michelle Drouin and Rakel Delevi, and I hypothesized that people who were afraid of being single or had dating anxiety and who were, at the same time, anxious or insecure in their attachment style would be more likely to sext. We also thought these singles would be more likely to sext their romantic partners, even when their relationship wasn't very committed.

We gave 459 unmarried, heterosexual, undergraduate students an [online questionnaire](#) to learn more about how relational anxiety influences sexting behavior. It covered questions measuring their sexting behaviors, relationship commitment needed to engage in sexting, their fear of being single, their dating anxiety and their attachment style (secure or insecure). Half of the people who took the survey were single, and about 71 percent were female.

We found that people in romantic relationships – whether of long or short duration – were more likely to have sexted than those who did not have romantic partners. There were no gender differences for engaging in sexting, except that males were more likely than females to have sent a text propositioning sexual activity.

We also found that, generally, dating anxiety from fear of negative evaluation from the romantic partner (basically,

worrying about what your partner thinks of you) and having a more secure attachment style (i.e., comfort with intimacy and close relationships) predicted if someone had sent a sexually suggestive photo or video, a picture in underwear or lingerie, a nude photo or a sexually suggestive text.

We expected to find that anxiety would prompt people to sext but were surprised that comfort with intimacy related to sexting behaviors. We also expected to find that sexting would occur in relationships without a lot of commitment, meaning that we thought that sexting would be part of the wooing.

But it turns out that people who are comfortable with close relationships (a secure attachment style) and also worry about what their partner might think of them are more likely to engage in sexting, but only if there some level of commitment in the relationship.

So our hypothesis was only partially confirmed.

What's dating anxiety got to do with it?

What this tells us is that people may be concerned with pleasing their partner's desire – or perceived desire – to engage in sexting and that it is the comfort with intimacy in relationships that may allow sexting to occur. And, when there is greater relationship commitment, this continues to be the case.

It appears that there is less stigma and greater comfort with sexting, provided that one perceives that his or her partner wants to sext and if there is a degree of relationship commitment.

So, a little sexting within a relationship might not be too bad.



[Rob Weisskirch](#), Professor of Human Development, [California State University, Monterey Bay](#)

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