

EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE PARTNER-SEEKING AND 'SEXTING' AMONG A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE: FINDINGS FROM THE THIRD AUSTRALIAN STUDY OF HEALTH AND RELATIONSHIPS

Authors:

CALLANDER D¹, MCMANUS H¹, DE VISSER R², GRULICH A¹, HOCKING J³, RISSEL C⁴, GUNARATNAM P⁵, CARTER A¹, BATESON D⁶, FISHER C⁷, YEUNG A⁸, HAMMOUD M¹, OGILVIE E¹, GUY R¹

¹Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales, ²University of Sussex, ³Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, ⁴Flinders University, ⁵Clinton Health Access Initiative, ⁶Medicine and Health, University of Sydney, ⁷Victoria University, ⁸Unity Health Toronto, University of Toronto

Background:

Recent years have seen incredible expansion of online partner-seeking technologies (e.g., mobile apps) and practices (e.g., sexting), presenting sexual health challenges and opportunities. This study aimed to estimate prevalences of online partner-seeking in Australia to guide policy and intervention.

Methods:

The *Australian Study of Health and Relationships* (ASHR) is a nationally representative survey conducted every decade. ASHR3 comprises population-weighted data collected in 2022/2023 by computer-assisted-telephone-interviews with 3,480 men, 3,680 women, and 66 non-binary people (n=7,226). Univariable and bivariable analyses describe key variables and assess trends; weighted odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) were calculated between sociodemographic strata.

Results:

In 2023, 34.1% of ASHR3 participants reported ever using the internet to find partners (95%CI:32.8-35.4), up from 5.4% in ASHR2 conducted 2012/2013 (95%CI:5.09-5.72). In ASHR3, 19.2% in steady relationships met online (95%CI:18.1-20.3) while 38.1% met a recent sexual partner online (95%CI:34.6-41.8). By age, 20-39-year-olds were most likely to meet partners online (51.8%) compared to 16-19-year-olds (24.8%; OR=0.39, 95%CI:0.35-0.44) and ≥40-years-old (28.6%; OR=0.28, 95%CI:0.21-0.39). However, among those with a sexual partner in the past 12 months, ≥40-years-old were the most likely to have met online (41.7%), similar to 20-39-year-olds (38.1%; OR:0.88, 95%CI:0.65-1.21) but higher than 16-19-year-old (26.7%; OR:0.45, 95%CI:0.22-0.89). Overall, 41.7% had sent sexual digital content ('sexting'; 95%CI:41.2-43.4), including 9.1% first while under the age of 16 (95%CI:8.9-11.2). In total, 3.9% had sexual content of themselves shared without consent, which was more common among women (4.5%) than men (3.2%; OR:0.70, 95%CI:0.54-0.91) but most common among non-binary people (11.7%; OR:3.05, 95%CI:1.36-6.81).

Conclusions:

A third of Australians have met sexual or romantic partners online, and many share sexual content. Such content is often shared at a young age and without consent. These findings highlight an urgent need for digital literacy strategies around online sex and dating, especially for young people.

Disclosure statement:

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