

## Chapter 7.21

# The Internet and Adolescent Sexual Identity

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the potential role of the Internet in the process of adolescent sexual identity construction. It starts by providing evidence of the ever-increasing role the Internet is playing in the lives of adolescents and by considering the potential impact such a technology is likely to have given the transitional nature of the adolescent brain. A consideration of theoretical approaches for understanding the role the Internet is likely to play in individuals' sexual self-identity development is then undertaken. A review of the specific role Internet communication technologies have come to play in the process of adolescent sexual socialization is then carried out. In doing so the authors argue that

future research addressing the role of the Internet in the process of adolescent sexual socialization and identity development must consider both the specific structure of the adolescent brain and the unique nature of the Internet as a source of information and an opportunity for social networking.

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period of great psychological and social transformation. Puberty is a major developmental milestone of adolescence. The changes occurring during puberty signal the transition into adolescence from childhood. These changes are initiated by the synthesis and release of various steroid hormones. This in turn results in the onset of secondary sexual characteristics as well as often

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striking changes in individuals' mood, positive affect, sensation seeking and behavior (Petersen, Silbereisen, & Sorenson, 1996, p. 5). It is with this sometimes tumultuously transitioning brain that adolescents are often forced to develop a new sense of self identity; one befit for a world suddenly marked by so much physical, social, and psychological change. Given all of the chemical, biological, and (related) psychological changes occurring during adolescence it should come as little surprise that the development of one's sexual self-identity is one of the most complex experiences marking the period of transition from childhood to adulthood.

Researchers have long accepted that one of the primary tasks of adolescence is the development of a sense of self or identity (Erikson, 1968). This includes development on the part of individuals of a sense of how they fit into their social and physical worlds, as well as a perception of how they are perceived in those worlds by others. A fundamental part of the construction of every young person's self-definition is the development of a sexual identity (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996; Chilman, 1983; Gagnon & Simon, 1987). According to Buzwell and Rosenthal (1996), sexual identity, in addition to an individual's sexual preferences, perceptions of masculinity and femininity, or what they perceive to be appropriate or inappropriate sexual behaviors, also includes "... an individual's perception of his or her 'qualities' in the sexual domain" or "...their perceptions of the *sexual self*" (p. 490). These preferences and perceptions, it is argued, are largely a function of, among other things, the interplay between an individuals' psychological constitution and their social experiences (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002; Sisk, 2006). Key to understanding the development of adolescent sexual identity is therefore a consideration of both the structure of the adolescent mind and the nature and types of information and experiences upon which individuals rely in constructing this dimension of their self concept.

Although media have long been assumed to

have a primary role in the process of sexual socialization (for reviews, see Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005; Ward, 2003; see also, Brown, 2000), recent research has demonstrated that the Internet is a particularly powerful source of information for young people regarding issues of sexual identity (Bremer & Rauch, 1998; Kraus & Russell, 2008; Peter & Valkenburg, 2008; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). Adolescents have been found to frequently use the Internet to communicate about and explore their sexualities. This includes everything from the discussion of a broad range of sexual topics, to virtual dating, to participating in episodes of "virtual sex" (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield & Tynes, 2004; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006).

The current chapter argues that adolescents' growing reliance on the Internet as a source of information exchange, entertainment, and potential social networking (both of a sexual and nonsexual nature) means that it is playing an increasingly important role in the development of young peoples' sexual identities. Any understanding of contemporary sexual identity development must therefore include a consideration of the role of the Internet in this process. Further, we argue that specific attention must be given to understanding how various characteristics associated with the unique technological nature of the Internet are likely to be processed by, and influential on the distinctive adolescent mind. An understanding of this interaction will allow researchers, clinicians, and educators to better aid adolescents in effectively preparing for, and dealing with the process of sexual identity construction in today's world.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Adolescents' Use of the Internet**

Data from the United States and the United Kingdom indicate that the amount of time adolescents spend online has continued to increase since the Internet first became publicly available in the early

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