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Assessing Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction in Adolescent Relationships Formed Online and Offline



Heather D. Blunt-Vinti, Ph.D., M.P.H.^a, Christopher Wheldon, Ph.D., M.S.P.H.^b,
 Mary McFarlane, Ph.D.^c, Natalie Brogan, M.P.H.^d, and Eric R. Walsh-Buhi, Ph.D., M.P.H.^{e,*}

^a Department of Health, Human Performance, and Recreation, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

^b Department of Community and Family Health, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida

^c Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia

^d Booz Allen Hamilton, McLean, Virginia

^e Division of Health Promotion and Behavioral Science, Graduate School of Public Health, San Diego State University, San Diego, California

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Using the Internet to meet new people is becoming more common; however, such behavior is often considered risky, particularly for adolescents. Nevertheless, adolescents are meeting people through online venues and some are forming romantic/sexual relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship and sexual satisfaction reported by teens in online- and offline-initiated relationships.

Methods: Data were collected from 273 13–19 year olds visiting a publicly funded clinic through 2010 and 2011. Questions included where respondents met the partner (online vs. offline), time between meeting and first sex, how well they knew the partner, and relationship and sexual (R&S) satisfaction. Analyses consisted of descriptive statistics, *t* tests, and path analysis, exploring R&S satisfaction in online- and offline-initiated relationships.

Results: R&S satisfaction scores were moderate for adolescents who reported meeting partners online and in person but were statistically higher in offline-initiated relationships. There was an inverse relationship between having an online partner and both relationship and sexual satisfaction. Additionally, knowing partners for a longer period of time and feeling more knowledgeable about partners before having sex were statistically significantly related to higher R&S satisfaction.

Conclusions: Teens in this study reported more satisfying relationships with partners met offline compared with online. Results suggest that encouraging teens to wait longer and to get to know their partner(s) better before engaging in sex may improve satisfaction with, and quality of, those relationships. These findings provide an important contribution to sexual health promotion among young people, with whom technology use is ubiquitous.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Despite its ubiquity in today's society, particularly among adolescents, little is understood about adolescent use of technology in forming relationships, including romantic and sexual relationships. This study assessed sexual and relationship satisfaction reported by adolescents and found higher satisfaction in relationships initiated offline compared with online. Implications for education are discussed.

* Address correspondence to: Eric R. Walsh-Buhi, Ph.D., M.P.H., Division of Health Promotion and Behavioral Science, Graduate School of Public Health, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182-4162.

E-mail address: ebuhi@sdsu.edu (E.R. Walsh-Buhi).

Adolescence, typically encompassing ages 13 through 19 years, is a time when teens are exploring their sexuality and engaging in new romantic relationships. In a recent national study of high school students, nearly half reported having had

sexual intercourse [1]. Most of the literature in this area focuses on sexual activity in adolescence as a risk factor for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) [2], unintended pregnancy [3], and negative mental health outcomes [4,5]. This body of research is devoid of any mention of sex as pleasurable or satisfying for teens [6], although we know that the quality of adolescent sexual experiences may influence psychosexual development (e.g., sexual self-concept) and impact sexual health into adulthood [7]. Although it is important to understand the risks and consequences of adolescent sexual activity, this negative focus leaves us ill equipped to address adolescent sexuality holistically and to support positive and healthy relationships formed during adolescence that may lead to healthy adult and family relationships [8,9].

Consequently, there has been a call for sexuality research and education to embrace positive aspects of adolescent sexuality [10] and for the development of sex-positive approaches to adolescent sexuality research [11]. To develop a comprehensive understanding of adolescent sexual experiences and sexuality-related choices, we must consider these relationships and experiences fully, including the positive experiences. Indeed, there is a body of literature, dating back to article by Fine [12], recommending that sexual health education include discourse about pleasure and desire, particularly as a method to empower young women about their sexual agency and even reduce pressured or coerced sexual activity [12–16]. Nevertheless, in 2015 we have little more information about adolescent sexual pleasure and desire than several decades ago. Within the limited existing research, there is evidence that older adolescents and young adults report high levels of satisfaction within their sexual relationships. One study [17] found that young people aged 18–25 years reported feeling physiologically and psychologically sexually satisfied at first intercourse (62% and 67% reported moderate–extreme satisfaction, respectively). Another study found that 85% of participants aged 14–24 years reported being satisfied with their current sexual relationship [9]. The literature shows that relationship and sexual satisfaction are important components of adult romantic relationships [18], and as adolescents are in the early stages of learning about and experimenting with relationship development, it is important to consider their satisfaction along with sexual health in these experiences. However, the research with younger teens is still lacking, despite stable numbers of young adolescents engaging in sexual activity. Although adolescent sex is a sensitive topic, it is imperative that we explore all aspects of adolescent relationships, including romantic and sexual satisfaction, in an effort to better understand the role this may play in the development and stability of relationships during this stage of development. Understanding the role of satisfaction in various forms of adolescent sexual and/or romantic relationships (e.g., in dating relationships, “friends with benefits”, and so forth) will help public health professionals develop and deliver comprehensive, relevant, and most importantly, informed sexuality education to young people.

Adolescents and the internet

In an exploration of contemporary adolescent relationships, we cannot ignore one ubiquitous method of communicating and connecting with others—use of the Internet and social networking sites (SNSs). Adolescents are among the earliest adopters and most engaged users of the Internet and spend

much of their time communicating through SNSs (e.g., Facebook), instant messaging, chat (e.g., Snapchat, WeChat) and other sharing applications (e.g., Instagram), and blogs [19,20]. Along with instant messaging, SNSs continue to serve as a main method of communication for teens [21,22]. In addition to forming friendships with people met online [21], teens are reporting initiation of romantic and sexual relationships through online venues, such as online dating and SNSs [23]. In a systematic review, we found no literature focusing on relationships that initially develop online and transition into offline friendships or sexual relationships.

Finding sex partners online

Experiences of finding sex partners online is well documented among certain priority populations, including men who have sex with men [24] and, more recently, among heterosexual men and women [25]. Some research suggests that younger people, including adolescents, are meeting new people and initiating romantic and sexual relationships online [26]. Most research on Internet partnering has focused on risks involved, including risk of STIs [24,27]. Research based on young men who have sex with men has indicated that sex with an online partner was perceived to be less risky when they reported “knowing their partner” [28]. Although it is important to understand the potential for emerging sexual health risks associated with meeting partners online, it is also important to assess characteristics of these relationships (such as “knowing the partner”) that may influence both sexual risk and satisfaction and to explore ways in which online relationships may, or may not, systematically differ from those that originate through more traditional venues (e.g., offline).

Studies have examined satisfaction with strictly online romantic relationships (those that did not transition into “real life” relationships) in men and women and found some similarities in variables that predicted online relationship satisfaction compared with face-to-face relationships, including trust, intimacy, and communication satisfaction [29]. However, to date, we are not aware of any research that has examined sexual or relationship satisfaction in relationships that are initiated online and transition into face-to-face, particularly with adolescents.

Our study aims to (1) identify factors that may influence adolescent relationship and sexual satisfaction, which may contribute to accurate and relevant information on desire and pleasure included in comprehensive sex education and (2) provide insight into adolescent relationships formed through technology use, a growing venue through which this age group is forming new relationships. We explore characteristics of adolescent relationships and, specifically, assess potential differences in sexual relationships initially formed online compared with those formed offline.

Methods

Data were collected through an audio computer-assisted self-interview (ACASI) as part of a larger study surveying 13–19 year olds visiting a publicly funded clinic in Florida [30]. The purposes of the larger study were to examine the prevalence of online sex seeking and online sexual partnership development among adolescents; to explore the differences in sexual health profiles between teens who do and do not report meeting sex partners

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