Chapter 11

Youth, Sexuality and the Internet: Young People’s Use of the Internet to Learn about Sexuality

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ABSTRACT

Prior research on the use of the internet for sexual purposes has primarily focused on its negative and problematic aspects, such as compulsivity and addiction. Thus, little is known about any possible benefits. The purpose of the current chapter is to focus on how young people aged 12-24 use the internet as a source of knowledge about sexuality. The results rely on qualitative and quantitative data collected in Sweden at various points in time between 2002 and 2009. Young people seek information about various things in relation to sexuality. The primary reason is to gain knowledge about bodily functions and sexual performance. The qualitative data also indicated gender differences in how sexual issues were communicated online. Some young people sought sex information to become sexually aroused while others viewed online pornography to gain knowledge about sexuality, suggesting a possible link between knowledge and sexual arousal. The internet encompasses specific characteristics making it easier to communicate about sexuality in ways sometimes impossible offline. The fact that one can type while being physically distant to others appears to be a particular advantage with using the internet as a source for knowledge about sexuality compared to other ways of communication.

This chapter contains explicit content

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how the internet can constitute an arena of knowledge and learning about sexuality for young people in today’s society. In many western cultures and societies sexuality is surrounded by shame and guilt and often consigned to the private areas of life. Nevertheless, sexuality is one part of the reflexive self which is being negotiated in a never-ending project (Giddens, 1992). Gagnon
and Simon (1973) claim that the sexual learning process from early age is often non-verbal or negative in the sense that sexual behaviours are either ignored or deemed inappropriate. Sexuality or knowledge about sexual intercourse, for example, is not included in the cultural norms embedded in modern discourses of childhood and therefore neglected (Renold, 2005). According to Gagnon and Simon (1973), most of our sexual knowledge is gained from peers when we are young. As we grow older, we make the association between sexuality and guilt which makes us keeping sexual matters secret from, for example, parents and friends.

The consequence is that sexual arousal and practices are restricted to the individual and kept as secrets, away from others sometimes including one’s partner(s). At the same time, and as Foucault (1976) observed some decades ago, sexuality is discussed more openly today than ever before; it is constantly present in public settings in various media and defined as the individual’s responsibility. This reveals two parallel tendencies: privatization by individualization on the one hand and collectivization by increasing public exposure on the other. One can assume that this becomes a complex area to handle for the individual in general and for young people in particular since sexuality is a topic in progress for this group. Young people and the complexity of the topic combined with the restrictions for social performances in offline environments and the alternative conditions for interaction that the internet provides make an interesting point of departure for further investigation about how this topic is handled by young people in online environments. This point of departure becomes even more interesting when considering the technological shift from the early days when the World Wide Web was a means to communicate contents to an almost endless number of users to Web 2.0 platforms where the users create the content themselves in a more interactive version of the web.

Relatively few studies focus on how young people seek information or talk about love and sexuality online and when this is the case they primarily focus on the negative or problematic aspects associated with this usage. Concerns arise in adult society when young people spend time interacting or gathering information about sexuality. One example of this is a study of youth magazines in the UK (Tincknell et al., 2003). This study shows that there is a “societal concern” arising about some magazines that provide too much sexual information to young girls. One can easily come to the conclusion that young people’s use of the internet for developing sexual skills is a burning issue and therefore strongly related to negative aspects. So far users have been seen as passive victims of problematic online content (Döring, 2009). This may be particularly true when referring to the younger segment of users. However, research suggests that most young people manage to navigate in the sexual landscape while being both reflective and critical (Månsson & Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2007). Thus, young users should be perceived as active internet users who decide what content they want to find and what content they want to avoid online. Furthermore, young users may be perceived to encompass a competence which allows them to evaluate and reflect over the sexually related content they find or avoid on the internet.

Although the number of published articles about love and sexuality on the internet has grown exponentially since 1993, a closer look reveals a fragmented field of research. A comprehensive literature review of the scientific journal papers published between 1993 and 2010 concludes that a lion’s share of the studies have focused on the negative – or problematic – consequences of the use of the internet for sexually related activities (Döring, 2009). Another literature review suggests that it is possible to discern three problematic areas that have caught the researchers’ attention since the mid 1990s. One is the medical, or epidemiological, area where the major focus has been on the internet in
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