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Adolescent online romantic relationship initiation: Differences by sexual and gender identification

Josephine D. Korchmaros ^{a, b, *}, Michele L. Ybarra ^{b, 1}, Kimberly J. Mitchell ^{c, 2}^a University of Arizona-Southwest Institute for Research on Women, 181 S. Tucson Blvd., Ste. 101, Tucson, AZ 85716, USA^b Center for Innovative Public Health Research, Inc., 555 N. El Camino Real #A347, San Clemente, CA 92672-6745, USA^c Crimes Against Children Research Center, Family Research Lab, University of New Hampshire, 10 West Edge Drive, Ste. 106, Durham, NH, USA

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ABSTRACT

Data from the national Teen Health and Technology Study of adolescents 13–18 years old (N = 5091) were used to examine online formation of romantic relationships. Results show that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) and non-LGBTQ adolescents similarly were most likely to have met their most recent boy/girlfriend in the past 12 months at school. However, they differed on many characteristics of romantic relationship initiation, including the extent to which they initiated romantic relationships online. LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ adolescents also differed on level of offline access to potential partners, offline popularity, and numerous other factors possibly related to online relationship initiation (e.g., Internet use and demographic factors). Even after adjusting for differences in these factors, LGBTQ adolescents were more likely than non-LGBTQ adolescents to find boy/girlfriends online in the past 12 months. The results support the rich-get-richer hypothesis as well as the social compensation hypothesis.

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Romantic relationships are common among U.S. adolescents (Manning, Longmore, Copp, & Giordano, 2014). Having these intimate relationships is a normative, age-typical task for adolescents, and these relationships have significant implications for health, adjustment, and psychosocial functioning (Bouchey & Furman, 2003; Collins, 2003). These relationships are opportunities for adolescents to learn about positive relationship dynamics as well as challenges of relationships (Manning et al., 2014). With an estimated 95% of U.S. adolescents ages 12–17 using the Internet (Lenhart et al., 2011), the Internet is a readily available tool to find and interact with potential romantic partners. Thus, understanding the extent of and factors related to adolescents' use of the Internet to meet romantic relationship partners can have important implications for the long-term well-being and health of adolescents.

* Corresponding author. University of Arizona-Southwest Institute for Research on Women, 181 S. Tucson Blvd., Ste. 101, Tucson, AZ 85716, USA. Tel.: +1 520 295 9339x210.

E-mail addresses: jkorch@email.arizona.edu (J.D. Korchmaros), michele@isolutions4kids.org (M.L. Ybarra), kimberly.mitchell@unh.edu (K.J. Mitchell).

¹ Tel.: +1 877 302 6858x801.

² Tel.: +1 603 862 4533.

To date, research on the extent to which people initiate romantic relationships on the Internet, or online, has focused on adults. Studies indicate that it is common for adults to develop relationships online. However, only about 3–26% of these relationships are romantic (Donn & Sherman, 2002; Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant, & Zusman, 2001; Madden & Lenhart, 2006; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Smith & Duggan, 2013; Stevens & Morris, 2007). What seems to be missing in the literature are rates by which adolescents are forming romantic relationships online.

Adolescents are developmentally unique in terms of sexual development, sexual identity development, and other factors that impact romantic relationships and their formation (Connolly & McLissac, 2011; Furman & Wehner, 1997). Thus, data regarding online formation of romantic relationships from adults are not necessarily reflective of adolescent behavior. Data from adolescents are needed to know the extent of adolescents' online formation of romantic relationships.

Some attention has been paid to factors related to adolescents' use of the Internet to form relationships more generally. Much of this attention has focused on two hypotheses (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The rich-get-richer hypothesis proposes that the characteristics that facilitate relationship formation offline (i.e., in person) will also facilitate relationship formation online. Consequently, those adolescents who are relatively popular offline will be relatively popular online and group-based disparities in adolescents' formation of relationships offline will be mirrored in online relationship formation (Kraut, 2002; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005). Conversely, the social compensation hypothesis proposes that the online environment and affordances facilitate relationship formation particularly for adolescents who have difficulty forming relationships offline (Kraut, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Peter et al., 2005). Consequently, group-based disparities in the formation of adolescents' relationships offline will *not* be experienced when forming relationships online. Instead, adolescents who have difficulty forming relationships offline will experience relative ease in forming relationships online.

Consistent with the rich-get-richer hypothesis, socially anxious and lonely adolescents communicate via the Internet less often than those who are not (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008). As a result, socially anxious and lonely adolescents have less opportunity to form and develop relationships online.

Consistent with the social compensation hypothesis, lonely and socially anxious adolescents prefer online to face-to-face communication (McKenna et al., 2002; Peter et al., 2005; Pierce, 2009; Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007), suggesting that they are more comfortable communicating in the online environment. Furthermore, lonely adolescents (McKenna et al., 2002) and those with greater depressive symptomatology (Ybarra, Alexander, & Mitchell, 2005) are more likely to use the Internet to form relationships.

Although research concerning rates of and factors associated with adolescents' online formation of *romantic* relationships is lacking, scholars have speculated about which adolescents go online to meet romantic partners and the benefits of doing so (e.g., social enhancement and social compensation). This speculation has considered social skills as well as other social factors that impact the difficulty of forming romantic relationships. Some scholars (e.g., Walther & Parks, 2002) have focused on the characteristics of online communication that can have detrimental effects on relationship initiation, for example, reduced social cues. Consistent with the rich-get-richer hypothesis, these characteristics of the online environment seem to favor relationship formation for socially adept individuals.

Contrarily, consistent with the social compensation hypothesis, some scholars have speculated that people who experience barriers to meeting romantic partners, such as shyness and lack of access to available partners, will particularly benefit from non-traditional methods to find and meet potential romantic partners, such as using the Internet (e.g., Woll & Cozby, 1987). For example, the relative ease of self-disclosure online can lead to attraction (e.g., McKenna et al., 2002; Whitty & Carr, 2006), which, in turn, can facilitate romantic relationship formation for shy or otherwise socially-guarded people. In addition, the widespread reach of the Internet greatly increases opportunities to find particular types of people. These opportunities are particularly important for some minority groups, such as gay teens (e.g., Cooper & Sportolari, 1997).

Certain groups of adolescents, such as those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), might experience particular difficulty forming romantic relationships offline. This difficulty might be because LGBTQ adolescents tend to have fewer potential romantic partners available as they are estimated to comprise only 5% of the population of adolescents 13–18 years old (Harris Interactive & Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2005). Simply because LGBTQ adolescents are a minority group, they have a limited number of potential partners. In addition, LGBTQ adolescents might experience particular difficulty forming romantic relationships offline because potential partners might be fairly well hidden; the stigma of developing romantic relationships with same-sex partners can be particularly difficult to overcome as an adolescent; and the risk of prejudice and physical harm may be great (Lever, Grov, Royce, & Gillespie, 2008).

Although there may be differences based upon one's sexual and/or gender identity (e.g., gay/lesbian compared to bisexual), generally the barriers to creating and maintaining romantic relationships for LGBTQ adolescents are more similar to each other than to the barriers for non-LGBTQ youth. These difficulties contribute to LGBTQ adolescents being less likely to have romantic relationships as compared to heterosexual female and male adolescents (Diamond & Dube, 2002).

Consistent with the social compensation hypothesis, the Internet might help to address these barriers that are experienced by LGBTQ adolescents and to ease the process of initiating romantic relationships for them. The Internet provides LGBTQ adolescents with an environment in which they can search for, find, and interact with like-minded individuals anonymously and, generally, can do so more safely than in the offline environment. LGBTQ individuals have the potential to learn about another person, such as their sexual identity, through the information that person posts online, such as on a social network page (McKenna, 2007).

Existing data suggest that LGBTQ adolescents use the Internet to address these barriers. A substantial percentage of males aged 16 to 24 who have sex with other males have had sexual partners whom they met online (Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski,

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