

Young people must negotiate risks and issues of consent for online sexual encounters, researcher says

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Young people see the internet as a natural platform for their everyday romantic and sexual encounters, but at the same time, they have to weigh

up the benefits against various risks and dangers. This is according to a new study from a Malmö University researcher.

In the study, "Youth, [consent](#) and the internet: An affect-theoretic study of young people's sexual online practices," teenagers aged 16 to 19 participated in group discussions. Questions related to how they make sense of and negotiate consent in different sexual situations in [digital communication](#), and how early online experiences shape their choices regarding digital sexual communication and dating in general.

Kim Ringmar Sylwander, a postdoc at the Center for Sexology and Sexuality Studies, notes that negotiations of sexual consent online are shaped by heteronormative expectations of boys' and girls' sexuality. And much like in offline [sexual encounters](#), consent in online sexual communication is rarely negotiated as a "yes" or "no," but rather about feeling each other out.

"The boys and young men in our study feel pressure to ask for consent but also to get it in the right way; that is, it should feel good for the girl. Whereas the girls and [young women](#) find it difficult to navigate situations where they receive unwanted invitations from people they don't want to have a [sexual relationship](#) with; this has to be constantly negotiated to avoid shaming. The girls describe it as 'letting them down gently.' They have to calculate what the consequences are if they angrily dismiss or block someone at school with the risk the guys might spread nasty rumors about them."

The young people describe doing things when they were younger that they now consider immature. For example, they were on chat websites, such as Omegle, where naked men could appear and masturbate. The boys were "nude hunting" (looking for girls' nude pictures on the social networking site, Yubo) and didn't consider that there was a real person behind the picture.

"The interesting thing is that they perceived themselves as mature when they were twelve years old; they thought they were in control and certainly understood the risks and could handle the platforms in a responsible way. However, they now see their previous choices as a result of a lack of consequential thinking."

They also report that the digital sexual practices they engaged in during their early teens faded significantly when they later became romantically involved in offline settings.

"It is also clear that no adult has ever talked to them about the benefits of online sexual interactions, most of the educational messages they receive are about risks and dangers—especially for girls, which reinforce victim-blaming. We should focus more on what sexual rights [young people](#) have and what right they have to their privacy and their own body," says Sylwander.

More information: Project: mau.se/en/research/projects/Young-people-must-negotiate-risks-and-issues-of-consent-for-online-sexual-encounters-researcher-says

Provided by Malmö University

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