



A Qualitative Analysis Approach for Romantic and Sexual Themes in the Online Communications of Adolescents

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Introduction

An expanding literature on cyberbullying has demonstrated that conflict through digital media can be linked to adverse mental health outcomes, notably depression¹⁻³ and suicidal ideation and attempts.⁴⁻⁶

Digital social environments provide an ideal setting for qualitative study of adolescent interactions as they reveal communications uninfluenced by the presence of an adult researcher.⁷ Despite at least a decade of calls for such inquiry, however, only a very limited body of work has examined first-hand the online communications as a context of psychosocial development.⁸

Sexuality,⁹ sexual orientation/gender identity,⁵ and sexual assault and harassment¹⁰ have been emphasized as core areas of research into cyberbullying and its mental health implications. Due to the personal, dyadic, and at times taboo nature of adolescent sexuality and romance, such relationships are one area of psychosocial development where there is particular value in opportunities for qualitative analysis uninfluenced by the presence of an observer.¹¹

This work takes a thematic analysis approach¹² to examining digital interactions of adolescents in their direct digital communications with peers.

In particular, the purpose of this work is to establish a qualitative scheme for examination of how romantic/sexual relationships and sexual orientation appear in the digital communications of adolescents aged 13-17.

Methods

Study Participants: The participants were part of a larger NICHD-funded R21 study evaluating a text-message-based intervention for secondary prevention of cybervictimization. Eligible participants were 13 to 17 years old and had reported past-year cybervictimization. This research was conducted under approval from the Rhode Island Hospital Institutional Review Board.

Data Collection and Pseudonymization: As a voluntary part of the overall study, participants were asked to allow pseudonymized download of up to four weeks of online/text message conversations. Participant data was extracted using the Sochiatrist software.¹³ Participants were present at the time of the download and given the ability to decide which messaging platforms and particular messages could be downloaded.¹⁴ All downloaded messages were automatically pseudonymized by the software, and then hand-checked for any missed identifiers before coding was conducted.

Development of a Qualitative Coding Scheme: The coding scheme was developed by a mixed deductive-inductive process. An initial set of codes was developed based on literature review, pre-identified themes of interest, and study objectives. This initial scheme was then modified and refined based on emergent and inductive findings, elimination/consolidation of less-applicable codes, and areas of disagreement or variation that arose among independent coders until a consensus scheme was reached.

Results

Participant Demographics

Of the participants completing the follow-up interview (n=34), 59% (n=20) agreed to have their messages downloaded. Among those agreeing to the download:

- Mean age: 14.7 years
- 65% female
- 85% non-white
- 50% Hispanic or Latino

There were no significant differences in age, gender, race/ethnicity, or self-reported cyberbullying scores between those who did and did not agree to the data download.

Coding Scheme and Examples*

1. Degree of involvement of conversational participants in relationship being discussed
1.1 Conversation between partners in the relationship
1.2 One person in the conversation in the relationship
1.3 Relationship doesn't involve anyone in conversation

"Babe I miss you" (1.1)
"I used to talk with him" (1.2)
"Ok but why is [name] on a date with some junior?" (1.3)

2. Behaviors and Events of Sexual/Romantic Relationships
2.1 Planning relationship activities
2.1.1 Planning for clear sexual activity
2.2 Desire
2.3 Past Partners
2.3.1 Exes
2.3.2 Break-up (event)
2.4 Infidelity
2.5 Reference to taboo, illegal, or undesired sexual behaviors
2.6 Progression toward or within a relationship
2.7 Expression of feeling for a partner
2.8 Sexual/romantic behavior that already happened

"next time its gonna be in your bed" (2.1.1)
"I still haven't had time to get over [name]" (2.3.1)
"how come he never shows that kind of loyalty with females" (2.4)
"he was like 'once your ## call me'" [referring to older client at work] (2.5)
"I cant be happy with anyone else" (2.7)
"either that or youve just been staying with me for the sex" (2.8)

3. Characterizations of persons involved in relationships
3.1 Reference to sexual orientation/minority gender identity
3.2 Reference to sexual "reputation"
3.3 Reference to appearance/attractiveness of a partner
3.4 Reference to trait other than appearance of a partner

"jokes on you though, your new girl looks like she likes girls" (3.1)
"damn boys would f***anything" (3.2)
"You better look good or were breaking up" (3.3)

4. Sharing of Sexually Explicit Imagery
4.1 Request for sexual/explicit images
4.2 Discuss (non-request) sexual/explicit images

"Ill send a pic n make it easy" (4.1)
"you know what kinda pics I was talking about" (4.2)

*In keeping with best practices for social media research, quotes used throughout have been modified slightly to avoid unintentional violation of confidentiality.¹⁵

Conclusions

The iterative coding scheme has developed to reflect three “dimensions” of messages pertaining to sexuality:

- (1) Codes: Degree of involvement of the persons in the conversation as members of the relationship/sexual behavior
- (2) Codes: Nature and events of the relationship/sexual behavior
- (3) Codes: Characteristics of the people involved in the relationship or sexual behavior

An additional category (4) was included to capture specific topics of interest, notably discussion of/requests for sexually explicit imagery. This section may be used to capture additional illustrative topics of interest should they arise.

Next Steps

These dimensions of the scheme will allow, upon complete coding of all transcripts, for analysis of patterns of 1) who discusses relationships, 2) what elements they discuss, and 3) what these discussions suggest about the adolescents involved. Notably, we expect that themes will arise from the frequency and ways with which codes do (or don't) overlap with those of the other dimensions (e.g. whether comments about physical attractiveness occur more often about persons *not* in a conversation vs. in conversations involving the subject being discussed). Query-based analysis will thus focus on the frequency and nature of co-occurrence of the various codes/coding categories. This analysis will also assess overlap with previously-coded themes of conflict within this same data set.¹⁴

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