



How are Youth Using Technology to Explore Sexuality Today?

by Janis Whitlock, Laura Dedmon, and Hannah Light-Olson

Humans have shown clear interest in portraying and communicating about sex and sexuality since the earliest days of humankind. Cave paintings depicting sexual acts gave way to ever more sophisticated descriptions in print and visual media as communication technologies evolved. With the advent of the internet, social media, and mobile apps, vehicles for sharing sex-related information, stories, images, or “hook-up” opportunities have opened possibilities previous generations could not have imagined in their wildest fantasies.

Internet access for everyone, including youth and young adults, is now the norm (Lenhart, 2015). The Pew Research Center has shown that most teens go online daily, often many times a day. With these changes come greater opportunities to explore sexuality through technology-mediated outlets. Youth engagement with technology as a means of exploring sex raises questions about effects on health and well-being, potential legal ramifications, and how parents and youth work professionals might best approach the issues that may now arise. This article will briefly summarize what research tells us about three ways young people mediate sexuality through technology: pornography, sexting, and mobile dating applications (apps).



Janis Whitlock is a research scientist in the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research at Cornell University. Dr. Whitlock studies youth mental health, sexuality, and the role social media plays on both of these.

Laura Dedmon is the former lab coordinator for Dr. Whitlock’s program. She is currently pursuing a post-baccalaureate pre-medical program at Hunter College.

Hannah Light-Olson is a junior at Cornell University, majoring in Human Development.

Pornography

Pornography, or “porn” for short, has flourished in the online age. No longer confined by the limits of still pictures or videos stored in the back of the store, viewers can now access thousands of videos of every conceivable type of porn in just a few mouse clicks. In short, porn use is now a highly personalized digital sexual experience.

Research indicates that while most teens have yet to develop specific tastes when it comes to pornography, by early adulthood the majority of male college students are using porn in some capacity (Carroll et al., 2008). Although porn is accessed by all genders, research suggests that males are more likely than females to access it regularly, and that males are more likely to allow porn to influence their sexual behavior in real life (Buzzell, 2005; Doornwaard et al., 2015).

Strong studies on the effects of porn use on youth are not common. Some research has linked exposure to sexually explicit media to less progressive gender role attitudes, more permissive sexual attitudes, and increases in sexual experience, though substantial differences occur in patterns for males and females (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Doornwaard et al., 2015). Studies of young adult Danish pornography users reported little or no negative effects from their pornography consumption and predominantly cited diverse positive effects on their sexual experience (e.g., frequency of sexual activity, sexual performance, positive outlook on sex, improved sexual knowledge) and quality of life (Hald & Malamuth, 2008; McKee et al., 2008, p. 85). Some scholars suggest that there may be positive effects of porn when it is intentionally sought out rather than unintentionally discovered – such as increased pleasure, self-acceptance, inclusion of handicapped people, and improved communication between sexual partners, in addition to the widening of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts. However, these positive effects have been the subject of very few empirical or theoretical studies so far (Innala, 2007).

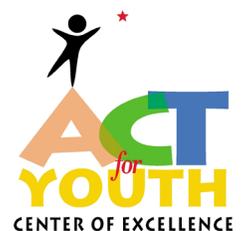
While the research is unclear about the short- and long-term effects of its use, pornography continues to be a strongly divisive issue, particularly among feminists. Some argue that pornography is inherently damaging to women because of the way it commodifies women's bodies, recruits young women into the industry, and implicitly sanctions and glorifies violence against women (Bindel, 2010; MacKinnon, 1987). Others see pornography as a form of sex positivity because it is a medium for sexual expression long denied but now available to women. They assert that pornography challenges longstanding ideas of women as naturally asexual or sexually conservative and broadens the idea of what bodies and behaviors are sexy (Willis, 2005).

Sexting

Sexting is a term used to describe sending explicit photographs to another person via the Internet or a mobile device. It is a contentious topic when it comes to youth. In some states, legal precedent has been established to criminalize sexting for teens, carrying the potential to greatly impact a young person's future if they choose to communicate in this way (Sacco et al., 2010).

Who is sexting?

A large, representative study conducted by the Pew Research Center showed that 4% of cell phone users age 12-17 had sent nude or nearly nude images of



themselves to someone else via text messaging, and 15% had received nude or nearly nude images of someone they knew (Lenhart, 2009). Interestingly, the Pew study found that teens who pay their own phone bills are more likely to send sexts (17% of teens who pay versus 3% of teens who do not pay). Adolescents who engage in sexting are also more likely to be sexually active or in a romantic relationship (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014).

The practice becomes more common as adolescents age and gain sexual experience. A large study of young adults (age 18-24) found that while 57% of the sample did not sext, 43% engaged in sexting in some capacity. More than one in four (28%) young adults both sent and received sexts, while 13% reported receiving but not sending sexts, and 2% reported only sending sexts (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). This study also found that among young adults sexting was not associated with a higher number of partners, nor was it associated with a greater proportion of unprotected vaginal or anal sex. However, studies of associations with risky behaviors are mixed (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014).

Why do young people sext?

In general, the Pew Research Center found that teens who sext do it for one of two general reasons: a) they are already dating the person with whom they are sexting and it is a form of flirtation or connection, or b) one person is romantically interested in another and considers sexting a form of enticement or “relationship currency” (Lenhart, 2009). Gordon-Messer and colleagues suggest that sexting is becoming a regular part of dating among young adults (2013).

Whatever the intention, it’s important for youth to grasp that once a sext is sent, it can be forwarded and shared well beyond the intended recipient, and the cycle of images being passed around without consent of the person in the picture can take off rapidly. This last finding is important in the context of the legal implications of sexting. While federal law defines sexually explicit content of minors as nude pictures or images of actual or simulated sex, several states have more stringent restrictions, sometimes including the sending of explicit messages among minors as a violation of law (Judge, 2013). Several high profile sexting cases have spurred important conversations about how to handle sexting since it does not conform well to federal child pornography laws largely designed to protect minors from adults. Nevertheless, in many states teens can be charged if they send or receive a sext, with penalties that can be quite significant, especially if one of them is over 18 (Sacco et al., 2010).

Dating Apps

Dating apps are geography-based mobile apps which allow a user to create a profile, select app users nearby who might be interested in meeting, and text with them, sometimes leading to meeting in person within minutes. While these apps are known for facilitating short-term sexual hook-ups between strangers, they are also used for “killing time,” socializing, and attempting to find partners for long-term relationships (Goedel & Duncan, 2015; Rice et al., 2012; Willoughby et al., 2014). Dating apps such as Tinder and Grindr are widely known, and there are many more which pop in and out of existence depending on their popularity. However, what we know about the use of these apps among youth, as well as the effects of dating apps on young people’s sexual experiences, health, and relationships, is very limited.



The number of young adults (age 18-24) who use mobile dating apps has increased dramatically from 5% in 2013 to 22% in 2015 (Smith, 2016). Little is known about the prevalence of use among minors; however, Tinder reported in 2016 that 7% of its users were between the ages of 13 and 17. These findings prompted Tinder to institute a policy change prohibiting minors from using the app (Farber, 2016). While most dating apps are restricted to those over the age of 17, processes for verifying age are limited and easily circumvented.

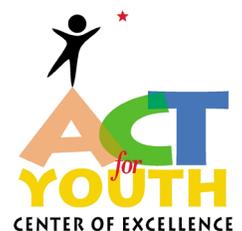
Like online dating websites, dating apps have the potential to foster some sense of connection, particularly for individuals who feel marginalized or live in big cities. For example, those who are stigmatized for their sexual orientation may find community through dating apps and matchmaking websites (Rice et al., 2012; Willoughby et al., 2014). So far, however, research suggests that connections formed in this way may not last long (Feuer, 2015). One qualitative study of adult gay men, for example, showed that men who created profiles on dating apps generally used these for hook-ups rather than to find long term relationships. The study found that lasting relationships were typically started and fostered outside of their dating app accounts (Gudelunas, 2012).

While research into mobile dating apps and sexual health is sparse, a number of studies have focused on adult men who have sex with men, who were early adopters of the technology. Research suggests that adult men who use the internet to find opportunities for sex with men may be more likely to take risks with sex (i.e., more sexual partners, more partners known to be HIV+, and higher odds of unprotected anal sex) than those who do not use the internet for dating (Goedel & Duncan, 2015). The use of dating apps for hook-ups (as opposed to use of the internet more broadly) does not necessarily mean that sex is more likely to be unprotected, and studies of dating apps used by men who have sex with men are few and inconclusive (Grosskopf, LeVasseur, & Glaser, 2014). However, there is growing interest in discovering ways to use dating apps to promote public health messages about safer sex (Huang et al., 2016).

Talking with Youth about Sex in the Digital Age

The broad array of opportunities for accessing sexual content and exchange supports the need for greater family communication about values, expectations, and agreements. Early and regular communication about sex and sexuality is helpful for teens and tends to promote healthier engagement. When parents regularly discuss sex with adolescents, their children feel closer to them. These conversations also leave children feeling better able to communicate with their parents, both specifically about sex and on topics more generally (Martino et al., 2008).

Sex education is a powerful tool for engaging young people in discussion about the healthiest ways to explore sexuality and meet potential romantic partners. As technology plays a greater role in human engagement with sexuality, it's important to integrate these topics into both formal sex education and informal conversations with trusted adults, providing young people the tools they need to safely find their way. ★



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Bronfenbrenner Center for
Translational Research
Beebe Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14853
t. 607.255.7736
f. 607.255.8562
act4youth@cornell.edu

www.actforyouth.net

www.nysyouth.net

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