



# Why Do People Send Unsolicited Sexual Images?

Ontario Tech University  
Rebecca Fisico and Leigh Harkins

IATSO  
2021

## Background

- Unsolicited sexual images are images that include sexual content that are sent to a recipient via technology who did not request or want to receive the image.
- Two studies have indicated that a common motivation reported by men for sending unsolicited sexual images, specifically unsolicited “dick pics,” is sending them to try to get something in return from the recipient, such as sex or a sexual image (i.e., “transactional mindset”; Lehmiller, 2019; Oswald et al., 2019).
- We aimed to investigate the motivations for sending unsolicited sexual images more generally, rather than for sending unsolicited “dick pics” specifically.

## Method

### Participants (*N* = 959)

- **Gender:** 49.7% (*n* = 474) female, 48.8% (*n* = 466) male, 0.8% (*n* = 8) non-binary, 0.6% (*n* = 6) transgender
- **Sexual Orientation:** 80.4% (*n* = 752) heterosexual, 11.2% (*n* = 105) bisexual, 2.8% (*n* = 26) homosexual, 2.1% (*n* = 20) pansexual, 1.9% (*n* = 18) asexual, 1.5% (*n* = 14) other
- **Age:** 18 – 73 years old; Mean = 23.79 years old (*SD* = 7.73)
- **Race/Ethnicity:** 48.0% (*n* = 452) Caucasian, 18.5% (*n* = 174) South Asian, 6.8% (*n* = 64) Black, 6.7% (*n* = 63) Other, 5.0% (*n* = 47) Southeast Asian, (4.7%, *n* = 44) Chinese, 3.4%, (*n* = 32) Arab, 2.9% (*n* = 27) Filipino, 2.5% (*n* = 24) Latin American, 1.2% (*n* = 11) West Asian, 0.2% (*n* = 2) Japanese, 0.1% (*n* = 1) Korean, 0.1% (*n* = 1) Aboriginal

### Materials

Experiences with Sexual Images Questionnaire (ESI) → Motivations to Send Sexual Images section (adapted from the Motivations Behind Sending Genital Pictures measure; Oswald et al., 2018).

- Participants were asked to indicate reasons why they have sent unsolicited sexual images.

\*Participants also completed measures assessing personality characteristics and history perpetrating contact sexual violence and exhibitionistic behaviours; however, only results pertaining to the ESI Motivations to Send Sexual Images section will be discussed.

### Procedure

- Participants 18 years of age or older who reported living in North America were recruited on the undergraduate student research portal (SONA) and social media (i.e., Twitter, Reddit) to complete an anonymous online survey.

## Results

- 49.4% (*n* = 464) of participants reported having sent a sexual image (solicitation not specified).
  - Within this subsample, 23.5% (*n* = 108) of participants reported having sent a sexual image to someone who did not ask for one (i.e., unrequested).

Motivations for Sending Unrequested Unsolicited Sexual Images			%	n	%
I have sent a sexual image to someone <b>who did <i>not</i> ask</b> for one...					
<b>Transactional Mindset</b>					
Hoping that the person will want to have sex with me.	39.6	42	36.3		
Hoping to receive sexy pictures in return.	33.0	35			
<b>Partner Hunting</b>					
Because I misinterpreted the person’s sexual interest in me.	6.6	7	23.2		
Because that is a normal way of flirting.	24.5	26			
Because I feel like if I send out enough pictures of myself someone will eventually respond.	4.7	5			
To let them know I have a sexual interest in them.	33.0	35			
In the hopes of turning someone on.	47.2	50			
<b>Sexual/Personal Gratification</b>					
Because I like having my body insulted.	3.8	4	19.8		
Because I am not confident about the appearance of my body and hope that someone will respond positively and boost my esteem.	14.2	15			
Because I thrive on positive feedback about my body.	18.9	20			
Because I think my body is something that others would be excited to see.	29.2	31			
Because I’m proud of the way my body looks and want to share it with others.	23.6	25			
Because sending them turns me on.	29.2	31			
<b>Power and Control</b>					
Because I get off on the knowledge that someone was forced to see my naked body without their consent.	3.8	4	5.7		
Because I like to make people angry by sending pictures of my naked body in response to a disagreement.	2.8	3			
Because sending sexual images gives me a feeling of control over the person I have sent it to.	8.5	9			
Because I think it is funny to send sexual images to someone who didn’t request one.	7.5	8			
<b>Unresolved Childhood Conflict</b>					
Because I remember being made to feel shame by my parents when I got too old to be naked around them and others; sending sexual images makes me feel better.	2.8	3	3.8		
Because I miss the freedom of being naked around others that I experienced as a young child; sending sexual images is a way of reliving that feeling.	4.7	5			
<b>Misogyny/Misandry</b>					
Because I don’t like feminism and sending sexual images is a way to punish women for trying to take power away from men.	0	0	2.4		
Because I feel a sense of dislike towards women and sending sexual images is satisfying.	2.8	3			
Because I don’t like patriarchy and sending sexual images is a way to punish men for trying to take power away from women.	3.8	4			
Because I feel a sense of dislike towards men and sending sexual images is satisfying.	2.8	3			

*Note.* The frequencies and percentages represent the findings from 106 participants who reported having sent an unrequested unsolicited sexual image and provided a valid response to this question (i.e., reported that at least one motivation applied to them or selected not applicable).

## Discussion

- The most commonly endorsed motivational category for sending unrequested unsolicited sexual images in the current study was “Transactional Mindset.” This is in line with the literature, as other studies (Lehmiller, 2019; Oswald et al., 2019) have found this to be a common driving force behind men sending unsolicited “dick pics.”
- The most highly endorsed individual motivation for sending unrequested unsolicited sexual images in the current study was “In the hopes of turning someone on,” which was also found to be the most commonly endorsed individual motivation for sending unsolicited “dick pics” in a previous study (Oswald et al., 2019).
- These findings suggest that most people do not send unrequested unsolicited sexual images for more outwardly disconcerting reasons (e.g., Power and Control, Misogyny/Misandry); though, notably, some do. Instead, the current study’s findings suggest that sending unsolicited sexual images is often a goal-oriented act.
- These goal-oriented motivations might be fueled by previous findings suggesting that people can be successful in reaching these sexual outcomes (e.g., sex; Lehmiller, 2019; Ruhland, 2019) after sending an unsolicited sexual image.

## Limitations and Future Directions

- Self-report survey.
- Findings are based on a relatively small subsample of participants who reported having sent an unrequested unsolicited sexual image.
- Future studies could examine the motivations for sending unsolicited sexual images in different relational contexts (e.g., sending to a stranger versus an intimate partner).
- Conduct a similar study with participants who have been convicted of a sexual offence to examine if motivations for sending these images differ in this population.

## References

Lehmiller, J. J. (2019, November). *The psychology of “dick pics”: How many men have sent unsolicited photos of their penises and why?* Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, Denver, CO.

Oswald, F., Lopes, A., & Pedersen, C. L. (2018). *Motivations behind sending genital pictures*. [Unpublished measure].

Oswald, F., Lopes, A., Skoda, K., Hesse, C. L., & Pedersen, C. L. (2019). I'll show you mine so you'll show me yours: Motivations and personality variables in photographic exhibitionism. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 57(5), 597–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1639036>

Ruhland, S. A. (2019). *Ignorance or intent? Motivations and predictive factors for the sending of unsolicited sexual images* [Master's thesis, University of Kent]. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/81205/>

**Acknowledgement:** This research is supported in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada



rebecca.fisico@ontariotechu.net