

# DIGITAL CONSENT TODAY

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This month's newsletter explores how consent applies in digital spaces. We unpack how digital interactions can be sites of both connection and harm, and highlight why it's important to treat digital consent with the same care we give to in-person interactions. Alongside this, we share some simple dos and don'ts for respecting digital consent.



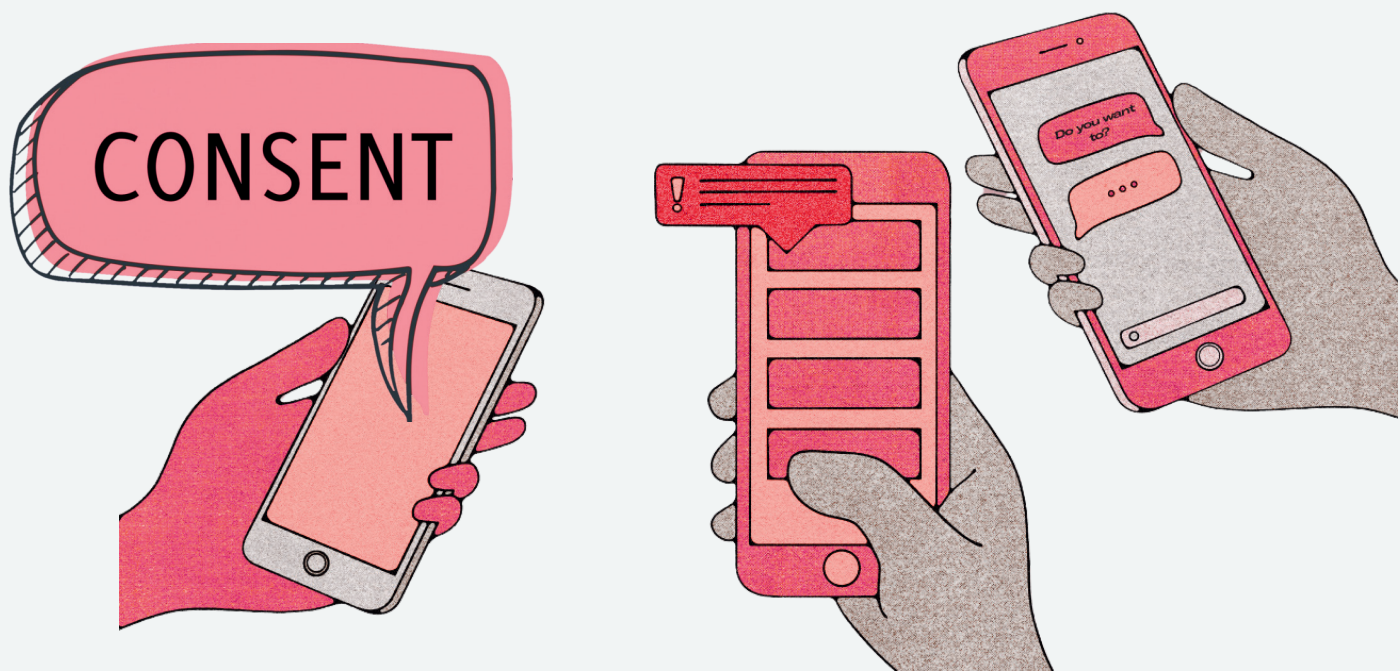
## Consent in Online Spaces

It is no longer novel or even a fresh insight to say that digital technology shapes our daily lives, that our experiences are closely intertwined with what happens online, or, as some might put it, that digital life is simply an extension of real life. What is less often discussed, however, are the power imbalances that also find their way into these spaces with just as much weight.

These power imbalances can be particularly visible in the context of sexual assault, where consent violations cross over between physical and digital spaces. In some cases, these experiences begin online; in others, online platforms become key spaces for sharing and addressing harm.

Clicking, sharing, and resharing are now routine activities, yet these simple actions carry real power. Unfortunately, that power can sometimes be used in ways that cause harm, especially for those who are already more vulnerable.

Take, for example, the non-consensual distribution of intimate photos, a form of digital abuse that has affected people of all genders for decades. Many who grew up as teenagers during the early days of the internet would likely admit this was a constant fear, especially since the film and television industry in the 2000s seemed absolutely saturated with this theme. Popular shows like *Savdhaan India* and *Crime Patrol* are case in point; if you flipped channels back then, chances were you'd land on an episode about non-consensual photo sharing or digital abuse. Early digital citizenship came with a built-in warning—this threat was something people learned to anticipate.



One might hope that the internet has progressed, that awareness has increased, and that support systems have improved, helping to reduce the shame and harm caused by these violations. Yet, the reality is that such violations still occur and have serious real-world consequences, deeply affecting individuals' sense of agency, with marginalized communities often bearing the brunt of the harm.

Because digital interactions take place outside the realm of physical presence, navigating them can often feel ambiguous, with personal boundaries being crossed either unintentionally or knowingly. While there are perceived differences between in-person and digital consent, due in part to the lack of physical cues, the fundamental principle remains unchanged. Researchers Hickman and Muehlenhard define consent as the “freely-given verbal or nonverbal communication of a feeling of willingness to engage in sexual activity.” Since willingness lies at the heart of this definition, it follows that the concept of consent applies equally to digital spaces, including interactions such as sexting, sharing images, and other forms of online communication.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize and respect the digital integrity of individuals, expanding our understanding of harm beyond the physical realm. The impact of violations in digital spaces often extends far beyond the immediate moment, carrying psychological and emotional consequences that can be deep and lasting. To foster safer and more equitable digital communities, we must approach online consent with the same seriousness and care as we do consent in the physical world, ensuring respect for personal boundaries across all forms of interaction.

# DIGITAL CONSENT AND SEXUAL BOUNDARIES

Sexual consent is about clear, informed, and voluntary agreement. In the digital realm, this principle extends to sharing intimate images, conversations, and personal information. Digital spaces can be sites of connection and care, but also of harm, especially when sexual boundaries are crossed. When someone shares or circulates intimate or sexual content without permission, it can be a form of sexual violence, sometimes called “image-based sexual abuse” or “non-consensual sharing.”

## DO'S OF DIGITAL CONSENT



### **Ask First, Always**

Ask for clear, affirmative consent before sharing or forwarding any personal content such as photos, texts, screenshots, and more.



### **Respect Privacy as an Extension of Bodily Autonomy**

Treat personal images and messages as part of someone's bodily integrity and dignity.



### **Recognize the Power of Images**

Intimate or sexual images can be deeply personal, so respect their privacy, context, and meaning



### **Acknowledge Power Dynamics**

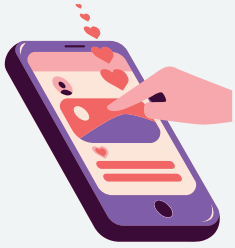
Recognize how roles (teacher-student, boss-employee, friend-group hierarchies) shape people's capacity to say “no.” Respect boundaries accordingly.



### **Check in Regularly**

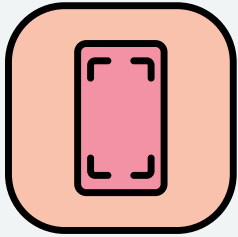
Consent is ongoing, not a one-time permission slip. Someone might feel differently later, and that's okay.

## DON'TS OF DIGITAL CONSENT



### Don't Assume It's Okay Just Because It's Online

Even when posts are public, personal boundaries still matter and should be honored.



### Don't Treat Screenshots as Harmless

Taking and sharing screenshots can break trust, even if you didn't mean harm.



### Don't Forward Without Permission

Before forwarding or reposting, pause and ask—would the original sender feel comfortable?



### Don't Overlook Someone's Hesitation

Silence doesn't always mean "yes." Make space for honest answers.

# Consent

### Don't See Consent as a One-Time Thing

Consent is an ongoing dialogue. What felt okay yesterday might not feel okay today.

The monthly newsletter from the Committee for Managing Gender Issues (CMGI) is an attempt to initiate conversations on sexual harassment. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to Geetika Sharma at [geetikas@iima.ac.in](mailto:geetikas@iima.ac.in) for queries, submissions, and/or feedback.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions regarding curbing sexual harassment on campus, please reach out to us at: Email: [chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in](mailto:chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in). Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.