
SEX EDUCATION IN A DIGITAL AGE:
THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND
TECHNOLOGY IN
TEENAGERS' LEARNING
EXPERIENCES

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A QUICK

OVERVIEW

- Scope of the issue: K-12 sex ed in U.S.
- Sex-positive criminology framework
- Methods
- Findings
- Recommendations for research, policy, and education

UNITED STATES CONTEXT

NO NATIONWIDE STANDARD FOR SEX ED

- Competing Ideologies: Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) and Abstinence Only (AO)
- **As of May 1, 2022:**
 - **39 states and DC mandate sex ed and/or HIV education**
 - 30 states + DC mandate that the content *meet certain requirements*:
 - Medically accurate (18 states)
 - Age-appropriate (26 + DC)
 - Culturally competent/inclusive (9)
 - Abstinence must be stressed (28)
 - Only negative information about LGBTQ / positive emphasis on heterosexuality (5)
 - Healthy relationships (35 + DC)
 - Teen dating violence and sexual violence prevention (40 + DC)
- As a consequence: students seek out information about healthy versus unhealthy sex and relationships through **informal sources** (e.g., family, friends, experience internet)

GENERATION Z: DIGITAL NATIVES AND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

- Born after 1996; largest and most diverse generation
- Grew up in post-internet world and rely on technology for communication, education, activism, entertainment
- Victimization in adolescence has short- and long-term consequences on wellbeing; yet, research on this topic focuses on college-aged samples
- Crucial voices in understanding the current sociopolitical climate, their hopes and fears for the future, and their perceived role in enacting sociopolitical change



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SEX-POSITIVE CRIMINOLOGY

- Feminist, queer, intersectional framework focusing on humanizing sexuality and preventing violence
- Advocates for destigmatizing conversations around sexuality, teenagers' opportunities to develop social-emotional skills including boundaries, agency, and communication, and ongoing education about physical psychological, and emotional safety (Wodda & Panfil, 2018)
- **Thick desire** (Fine & McClelland, 2006)
- **Ongoing comprehensive sex ed is a form of violence prevention**

RESEARCH QUESTION

What roles do media and technology play in teenagers' perceptions and knowledge of sexual education?

METHODS

- Recruitment
 - Recruitment fliers, convenience sampling, snowball sampling
 - Amendments in response to Covid-19
- Data collection
 - Semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted virtually
- Analytic Strategy
 - Memos
 - Grounded theory
 - Deductive and inductive coding

DATA AND SAMPLE

Total sample: 43 interviews

	N (%)		N (%)
School type		Race/ethnicity	
Public school	27 (63%)	White (Non-Hispanic)	29 (67.4%)
Private school	16 (37%)	Black	10 (23.3%)
Grade level		Asian	1 (2.3%)
9 th	3 (7%)	Hispanic/Latinx	2 (4.7%)
10 th	19 (44.2%)	Sexual orientation	
11 th	11 (25.6%)	Heterosexual	31 (72.1%)
12 th	10 (23.3%)	Bisexual	4 (9.3%)
Gender		Gay/lesbian	3 (7%)
Male	12 (27.9%)	Unsure, still deciding, no label	3 (7%)
Female	30 (69.8%)	Prefer not to say	2 (4.7%)
Non-binary	1 (2.3%)		

THE ROLE OF

MEDIA AND

TECHNOLOGY

1. INDEPENDENT
RESEARCH

2. COMMUNICATION

3. ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH
“THERE’S ALWAYS GOOGLE”

- **Over half** (58%, n=25) of respondents described looking up information on their own
- Females described researching sexual and reproductive health
- **All** respondents who **identified as LGBTQ** described using the internet to gain a better understanding of their sexuality and the LGBTQ community.
 - For LGBTQ students, pornography served an educational purpose

EXPLORING SEXUALITY **ON THE INTERNET**

*“I take ‘Am I gay?’ quizzes and I’ve definitely looked it up. **But I haven’t found a definite answer from Buzzfeed.com... there’s so many different labels I honestly didn’t know, I still don’t understand what queer means and I didn’t know what pansexual was I just researched it, I am researching about myself”**
(Taylor, 10th grade)*



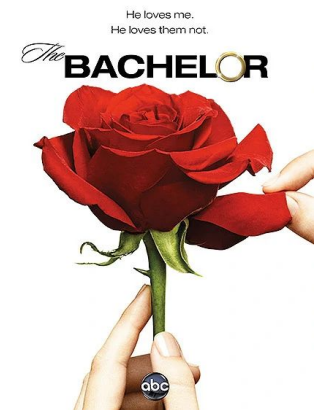
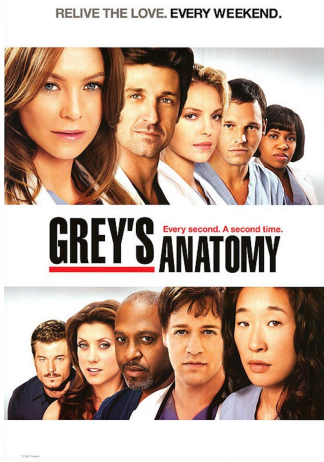
COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

“YOU LEARN FROM THE INTERNET AND YOU
TELL YOUR FRIENDS”

- Nearly 90% (n=38; 88%) of respondents used social media
- Nearly three-quarters (n=31; 72%) of respondents learn about current events and issues related to sexual violence (#MeToo) through social media
- Student-led social media activism served as a source of information and support for issues of racialized and gendered victimization experiences

HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA

- Over one-third (n=17; 40%) referenced YouTube series, tv shows, and/or movies when describing their personal definitions and examples of healthy or unhealthy relationships



NORMALIZING SEXUALITY

SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MEDIA

- Teenagers' perceptions and attitudes towards pornography are complex
- Nearly one-third (n=9; 30%) of females embraced sex-positive feminist motifs, highlighting gendered double standards in media
 - *"We follow porn stars on Instagram. Porn stars are Instagram influencers now."*
(Molly, 11th grade)
- Nonetheless, respondents consistently expressed dangers of pornography perpetuating unrealistic expectations, misogynistic attitudes, and acceptance of sexual coercion and violence
 - *"There can be a lot of rape, and not taking a no, and taking on intimacy as a real no, saying 'you just don't like it I will make you like it', those kind of messages are often shown in porn and it is not good"* (Kat, 12th grade)

“The only way to make kids more educated, more safe, and have healthier relationships is to make it more normalized”

Olivia, 11th grade

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, EDUCATION, POLICY

1. Research
 - a. More research needed: children's and adolescents' technology consumption
 - b. More research needed: K-12 sex education and its role in prevention
 - c. U.S. can learn from international perspective: evidence-based programming and successful models of sex education
2. Education
 - a. Incorporate technology into pedagogy
 - b. Media literacy and porn literacy (Quinlivan, 2018; Rothman et al., 2018)
3. Policy
 - a. CSE that is medically accurate, age-appropriate, inclusive should be **universally implemented** in the United States
 - b. Expansion of funding, training, resources for sexual violence and teen dating violence prevention at K-12 level

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THANK YOU!



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