



Review Article

## Romance, coercion, and consent: Unavoidable concepts in sexuality

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**Abstract**

The concept of love and romance has intrigued human society from a long time. The multi-faceted word romance is popularly known as love between people who tend to be together with intentions of intimacy. Therefore, the relationships have always been a complex area to study, and there are certain important concepts in the dynamics of romantic relationships. Coercion, sexual esteem are important areas among these, as they impact the mental processes profoundly. In this article, we have discussed about sexual coercion and consent, its effects on sexual esteem, the areas where the capacity to consent and coercion may happen and explored the cross-cultural dynamics of relationships within the romantic relationships.

**Introduction**

Human beings are social animals by nature, hence establish relationships with fellow human beings. Human development is

tremendously affected by the relationships they keep and pursue. One of the most significant relationships made by human beings is romantic one. They tend to invest a lot in their romantic relationships. They devote a substantial number of resources in romantic relationships than in others in terms of time and finances. Romance has fascinated people from time immemorial. Since it was first coined; the word 'Romance' has been a source of inspiration to poets and authors. Initially, romance was related to the idea of love but not only limited to that but extended beyond to the expression of innermost desires. These desires may or may

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not relate to love. In the 11th century AD, the expression of romance evolved. The writings of the poets changed the face that later became something more referred to romantic courtly love. This was more chivalrous and often included extreme devotion and respect for the women but not related to the sexual relationships (Mc Williams Peter, 1997). The evolution of romance has changed over time to the current meaning of an affectionate relationship between human beings who participate in sexual relationships. Romance thus transformed from a platonic, courtly, chivalrous love to an affectionate, intimate sexual relationship.

With the changing times, romance has also changed; now, it refers to much more than just an artistic or exaggerated expression of feelings within the context of love relationships. Romance is often colored with the active expression of one's love and profundity of internal desires to connect intimately and commitment to marriage and long-lasting relationships. It means that romantic relationships also contain a spectrum of relationships, including fascination attractions, and attachments towards their potential or actual partners (Alberoni Francesco., 1983)

### Relative history

The modern-day romance is very different from Aristotle's way of romance, which was platonic (more spiritual) and now has evolved to much nearer to its literal meaning, which is more intimate and involves sexuality. Romance is usually present in the institutions of marriage and betrothal and outside the orthodox companionships. Some of these have become classics, like the Arthurian story of 'Lancelot and Guinevere'. In Classic English literature of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, these stories tell the tale of

romantic love that would go beyond the boundaries of spiritual love, even at the cost of their lives (Denis de Rougemont, 1990). On the other hand, some authors have expressed pessimism regarding romance, stating that romance is nothing more than the way of nature to attract a mate and reproduce (Schopenhauer, 1973).

Sexual coercion has become a burning issue in the modern world (Carey et al., 2015). The consequence of this has multifaceted effects on individuals experiencing it. The academic community has faced difficulties defining and describing the phenomenon of sexual coercion (Carey et al., 2015). But there is consensus upon the consequences of sexual coercion and that they mainly affect the psychological health of the involved persons.

### Definitions

**Romance:** Romance is a word that has been talked about for ages and by the dictionary, means a relationship between two people bonded by love and may or may not be married. This word has also been associated synonymously with love and affairs. Romance is also defined as mysterious, intriguing, and exciting, along with other meanings that lead to variation in understanding of the word culturally and linguistically (Merriam Webster English Dictionary, 1996).

**Coercion:** It is an act of persuading someone to do something that they don't want to do. A few synonyms for coercion include force, threaten, oppress, intimidate, pressurize, demand (Merriam Webster English Dictionary, 1996)

Campus sexual assault is a pervasive issue impacting all students' well-being, quality of life, and education. There have been many recent efforts to prevent and address campus sexual assault, most notably the adoption of

affirmative consent standards (Pugh and Becker, 2018). However, efforts to address sexual assault on college campuses through an affirmative consent standard could be undermined by traditional gender norms, sexual scripts, and the power dynamics inherent in heterosexual relations, which lead to situations in which many women consent to unwanted sex (Thomas and Gorzalka, 2013). Studies indicate that college women are likely to experience verbal sexual coercion, yet research has failed to reach a consensus on defining, operationalizing, and studying verbal sexual coercion (Carey et al., 2015). Research on sexual consent is also lacking, particularly regarding approval to unwanted sex due to the presence of verbal sexual coercion. This article discusses how multiple forms of unwanted sex can be conceptually examined (Katz and Myhr, 2008). Policy implications and areas for future research are discussed (Pugh & Becker, 2018).

Sexual coercion can be defined as a phenomenon where sexual exploitations occur among people who are not giving consent freely, but approval is obtained by pressure, promise, threat, and intimidation.

**Affirmative consent (No means No and Yes means Yes):** It is a concept of verbal consent that can empower women and remedy the issues with consent (Pugh and Becker, 2018).

**Communicative sexuality:** Communicative sexuality is a type of communication in which the initiator (usually the male person) has to obtain consent for each activity verbally before perusing it (Thomas and Gorzalka, 2013).

### **Sexual coercion in a romantic relationship**

Sexual coercion in romantic relationships has been studied in recent years; a study reported

that this type of coercion could be explained by the theory of planned behavior (Simms and Byers, 2012), they found that sexual pressure in romantic relationships was linked with various factors namely; perception of social norms, initiation behavior; perceived behavioral control and attitudes. It was identified that the partners would usually approve the sexual initiation behaviors, and the initiation confidence was higher among the partners who received positive outcomes of their initiation behaviors. Men were mainly the initiators, and they had a more traditional approach towards sexual behavior than women. The majority of the people who perceived that their partners initiated sexual intimacy were more satisfied in the relationship than those who initiated sexual intimacy on their own (Simms and Byers, 2012).

### **Sexual esteem**

Sexual esteem is more like self-esteem, and people start gaining sexual esteem from a young developmental period, and by the time children reach adolescence, they start to form their sexual esteem. When they reach youth, their sexual esteem reaches maturity as they encounter various relationships and undergo romantic and sexual relationships. Sexual esteem refers to the pattern individual views their sexuality in comparison with others and develops a positive outlook towards their sexuality (Maas and Lefkowitz, 2015). A study from North America conducted among a racially diverse population studying at university found that students who had engaged in sexual behaviors of both oral and penetrative nature had more sexual esteem than those who were not involved in a relationship. Students who had used contraception were more confident about themselves compared to the people who had not used contraception or had not been in sexual

relationships (Maas and Lefkowitz, 2015). The study found that the youth engaged in sexual activities had stronger opinions about their ability to consent and were more confident about themselves. Men who had more partners were more confident about their initiation and outcome of their sexual activity. Sexual esteem plays a significant part in building confidence and responding to coercion. People with less sexual esteem were more vulnerable to coercion, abuse, undergoing abortion, and loss of self-worth (Calogero and Thompson, 2009).

### Romance as a development

Human development happens in phases comprising certain periods. These phases are characterized by specific tasks of that period. One of the significant tasks in adolescence is to establish romantic relationships, and people choose their paths. Be it passion about the career or a person of choice. Romantic relationships, in most cases, face a situation of coercion towards sexual involvement. This leads to problems and issues faced in the future (Adams-Curtis and Forbes, 2004). Studies have reported that romantic relationships that involve sexual coercion have had long-lasting effects on the sufferers (Thomas and Gorzalka, 2013). Effects of sexual coercion have been studied. The results can range from loss of sexual esteem to post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, and long-term sexual dysfunctions (Collibee and Furman, 2014a). The impact of sexual coercion in romantic relationships is common, like eating disorders, reduced self-esteem, internalization, and externalization of symptoms up to suicidality (Collibee and Furman, 2014a). It makes them more vulnerable to increased sexual exploitation. According to cross-sectional studies, there is increased fear and anxiety among the people suffering from sexual victimization in their lives (Katz et al., 2007; Katz and Myhr, 2008).

A long term study on adolescents regarding sexual coercion in romantic relationships suggested that adolescents who faced sexual coercion in their early years' developed low self-esteem and had more casual sexual relationships; although they did not have much difference in the quality of the relationship, there were increased jealousy and low self-satisfaction in the relationship and also increased risk for victimization (Adams-Curtis and Forbes, 2004; Collibee and Furman, 2014a).

### Factors affecting sexual coercion in romantic relationships : Theories

1. Men's attempts to dominate and control their partners (DeMaris, 1997; Goetz and Shackelford, 2006) found a significant positive relationship between men's controlling behaviors and their use of sexual coercion in an intimate relationship, thus supporting the domination and control hypothesis (Maas and Lefkowitz, 2015). This hypothesis tries to explain that men in society try to keep their status at a higher position than women. This provides a notion of superiority since childhood and the formation of a new family by dominion. This percolates in the society since childhood giving rise to more sexually aggressive behaviors among men to intimidate and overpower women physically. This similar notion builds up among the young girls, where they feel it is justified to be suppressed by their male counterparts. This leads to coercive behaviors in intimate relationships.
2. There is a theory of impulsive behavior that several studies can support. The studies have found that physically abusive men were more likely than non-abusive men to sexually coerce their female partners (Apt and Hurlbert, 1993;

- Camilleri, 2004; Camilleri et al., 2009; De Maris, 1997; Thomas and Gorzalka, 2013). This can also be explained by Freudian Psychoanalytical theory that impulsive men commonly coerce in sexual relationships.
3. This expression of power is the product of men's social roles (Camilleri et al., 2009; Gage and Hutchinson, 2006; Goetz and Shackelford, 2006). Men in patriarchal societies have been observed to showcase their powers in patterns by the subordination of women in sexual relationships. The higher social status of men biases the notion that sexual pleasures remain mainly in their domain, and they behold the right to it, thus giving them more power over their women counterparts. Similar social constructs give rise to the notion and social bias and give men a higher social status. This, in turn, leads to bias in which men are perceived to have the right to initiate and acquire sexual favors from women without women's consent, leading to socially accepted coercion.
  4. Another hypothesis has been advanced by researchers studying sexual coercion from an evolutionary perspective: sexual coercion in intimate relationships may function as an anti-cuckoldry tactic, with its occurrence related to a man's suspicions of his partner's sexual infidelity (Camilleri et al., 2009; De Maris, 1997; Thomas et al., 2016; Thomas and Gorzalka, 2013). This theory explains the phenomenon that if a woman disobeys her partner's will to engage in sexual activities in a relationship, she might be losing interest in him. This behavior is perceived differently as if the woman may like another person and had engaged in a relationship with other males.
  5. Coercion in response to cues of his partner's sexual infidelity might function to introduce a male's sperm into his partner's reproductive tract at a time when there is a high risk of cuckoldry (i.e., when his partner has recently been inseminated by a rival male). This sperm competition hypothesis was proposed following the recognition that partner rape in non-human species followed female extra-pair copulations (Goetz and Shackelford, 2006) and that sexual coercion and partner rape in humans often followed accusations of female infidelity (Lalumie're et al., 2006; Thornhill and Thornhill, 1992). This shows a three-path model for developing sexually coercive behavior in general to sexual coercion in relationships.

### Consent and sexual coercion

By definition, consent means to agree upon (Merriam-Webster English Dictionary, 1996). Consent is a part of daily life, and we give consent for so many things that it often becomes a pattern of our personality. When engaged in romantic relationships, people often assume consent. In sexual relationships, consent is an important binding one must obtain to engage in any sexual activity. Unfortunately, this has not been the scenario in society. There are many factors on which consent depends (Maas and Lefkowitz, 2015).

'Sexual Consent' basically consists of three parts:

- (1) The initiator (usually a man, if it is a heterosexual relationship) will seek consent actively.
- (2) The other partner will provide the consent actively or will refuse
- (3) The initiator will accept the positive or negative consent for sexual behavior.



It can be pretty understood that romantic relationships are just more than superficial transactional relationships, and usually, sexual requests are more likely to be involved with the mental reward mechanism and feelings of guilt after refusal (Calogero and Thompson, 2009). There is also a burning issue that not all initiators will take a refusal seriously, increasing the risk for sexual assault and violence (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Verbal affirmative consent thus cannot be considered as standard because of the reasons mentioned above.

The concept of consent is not very well understood worldwide (Pugh & Becker, 2018). However, there have been attempts to generate awareness about consent through social media and structured methods, and studies report that youth has the concept of consent in sexual behaviors (Thomas et al., 2016).

### Partner rape/marital rape

Marital rape, though it sounds like an oxymoron, is quite a known phenomenon globally and definitely with high prevalence in the Southeast Asian region. Marital rape can be classified into three types, force-only rape, battering rape, obsessive rape.

In a 2013 United Nations survey, 1/4th of the 10000 people interviewed in the Asia Pacific region admitted to having raped their wives at least once in a lifetime (Rosellini et al., 2013). The US department of justice has defined marital rape as any unwanted sexual act committed by a spouse or ex-spouse without the partner's consent (US Department of Justice, 2000). California penal code section 262 has also mentioned spousal rape and punishment specific to it. Marital rape, a form of sexual coercion, is considered a crime in multiple American states, with different culpable sentences.

In India, various penal codes for similar

situations, like Section 498(A) domestic violence, Section 377 unnatural sexual offenses, Section 375 of IPC, define rape as a crime. However, no specific provision of law has been proposed for sexual coercion. Though exception section 2 of 375 IPC, marital rape is a crime under age 15 years, doesn't support article 14. However, article 14 guarantees equal protection and equality before the law hence creating a dilemma in the law.

### Types of marital rape

**Force only rape:** Husband uses threat and violence to the extent to get/coerce sexual activity. Here, violence happens mostly during intercourse. This can be dangerous, and the partner can be hurt in fatal ways. This leads to emergency room visits and criminal charges against the perpetrator.

**Battering rape:** Here, the woman faces both physical and sexual violence, mostly together. The rape often occurs as a continuum of physical assault, and women mostly face this type of marital rape (Gage and Hutchinson, 2006).

**Obsessive rape:** It can be explained as a type of sadistic pleasure; the act itself is much violent here (Shackelford and Goetz, 2004).

The validity of marital rape has been in question as it acts as an anti-cuckoldry tactic, its occurrence related to a man's suspicions of his partner's sexual infidelity. Here the man expects that wife must not decline the consent as they are married, which becomes a moral right to obtain sexual gratification. Although sexual coercion in intimate relationships sometimes includes men's use of violent physical force, sexual coercion in close relationships often includes subtle forms of psychological and emotional manipulation (Collibee and Furman, 2014a; Gage and Hutchinson, 2006).

## The worldwide trend of sexual coercion

Sexual coercion in romantic relationships is commonplace, and there are few population-based studies regarding intimate partner violence throughout the world.

According to a national report of the USA, 25 % of women reported being coerced for sex in their romantic relationships, and 7.6% of men reported being coerced for sexual activities in their relationship (US Department of Justice, 2000). According to their report, more than 1.5 million women get raped by their partners in a year. A systematic review of intimate partner violence reported that lifetime prevalence of intimate partner inflicted sexual coercion was as high as 25% in all the college-going women within the past year (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2015). Throughout the relationship, the extent of sexual coercion was as high as 91%. The overall intimate partner-related sexual violence was reported to be 33.9%, which means one in three women in their lifetime experience some type of sexual violence in their lives, which can range from verbal to violence, including rape. Among the LGBTQ community, sexual coercion is present in almost 21% of the cases (Ard and Makadon, 2011). This great extent of sexual coercion in romantic relationships leads us to an increased burden of care for the victims and sufferers. Sexual coercion thus contributes to a great deal of preventable health care expenses throughout the world. However, more studies in this field are necessary as most incidences remain unreported to get the exact idea of the magnitude of the problem.

## Sexual coercion in adolescents

Adolescence is an essential landmark in any individual's life. The first idea of romantic attraction happens at this age in most human

beings. The individuals first taste the essence of romance and experience the impact of a romantic relationship(s). The relationship often turns intimate and physical in 30-40 % of males and females, these experiences are colored by peer sexual coercion and victimization (Collibee and Furman, 2014b; Hickman et al., 2004; Young & Furman, 2008). Moderate to severe sexual victimization is related to an increase in disordered eating behaviors, reduced self-esteem, heightened risk for internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and suicidality (Ackard and Neumark-Sztainzer, 2002; Carver et al., 2003; Friedman, 1992; Sue Newman and Campbell, 2010; Wolfe et al., 2005; Young et al., 2012). Furthermore, sexual victimization contributes to greater risk for subsequent victimization (Young et al., 2012).

In a study, the frequency and long term (8.5 years) impact of sexual coercion were studied among 94 youths, where a significant amount of sexual coercion has been observed following which jealousy, violence, or other negative interaction and impact on further dating behavior has been observed (Collibee and Furman, 2014b). However, they didn't find any change in support or relationship satisfaction, which has been mentioned by other researchers (Levesque, 1993). Covert sexual coercion is often unnoticed; however, the overt forms, especially those directed against women, are often considered among the most heinous crimes per various laws and constitutions. The most overt form of sexual coercion, i.e., rape, has always taken precedence in gaining the notice of lawmakers, and India is no exception either. Article 21 of the Indian constitution guarantees the right to life for every individual, hence protecting every woman from any non-consensual intimacy, romance, or sex.

## Gender difference

Beliefs about intimacy and sexual behavior are often different in both genders, which is evident in all cultures, and epidemiological research has supported the same. Especially, the permissiveness about premarital sex among adolescents has shown more skewed towards permissiveness by male respondents. Interestingly, both the boys and girls have expressed more permissiveness towards male-only premarital sexual behaviors for a large sample of the population from three Asian cities, (n=16,554) (Zuo et al., 2012). The boys' beliefs were grossly towards gender inequality, all of which clearly say possibilities, chances, and facts about sexual coercion and its obvious direction among the couples. As the popularly held beliefs often being considered as 'norm' followed by frequent practices of the same, these commonly held beliefs/trends need much attention, reported up to 15% (up to 20% as per (Camilleri, 2004) of adolescent women were 'forced by a romantic partner' 'to do sexual things which initially they didn't want to do (Bogale and Seme, 2014).

Sexual coercion, needless to say, negatively impacts the emotional, behavioral, physical, and all the other aspects of both current and future relationships. Ongoing continuous coercion can lead to increased jealousy and a definite decrease in the couple's satisfaction. (Collibee and Furman, 2014b). For example, a single experience of sexual coercion increases an adolescent women's likelihood of experiencing future sexual coercion in that same relationship by seven (Camilleri et al., 2009; Collibee & Furman, 2014b)

Apart from these, sexual coercion leaves the individual with multiple physical and mental health consequences, like PTSD, lower levels of self-esteem, higher levels of depression, and higher use of various psychoactive

substances (Ackard and Neumark-Sztainzer, 2002).

## Controversy

The idea of female sexual narcissism, women seek sexual satisfaction through action done on them. Gender inequality affects the criteria of sexual attractiveness. This concept is utilized by a significant number of industries, especially beauty and cosmetics. This makes products and items that focus on some women's attributes to make them feel more desirable. It is more concerned about the performance of specific activities apart from investment in the relationship. This is a type of romantic relationship when the partner is mostly bothered about his or her attributes or qualities in a narcissistic way, so the other partner feels used up and only serves as an object of gratifying desire (Jin et al., 2019).

**Sexual fantasy:** Men fantasize about doing things to others, where women think more about getting things done to them. However, this implies a more general orientation of women, rejecting men as sexual objects in favor of conceiving them as instruments to release their female sexual potential. Men do the opposite.

In conclusion, gender inequality produces oppositions and tensions between male and female sexuality through two associated processes. Men impose their desires and fantasies on women and cultures as a result of their dominance. Simultaneously, women use sexuality as a resource to ameliorate their subordination. These cross-currents make sexuality overwhelmingly conflict-ridden. Sexuality thus becomes a conflicting entity of which creates a dispute between desire and repulsion. This tangle of tension and hidden motives produces the ideological deceptions and misconceptions through



which we know sexuality (Buss and Malamuth, 1996).

Owing to their inequality, women and men make a battleground of sexuality. Neither can be termed victors in this conflict. In historical conditions like feudalism, when men's abusive physical power reduced women's capacity for effective resistance, sexuality probably appeared much more purely a reflection of men's control. Even then, good sex required women's active participation, which is difficult to obtain by coercion. More generally, good sexual relations depend on trust, openness, and reciprocity. These are difficult enough to foster between objectively unequal people. Nevertheless, the desire for sex, even more than they need for reproduction, has driven women and men inexorably toward each other, regardless of the repellent feelings aroused by inequality and conflict.

**Strategies of the subservient :** Women may contribute to their sexual deprivation by using sexuality to resist men, but this can appear worthwhile if it gains them enough leverage against men's objectively superior position. Since women experience as much sexual desire and are capable of as much sexual pleasure as men, the strategy of sexual resistance requires that they forego pleasure to resist subordination. Moreover, this pattern of sexuality reinforces female sexual narcissism, the common psychological condition (discussed previously) where women focus on themselves as the objects of men's desires. But, while women have lacked other resources with which to fight men's dominance, sexual resistance was worth its price (Buss and Malamuth, 1996; Thornhill and Thornhill, 1992).

## Conclusion

Sexual coercion is a phenomenon observed not only in humans but in various other

animal species. It has been observed in many strata of the animal kingdom, as humans, being such an advanced species, sexual coercion has played a great part historically and socially in informing the current society. Women are likely to be subjected to sexual coercion from a young age compared to men. Socio-cultural norms and values have been the main reason for the development of such behaviors. The majority of the cultures have been patriarchal where men have enjoyed superior status socially, resulting in their ability to form coercive relationships and objectification of women also have subjected women to be a victim of coercion. There are incidences of men being subjected to coercion, but that has been lesser than women.

Last but not least, the affirmation or the ability of women to provide consent, even though acceptable in modern times, still has a lot of flaws. This subtle coercion in romantic relationships often leads women to take steps that they are not completely willing to take, in turn, face a trauma that puts them in a state of vulnerability to sustain mental and physical problems. These coercive experiences may also lead to the development of sexual diseases and other mental health disorders. Sexual coercion as a phenomenon is present across all societies. Men and women both suffer from the consequences of coercion, leading to a lack of self-worth and subsequent jealousy, lack of trust, and increased vulnerability. All this form a negative outlook, and studies have shown that sexual coercion in romantic relationships affects people's quality of life at large, targeting their emotional problems and issues. The number of sexual coercion experienced is also directly related to the sexual esteem of the person and their self-esteem. Prevention of such coercion is necessary to promote good mental and sexual health and quality of relationships.

Obtaining verbal consent and encouraging verbalization of such situations can bring about desired positive outcomes. Apart from personal strategies to prevent coercion, it is necessary to bring about social change and de-stigmatize the taboo to talk about sexual coercion. Legal and administrative bodies must also get sensitized to take measures for the effective management of coercive behaviors. Social and medical support systems for people experiencing coercion in romantic relationships must be established to deal with this growing problem.

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