

## Such a Tease: Intentional Sexual Provocation within Heterosexual Interactions

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Received: 11 April 2006 / Revised: 19 October 2006 / Accepted: 4 November 2006 / Published online: 6 March 2007  
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**Abstract** Sexual teasing is a form of provocation characterized by the promise of sexual contact followed by withdrawal. The intention is to frustrate or cause tension in the target and incorporates some use of power of one person over another. To date, this form of interaction between individuals has received little research attention. A total of 742 undergraduate university students (143 men, 599 women) provided reports regarding whether they had ever engaged in sexual teasing and, for those who had, the motives behind this behavior, the type of relationship and sexual history with the target, and the reactions and outcomes associated with these interactions. Sexual teasing was relatively common among both women and men, although women were significantly more likely to report having engaged in sexual teasing at least once in the past. The outcomes associated with their interactions were perceived to be more positive for participants (elicitors) than for their targets, although relatively few participants reported more adverse outcomes from the use of sexual teasing. Discussion focused on the need to better characterize forms of communication regarding sexual intentions and consent. The findings may have implications for efforts to improve models of communication and negotiation in sexual interactions.

**Keywords** Communication · Sexual behavior · College students · Gender · Consent

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### Introduction

Clarity and consistency in communicating about sexual intentions to one’s partners are stressed in programs designed to reduce young people’s risk for sexual assault (Gidycz et al., 2001), and improve negotiations about safer sex (Academy for Education Development, 2005; Brimlow & Ross, 1998; Melendez, Hoffman, Exner, Leu, & Ehrhardt, 2003), and in couples therapy (Delaney & McCabe, 1988; Miller & Sherrard, 1999). Despite such efforts, unclear and indirect forms of communication seem to characterize the majority of interactions in the sexual arena, especially in less-established heterosexual relationships, such as many dating relationships. For example, studies assessing both the verbal and nonverbal components of sexual initiation in dating relationships reveal relatively little use of direct, open forms of communication to express sexual interest, intentions, or consent (Koukounas & Letch, 2001; Renninger, Wade, & Grammer, 2004). Even so, clear communication of interest, intentions or consent are often inferred in scenarios depicted as involving few clear cues whatsoever (Rosenthal, 1997). In the context of increasing concern about ensuring respect of sexual rights, it is important to understand how women and men communicate about their sexual intentions with potential sexual partners and the consequences associated with unclear, possibly ineffective, forms of communication.

### Research on indirect and discrepant forms of communication

Over the past two decades, researchers have documented a range of indirect forms of sexual communication. In more established relationships, young women and men commonly report agreeing to unwanted sex (i.e., without expressing their unwillingness or disinterest) with a partner for such

reasons as wanting to maintain or promote a relationship or avoid a fight (Basile, 2002; Impett & Peplau, 2002; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Other studies have addressed occasional ambivalence about desire to engage in a sexual activity with one's partner (Krahé, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Kolpin, 2000; O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998) coupled with agreeing to sex because of internal feelings of pressure, guilt, obligation, or concerns about the relationship or situation (Livingston, Buddie, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2004).

In other work, researchers have investigated scenarios whereby individuals have deliberately communicated messages that run counter to or are discrepant from their true intentions. One focus of study that has garnered research attention is referred to as “token resistance” and involves a partner communicating “no” to sex, but meaning “yes” (Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988; Walker, 1997). Both women and men report engaging in token resistance on occasion (Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1994). Some studies find associations between token resistance and histories of sexual coercion (Krahé et al., 2000; Loh, Digycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005; Osman & Davis, 1999), as well as beliefs that coercion is justifiable in response to a partner's use of token resistance (Garcia, 1998; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Osman, 2003).

A parallel form of discrepant communication is sexual provocation or “teasing,” which has received far less research attention. It is characterized by communication to an interested individual of interest and intent to engage in sex despite having no intentions to follow through—a behavior often attributed to women in media depictions of teasing. Like token resistance, this type of communication is linked to beliefs in the justification of rape and is seen as representing a form of rape myth (Burt, 1980; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). One early study on this topic found that college women's beliefs that it was improper for women to “lead men on” were associated with higher ratings that rape was justified in scenarios depicting date rape (Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988). However, it is unclear from the literature how common sexual teasing is among young dating couples or the type of emotional valence or consequences associated with its use.

#### Sexual teasing as a form of provocation

Research on teasing behavior in intimate relationships is relatively sparse in the communication literature and tends to focus on flirting behaviors, such as using “pet” names or telling embarrassing stories about one's partner (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001), rather than possibly more hostile or aggressive forms, such as making fun of a partner's sexual habits or appearance. Although teasing can be construed as a form of flirtation, it usually involves a combination of both antagonistic and playful behavior (Keltner,

Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). We view sexual teasing as a form of provocation in that (1) this form of communication involves an intentional offer then offer-withdrawal of sexual contact in some form, whether implied or explicit, (2) causes tension in the target, such as frustration or embarrassment, and (3) incorporates the use of power of one person (the elicitor) over another (the target). Sexual teasing may involve prosocial components, such as humor or play (Alberts, 1992; Keltner et al., 2001), or antisocial components, such as antagonism, taunts, or mild forms of derision (Eisenberg, 1986). We distinguish it here from flirting, which can also be an intentionally ambiguous form of communication and designed to elicit some response in the target. However, with flirting, the intent is not antagonistic and often involves the sincere communication of sexual attraction to a target.

#### Conceptual frameworks for understanding sexual teasing

There are two conceptual frameworks that may help to understand the use of sexual teasing. Goffman (1967) viewed social interactions as involving protection of individuals' desired social identity or “face” (Sabini & Silver, 1982; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Efforts to protect face were often played out in seemingly ordinary interactions and stem from the motive to maintain harmonious relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Sexual teasing is a face-threatening act, especially from an elicitor who is not invested in maintaining the relationship or sparing the target's feelings or dignity. Of note, elicitors in teasing scenarios (more broadly defined) typically attribute relatively benign or affectionate motives to their acts of provocation, such as expressing affection or amusing others. Targets however, typically perceive these acts as somewhat to very aggressive and experience negative emotions with these experiences, including humiliation, anger, or “loss of face” (Keltner et al., 2001; Kowalski, 2000). There may be important gender differences in teasing experiences. In a study of peer interactions among adolescents, young women's teasing tended to be more playful and relationship-enhancing, whereas young men's teasing was viewed as more hostile or relationship-demeaning (Eder, 1993).

From another perspective, script theory (Gagnon, 1990; Simon & Gagnon, 1987) positions men as aggressors in sexual interactions and women as “gate-keepers” or limit-setters. Proponents argue that one of the few forms of power that women have in sexual interactions with men is “reactive power” (Grauerholz & Serpe, 1985; Howard, 1988), which refers to women's responsibility to restrict or control the rate of progression in sexual intimacy (notably toward sexual intercourse) with an interested male partner. Scripts identify the content, sequence, and boundaries of appropriate behavior for pursuing, negotiating, and enacting the sexual act (Metts

& Spitzberg, 1996). In this context, sexual teasing or provocation can be construed as a power strategy that women use against men in scripted heterosexual interactions. In line with this theory, men's use of sexual coercion is viewed as an extreme form of the male prerogative to pursue higher degrees of sexual intimacy from women and a means of ultimately overcoming women's restrictions in terms of sexual access (Byers, 1995). The extent to which actual use of sexual teasing is associated with such adverse negative consequences for the elicitor (or target) is unknown.

### Contextual predictors of sexual teasing

Based on the general teasing literature and the conceptual frameworks outlined here, we speculated that experiences of sexual teasing are likely to vary considerably according to the social context in which it takes place. We focused on three features of the context for which we could formulate some hypotheses: (1) the social relationship between the elicitor and target; (2) the shared sexual history of both individuals; and (3) the gender of the elicitor.

Specifically, we hypothesized that teasing would be more likely in less intimate than in more intimate relationships. That is, teasing would more likely characterize relationships that were less well established or uncommitted romantic partnerships and which have little or no shared sexual history because of lowered concerns about maintaining intimacy and saving face. We also expected that teasing in less intimate relationship contexts would involve less prosocial (or more antisocial) motives and be perceived as eliciting more negative reactions than their counterparts. Although men are more likely to tease than are women in general (Keltner et al., 2001), we predicted that women would be more likely to report engaging in sexual teasing because of its association with women's scripts for heterosexual interactions. Finally, there likely would be important individual differences in propensity to engage in (or to report engaging in) sexual teasing. We expected that individuals with greater social confidence (or extraversion) would be more likely to report using teasing as expressing sexual interest (even if insincere) requires some directness and confidence because of the risk of rejection from a partner. Researchers have found that extraversion is associated with relationship conflict in that a salient motive for extraverts is agency (or domination) (Buss, 1991; Geist & Gilbert, 1996)—a dynamic of particular relevance to the study of sexual provocation. Moreover, the provocative and often antagonistic nature of sexual teasing, especially with regard to the intentional offer-withdrawal nature of teasing and use of power over another, suggested that sexual teasing might be associated with lower rates of agreeableness and conscientiousness among elicitors. Agreeable individuals are motivated to maintain positive social relationships (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Graziano, Jensen-

Campbell, & Hair, 1996) and tend to be submissive (non-dominant) in interpersonal interactions (Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997). In conflict scenarios, agreeableness is associated with harmonious and constructive conflicts rather than antagonistic forms (Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams, & Malcolm, 2003). Conscientious individuals use direct, active, problem-focused strategies of interaction, eschewing avoidant or emotional strategies (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996; Watson & Hubbard, 1996) that would characterize sexual teasing as conceptualized here.

### The current study

In summary, the empirical research on communication has not adequately examined sexual teasing as a form of provocation. The literature suggests specific hypotheses about how reports of sexual teasing will vary according to relationship type and history, gender, and personality. In this investigation, we examined the following research questions (RQ) and hypotheses (H):

RQ1: How common are experiences of sexual teasing among women and men in their heterosexual encounters?

RQ2: How frequently does this form of communication occur in heterosexual interactions?

RQ3: What are the most common motives for engaging in sexual teasing?

H1: Women will be more likely than men to report at least one past use of sexual teasing in their heterosexual encounters.

H2: Sexual teasing will be more likely in less intimate relationships compared to more intimate or established romantic/sexual relationships.

H3: Targets of sexual teasing will experience more negative (less positive) reactions compared to their elicitors.

H4: Individuals who report sexual teasing will have higher levels of extraversion and lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness compared to those who do not report sexual teasing.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 742 heterosexual undergraduate volunteers (143 men, 599 women) from a large southwestern university in the United States participated for course credit in Introductory Psychology classes. The participants were enrolled during the Fall semesters, 2000–2003 (August–December) or the Spring semesters, 2001–2003 (January–May). Cohorts varied in number of participants (2000–2001,  $n = 26$ ; 2001–2002,  $n = 346$ ; 2002–2003,  $n = 370$ ). The sample

consisted of 66% Caucasian, 14% Hispanic, 13% Asian, 5% African American, and 3% other participants. Participants ranged from 17 to 41 years old (96% between ages of 18 and 22) with a mean age of 19.2 years for men and 18.8 years for women. Eighty-three percent of the female participants were involved in sexually active relationships when they completed the questionnaires, compared to 70% of the male participants. Religious affiliation varied broadly and included Christian (35%), Catholic (23%), Protestant (16%), Atheist/Agnostic/None (14%), Jewish (5%), Muslim (1%), Hindu (3%), and Buddhist (2%) participants.

## Measures

### *Sexual teasing*

Participants completed a brief measure designed specifically for this study to assess whether they had ever engaged in sexual teasing. Sexual teasing was defined as pretending to want to have sex with a member of the opposite sex when, in fact, they had no intention of doing so (for questionnaire wording, see Appendix A). On a scale of 0 (never), 1 or 2 times, 3–10 times, and more than 10 times, participants indicated how many times they engaged in sexual teasing in their lifetime. Those who indicated having engaged in this behavior were asked to indicate from a list of 30 possible motives which (if any) characterized the reasons that they had engaged in the sexual teasing in the past, and were given an open-ended response option to provide an explanation of any motives not listed (none provided additional reasons). The list of 30 possible motives was constructed based on a review of the range of possibilities suggested by the literature and our conceptual framework.

Principal components analysis was conducted on the 30 items. Varimax rotation was applied to transform the original principal components produced to ease interpretation. This method searches for a linear combination of the original measurements aiming to maximize the variance of the component loadings, leading to high correlations with some of the original variables, and low correlations with others. We inspected three and four factor solutions, based on principal components analyses followed by varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. The three factor solution was conceptually meaningful, with 26 of the 30 items loading most highly and uniquely on each of the three factors. The three factors accounted for 31% of the total variance; eigenvalues for each of the three factors exceeded a value of 1.8. The factors were labeled positive/prosocial motives ( $n = 10$ ), negative/antagonistic motives ( $n = 7$ ), and neutral motives ( $n = 9$ ). Four motives were eliminated as they did not load highly (.30 or above) on any of the three factors (see Table 1). Reliability coefficients for positive, negative, and

neutral motives were Cronbach's alpha = .88, .59, and .79, respectively.

On this same measure, participants also indicated how long it had been since the most recent teasing event, what type of relationship they had with the target (e.g., just met, acquaintance or friend, boyfriend or girlfriend), and how the target reacted once he or she realized that the elicitor was not intending to engage in sexual intercourse (using a checklist of options including indifference, anger, non-response, positive reactions, or unknown). To assess shared sexual histories, participants were asked whether they had engaged in sexual intercourse with the individual on a previous occasion (yes/no) or some other type of sexual activity on a previous occasion (yes/no). Finally, participants reported separately how both they and the target experienced the exchange using a five-point scale ranging from very negative (1) to very positive (5).

### *Personality measures*

The short form, 44-item, Big Five Inventory (BFI) (John & Donahue, 1989) was used to assess each of the "Big Five" personality dimensions: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Openness, and Neuroticism. The items were endorsed on five-point Likert scales ranging from "Not accurate" to "Very accurate." John and Donahue (1989) reported test-retest correlations (based on a 6-week interval) between .65 and .83. Validity of these dimensions have been demonstrated among many groups, including college students (Biesanz & West, 2004; Worrell & Cross, 2004).

## Procedure

Participants completed questionnaires in groups of 5–10 individuals in large testing rooms. Adequate space was provided for each participant to maximize privacy. Participants who registered for these testing sessions were aware of the sexual nature of the research. Same-sex researchers obtained informed consent, gave instructions, and answered any questions during the testing sessions. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was randomly assigned a number associated with their data. Volunteers were informed that those who felt uncomfortable with the sensitive nature of the questionnaires would be provided neutral reading material and receive full credit for attending the testing session. None of the participants chose this option. Participants were also informed that should they experience discomfort during the study, they could stop participation without any academic penalty or loss of credit. Participants placed their completed questionnaire packets in a large "drop box" as they left the testing room. Consent forms were stored separately from the questionnaires to ensure confidentiality. Collected

**Table 1** Factor analyses of motives for sexual teasing

Item description	Factor		
	Positive/ Prosocial	Neutral	Negative/ Antagonistic
I wanted to see how much she/he wanted me	.65		
I wanted to make him/her aroused	.63		
I wanted to make him/her want me sexually	.62		
I wanted to heighten his/her interest in me sexually or as a dating partner	.60		
I wanted to see how far I could go teasing him/her	.58		.36
I wanted to turn myself on	.55		
I wanted to make myself feel attractive or desirable	.55	.31	
I wanted others to realize I am sexy or attractive	.52		
I wanted to make someone else want me sexually	.50		
I wanted to feel in control or powerful	.47		
I didn't want others to think I was too "easy"		.71	
I didn't want to seem too "easy" by having sex with him/her		.70	
I was drunk and otherwise would not have pretended to be interested		.49	
I wanted to make someone else jealous		.47	.37
I wanted to keep someone else away from approaching me sexually		.46	.31
I was scared of being forced into sex, so played along to "buy some time"		.42	
I wanted to appear unavailable to someone else		.40	.36
I wasn't interested in him/her at that time, but wanted to keep him/her as potential future partner		.47	
I wanted to avoid offending him/her by not showing interest		.33	
I wanted to entertain my friends; have something funny to talk about later			.60
I wanted him/her to suffer			.55
It was a joke or a bet			.48
I wanted to anger his girlfriend or her boyfriend			.47
I was angry at him/her			.42
I wanted to impress my friends	.30		.40
I wanted him/her to know that they weren't so irresistible			.35
It was a game between us			
I thought it might get me a job or a favor			
It was against my values (e.g., religious, moral) to have sex with him/her, but wanted him/her to know s/he was attractive			
I didn't want others to think I didn't like sex or something was wrong with me sexually			

Note. Factor loadings <.30 have been suppressed.

questionnaires were maintained in locked file shelves and data were entered into a password-protected data file. This research was approved annually by the Institutional Review Board during the 2000–2003 time period.

## Results

### Prevalence and frequency of sexual teasing

For the entire sample, 60% reported at least one past incident of sexual teasing. In line with the scripts framework attributing this behavior to women, our analyses indicated

that more women (64%) than men (43%) reported that they had ever used sexual teasing in the past,  $\chi^2(1) = 20.0$ ,  $p < .001$ . The mean number of past occurrences among those who reported at least one occurrence in their lifetime was 7.0 ( $SD = 5.0$ ) and 7.3 ( $SD = 4.7$ ) for men and women, respectively. There was no significant gender difference between means,  $t(440) < 1$ .

### Relationship context of most recent occasion of use

Among participants who reported using sexual teasing in their past, their last occasion took place relatively recently

( $M = 20.25$  weeks prior to the study;  $SD = 29.8$ ), suggesting that these are not rare or distal events. In addition, concerns regarding errors in recall are lessened somewhat by the recency with which these interactions occurred. Among both women and men, sexual teasing was used most commonly with an acquaintance or friend (endorsed by 39% of women and 52% of men) and least commonly with a stranger (endorsed by < 1% of women and 2% of men) or a date (endorsed by 5% of women and 3% of men). The six relationship types were dichotomized on the basis of familiarity into more intimate forms of relationships (i.e., boyfriend/girlfriend or someone dated in the past) and less intimate forms (i.e., just met, acquaintance or friend, date, stranger). Approximately 60% of the women and 65% of the men reported engaging in sexual teasing in less intimate relationships; 40% of the women and 35% of the men reported engaging in sexual teasing in more intimate relationships. Across gender, results from a chi square analysis indicated a trend such that more participants engaged in sexual teasing in relationships with less intimate partners,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.63$ ,  $p < .06$ . Twenty five percent of both the women and men reported having engaged in sexual intercourse with the individual on a previous occasion, and 51% of women and 44% of men reported having engaged in some other type of sexual activity on a previous occasion.

#### Motives associated with most recent occasion of use

Table 2 indicates the frequency with which women and men who had engaged in sexual teasing in the past endorsed each of a range of motives for this type of communication. The most frequently cited reason for both women and men was “I wanted to make him/her want me sexually” (endorsed by 69% of the women and 58% of the men). Again, for both women and men, the least-commonly endorsed reason for engaging in sexual teasing was relatively antisocial: “I wanted to anger his girlfriend/her boyfriend” (endorsed by 6% and 3% of the women and men, respectively).

Composites were formed for Positive, Negative, and Neutral reasons by computing the mean number of reasons within each category. Overall, participants reported far more positive ( $M = .37$ ) than neutral ( $M = .22$ ) or negative reasons ( $M = .13$ ). Results of a 2 (Sex) by 3 (Type: Positive, Negative, Neutral) ANOVA indicated an overall significant gender difference in the use of reasons for engaging in sexual teasing,  $F(3, 438) = 5.37$ ,  $p < .01$ . Between sex analyses revealed that women ( $M = .23$ ) were significantly more likely than were men ( $M = .17$ ) to endorse neutral reasons for engaging in sexual teasing,  $F(1, 440) = 4.52$ ,  $p < .05$ , and men ( $M = .18$ ) were significantly more likely than were women ( $M = .12$ ) to endorse negative reasons

for engaging in sexual teasing,  $F(1, 440) = 6.93$ ,  $p < .01$ . There was no significant gender difference in the endorsement of positive reasons for engaging in sexual teasing,  $F(1, 440) < 1$ .

#### Perceived outcomes associated with use of sexual teasing

When asked to indicate how the target reacted once he or she realized that the participant (elicitor) was not intending to engage in sex, 30% of the women compared to 32% of the men reported that the target (1) reacted positively (e.g., laughed, made a joke about it). Twenty four percent of the women and 32% of the men reported that the target (2) reacted like they did not care (indifferent), 15% of the women and 17% of the men reported that the target (3) did not respond in any way, 13% of the women and 14% of the men reported that (4) they were not there to see (e.g., if elicitor had not shown up for a promised encounter) or (5) did not notice how the target reacted once they realized the elicitor had been teasing, and a minority of both with 10% of the women and 7% of the men reported that the target (6) reacted negatively (e.g., got angry, tried to force me, called me names). These perception percentages did not differ significantly between genders,  $\chi^2(5) = 5.99$ .

Results of a 2 (Sex) by 2 (Object: Self vs. Target) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for Object,  $F(1, 416) = 46.96$ ,  $p < .001$ . As hypothesized, both men and women reported that they believed the experience was more positive for themselves than for the targets. On a 5-point scale ranging from very negative (1) to very positive (5), female and male participants provided mean ratings of their own reactions as  $M = 3.06$  ( $SD = .97$ ),  $M = 3.26$  ( $SD = .86$ ), respectively, and their targets' reactions as  $M = 2.63$  ( $SD = .98$ ),  $M = 2.63$  ( $SD = .92$ ), respectively.

To begin understanding the link between why an individual engages in sexual teasing and how they perceive the target's reaction, Pearson correlations were conducted between type of teasing (negative, positive, neutral) and the person's perception of what the experience was like for the target. Among women, there were no significant correlations between type of sexual teasing and how positive or negative they thought they experience was for the target (all  $ps > .25$ ). Among men, there was a significant correlation between negative reasons for engaging in sexual teasing and how they thought the target perceived the teasing,  $r(57) = -.27$ ,  $p = .04$ . That is, men who engaged in sexual teasing for negative reasons believed the target viewed the experience as negative. Correlations between positive and neutral reasons and target's experience were not significantly related in men.

**Table 2** Gender comparisons in reasons associated with use of sexual teasing

	Women ( <i>n</i> = 380) % Endorsed	Men ( <i>n</i> = 62) % Endorsed
<b>Positive/Prosocial</b>		
I wanted to make him/her want me sexually	68.7	58.1
I wanted to see how much she/he wanted me	56.8	54.8
I wanted to make myself feel attractive or desirable	51.8	27.4
I wanted to feel in control or powerful	36.3	25.8
I wanted to turn myself on	11.8	21.0
I wanted others to realize I am sexy or attractive	19.5	24.2
I wanted to heighten his/her interest in me sexually or as a dating partner	42.1	37.1
I wanted to make someone else want me sexually	18.5	28.8
I wanted to see how far I could go teasing him/her	30.0	45.2
I wanted to make him/her aroused	36.3	40.3
It was a game between us	35.3	35.5
<b>Negative/Antagonistic</b>		
It was a joke or a bet	28.2	45.2
I wanted him/her to suffer	7.1	6.5
I wanted to entertain my friends; have something funny to talk about later	7.6	22.6
I was angry at him/her	6.3	3.2
I wanted to anger his girlfriend or her boyfriend	5.6	3.4
I wanted him/her to know that they weren't so irresistible	26.8	21.0
<b>Neutral</b>		
I didn't want to seem too "easy" by having sex with him/her	33.2	12.9
I wanted to keep someone else away from approaching me sexually	13.2	8.1
I wanted to make someone else jealous	26.8	25.8
I was drunk and otherwise would not have pretended to be interested	45.0	45.2
I wanted to appear unavailable to someone else	10.2	10.2
I was scared of being forced into sex, so played along to "buy some time"	15.8	3.2
I wasn't interested in him/her at that time, but wanted to keep him/her as potential future partner	21.9	25.8

### Individual differences in reports of sexual teasing

Pearson product moment correlations were computed between the Big Five personality factors and reports of sexual teasing, separately by gender, for all study participants (including those who had not endorsed sexual teasing). As can be seen in Table 3, our hypotheses regarding individual differences were only partially supported. Among women, as predicted, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were significantly correlated with sexual teasing; disagreeable, low conscientiousness women were more likely to engage in sexual teasing. Contrary to predictions, Extraversion was not significantly related to sexual teasing in women and Neuroticism showed a small but significant positive relationship with sexual teasing. Contrary to our hypotheses, neither Extraversion, Agreeableness, nor Conscientiousness was associated with sexual teasing among the men. Unexpectedly, Openness was significantly negatively related to sexual teasing in men. More open men were less likely to report sexual teasing. Neuroticism was unrelated to men's reports of sexual teasing.

Additional analyses were conducted to examine relations between personality dimensions and reasons (positive, negative, neutral) for sexual teasing among persons who had endorsed sexual teasing in the past. Among women, Agreeableness,  $r(380) = -.13$ ,  $p = .01$ , and Neuroticism,  $r(380) = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ , were significantly related to positive reasons for engaging in sexual teasing. More agreeable women were less likely to use positive reasons for engaging in sexual teasing, and more neurotic women were more likely to use positive reasons for engaging in sexual teasing. There were no significant correlations between neutral or negative reasons and Big Five personality factors (all  $ps > .20$ ) among women. There were no significant correlations between any of the reasons for engaging in sexual teasing and Big Five personality factors among men (all  $ps > .25$ ).

A two step hierarchical linear regression was computed to predict sexual teasing. In the first step, the Big Five personality dimensions were entered as predictors. In the second step, gender and the gender by Big Five interactions were added to the list of predictors. The first step explained 3% of the variance in sexual teasing,  $F(5, 703) = 5.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ,

**Table 3** Correlations between having engaged in sexual teasing and big five personality domains

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Women ( $n = 596$ )	.05	-.13**	-.09*	-.10*	-.05
Men ( $n = 143$ )	.03	-.08	.11	.00	-.23*

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

suggesting that a small but significant portion of the variance in sexual teasing was accounted for by Big Five personality dimensions. The second step added significantly to the model,  $R^2 = .038$ ,  $F\Delta = 2.13$ ,  $p = .05$ , suggesting that gender and the interaction between gender and the Big Five personality domains provided further explanation for sexual teasing, but still accounted for relatively little variance overall.

## Discussion

The current study examined young people's use of sexual teasing in heterosexual contexts. Our study demonstrated that these interactions were relatively common with the majority of participants in this study reporting at least one recent occasion of past use. Women were more likely to report sexual teasing than were men, in line with a traditional script that depicts women as controlling men's sexual access as a form of reactive power in heterosexual encounters (Grauerholz & Serpe, 1985). College students were more likely to agree that various forms of sexual violence were justified in situations in which a woman was viewed as "leading a man on" or given mixed signals in some way (Locke & Mahalik, 2005), suggesting that cultural norms or attitudes strongly prohibit women's use of sexual teasing in some contexts. We found that sexual teasing was more common in less intimate contexts, but not with strangers or dates, where false offers of sexual contact may be considered too risky and more likely to elicit retribution on the part of a target.

In some scenarios involving sexual teasing, it appears that the man and woman involved had no shared sexual history, but this was in a minority of cases. One-quarter of the participants reported that they had engaged in sexual intercourse with the target at least once in the past, but the remainder involved scenarios in which the two partners had less shared sexual history. Other research has found that young women and men report feeling obliged to engage in sexual intercourse with a partner with whom they share a sexual history and that sexual precedence, in essence, constitutes an "implicit contract" to engage in future sexual activity (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Shotland & Goodstein, 1992). Sexual teasing in similar contexts might be viewed as violating such a contract. Alternately, sexual teasing might be a means of amplifying another's interest in cases where there

has been little investment in further sexual contact, while withholding contact at that time to heighten appeal, or in line with Goffman's (1967) concept of "face," teasing might be used in relationships in which the elicitor is not particularly invested in maintaining the relationship or sparing a target's dignity.

For the most part, participants reported primarily positive motives behind their use of sexual teasing. This was true of both women and men who reported similar numbers of positive motives. In addition, we found that men reported more negative motives than did women, which corresponds to past research (Eder, 1993). However, we also found that women reported more neutral motives compared to the men in this study, although it is unclear why this might be.

Participants reported a range of behavioral reactions on behalf of the target, with approximately one-third reporting that the target reacted positively, and more than half indicating that the target reacted indifferently, had no discernible reaction, or else they were unaware of the target's reaction. A minority indicated that the target reacted negatively. The participants, as elicitors, rated their own reactions to the experience as more positive than those of the targets, although of course participants could only infer the emotional valence of the targets' reaction. However, participants typically rated the targets' emotional reactions as a somewhat to very negative experience, suggesting an important discrepancy between the targets' overt behavioral reaction and attributions regarding his or her internal experiences, perhaps compensation for loss of "face." Moreover, there was little relationship between elicitors' reports of their motives and the perceived impact on their targets, suggesting the need for future research about these discrepancies in perception, the overall function of sexual provocation, and closer examination of targets' experiences.

The personality of the elicitors appeared to play a very small role in explaining sexual teasing. In brief, women who were less agreeable and less conscientiousness were more likely to report sexual teasing than their counterparts. Teasing likely involves some level of social skills or confidence to risk the rejection that might ensue from expressing sexual interest in another person, regardless of how sincerely or insincerely felt. Sexual teasing is also a provocative act and both of these dimensions of personality are associated with lower investment in maintaining positive and harmonious relations (Bono, Boles, Judge, & Lauer, 2002). Extraversion was not



associated with reports of sexual teasing, contrary to our predictions, perhaps because of one of its subfactors, sociability, was somehow counterindicated here. DePue and Collins (1999) argue that affiliation and the valuing of interpersonal bonds are central to extraversion, perhaps overriding agency, assertiveness, and dominance characteristics of this personality dimension. We also found a relationship among women between sexual teasing and higher levels of neuroticism. Individuals higher in neuroticism demonstrate less empathy and more maladaptive coping strategies in stressful interactions involving close partners (Lee-Baggley, Preece, & DeLongis, 2005). Whether these tendencies are related to sexual teasing requires further investigation.

The lack of associations among men in this study between reports of teasing and personality might be related to the lower number of men included in the analyses. Only openness was found to be related to men's reports in that men who were more open were less likely to report sexual teasing, likely reflecting tendencies toward expressiveness rather than detachment or concealment in their communication (Mahoney & Stasson, 2005). Although this exploration constituted a relatively cursory investigation of the role of individual differences, it appears that social contexts play a greater role in understanding the use of sexual teasing. Further research is needed to address more closely the social contexts within which this form of communication takes place. For example, it is unclear from our approach whether sexual teasing took place in primarily public or private spheres. There may be important distinctions in meaning, expression, and outcomes between experiences that take place in public contexts, such as a party or bar, as compared to a more intimate or private context, such as in one's bedroom. In-depth interviews would be especially helpful in exploring this phenomenon more closely.

There are a number of other limitations of the current study that should be noted. The study was limited to U.S. college students, as well as heterosexual interactions. Research should explore experiences of sexual teasing in studies involving other groups, including younger dating samples, married samples, and those in same-sex relationships, as well as among individuals in other countries. Teasing may very well be understood or experienced quite differently in contexts different from U.S. college students' heterosexual interactions. To provide a fuller picture of how pervasive sexual teasing may be, future research should involve collecting information regarding both experiences of being elicitors and targets of sexual teasing, ideally using prospective sampling methods, and possibly within couples to match reports. Moreover, it is not clear from the current study whether sexual teasing is related in any way to the possibility or threat of sexual assault, as suggested in the rape myth literature. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2004) did find that, in a sample of women who reported past experiences of nonconsensual

sex, those who endorsed a belief that women who sexually tease men deserve to be raped were less likely to label their experiences as rape compared to women who did not endorse this belief. Given that sexual teasing appears to be relatively common among young people and that the majority of experiences appears unrelated to adverse consequences, at least in our sample, it is not clear whether there is an important causal link between cultural beliefs in women's use of teasing and sexual coercion, or whether sexual teasing is a way to justify coercion on behalf of perpetrators and attribute responsibility or blame to victims, as has been suggested elsewhere (Crawford, 1995).

Despite these limitations, this initial investigation has provided some important new insights into this phenomenon. In particular, the current research reinforces the need to better characterize forms of communication regarding sexual intentions and consent. There are clearly key disjunctures that are often overlooked by scholars in our field regarding many elements of communication interactions, including between actual desire, intentions, expression, and perception of willingness and consent, and the outcomes related to these components (Beres, Herold, & Maitland, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2005). Our findings emphasize the need to formulate, refine, and test new models of communication and negotiation in the sexual interactions of young dating samples that move us beyond traditional efforts that stress how individuals (and women, in particular) must use open and direct communication in their expressions of sexual desire. Such research can provide a platform for innovative new research upon which scholars, educators, clinicians, and policy makers can develop programs that help ensure healthy and satisfying sexual interactions among people.

## Appendix A: Sexual Teasing Questionnaire

Instructions: Sometimes people act or pretend like they are going to have sex with a member of the opposite sex when, in fact, they have no intention of doing so. An example of this situation would be if you were with someone who wanted to have sex with you, and you talked about how much fun sex would be with them leading them to think it would happen, or you told them you would meet him or her upstairs in a bedroom but did not go.

Please indicate below how many times (in your lifetime) you have engaged in this behavior. Keep in mind that we are *only* interested in situations in which 1) it was very clear to you that the person wanted to have sex (i.e., sexual intercourse) with you, 2) you *intentionally* communicated in some way (e.g., flirting, body gestures, words) that you were willing to "go along" and have sex with them, and 3) you knew all along that you would not have sex with them.

*I have engaged in this behavior:*

Never (0 times)----- 1 or 2 times----- 3-10 times----- More than 10 times-----

Below are some of the reasons why people may engage in this behavior (i.e., pretend to want sex when in fact they don't). Please check all those that apply to you.

In the past, I have pretended to want sex when in fact I didn't because. . .

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ...I wanted to make him/her want me sexually                                   | ...I wanted to make someone else jealous   |
| ...It was a joke or a bet  | ...I wanted to see how much she/he wanted me   |
| ...I wanted him/her to know that they weren't so irresistible                  | ...I wanted to impress my friends <sup>1</sup>   |
| ...I wanted to feel in control or powerful                                     | ...It was a game between us  |
| ...I thought it might get me a job or a favor <sup>1</sup>                     | ...I wanted others to realize I am sexy or attractive  |
| ...I wanted to make myself feel attractive or desirable                        | ...I wasn't interested in him/her at that time, but wanted to keep him/her as potential future partner                                     |
| ...I was angry at him/her  | ...It was against my values (e.g., religious, moral) to have sex with him/her, but wanted him/her to know s/he was attractive <sup>1</sup> |
| ...I was drunk and otherwise would not have pretended to be interested         | ...I wanted to turn myself on  |
| ...I wanted him/her to suffer  | ...I didn't want to seem too "easy" by having sex with him/her   |
| ...I wanted to entertain my friends; have something funny to talk about later  | ...I wanted to see how far I could go teasing him/her  |
| ...I wanted to avoid offending him/her by not showing interest <sup>1</sup>    | ...I wanted to make him/her aroused  |
| ...I wanted to keep someone else away from approaching me sexually             | ...I didn't want others to think I didn't like sex or something was wrong with me sexually <sup>1</sup>                                    |
| ...I wanted to heighten his/her interest in me sexually or as a dating partner | ...I didn't want others to think I was too "easy" <sup>1</sup>   |
| ...I was scared of being forced into sex, so played along to "buy some time"   | ...I wanted to make someone else want me sexually  |
|  | ...I wanted to appear unavailable to someone else  |
|  | ...I wanted to anger his girlfriend or her boyfriend   |

Please answer the following questions with reference to the *most recent time* that you engaged in this behavior.

- When was the most recent time you were involved in this type of situation? . . . (Number of weeks ago)
- What type of relationship did you have with the person who wanted to engage in sex with you?
 

...Just met	...Boyfriend or girlfriend
...Acquaintance or friend	...Someone you had dated in the past
...Date	...Stranger
- Was this person someone you had engaged in. . .
 

• sexual intercourse on a previous occasion	...Yes	...No
• some other type of sexual activity on a previous occasion	...Yes	...No
- What happened after he or she realized that you were not intending to engage in sexual intercourse with him/her?
 

...He or she reacted like they didn't care (indifferent)
...He or she reacted negatively (got angry, tried to force me, called me names)
...He or she did not respond in any way
...I was not there to see or did not notice how he or she reacted
...He or she reacted positively (laughed, made a joke about it)
- What was this experience like for you?
 

...Very negative
...Somewhat negative
...Neither positive or negative
...Somewhat positive
...Very positive
- What do you think this experience was like for the other person?
 

...Very negative
...Somewhat negative
...Neither positive or negative
...Somewhat positive
...Very positive

<sup>1</sup>One of six items deleted from analyses.

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