



2020

## Love on the Telephone: Sexting and Intimacy in Committed Couple Relationships

Katharine G. Davidson  
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Davidson, Katharine G. (2020) "Love on the Telephone: Sexting and Intimacy in Committed Couple Relationships," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 5. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol15/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# Love on the Telephone: Sexting and Intimacy in Committed Couple Relationships

**Katharine Davidson**  
Brigham Young University

## **Abstract**

This literature review explores research on sexting—the sending of nude or partially nude photographs or sexual messages via technological mediums—within couple relationships. While sexting has often been touted as an unhealthy or deviant practice among adolescents and adults, recent attitudes and research suggest that sexting in committed couple relationships may be associated with some positive outcomes, such as higher sexual satisfaction. This paper focuses on the relationship contexts in which sexting is more likely to have positive or negative outcomes. Insecure attachment, lower emotional commitment, and negative motivations for sexting may lead to less intimacy in the relationship instead of more. For couples with these characteristics, sexting exacerbates previously existing distance in the relationship. Relationships with secure attachment and higher levels of couple commitment are more likely to experience increased intimacy from sexting and are less likely to experience negative outcomes associated with sexting.

In today's culture, technology is intertwined with almost every aspect of daily living, including the development and maintenance of intimate relationships (Murray & Campbell, 2015). Smart phones, online dating services, text messaging apps, and social media all allow individuals and couples to communicate in ways that have previously been impossible, in terms of both medium and frequency. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is becoming increasingly common in couple relationships, and romantic couples are more likely to use their cell phones to reach their partner than any other type of media communication (Coyne et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2016). Many couples use cell phones to send affectionate text messages to each other, and this behavior is associated with positive couple communication, positive attachment, and higher relationship satisfaction (Novak et al., 2016; Schade et al., 2013).

One controversial use of technology to express affection is sexting. The sending of explicit text messages, images, or videos has long been considered a risky behavior in adolescents and an avenue for infidelity in adults (Frankel et al., 2018; Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Adult sexting has even been viewed as a deviant behavior that should be considered for classification in the DSM (Wiederhold, 2011). While these negative outcomes have been examined extensively, there has been some shift in the literature to look at sexting behaviors in a different way. Recent findings have reflected that over half of both men and women aged 18 to 36 in committed relationships report having engaged in sexting (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012), and many couples view sexting as a way to bring greater intimacy into their sexual relationship (Galovan et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2013). The call for adult sexting to be considered a disorder has since been redacted by the same researcher that extended it, and other researchers have suggested prescribing sexting to couples in therapy who are struggling with intimacy (Parker et al., 2013; Wiederhold, 2015). Despite these changes in the scientific perspective surrounding sexting, the benefits of sexting for couples are still not entirely clear.

Couples who sext each other may experience greater overall satisfaction in their sexual relationship (Galovan et al., 2018), but the influence of sexting on other aspects of the relationship are less clear. Outcomes vary widely across demographic groups such

as males, females, heterosexual couples, non-heterosexual couples, cohabiting couples, and singles (Coyne et al., 2011; Currin et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2013). Attachment style is also an important mediator of outcomes of sexting; those with insecure attachments to their partner have more negative sexting experiences and fewer positive outcomes than those with secure attachments (Drouin et al., 2017; Galovan et al., 2018; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015). Overall commitment to the relationship is another influencing factor: in general, individuals in more committed relationships seem to be less affected by the potential negative consequences of sexting (Dir et al., 2013; Drouin et al., 2017).

Although the outcomes of consensual sexting between partners in committed relationships are varied, heterosexual couples with higher levels of security in their relationship are less likely to experience the potential negative outcomes associated with sexting than those in less secure relationships. This literature review will provide an overview of the research surrounding the topic of sexting in committed couple partnerships by addressing the relationships between sexting and attachment in romantic couples, commitment level between partners, and sexting motivations.

### **Sexting and Attachment**

For many couples, sexting is not the passionate, intimacy-enhancing behavior they may imagine it to be; rather, it is a behavior related to greater ambivalence and lower commitment in their relationship (Galovan et al., 2018). This is likely due, at least in part, to the positive relationship between engaging in sexting and insecure or avoidant attachment (Drouin et al., 2017; Galovan, et al., 2018; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015). Attachment has strong implications for sexual behavior, with insecurely attached individuals reporting higher levels of anxiety surrounding sex and greater avoidance of sex with their partners (Johnson & Zuccarini, 2010). These findings may translate into sexting, since people with less secure attachment styles have been found to sext more frequently, possibly with the intent of keeping their partner close and avoiding abandonment or creating emotional distance with their partner (Galovan et al., 2018; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015).

*Love on the Telephone*

The differences between men's and women's sexting behaviors with regard to attachment, sexual desire, and emotional intimacy are important. Men are more likely than women to sext in a casual relationship in order to fulfill sexual desire while maintaining relational distance; women, conversely, are more likely to sext in a committed relationship in order to encourage relational closeness. However, given the gender differences in sexting, women's sexting behavior may not produce the desired effect and, consequently, may lead to less intimacy in the relationship (Drouin et al., 2017). Indeed, women tend to have more negative expectations of sexting experiences overall (Dir et al., 2013). Thus, the implications of sexting and insecure attachment are different for women and men (Drouin et al., 2017; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015), perhaps because women tend to display more intimacy-seeking behaviors and men tend to display more distancing behaviors, both of which are associated with insecure attachments (Drouin et al., 2017).

In addition to the context of sexting, the type of sexting is also related to attachment. (Drouin et al., 2017; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015). Men and women who send nude or partially nude photographs are more likely to have anxious or avoidant attachment styles, respectively, but this correlation does not exist with "sexy messages," or messages that contained words but no pictures (McDaniel & Drouin, 2015). The relationships between types of sexts and attachment styles are important because, although sexting does not have a significant relationship to depression or self-esteem on its own, those with greater attachment avoidance report more negative consequences, such as trauma and regret, as a result of sexting (Galovan et al., 2018; Drouin et al., 2017). Regardless of a person's gender and subsequent motive for sending explicit messages, sexting negatively affects individuals and relationships when coupled with anxious or avoidant attachment (Drouin et al., 2017; Galovan et al., 2018; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015).

### **Sexting and Couple Commitment**

The context of a couple's relationship, sexual behavior, and consequent sexting behaviors influences sexting outcomes for individuals. This may be because those in less committed relationships or who have insecure attachment styles may use

sexting as a replacement for, rather than as an augmentation of, true intimacy. Relationship type is the strongest predictor of positive or negative relationship outcomes of sexting. Individuals in committed relationships experience more positive outcomes, fewer negative outcomes, and more comfortable sexting experiences than do couples in casual relationships (Drouin et al., 2017; Galovan et al., 2018). Conversely, higher levels of sexting are also predictive of lower commitment within the relationship (Galovan et al., 2018). This finding points to the idea that a committed relationship may be one where partners are in a serious or married relationship but do not necessarily feel a deep emotional commitment to their relationship. This situation often occurs when couples engage in sexual behavior early in their relationship and remain in that relationship when they would not otherwise because they feel a sense of moral duty or convenience that discourages them from leaving (Busby et al., 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Such couples may experience lower relationship satisfaction, communication, and sexual quality (Busby et al., 2010). Couples who sext earlier on in their relationships, perhaps when they are less committed to each other, could likely experience these same negative results, which could result in greater relationship ambivalence and lower commitment throughout their relationships (Galovan et al., 2018).

In addition to relationship length and commitment, demographics may also play a role in the relationship between sexting and commitment; much of the research on sexting between committed couples is conducted on heterosexual undergraduate populations (Currin et al., 2016; Dir et al., 2013; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Murray & Campbell 2015). The nature of undergraduate relationships, which are perhaps more transient than those of more mature adults, could contribute to the findings of negative sexting outcomes, particularly if undergraduate partners engage in sexual behavior, including sexting, early in their relationships. Furthermore, older adults are far less likely to engage in sexting with their partners (Galovan et al., 2018), perhaps due to cultural practices and values or lack of technological understanding. These nonrepresentative

*Love on the Telephone*

samples could skew the general understanding of sexting influence because couples in the longest-lasting relationships are those that do not or have never sexted.

### **Sexting Motivations**

Motivations for sexting may mediate the influence of sexting on relational outcomes (Parker et al., 2013; McDaniel & Drouin 2015; Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Drouin et al., 2017). As mentioned previously, those with different attachment styles have differing motives for sexting, from personal sexual fulfillment to bids for deeper relational intimacy (Drouin et al., 2017). Hedonism (Parker et al., 2013) and maintaining the relationship (Currin et al., 2016; Drouin & Tobin, 2014) are two significant sexting motivators that may be related to poor relational outcomes because of these variables' relationships to emotional commitment and intimacy.

Hedonism, including pleasure and experience seeking, has been shown to be a greater motivator than intimacy for sending and receiving sext messages (Parker et al., 2013). The use of sexting for personal pleasure, rather than for couple pleasure or intimacy growth, could point to a lack of commitment to one's partner. This is especially true if there is a discrepancy between male and female sexting motivations; women, who are more likely to use sexting to foster closeness in the relationship (Drouin et al., 2017), may feel ignored or unfulfilled if their male partners are using sexting instead for hedonic pleasure. Hedonism as a motivator may also lead to increased use of sexting for infidelity, particularly when considering the ease with which sexting can be used with individuals outside of one's committed relationship (Murray & Campbell, 2015).

Another motivation for sexting is maintaining expectations in the relationship (Currin et al., 2016; Drouin & Tobin, 2014). Within a couple's relationship, individuals may engage in consensual but unwanted sexting, which occurs when a partner agrees to exchange sexts even though he or she does not want to (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). Women may be more likely to engage in unwanted but consensual sexting than men (Currin et al., 2016), though men also engage in consensual but unwanted sexting (Currin et al., 2016; Drouin &

Tobin, 2014; Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988). This is particularly true if men feel pressure from peers to engage in unwanted sexual behavior (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988). Women's motivation for sexting, especially unwanted sexting, may stem from a cultural script that suggests women and their sexuality should submit to men and their sexuality (Currin et al., 2016). Women who refuse to return sexts to their male partners may feel as though they are inappropriately breaking from that script and not fulfilling their role in the relationship, resulting in greater relationship anxiety and feelings of being devalued in the relationship instead of increased intimacy (Currin et al., 2016).

Furthermore, young adults with anxious or avoidant attachment styles in committed relationships are likely to cite "avoiding an argument" as a motivator for sexting (Drouin & Tobin, 2014), suggesting that they are more willing to comply with their partner's wishes than to risk losing their partner or discussing a relational problem. This behavior could create distance, perpetuate the partner's avoidance and insecurity, and negatively influence the couple's relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, sexting only to fulfill a romantic partner's sexual expectations could create a false sense of intimacy within the couple. While the willing sexting individual might feel valued, sexually satisfied, and emotionally close to their partner, the reluctant individual might feel objectified, unheard, and lonely; partners may feel that their sexual relationship is being enhanced or undermined, respectively. When deciding whether to engage in sexting, partners should ensure that their motivations for sexting are aligned to ensure a positive sexting experience.

## **Conclusion**

Although some researchers have recommended that therapists prescribe sexting to couples as a mechanism to create more intimacy in their sexual relationship (Galovan et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2013), the body of research reviewed here suggests that therapists should consider the couple's attachment and relationship context before recommending sexting as a therapeutic intervention. Gaps and limitations also exist in the research that should direct future

*Love on the Telephone*

study of sexting and relationship outcomes. Much of the current literature review only examines sexting in heterosexual couples, and the relationship between sexting and couple commitment may be very different in non-heterosexual couples (Currin et al., 2016; Galovan et al., 2018). While some studies examine sexting in committed relationships, little data exists about sexting in married relationships. Studies of sexting behaviors between married partners could lend new insights into potential motivations for and outcomes of sexting if they consider unique characteristics and commitment patterns of individuals who choose to get married. Furthermore, these future studies could examine long-term implications of sexting on relationships as couples that are forming now have the ability to engage sexting throughout their entire relationship, a phenomenon that was not possible before the advent of mobile phones and other means of CMC.

Relationship contexts and characteristics play a significant role in determining whether is likely to lead to negative outcomes for individuals in a couple relationship. Although sexting has been shown to increase sexual satisfaction for some individuals in committed relationships, there is no evidence yet that sexting may lead to a global increase in relationship satisfaction or intimacy (Currin et al., 2016; Galovan et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2013). Individuals who have insecure attachments, are in less committed relationships, or have unhealthy sexting motivations are more likely to use sexting to replace instead of enhance intimacy, and are therefore more likely to experience anxiety and less intimacy in their relationships (Galovan et al., 2018; Johnson & Zuccarini, 2010). This relational anxiety and lack of intimacy could be due to a lack of emotional commitment in the relationship as a result of precocious sexual entanglement (Busby et al., 2010), characteristics of the sexting population's demographics (Currin et al., 2017; Drouin & Landgraff 2012; Murray & Campbell 2015), or unhealthy motivations for sexual engagement (Currin et al., 2016; Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Parker et al., 2013). Although there is still much to learn about the effects of sexting on relationships, the current research supports this literature review's claim that sexting to create intimacy is most successful and produces the fewest negative outcomes in securely attached, committed couple relationships.

**References**

- Busby, D. M., Carroll, J. S., & Willoughby, B. J. (2010). Compatibility or restraint? The effects of sexual timing on marriage relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology, 24*(6), 766–774.
- Coyne, S. M., Stockdale, L., Busby, D., Iverson, B., & Grant, D. M. (2011). ‘I luv u :)!’: A descriptive study of the media use of individuals in romantic relationships. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies, 60*(2), 150–162.
- Currin, J. M., Jayne, C. N., Hammer, T. R., Brim, T., & Hubach, R. D. (2016). Explicitly pressing send: Impact of sexting on relationship satisfaction. *American Journal of Family Therapy, 44*(3), 143–154.
- Dir, A. L., Coskunpinar, A., Steiner, J. L., & Cyders, M. A. (2013). Understanding differences in sexting behaviors across gender, relationship status, and sexual identity, and the role of expectancies in sexting. *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking, 16*(8), 568–574.
- Drouin, M., Coupe, M., & Temple, J. R. (2017). Is sexting good for your relationship? It depends .... *Computers in Human Behavior, 75*, 749–756.
- Drouin, M., & Landgraff, C. (2012). Texting, sexting, and attachment in college students’ romantic relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior, 28*(2), 444–449.
- Drouin, M., & Tobin, E. (2014). Unwanted but consensual sexting among young adults: Relations with attachment and sexual motivations. *Computers in Human Behavior, 31*, 412–418.
- Frankel, A. S., Bass, S. B., Patterson, F., Dai, T., & Brown, D. (2018). Sexting, risk behavior, and mental health in adolescents: An examination of 2015 Pennsylvania youth risk behavior survey data. *Journal of School Health, 88*(3), 190–199.
- Galovan, A. M., Drouin, M., & McDaniel, B. T. (2018). Sexting profiles in the United States and Canada: Implications for individual and relationship well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior, 79*, 19–29.
- Johnson, S., & Zuccarini, D. (2010). Integrating sex and attachment in emotionally focused couple therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 36*(4), 431–445.
- McDaniel, B. T., & Drouin, M. (2015). Sexting among married couples: Who is doing it, and are they more satisfied? *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking, 18*(11), 628–634.
- Muehlenhard, C. L., & Cook, S. W. (1988). Men’s self-reports of unwanted sexual activity. *Journal of Sex Research, 24*, 58–72.
- Murray, C. E., & Campbell, E. C. (2015). The pleasures and perils of technology in intimate relationships. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 14*(2), 116–140.

*Love on the Telephone*

- Novak, J. R., Sandberg, J. G., Jeffrey, A. J., & Young-Davis, S. (2016). The impact of texting on perceptions of face-to-face communication in couples in different relationship stages. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 15(4), 274–294.
- Parker, T. S., Blackburn, K. M., Perry, M. S., & Hawks, J. M. (2013). Sexting as an intervention: Relationship satisfaction and motivation considerations. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 41(1), 1–12.
- Schade, L. C., Sandberg, J., Bean, R., Busby, D., & Coyne, S. (2013). Using technology to connect in romantic relationships: Effects on attachment, relationship satisfaction, and stability in emerging adults. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 12(4), 314–338.
- Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (1992). Assessing commitment in personal relationships. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 54(3), 595–608.
- Wiederhold, B. K. (2011). Should adult sexting be considered for the DSM? *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 14(9), 481.
- Wiederhold, B. K. (2015). Does sexting improve adult sexual relationships? *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 18(11), 627.
- Wysocki, D. K., & Childers, C. D. (2011). ‘Let my fingers do the talking’: Sexting and infidelity in cyberspace. *Sexuality & Culture: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 15(3), 217–239.