

Online Peer Support for Adolescent Online Sexual Risk

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1. INTRODUCTION

Children are growing up in an increasingly digitalized world and their processes for learning, creating, communication and socializing are affected by technology from an early age [14]. 57% of teens aged 13-17 report having started friendships online and 55% have used social media to flirt with someone [10]. Internet affords them opportunities to form relationships and explore sexual identities [18]. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that more sexual interactions between teens will be moving online. However, using the Internet to seek intimacy has also become a key stressor [19] that can pose risks to safety and wellbeing.

Research shows that adolescents are more often victimized by people that they know [6,16]. They are also struggling more to reject online sexual solicitations such as requests for nudes or sexts from people they know, than from strangers [15]. When it comes to adolescent online sexual risk, parents and researchers however often focus on sexual predation risk from strangers. We also know that adolescents are increasingly leveraging the Internet to seek support and advice about relationships [9], and sexual health [8,17]. However more research is warranted concerning the kind of social support they receive via the Internet about their online sexual experiences [1]. We build upon prior research by analyzing social media trace data from an online peer support platform to answer the following research questions:

1. What kind of online sexual experiences with people they know do adolescents seek support for online?
2. What kinds of online peer support do adolescents receive in order to deal with these situations?

2. RELATED WORK

Related research can be divided to following themes:

Risky Adolescent Online Sexual Experiences such as abuse and sexting [11,18], unwanted sexual solicitations [12], looking for sexual partners [13] and grooming [7]. Much of the research concentrates on risks posed by strangers, while we investigate what online sexual experiences adolescents seek support for related to people they already know.

Peer Support for Sexual Risk. Peer support is important when coping with stressful situations [4,5], peer support is important also for discussing online sexual experiences [2,3,9]. Much current research focuses on adults, and we add to this discussion by examining what kind of support they receive in order to deal with these situations.

3. METHODS

We licensed a dataset from an online mental health peer support platform which included over 5 million posts and 15 million comments from 2011- 2017. It was scaled down to a feasible size for qualitative analysis by identifying posts by adolescents aged 13-17 that were seeking support for online sexual experiences (not offline) with people they know (not strangers). This resulted in a dataset of 837 original support-seeking posts made by 721 unique users. Average age of posters was 15.5. 78% were female, 12% were male, 10% did not disclose their gender. 3050 associated peer comments were made by 1642 unique commenters whose age or gender is not identifiable from the data. As the vast majority of the posters were female, our data tells a story about empowering teenage girls to seek and receive support on how to engage in sex safely online.

We started our analysis by doing a qualitative thematic analysis of the support seeking posts in our dataset to identify online sexual experiences with people they know that adolescents seek support for (**RQ1**). To develop the codebook three coders discussed the posts and came up with initial codes and descriptions. They were discussed between five researchers, similar codes were merged as consensus was reached. Coder Inter-rater reliability was 84.4%.

Next a qualitative thematic analysis of peer comments was carried out using a classification of social support developed by Cutrona and Suhr [4,5], in order to find out what kind of support adolescents receive concerning these online sexual experiences (**RQ2**). Inter rater reliability for coding was 95.4%.

4. RESULTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This section presents the main results of our work and discusses the contribution to computer science.

4.1 Adolescent Support Seeking

Seeking support after having already **engaged** in online sexual experiences with someone they know was the most common category of posts with 35% of all posts (n=837). This included themes such as being ghosted after engaging, people forwarding nudes to others, and being bullied at school after people found about the sexual experiences.

Adolescents were also discussing **other** people's sexual experiences (22%), themes included sharing cautionary stories of others, seeking help for friends or venting about feeling awkward after accidentally seeing someone's sexts.

It was also fairly common to seek support after having been **solicited** to engage in online sexual experiences by people that they know (17%). Themes included for example fearing rejection if the request is turned down, or the fear that the other person is just using them for nudes, as well as self-esteem issues.

Teens had also received **unsolicited** online sexual advances (9%) and were unsure of how to react. As these advances involved people that they knew, they often feared awkward encounters in real life. 9% of the posts dealt with being **harassed** sexually online in a way that is causing them fear or distress. This

included for example being blackmailed after engaging in online sexual experiences, or being manipulated into them. Seeking support after being **accused** by friends or family members for engaging in online sexual experiences was relatively uncommon (5%), as was seeking support for being **interested** in engaging in online sexual experiences (4%). These posts were usually after general opinions, for example if engaging in sexting is a bad idea.

4.2 Peer Support Received

Providing information was the most common form of peer support received in original posts with 75% of all comments in our dataset (N=3050) falling under this category. This included for example providing advice on how to proceed in order to navigate out of a difficult situation or helping the original poster reassess or redefine the situation. For example a girl aged 14 sent nudes to boys and the whole school found about this, she fears they think she is slutty. A commenter responds: *"I've been through the same thing. You're not any of those things. They don't know what they're saying. Don't believe the names that they're calling you"*.

Providing emotional support was also common (36%). This was mostly done by simply expressing to the poster that you are listening to what they have to say, making attentive comments that have no purpose but to signal them that you are reading what they are explaining. Also common was expressing understanding or empathy, or sympathy. A girl aged 16 explains having had FaceTime sex with a boy she likes, but when she told him she wanted the relationship to be more, the boy stopped replying. A commenter replies: *"Honey i am so sorry!!! He isnt worth you if he did all that shit to you"*.

Esteem support (15%) was usually given by validating the poster's feelings, alleviating feelings of guilt, or emphasizing positive things about them. For example poster aged 16 has previously sent nudes to their now ex-partner, who has shared them with others. They received the following reply: *"We all make mistakes but we learn from them. Stay strong, you are beautiful"*.

Offering access to networks that can help was relatively uncommon (7%), as was **offering tangible**

assistance (4%) perhaps partly due to the medium. Comments in these categories mostly consisted of offering online companionship and expressing willingness to help by offering social media handles in case they want to discuss in private.

4.3 Contributions

To our best knowledge it is the first study using trace-data from teens to study how they seek and receive support for online sexual experiences with people that they know, as well as the types of peer support that is offered to them when trying to cope with the consequences of these experiences. Understanding of how teens seek support, and what kind of peer support they receive is necessary when designing online systems that effectively facilitate social support for adolescents that have the need to discuss sensitive matters that are important to them, such as their sexual experiences and their sexual health.

5. REFERENCES

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