Online communication predicts Belgian adolescents’ initiation of romantic and sexual activity

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## Topics

## Sample

A school-based, two-wave study conducted in 2010: 1504 students aged 12 to 18 years old from 12 schools in different regions of Flanders completed the questionnaire at baseline and 1163 of them (77.3 %) completed the questionnaires for both waves

## Implications For Educators About

Other

# Abstract

Online communication is associated with offline
romantic and sexual activity among college students. Yet, it
is unknown whether online communication is associated with
the initiation of romantic and sexual activity among adoles\_x0002\_cents. This two-wave panel study investigated whether chat\_x0002\_ting, visiting dating websites, and visiting erotic contact
websites predicted adolescents’ initiation of romantic and sex\_x0002\_ual activity. We analyzed two-wave panel data from 1163
Belgian adolescents who participated in the MORES Study.
We investigated the longitudinal impact of online communica\_x0002\_tion on the initiation of romantic relationships and sexual inter\_x0002\_course using logistic regression analyses. The odds ratios of
initiating a romantic relationship among romantically inexpe\_x0002\_rienced adolescents who frequently used chat rooms, dating
websites, or erotic contact websites were two to three times
larger than those of non-users. Among sexually inexperienced
adolescents who frequently used chat rooms, dating websites,
or erotic contact websites, the odds ratios of initiating sexual
intercourse were two to five times larger than that among non\_x0002\_users, even after a number of other relevant factors were
introduced.

# Outcome

"The odds ratio of initiating a romantic relationship was twice as large among frequent users of chat rooms as that among non-users, three times larger among frequent users of dating and erotic contact websites than that among non-users. Furthermore, the odds ratio of initiating sexual intercourse was twice as large among frequent users of chat rooms, three times larger among frequent users of dating
websites, and more than five times larger among frequent users of erotic contact websites than that among non-users. Adolescents
use online communication as a vicarious learning environment to explore their own sexuality and romantic feelings. While online communication appears to allow adolescents to experiment with their sexuality before engaging in actual offline sexual and romantic activities, it may at the same time hinder adolescents to engage in authentic, rewarding sexual and romantic interactions. Furthermore, the revealed findings are useful for the development of effective health communication campaigns. Education and prevention campaigns are recommended to target the segment of adolescents that frequently communicates online through chat boxes, dating websites, and/or erotic contact websites. Also, parents and educators need to be informed about the possibility to identify adolescents with an increased likelihood of becoming sexually and romantically active by their online usage." (Vandenbosch et al., 2016, pp. 512-514)