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Understanding How Young People Experience Risk with Online-to-Offline Sexual Encounters: A Second Qualitative Phase for the CH@T Project

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Understanding How Young People Experience Risk with Online-to-Offline Sexual Encounters:

A Second Qualitative Phase for the CH@T Project

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a concentration in Bio-Cultural Medical Anthropology
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Abstract

This study investigates how heterosexual young people understand and manage risks related to meeting sexual partners online in the United States. The purpose of this study is to help inform the development of culturally-appropriate sexual risk communication and health promotion messages for young people by linking public health knowledge of adolescent sexual health and eHealth with anthropological theories of risk. With qualitative data from two rounds of semi-structured interviews and two group interviews with university students in central Florida, this study shows how young people experience and prioritize more social-emotional risks in meeting online-to-offline sexual partners compared to physical risks. The prominence of these social-emotional risks implies the need for more health promotion messages that incorporate both physical and social-emotional health risk communication.
Chapter One: Introduction

As technology becomes more and more pervasive in American culture, there has been growing interest – both scholarly and publicly – in how advancements in technology and social media are affecting the experiences of young people. As Lenhart and colleagues (2015, 13) write in a recently released report for the Pew Research Center,

“In the past generation, parents, policymakers, advocates and journalists have paid particular attention to the possible pathologies that can arise from youths’ use of digital tools – from fears about online predators and bullying, to young adults’ purported narcissism, to the allure and distractions of screen-based life. Less attention has been focused on how teens have woven their technology use into the fundamentals of their social lives, particularly where friendships start and relationships deepen.”

My interest lies in the very same gap in the literature that Lenhart and colleagues identify, “how teens have woven their technology use into the fundamentals of their social lives,” and this study is based on the premise that more anthropological research is needed in this area.

The “fundamentals” of young people’s social lives – namely their behaviors and beliefs – are being constructed and enacted online, and this points to a new American sub-culture that should be explored by anthropologists. Since many are indeed concerned with the “possible pathologies” and health risks that emerge within this sub-culture, one way that anthropologists can help is to shed light on the emic perspectives of the young people themselves: How do they perceive and manage health risks in online-to-offline encounters? What aspects of health are most important to them? This study is meant to be an entrée into questions such as these.
In the United States, the percentage of young adults using the Internet has risen from 70% in 2000 to 96% in 2015 (Perrin and Duggan 2015). Of teens between the ages of 13 and 17, 92% report getting online daily with 24% of those saying they are online “almost constantly” (Lenhart 2015). The number of individuals using social networking websites doubled between 2008 and 2011; by 2011, nearly three-fourths of adolescents and young adults were using them – many on a daily basis (Noar and Willoughby 2012). According to the Pew Research Center, 71% of teens who use the Internet today report using Facebook – keeping Facebook as the most used social media site and Instagram as the second most popular – while a similar majority report using more than one social media platform (Lenhart 2015).

In terms of access to the Internet via different devices, 93% of teens report having a computer or access to a computer in the home, and almost one-quarter report having a tablet computer (Madden et al. 2013). As for mobile phones’ place in the American technological landscape, 88% of teens have access to smartphones or basic mobile phones and 90% of those teens use text messaging (Lenhart 2015). According to the Pew Research Center, mobile phones and other devices have become a “primary driver of teen internet use” (Lenhart 2015, 2); 91% of teens get online from mobile devices, and 94% of those teens do so at least daily.

With young people in the U.S. online almost constantly, these statistics all point to a cultural shift in young people’s norms, behaviors, communication styles, and social interactions. As health scientists, educators, and parents attempt to keep up with and reach out to young people, more formative, qualitative research will be useful. One area in which such research is proving to be particularly useful is sexual health promotion and risk communication.
THE ERA OF *CATFISH* AND POTENTIAL RISKS ONLINE

An interesting perspective on how young people use the Internet and other online modalities to establish and build relationships is found in the popular documentary film *Catfish* and the subsequent MTV series *Catfish: The TV Show*. Both recount the experiences of people meeting online prospective romantic partners in person after being deceived online. Stemming from the 2010 documentary film with the same theme, *Catfish: The TV Show* aired for the first time in 2012 as “a new MTV series that brings together couples who’ve interacted solely through their LCD screens” (MTV 2015). The reality show drama revolves around online couples’ first meetings in person where one person has been “catfished.” The show’s website defines “catfish” as “[pretending] to be someone you're not online by posting false information, such as someone else's pictures, on social media sites usually with the intention of getting someone to fall in love with you” (MTV 2015). The popularity of this show and the insinuated perils of meeting romantic/sexual partners online is clear from the references in other primetime network shows such as *Bones* and *New Girl* to getting catfished online and on apps such as Tinder.

As Buhi and colleagues argue in a recent chapter on “Sexuality and New Technologies” (2014, 92),

“The widespread adoption of mobile technologies, and the use of such technologies for sexual exploration and expression, call for a greater focus from sexual health researchers and educators to address the associated risks and benefits of their use.”

In a recent study with students from two different universities in Florida, Buhi and colleagues (2012) help direct that new focus by investigating the prevalence of sexual relationships among young people that began online along with any associated sexual health behavior risks. The research team emailed an online questionnaire to a random sample of 11,539 undergraduate students stratified by their year in school. A total of 2,630 students responded to the
questionnaire, but 92 students’ responses were excluded from the dataset because of self-reported dishonesty or inconsistent response patterns. For the analyses related to sexual risk, 2,053 students met the inclusion criteria including identifying as male or female and reporting ever having oral/vaginal/anal sex. Of those 2,053, 11.5% (237) reported sexual activity with an online partner. Of those 237, approximately half (48.8%) had met their online sexual partner through a social networking site. While 11.5% of the analyzed sample reported having sex with an online partner, only 9.6% reported using the Internet to look for sexual partners.

While risky sexual behaviors were not more likely with online partners versus offline partners, such data point to the need for more research on the complexities of online-to-offline sexual relationships among young people (Brown, Pugsley, and Cohen 2015; Buhi et al. 2012). As Buhi, Powers and Noble (2013) state:

“The focus on STD risk has led to a dearth of information about how teens and young adults find partners online, how online relationships transition to offline sex, and what other kinds of risks and outcomes manifest in those processes.”

In the context of evermore technologically-saturated relationships where the popularly cited risk of being catfished meets the physical sexual health risks prioritized by public health efforts, this study is meant to lend anthropological insight into young people’s online-to-offline sexual relationships and the nature of the risks they perceive for themselves in the online sub-culture of the United States.

RESEARCH PROJECT OVERVIEW

To that end, the objective for this paper is to recount and examine the experiences of young heterosexual people who have met sexual partners online. While participants’ experiences will be contextualized by descriptions of common elements in their narratives, the larger focus of this paper will be on the cultural manifestation of risk that those experiences present: young
people’s risk perceptions, risk management strategies, and opinions on how those risks should be communicated by public health practitioners to other young people. The research questions this paper intends to address are two-fold:

1. How do young people who have met sexual partners online identify and manage risks related to their experiences with online-to-offline sexual relationships?
2. How do young people who have met sexual partners online want to see the risks they perceive addressed by public health promotion efforts?

The next chapter, Chapter Two, will further position this study in relation to the existing literature on technologically-mediated sexual relationships, the cultural nature of risk and young people’s perceptions of it, and theories of risk management and communication. Chapter Two will introduce the relational theory of risk from economic anthropology, which will frame the analysis and discussion later in this paper. Chapter Three will detail the research design and methodology of this study, and results will be presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five will be a discussion of main findings and reflections on how this study contributes to the existing literature as well as the disciplines of anthropology and public health overall. As the final chapter, Chapter Five will close with recommendations for future research, comments on the limitations of this study, and concluding thoughts.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

There are growing bodies of literature in disciplines such as communications as well as public health investigating how advancements in technology and social media are affecting the experiences of young people, and sexual health promotion and risk communication are key areas of interest in the latter. As teens are agents in their own use of technology and how they use it in their social lives, they are also agents in understanding the risks that technology presents to them. Therefore, it is important to position this study within the literature on young people’s technology use as well as their perceptions of risk in general. While anthropologists have yet to delve into this new online/offline sub-culture of young people in the U.S., the anthropology of risk provides building blocks for this particular area.

Beginning with an overview of what technologically-mediated relationships look like in the United States (especially sexual relationships), this chapter goes on to review the literature related to young people’s perceptions of risk, our understanding thus far of the cultural nature of risk, and the theories of risk communication that may best help shape culturally-sensitive health promotion messages for young heterosexual people meeting sexual partners online. While this literature review started in public health and anthropological sources, gaps in that literature justify the need for this research. Where these gaps have surfaced, this chapter pulls from other intersecting disciplines such as communications and psychology to help frame this study.

TECHNOLOGICALLY-MEDIATED SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Pew Research Center has begun publishing a three-part series on teens’ use of technology, and the second and most recently released segment is on how teens use technology
in initiating and maintaining friendships – a telling feature of this sub-culture. According to Lenhart and colleagues (2015), 57% of teens in a nationally-representative sample have made at least one new friend online; 29% have made more than five new friends. Older teens are purportedly more likely to have online friends than younger teens, and the majority of these friendships (nearly two-thirds) begin on social media sites such as Facebook. However, most of these online friendships stay online – only one in five of those teens have met an online friend in person. In addition to communicating through the Internet (where instant messaging, social media, email, video chat and games, and messaging apps are popular platforms), text messaging on mobile phones is overall the most common way that teens interact with their friends on a daily basis (Lenhart et al. 2015).

In addition to using technology to begin and maintain friendships, though, young people also use the Internet for a whole host of sexuality-related purposes, including “sexual self-expression, communication, seeking and engaging in a wide variety of sexual behaviors, and accessing critical sexuality and sexual health information” (Buhi et al. 2014, 77). While the literature related to how people meet sexual partners online is indeed growing, it has been dominated by studies with men who have sex with men (MSM), adult heterosexuals, and European populations (Buhi et al. 2013b; Lelutiu-Weinberger et al. 2015). For that reason, this study delves into the sub-cultural experiences of young heterosexual people specifically.

**Online Dating**

In terms of what is known about adult heterosexuals and the phenomenon of online dating, one positive attribute to emerge from the research is that of “virtual nearness” (Mahfouz, Philaretou, and Theocharous 2008), which is the “sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social identification that arises from online interactions” that may be part of the benefits of
meeting sexual partners online (Buhi et al. 2014, 87). Another aspect of online platforms’ appeal for dating is individuals’ perceived control of self-presentation (Buhi et al. 2014; Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006). These concepts are related to the theoretical frameworks of self-presentation and self-disclosure/uncertainty reduction in the communications field (Ramirez et al. 2015), and there are corresponding negative aspects of online dating.

According to the literature, one of the most commonly cited concerns is the issue of trust and the possibility of individuals lying about or misrepresenting themselves in some way online (Buhi et al. 2014; Cali, Coleman, and Campbell 2013; Donn and Sherman 2002). Online daters have also reported worrying more about risks of physical or sexual violence with online partners (Anderson 2005), but the research done on online dating has not shown evidence of the validity of this concern (Cali, Coleman, and Campbell 2013). Although these particular concerns are even prominent among young adults on dating websites (Donn and Sherman 2002), whether or not these concerns are salient to young people on different social media platforms needs to be explored.

In the last decade, scholars have also begun studying “modality switching” as the tipping point between such positive and negative outcomes: relatively earlier modality switching, “transitioning from online communication to offline interaction” (Ramirez et al. 2015, 100), is associated with less uncertainty and more positive relational outcomes (e.g., intimacy) whereas later modality switching is associated with heightened uncertainty and more negative outcomes (e.g., distrust). The significance of modality switching has only begun to be understood in the context of adult online dating, however, and not yet in the context of young people’s oftentimes more casual experiences meeting sexual partners online.
Even as “more of people’s interactions take place in virtual environments, [and] online dating becomes a natural extension of their social lives” that is more accepted rather than stigmatized (Buhi et al. 2014, 86), young people’s formative experiences with online-to-offline relationships are still relatively unknown. As Rietmeijer and colleagues (2001, 1434) pointed out in the research literature over a decade ago,

“It may be that MSM are currently the group most actively using the Internet for sex-seeking purposes, but there is no reason to believe that this medium is less appealing to heterosexuals, particularly those who are coming of age in the on-line era.”

The Pew Research Center is trying to address this dearth of knowledge with the forthcoming third installment of their series on teens and technology, which will discuss teens’ romantic relationships. Along similar lines, the study presented in this paper is a qualitative inquiry into heterosexual young people’s experiences of online-to-offline sexual relationships.

UNDERSTANDING RISK, RISK COMMUNICATION, AND RISK PERCEPTION

Many social theorists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have written about the concept of risk, and the sociologist David Denney summarizes the main points of discourse in his book Risk and Society (2005). He contrasts the histories of the concepts of “danger” and “risk,” explaining that the latter has come to refer to more spatial-temporal “situations of uncertainty” that may have the former as a negative effect (9). Referring to Ewald’s work on the matter in the early 1990’s, Denney writes that, “rather than notions of danger, risk should be more closely associated with chance, hazard, probability, eventuality and randomness on the one hand, and loss and damage on the other” (9). While not necessarily always negative, risk is often perceived as negative and thereby one-in-the-same as danger. In Lupton and Tulloch’s sociological study, participants understood risk to mean the “danger of the unknown” (2002, 325).
As “part of the science of risk assessment and the process of risk management,” risk communication is most easily understood as a type of technical communication (i.e., the communication of scientific or technical information) that conveys information about health, safety, or environmental risks to a particular audience (Lundgren and McMakin 2013, 2). Risk communication is meant to inform, educate, persuade, or motivate change. Unlike other types of technical communication, though, risk communication is unique in how it relies on two-way communication; for risk communication to be successful, the entity attempting to manage a risk and the audience perceiving that risk (or not) must participate in some kind of feedback loop (Lundgren and McMakin 2013).

Risk assessment, management, and communication contribute to a number of research areas in public health, and they are key elements of many public health campaigns (Bennett et al. 2010; Lundgren and McMakin 2013). The anthropology of risk is vast as well, as anthropologists have been interested for decades in “how risk is identified, understood, communicated and managed and, ultimately, how risk is embedded in social life and its variety of contexts” (Boholm 2015, 1). The following sections of this chapter will detail the relevant risk literature from both public health and anthropology.

**Risks in Online-to-Offline Sexual Relationships**

According to the existing public health literature, having online sexual partners has been associated with physical sexual health risk behaviors such as unprotected intercourse, substance use, multiple sexual partners, and a history of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV (Brown, Pugsley, and Cohen 2015; Buhi et al. 2013b). Two juxtaposing theories have arisen in public health to explain the relationship between online relationships and sexual health risks: the accentuation hypothesis posits that the dynamics of meeting sexual partners online inherently
add to the physical sexual health risks posed, (i.e., attributes of the online environment such as anonymity may increase the risk relative to that involved when meeting sexual partners in person) (Liau, Millett, and Marks 2006). The self-selection hypothesis, on the other hand, suggests that individuals who are already at higher risk may be more likely to use the Internet to meet sexual partners (Liau, Millett, and Marks 2006). The more recent study described in Chapter One suggests that these two theories do not sufficiently address the cultural complexities of young people’s experiences with online relationships that lead to offline sexual relationships (Buhi et al. 2012).

Given the conclusions from the previous research, it is important to reiterate here that this research study focuses on the experiences of young people who have met sexual partners online and also identify as heterosexual – regardless of their motivations or intentions for those online-to-offline relationships. Young people were eligible for the study if they had a sexual encounter with someone they initially met online, whether or not they were seeking out a sexual partner online. This study is meant to set the stage for exploring the potential “other kinds of risks and outcomes” that young people meeting sexual partners online may perceive.

**Young People and Health Risks**

A point of contention in the literature on risk is related to the diversity of ways individuals perceive risks related to their own health. Risk perception depends on a number of factors, including knowledge, cultural experience, social stratification, and life stage, and risk-taking is the subjective negotiation of how an individual perceives of, and acts on, their own relevant risks and goals (Denney 2005). To understand the relationship between these different factors and risk perception during adolescence, researchers look to “broad social contextual processes” as well as “individual psychological and biological processes” (Lerner and Steinberg
For example, as part of the study of adolescence as a life stage in Western societies, some scholars dating back to the early 1990’s have argued that certain characteristics of young people make them more prone to risk-taking (Plant and Plant 1992). One such characteristic, the “myth of invulnerability” in which young people perceive themselves to be indestructible, has been associated with young people’s predilection for experimentation with unprotected sex, recreational drugs, and other risky behaviors (Denney 2005; Lerner and Steinberg 2004).

Scholars have historically attributed the myth of invulnerability to the idea that young people perceive risks to be more controllable or less harmful than adults do, but more recent in-depth studies of young people’s risk perception indicate that it is much more complicated – and much less universal – than that (Knoll et al. 2015). For example, Knoll and colleagues (2015) posit that social influence is a more predictive factor in adolescent risk-taking: young people adjust their perceptions of risk to conform to the perceptions of adult and peer social-influence groups. For young adolescents in particular, the risk perceptions of peers matter even more than those of adults (Knoll et al. 2015).

The nature of the relevant risk also affects young people’s perception of it; some researchers argue that “young people specifically tend to fail to understand cumulative risks and long-term severity of consequences” (Larsman, Eklöf, and Törner 2012, 741). In Larsman and colleagues’ recent review of studies on young people’s risk perceptions and risk behaviors, they found mixed associations. Some studies indicated a positive association between risk perception and risk behavior wherein young people involved in risky behavior better understood their increased susceptibility; and other studies suggested a negative association in which young people who engaged in risky behavior had lower risk perception (or the inverse). Such mixed associations led Larsman and colleagues to conclude that risk perceptions and risk behaviors
among young people must be understood on a case-by-case basis. This conclusion points to the importance of understanding the cultural nature of risk.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Anthropologists as well as sociologists have analyzed social/cultural influences on risk perception, and perhaps the most widely recognized theoretical contribution of anthropology has been the cultural theory developed by Douglas and Wildavsky (Rippl 2002; Boholm 2003). According to cultural theory, risk perception and risk management are entirely culturally constructed. It follows that “the values and worldviews of certain social or cultural contexts shape the individual’s perception and evaluation of risks” (Rippl 2002, 148), and “people understand and judge risks in terms of emic, locally defined, values and concerns” as well as local explanatory models and moral guidelines (Boholm 2003, 161). In this case, with the worldviews of young people being evermore constructed online, it follows that their perception and evaluation of risks in this context warrants more investigation.

The cultural theory of risk is not completely relativistic, though, since it lumps different risk responses into four “basic sociological forms” based on grid-group theory: egalitarianism, individualism, fatalism, and hierarchism. Each form is defined by its relative position on two axes: control and social commitment (Rippl 2002). According to Rippl’s explanation of the cultural theory (2002), egalitarians value social commitment/group cohesion but do not value social control/hierarchy, so they hypothetically will reject risks that endanger the group. Fatalists do not value social commitment but do accept social control/hierarchy, so they will not concern themselves with risks they perceive to be out of their control. On the other dimensional side, individualists devalue both control and social commitment, and they fear risks that could constrain them. The hierarchal group, by valuing both control and social commitment, will
hypothetically take on risks that are endorsed by the proper authorities (Rippl 2002). In terms of individuals’ perceptions of health risks, such distinct categorizations are problematic because perceptions of health risks are not static – as discussed earlier, they are continually constructed based on different factors in individuals’ lives (Denney 2005).

Scholars such as Boholm have advocated for a more critical look at how risk is cultural (Boholm 2003). Boholm writes, “we need… to find some middle ground between on the one hand the absolute relativism of … the culturally ‘constructed’ risk of cultural theory, and on the other, the technical ‘objectivist’ notion of risk” (Boholm 2003, 165). Some anthropologists have set about doing just that. The last decade in anthropology has seen advancements in the anthropology of risk, with anthropologists starting to try to go beyond cultural theory to unpack the “black box” of culture’s influence on risk perception and management (Boholm 2003; Zaloom 2004; Kabel and Chmidling 2014).

Drawing on the risk literature in economic anthropology to develop the relational theory of risk, Boholm explains how there are two types of risks: “known risks which people are prepared for and which they have adopted strategies to mitigate” (i.e., calculable risks with “rational” decisions) and other risks for which “knowledge is inadequate and… no established procedures of management exist” (Boholm 2003, 168). In the latter case, when “outcomes and probabilities are fairly unknown,” Boholm posits that people resort to “other, more culturally informed strategies to cope with risk” (Boholm 2003, 168). With such unknown risks and cultural responses, there is a great degree of variability in different people’s understandings of risks and appropriate responses depending on their local experiences. As Boholm writes, though, “in order to be perceived and managed, risks have to be identified and communicated” (Boholm 2003, 172). “Successful risk communication… depends on a common understanding of what
constitutes a threat, a value, a contingency, and a causal relationship. Understanding, not convincing, is the key” and the process of risk management starts with “identifying what is at stake, what is a threat, how one relates to the other, and why” (Boholm and Corvellec 2011, 187). The intention of the study presented in this paper is to help guide current public health promotion efforts towards such culturally-sensitive, successful risk communication.

**Contextualized Risk**

Literature on risk from other disciplines and areas such as natural disaster management and legal risk mitigation is also helpful to introduce, since concepts such as contextualized risk and situated social vulnerability give an even more sophisticated perspective on how risks may be perceived differently in different situations/places (Cutter, Boruff, and Shirley 2003). According to Thompson and Dean (1996), the social contextualist conception of risk holds that “the social context in which issues or decisions arise determine which dimensions of risk are most important” (368). Depending on the context, the most relevant dimensions may or may not include the objective/quantitative probability of harm, and they may include other dimensions such as voluntariness/individual control, catastrophic nature, and/or reversibility (Thompson and Dean 1996). In simpler terms, a contextualist perspective on risk posits that “risk” does not mean any one thing (Thompson and Dean 1996).

According to the literature on social vulnerability – which is closely related to the risk literature – another important, related concept that must be considered is that of “place inequalities” involved in participants’ experiences of online-to-offline sexual relationships (Cutter, Boruff, and Shirley 2003). Cutter and colleagues define place inequalities as the “characteristics of communities and the built environment… that contribute to the social vulnerability of places” (Cutter, Boruff, and Shirley 2003, 243). While community
characteristics such as rates of urbanization and economic growth can contribute to place inequalities (Cutter, Boruff, and Shirley 2003), other characteristics of different places can also situate social vulnerabilities. For example, stressors and reward structures in different workplaces can be place inequalities that contribute to the social vulnerability of women and other minorities (Mueller, Mulinge, and Glass 2002).

In accordance with these perspectives, as much emic, contextualized knowledge as possible has been elicited from participants in this study regarding how they define and experience risk in online-to-offline relationships. The final chapter of this paper includes a set of recommendations based on how participants contextualize risks, since according to the contextualist perspective, successful risk communication hinges on the fact that

“a person's desire for information is shaped by their circumstances, that the credibility of a source depends heavily on its perceived interest in a particular context, and that scientific information will be combined with broader values in forming any individual's personal beliefs” (Thompson and Dean 1996, 381).

**Communicative, Cultural Dimensions of Sexual Health Risks**

Going even further to situate an anthropological discussion of the cultural nature of risk within the sexual health context, Pliskin argued in the late 1990’s that while STD prevention programs may address biological, physical risks, they must also address the “communicative, cultural dimensions of behavioral experience” – i.e., the other more subjective, social risks (Pliskin 1997, 102). As an example of the complex physical and social risks associated with sexuality and sexual health, Pliskin demonstrated in a study with adults with herpes meeting new sexual partners how “informants [were] more afraid of being rejected by a potential partner than they [were] of contracting another sexually transmitted disease, or of transmitting herpes to a partner” (Pliskin 1997, 90). While Pliskin urged public health practitioners to take culture into
account in addressing the “communication dilemmas of STD discourse” (102), the new sub-
culture of young people meeting online-to-offline sexual partners offers a new imperative and
new venue for further investigating physical versus social risks in terms of young people’s risk
perception and sexual communication.

HEALTH PROMOTION IN THE ERA OF CATFISH

In a recent review of online sexual health promotion interventions, Noar and Willoughby
(2012) write that “the rapidly changing media landscape and proliferation of new media
technologies creates vast opportunities for health promotion and disease prevention,” opening the
door to a relatively new field: eHealth (Noar and Willoughby 2012). Examples from the modern
online landscape are endless: traditional websites with “unidirectional information,” also known
as “web 1.0” (Chiasson, Hirshfield, and Rietmeijer 2010); interactive websites (i.e., web 2.0), e-
mail listservs, electronic bulletin boards, chat rooms, social media sites (such as Facebook and
Twitter), and mobile phone applications (“apps”) for those sites, plus countless others in addition
to other mobile phone functions, such as text messaging.

This continuously evolving and increasingly prominent online landscape is already
primed for sexual health promotion: 80% of American internet users already seek health
information online, making it one of the most popularly searched for topics on the Internet (Noar
and Willoughby 2012). As of 2010, 75% of all American adults and 28% of all teens online
reported searching for health information online (Chiasson, Hirshfield, and Rietmeijer 2010).
Furthermore, approximately one in five adults as well as teens have reported searching
specifically for sexual health information – one of the most common health topics that young
people search for online (Buhi et al. 2014; Whiteley et al. 2012). These factors have added to the
growing recognition of the Internet as an optimal venue for sexual health promotion, and some
studies have begun to demonstrate the feasibility of using social media sites as platforms for sexual health education (Buhi et al. 2014; Leanza and Hauser 2014).

While this opens the door to countless, rapidly evolving opportunities for online sexual health promotion efforts, the acceptability among young people of such targeted outreach via social media is still being investigated. Some of the research suggests that young people prefer to get information about sexual health and other sensitive issues through modalities like texting and social media, although other studies indicate that young people do not want to receive such information via social media because of concerns about maintaining their anonymity (Buhi et al. 2013a; Buhi et al. 2014; Selkie, Benson, and Moreno 2011). In the latter case, text messaging is often more preferable (Gilliam, Chor, and Hill 2014; Selkie, Benson, and Moreno 2011).

Online sexual health promotion efforts are a relatively new branch of eHealth and still in the stage of acceptability/feasibility trials, and there is much to be gleaned from best practices in public health, other eHealth interventions, and sexual health risk communication efforts developed specifically for young people using other modalities. One best practice noted in the public health literature is using research aimed at understanding the target audience’s predispositions or pre-testing messages/materials to design interventions (i.e., formative research [Lundgren and McMakin 2013]). It is also important to use multiple channels and venues to reach the target audience, such as public service announcements on the radio and TV as well as online interventions using social media (Lundgren and McMakin 2013). For eHealth interventions, Cugelman and colleagues (2011) report the following two recommendations based on their review of 30 interventions:

- Shorter, more individually-tailored interventions have relatively more lasting impact on participants compared to longer interventions, and keeping interventions short can help avoid loss of motivation.
Interventions tailored with participants’ motivations in mind (i.e., the goals to which they are most committed and their self-efficacy) may have better intervention adherence and therefore more successful risk communication. Furthermore, by including portable content (e.g., podcasts, videos that users can share with others), online risk communication efforts can empower individuals to become independent health advocates who are often more successful at reaching their peers than the entity organizing the effort (Lundgren and McMakin 2013).

In terms of sexual health risk communication efforts that specifically target young people using different modalities, the literature suggests that there are certain intervention/campaign elements that lead to more successful risk communication than others. For example, one research team has found that sexual health promotion messages can be made more appealing to young people – and more effective – by adding visual aids to the messages (e.g., bar graphs representing health information [Garcia-Retamero and Cokely 2011; Garcia-Retamero and Cokely 2015]). Another study has emphasized the importance of including information and tools related to parent-adolescent communication in sexual health promotion interventions with young people (Wang et al. 2014).

Yet another sexual health risk communication approach that has been shown to be successful with young people is the Event History Calendar (EHC) approach. The EHC approach “addresses adolescent cognitive and brain development by providing adolescents with a means to concretely see his or her patterns of risk behaviors over time and discuss risks in [their social] context” with a nurse or health educator (Martyn et al. 2012, 109). This approach is a collaborative, partnership-based approach that is meant to help young people identify their own risks, strengths, and ways to reduce risk behaviors (Martyn et al. 2012), and it falls perfectly in line with the risk communication approach of Boholm’s relational theory of risk (Boholm 2003).
SUMMARY

This chapter has situated the phenomenon of heterosexual young people meeting sexual partners online at the cultural intersection of technology use, risk perception, and sexual health risk communication. As mobile technologies and social media platforms continue to hold a dominant role in this sub-culture, more and more relationships – romantic, sexual, and otherwise – will be initiated online. While public health practitioners are attempting to understand the benefits and risks associated with young heterosexual online-to-offline sexual encounters, they seem to be missing the mark so far for successful risk communication because they have been prioritizing “physical scientific knowledge” (i.e., physical sexual health risk factors) over the “private, subjective perception” of social risks (Pliskin 1997, 102). According to Boholm’s relational theory of risk, successful risk communication depends on a mutual understanding of contextualized risk: what the potential threats are, what is at stake, how those two relate, and how the potential risks could be mitigated. Applying these more culture-centered, emic-conscious concepts will help public health practitioners and scholars better understand the experiences of young people meeting sexual partners online and the risks they perceive while doing so.

In addition to guiding future health promotion efforts by reporting more formative, qualitative data than typically seen in other health promotion intervention studies, this study aims to address the gaps in the research literature regarding the cultural nature of how young heterosexual people navigate online-to-offline sexual relationships. This study is a new application of the relational theory of risk in anthropology, and it is meant to shed more light on the nuances of young people’s risk perception in technologically-saturated social environments. Furthermore, by exploring the cultural nature of risk in a whole new online arena, this study is an
effort to relate the anthropological concept of social risk and sexuality to the context of a younger segment of American society now in the twenty-first century. To that end, the remaining chapters of this paper will outline the methodology of this study, report its findings, and discuss the significance of this research in terms of recommendations for future health promotion and research activities.
Chapter Three: Methods

This research project utilized two seminal methods from anthropology to explore how young people who self-identify as heterosexual understand and manage risks related to meeting sexual partners online: semi-structured interviews and group interviews (LeCompte and Schensul 2013). This chapter will discuss the overarching design of this study and the details of its methodology in three sections. The first section, research design and methods, will detail the data collection and analysis methods used for each phase of this study. Then, the section on ethical conduct will cover the topics of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant compensation. The third section will discuss two main challenges in this study: my experiences with recruitment and positioning myself in relation to the study.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

For this study, I used two phases of semi-structured interviews to delve as deeply as possible into young people’s experiences meeting sexual partners online. As part of the larger, mixed-methods parent study, Phase One was designed as an exploratory qualitative phase by a faculty advisor and previous graduate students in the University of South Florida (USF) Department of Community and Family Health. The larger study’s aims were to:

1. Determine the prevalence of Internet sex-seeking behaviors and having sex with someone met online among teens visiting a local teen clinic.
2. Identify and characterize a group of youth who have met sexual partners online and a group of youth who have not met sexual partners online.
3. Examine the differences between the two groups of youth in sexual health risks, including current STD infection status, number of sexual partners, condom use, and self-reported history of STDs.

4. Determine the motivations for youth Internet sex-seeking and the appropriate online venues for interventions and messages aimed at decreasing risk associated with online-to-offline sexual encounters.

While Phase One was designed by colleagues in the USF Department of Community and Family Health to address the last of the four aims mentioned above, I designed Phase Two to narrow the focus of inquiry and address my two more specific research questions for this study. I based these two questions on my experience conducting Phase One interviews and reviewing the anthropological and public health literature related to online-to-offline sexual relationships:

1. How do young people who have met sexual partners online identify and manage risks related to their experiences with online-to-offline sexual relationships?

2. How do young people who have met sexual partners online want to see the risks they perceive addressed by public health promotion efforts?

**Phase One Exploratory Interviews**

I conducted and analyzed a total of 15 exploratory, individual interviews from Phase One using a semi-structured interview guide. These interviews ranged from 48 minutes to almost 2.5 hours long, with the mean being approximately 1.5 hours. All of these interviews took place on the university’s campus at specific locations chosen by participants, such as in a private office or in a private study room.

The interview guide, designed by Dr. Eric Buhi and colleagues in the USF Department of Community and Family Health, consisted of 30 topics with follow-up probes related to
participants’ experiences with online and mobile technologies (e.g., social media websites, mobile phone apps), their experiences meeting sexual partners online, and their preferences for online health promotion modalities (e.g., online advertisements, text messaging services, YouTube videos). Participants’ perceptions of the risks involved in their experiences were probed with two different items. Furthermore, the specific items used in each interview were tailored to participants’ experiences; if participants reported actively seeking a sexual partner(s) online, additional questions about their online experience and motivations were asked. The entire Phase One interview guide can be reviewed in Appendix A on page 99.

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

The inclusion criteria for Phase One were: being between the ages of between 17 and 19 years; having had sex with at least one partner first met online; and volunteering to be recruited for semi-structured face-to-face interviews by providing a phone number and/or e-mail address for recruitment purposes. In order to narrow the focus of inquiry for this study leading up to Phase Two, only interviews with participants who self-identified as heterosexual were analyzed. I conducted and analyzed interviews from a total of 15 young people (9 women and 6 men) who were in their first or second year of attending the university at the time of their interview. I conducted all Phase One interviews between July and December of 2013.

In order to determine eligibility, a pre-recruitment eligibility screening procedure was developed and used in three courses at the university during the summer and fall semesters of 2013 to inform potential participants about the study prior to actual recruitment. The three courses were popular among first-year students and met general graduation requirements: *Introduction to Anthropology* (ANT 2000), *Cultural Anthropology* (ANT 2410), and *Sex, Health, and Decision-Making* (HSC 2130). With the class instructors' permission (and permission from
the course coordinator or department chair), I distributed a short survey designed to screen for
study eligibility. All of the students present in each class received the survey, but completion was
voluntary. Each survey was covered with a Fact Sheet (i.e., consent document) which, in
addition to providing consistent information to all students, served as a privacy sheet to protect
the students’ responses. Upon completion of the survey, all students returned the survey.

Actual recruitment for Phase One did not take place until I made contact with eligible
young people via phone/text or email to explain what participation in the study entailed; most
screened young people were not recruited because they did not meet the inclusion criteria listed
above. The limitations of this eligibility screening and recruitment process are discussed in
further detail in the last section of this chapter.

Analysis

With permission from participants, I used a digital audio recorder to record each
interview for transcription and analysis purposes. Additionally, I took handwritten field notes
during each interview, noting participants’ nonverbal expressions and demeanor. All but four
interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service, with the other four
being transcribed by myself. Upon transcription completion, I began analysis. Looking first and
foremost at the items related to risk perception, I prepared a codebook with 1) a priori codes
based on this study’s specific research questions and my field notes; and 2) in vivo codes that
were added to the codebook throughout analysis. The preliminary analyses were used to develop
the semi-structured interview guide for Phase Two. Then, after Phase Two was completed, I
applied the constant comparative method to all of the transcripts to identify recurring themes and
variations (Krueger and Casey 2009). The process was an iterative approach to examine how
often different codes were applicable across interviews, how often they were not, how similar
different codes were, and how they could fit together in corroborating or sequential relationships. The thematic analyses for this study were done using both classic paper-and-pencil coding as well as the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (www.maxqda.com).

**Phase Two In-Depth Interviews**

I conducted and analyzed a total of 18 in-depth, individual interviews during Phase Two using a second, more narrowly focused semi-structured interview guide. Shorter than the Phase One interviews, these interviews took approximately 60 minutes (ranging from 41 minutes to 1.5 hours). Most of these interviews also took place on the university campus at specific locations chosen by participants, such as in a private meeting room or at an outdoor picnic area near the participants’ residence halls. To better accommodate some participants’ preferences and schedules, I conducted four interviews off-campus at places such as a local library or restaurant.

The Phase Two interview guide consisted of 16 topics with follow-up probes focused on participants’ experiences with online-to-offline sexual relationships and the risks they perceived regarding those relationships. I designed the semi-structured interview guide with the main concepts from the relational theory of risk in mind: “what is at stake, what is a threat, how one relates to the other, and why” (Boholm and Corvellec 2011, 187). Specific topics included the length/duration of their relationships, the specific setting and context for how their relationships began online, and whether or not participants perceived different risks depending on the online setting and duration of relationships. Throughout the interviews, I probed for as much emic knowledge as possible (e.g., what participants meant by different phrases such as “knowing someone”). At the beginning of each interview, I also verbally collected basic demographic and socioeconomic data from each participant in order to get a better sense of the segment of young people at the university who were eligible for and interested in this study. At the end of each
interview, in order to ensure the validity of the data (LeCompte and Schensul 2013), I reviewed the main points with each participant as they were documented in my field notes. The entire Phase Two interview guide can be reviewed in Appendix B on page 104.

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

In order to keep Phase One and Phase Two as comparable as possible, the same participant selection and recruitment procedures were used. A new sample of students at the same university were recruited for Phase Two with the same procedures that were used in Phase One. The eligibility screener survey was revised to more clearly define the refined inclusion criteria for Phase Two: being between the ages of 17 and 21 years; having had sex with at least one partner first met online (regardless of motivation or intention for meeting them online); identifying as heterosexual; and volunteering to be recruited for a semi-structured interview by providing a phone number and/or e-mail address for recruitment purposes. I conducted interviews with a total of 18 young people (14 women and four men) who were in their first, second, or third year of attending the university at the time of their interview. I conducted all Phase Two interviews between September and October of 2014.

**Analysis**

Similar to the analysis conducted for Phase One, I used a digital audio recorder to record each interview along with the handwritten field notes that I took during each interview. All 18 interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Upon transcription completion, I began analyzing both Phase One and Phase Two transcriptions using both classic paper-and-pencil coding and qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA) to apply the constant comparative method to identify recurring themes and variations (Krueger and Casey 2009).
Phase Two Group Interviews

As a way to share preliminary themes with participants and check the accuracy of the thematic analysis of Phase One and Phase Two individual interviews, I conducted two group interviews (one group interview with men and one with women) using a group interview guide. Two men and two women recruited from Phase Two participated. The discussion with the two men took slightly over one hour, while the discussion with the two women took approximately one half hour. The group interviews took place on the same day at the same private meeting room on the university’s campus, one scheduled an hour after the other.

The Phase Two discussion guide consisted of seven topics with follow-up probes focused on brainstorming how to help young people protect their sexual health while meeting sexual partners online. Once the conversation had been initiated with the topic of social media, I presented a list of the main themes of risks/concerns that young men and women identified during the Phase One and Phase Two interviews. Then, the groups discussed whether or not the themes matched the participants’ thoughts on young people’s experiences in general, how participants thought young people could mitigate each risk, and what kinds of health promotion messages participants would want to send to young people in regards to those risks. The entire Phase Two group interview guide can be reviewed in Appendix C on page 108.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

While only two men and two women from the Phase Two individual in-depth interviews were available to participate in the Phase Two group interviews, all of the Phase One and Phase Two participants were asked at the end of their individual interview whether or not they would be interested in participating in future research activities in this study. Because of the relatively high numbers of women who participated in Phase One and Phase Two, only the more recent
Phase Two female participants were selected for group interview recruitment. Of the 14 female participants from Phase Two, 10 were interested in participating in the group interview, and seven of those 10 responded when I started to schedule the meeting. Four agreed to participate, but only two came to the meeting. Since the numbers of men who participated in Phase One and Phase Two were much lower, all of the Phase One and Phase Two male participants interested in further research activities were selected for group interview recruitment. Of the 10 male participants, seven were interested, three responded during scheduling, and two came to the meeting. I conducted both group interviews in January, 2015.

**Analysis**

After using a digital audio recorder to record each group interview, I had both interviews transcribed for analysis purposes as well as the easel papers that I presented and the participants wrote on during the group interviews. I used the same qualitative analysis methodology to analyze these two transcripts after completing analyses of the Phase One and Phase Two individual interviews.

**ETHICAL CONDUCT**

This research study was originally approved as part of the larger parent study by the Florida Department of Health (DOH) Institutional Review Board (IRB) on December 31, 2009 (Protocol 09052). After the research study was removed from the DOH sites for the Phase One interviews, the study was approved by the USF IRB on December 18, 2013 (Protocol 15346). Two subsequent amendments to the protocol updating the inclusion criteria, sample size and incentives, and instruments for Phase Two were approved on August 07, 2014 and December 19, 2014; a continuing review was also completed and approved on November 18, 2014. See Appendix D on page 110 for the approval letters from the USF IRB.
**Informed Consent**

All study participants gave their informed consent at the time of every study activity in which they participated. During recruitment for both Phases One and Two, I asked participants via phone or email whether or not they would like to volunteer to participate, summarizing the information from the consent document they had received during the eligibility screening procedure. Then, at each interview meeting, I gave the participants the consent document again, reviewed it with them, and obtained verbal consent from them immediately before beginning the interview.

**Confidentiality**

I did not document participants’ names or any other identifying personal information on any of the field notes, recorded interviews, or transcripts. Signed consent was waived by the Institutional Review Boards to protect participants’ confidentiality, and I randomly assigned three-digit numeric codes to each participant in an enrollment codebook. Only participants’ first names were identified in the eligibility screening surveys and the enrollment codebook, and only I had access to these data. I informed all participants that their experiences would also be disguised with pseudonyms in all publications, including this paper, to protect their confidentiality.

**Compensation**

To thank participants for their participation and show appreciation for the time and effort they gave to this study, each participant received an Amazon.com gift card at the end of their participation. Phase One interview participants, who gave significantly more time during their interviews, each received a $30 gift card. Phase Two participants each received a $15 gift card.
The Phase Two participants who took part in both the individual in-depth interviews and the group interviews received a total of two $15 gift cards for their time.

CHALLENGES

A number of challenges presented themselves throughout the one and a half year course of data collection for this study. Both the issues of recruitment and my own position in regards to this study related to the target population, the particular research questions being explored, and the site of this study.

Recruitment Issues

Although I went myself to screen students for eligibility in order to start building rapport and trust with potential participants, it is difficult to say whether or not the true prevalence of young people meeting sexual partners online was captured in the collected eligibility screening surveys. For example, out of almost 900 students screened for Phase Two, only 32 were eligible based on the information they provided on their screening surveys and only 18 were successfully recruited to participate. While a small handful of students reported meeting sexual partners online and were not interested in being recruited, the majority of ineligible students reported never meeting a sexual partner online. This limitation drew out the timeline of the recruitment process and essentially limited the sample size of this study. It is impossible to determine whether the recruitment difficulties were due to the rarity of this phenomenon, students’ confusion about the terminology for meeting a sexual partner online (seeking sex online versus simply beginning a relationship online), or the stigma surrounding it. However, since the earlier quantitative phase of this study’s parent study captured a higher prevalence rate using a computer-based survey instrument that provided more privacy than face-to-face interviews, the
latter seems likely (Buhi et al. 2013b). These recruitment difficulties will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

**Positionality**

As Chapter Four and Chapter Five will illustrate, many of the participants in this study identified with a generation engulfed by technology and immersed in social (including sexual) relationships that have some online component. As the twenty-something year old researcher, I also identify with that generation. My position is something that I had to repeatedly think about as I conducted this study.

On one hand, I thought it would benefit the participants and the study if I identified with participants, called on my own emic knowledge, and affirmed their experiences by saying I had felt or witnessed the same things. This approach seemed to be more authentic and collaborative. I did not want to dismiss my own subjectivity, especially since participants often lumped me into their descriptions of “our generation,” and I did indeed come away from interviews thinking back on my own relationships and risk-taking. I felt empathetic and sometimes distraught over probing into experiences that were sometimes obviously embarrassing or uncomfortable for participants to recount.

On the other hand – the side I attempted to fully comply with throughout the study – I thought it would be more appropriate for me to distance myself and my own online experiences to take a more etic approach to understanding the participants’ experiences as just that: their own, unique experiences. Distancing myself meant probing into topics and language choices that I thought I already understood, such as the terms “hooking up” and “Facebook stalking.” Sometimes it was clear to me that a participant also thought I should already understand these things, so I had to make sure to interject and ask for clarification.
While I kept up such reflexivity throughout the study and managed to successfully balance rapport building with objective probing, everything written here is undoubtedly shaped by my own experiences and interpretations. In the end, the majority of participants expressed gratitude for getting the chance to talk through their experiences. My intention for the following chapters is to let their experiences be the foreground and my interpretation the background.

**SUMMARY**

I collected data for this study during two phases of face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews, with group interviews used at the end of the second phase as a form of member checking. Phase One consisted of lengthy exploratory interviews which helped formulate Phase Two, and the interviews were meant to provide a breadth of information regarding participants’ experiences meeting sexual partners online. Expanding on the risks perceived and experienced by participants during their online-to-offline sexual relationships, Phase Two consisted of more narrowly focused in-depth interviews. The first research question for this study has been addressed by both Phase One and Phase Two: How do young people who have met sexual partners online identify and manage risks related to their experiences with online-to-offline sexual relationships? The group interviews employed at the end of Phase Two were helpful in addressing the second research question for this study: How do young people who have met sexual partners online want to see the risks they perceive addressed by public health promotion efforts? In the analyses presented here, I include 15 Phase One interviews that I conducted between July and December of 2013. I also include the 18 Phase Two individual interviews that I conducted between September and October of 2014, as well as the two Phase Two group interviews I conducted in January, 2015. While Phase One data analysis began before
Phase Two started, more in-depth analyses of all the data from both phases began after data collection was complete.
Chapter Four: Results

Following from the methodology described in detail in Chapter Three, the findings from the thematic analyses for this study are presented in this chapter in five main sections. The first section details the demographic information captured for Phase One and Phase Two participants. The second section discusses themes from participant narratives and gives short vignettes to provide glimpses into the wide range of participants’ experiences online. All of the names used in this section and the rest of the paper are pseudonyms. To explore the primary research question for this study, the third section examines how participants identify and manage risks related to their experiences with online-to-offline sexual relationships. In the fourth section, five main thematic areas that emerged from the semi-structured interviews are explained: the online place inequalities that participants perceived; the role of social media in participants’ experiences; the tradeoff participants described between meeting sexual partners online versus in person; how knowing someone online versus in person relates to their experiences and conceptualizations of risk; and the stigma surrounding young people’s online-to-offline sexual relationships. Finally, in the fifth and last section, this study’s second research question is reintroduced by recounting participants’ recommendations for health promotion efforts aimed at reducing the risks they perceive for online-to-offline sexual relationships.

Because 23 of the 33 semi-structured interviews were with women, their experiences are highlighted in each section before those of the 10 men interviewed. While fewer in number, the male experiences that are described in this chapter nevertheless offer an interesting juxtaposition that is both similar and dissimilar to the female experiences discussed. Furthermore, while some
participants did end up having romantic relationships with their online-to-offline partners (for example, see the vignettes later in this chapter for Samantha, Geneva, Deon, and Thad), this paper does not go into the details of their relationships after their first sexual encounter.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Across Phases One and Two, I conducted and analyzed 33 semi-structured interviews with individual university students. Fifteen participants (45%) were 18 years of age at the time of their interview, 13 (40%) were 19 years of age, one (3%) was 20 years of age, and four (12%) were 21 years of age. Fifteen participants (45%) were in their first year at the university, eight (24%) were in their second year, two (6%) were second-year transfer students, two (6%) were in their third year at the university, and three (9%) were third-year transfer students. Over half of the participants identified as white (55%) and the majority were from Florida (61%). The most common field of study was comprised of disciplines related to the health sciences, and only 9 participants had a job at the time of their interview. While participants reported a wide range of sexual partners met online (1-15), 19 of them (58%) had only met one sexual partner online and for 42% of participants their online partner had been their first sexual partner ever.

Female Participants

Phase One

For the nine women interviewed during Phase One, the median age was 18 (range = 18-19). Five of the women (56%) were in their first year at the university; one was in her second year, one was a second-year transfer, and the grade levels of the remaining two were not captured in their semi-structured interviews. Three women identified as white, three as black (two of whom also identified as Latina), and three did not identify a race/ethnicity. Their majors were in public health, biology/biomedicine, theater, and criminology (with four women’s majors
not reported). Three of the women were from Florida, along with one from Michigan, one from Pennsylvania, one from Maryland, and three unreported. The women in Phase One reported having 1 to 15 online sexual partners, but the median and mode were both two, and six of the women (67%) reported that they met their first sexual partner online.

**Phase Two**

I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with women during Phase Two, and their median age was 19 (range = 18-21). Five women were in their first year at the university, five in their second year, one in her third year, and three were third-year transfers. Thirteen (93%) of the women in Phase Two were from Florida (one previously from New York and another from Maryland), and only one was from out-of-state (Massachusetts). Eight women (57%) were white, three were black, two were Indian, and one was Puerto Rican. Similar to Phase One, there was a wide range of majors among the Phase Two women, including: nursing, public health, microbiology, business, chemical engineering, psychology, education, and mass communications. Six (43%) of the 14 women had jobs at the time of their interviews, and only one did not have any financial support from her family or loans/financial aid. The women from Phase Two had between one and five online sexual partners (median/mode = 1), and almost three-quarters (71%) of these women reported having sexual partners prior to meeting a sexual partner online. Two of these women also participated in the Phase Two group interview.

**Male Participants**

**Phase One**

For the six men interviewed during Phase One, the median age was 19 (range = 18-19). Three men (50%) were in their first year at the university, one was in his second and one was a second-year transfer, and one man’s grade level was not reported. Three men (50%) identified as
white, two as black, and one did not identify a race/ethnicity. Their majors were in biomedicine, engineering, business, and art (with two men’s majors not reported). Two of the men were from Florida, one was from Illinois, one from Colorado, and two were unreported. The men in Phase One reported having one to four online sexual partners, and both the median and mode were one. Five men (83%) reported that they had had previous sexual partners before meeting a partner online.

**Phase Two**

Among the four men I interviewed for Phase Two, the median age was 19 (range = 18-21). Two men were in their first year at the university, one was in his second year, and the other was in his third. Two were from Florida, one was from Wyoming, and one was unreported. The men interviewed in Phase Two were studying biology/biomedicine and philosophy (one man’s major was unreported). All four men were white, three of them had a job at the time of their interview, and all of them had family assisting them with their expenses. Two men had met just one sexual partner online, the other two had met two sexual partners online, and for three out of the four it was their first sexual partner. Two of these men also participated in the Phase Two group interview.

**PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES**

**Female Participants**

**Vignettes**

The following three vignettes are intended to provide glimpses into the wide range of female participants’ experiences online. The first participant whose experience is described, Samantha, met her first sexual partner ever online early in high school. Samantha is a young
white woman from Michigan who was 18 years old and in her first year at the university at the
time of her interview.

Samantha had met two sexual partners online on Facebook. The first was one who had contacted her in the 10th grade saying that he thought he had seen her at a party and a mutual friend gave him her name. They talked on Facebook for one week, and then texted and talked on the phone all summer long. When they met in person for the first time, they had sexual intercourse against her wishes – their mutual friends “didn’t know he was so pushy.” He was the first man Samantha ever had sex with. Then, in the 11th grade, a mutual friend told Samantha to look another man up online. She contacted him on Facebook, they talked online for two weeks, and then they talked on the phone and texted for two to four weeks before meeting in person. She had started to develop feelings for him online, and he asked to meet in person. They hung out three to four times in person and were “kind of together” before they had sex for the first time.

Geneva is a young black woman from Florida who was in her second year at the university and 19 years old at the time of her interview. Unlike Samantha’s more local experiences that initiated on Facebook, Geneva met a long-distance online-to-offline sexual partner on Instagram when she began college.

Geneva met one sexual partner online via Instagram just the year before during her first year at college. He started following her on Instagram and had sent her a private message. After three weeks of talking on Instagram, he asked for her number and they started texting and talking on the phone every day. She used FaceTime to “prove she wasn’t a catfish,” and he started “pursuing” her romantically after about a month. They dated for eight months but she didn’t want to consider it a relationship because they were long distance – he was in the military stationed in Kentucky. He had family near her to visit, though, and he came to see her in person approximately three to four months after they started dating. She took a friend to meet him for the first time at his mom’s house, and she had oral sex with him just once two days into his visit.

Alyssa is a young white woman from Maryland who was 19 years old and in her second year at the university at the time of her interview. Out of all of the participants interviewed, Alyssa had the most routinized vetting process for meeting online-to-offline friends and sexual partners.

Alyssa had met approximately 15 partners online – and that was about the same number of people she had met initially online without having sex. While she started talking to
people online at the age of 13, she was 16 when she started meeting them offline. She would meet partners on dating sites and then have them add her on Facebook. They would transition from Facebook to texting when she gave them her phone number after one to two days, and she would make sure to get at least one picture of them and talk to them on the phone at least once. At first, she would vet them online for weeks or a month because she would be nervous about not knowing who they were. But now she may meet them the same night that she meets them online – only if they ask to meet, though. She never asks first. While she may occasionally have sex with a partner the same night she meets them, the longest she has waited to have sex with an online-to-offline partner is two months.

**Narrative Components**

Sixteen (70%) of the women I interviewed met their first online-to-offline sexual partner at the end of high school or the beginning of college. Six women (26%) met an online partner in the 9th or 10th grade, and one met a partner online at the end of middle school in the 8th grade (whom she did not have sex with until two or three years later). The platforms on which these young women met their partners online were quite diverse: 10 women (43%) met their first partner on Facebook; four (17%) met on the Tinder or Hot or Not phone apps; two each (9%) on MyYearbook, Tumblr, and the HowAboutWe.com or Okcupid.com dating websites; and one each on Instagram, MySpace, and Florida’s virtual high school.

The young women I interviewed used these platforms to learn about their prospective partner, flirt with them, and get to know each other. About Facebook specifically, they talked about how they used it to “Facebook stalk” prospective partners to see what they were doing and get to know them better. Daiana described how Facebook stalking makes her feel close to someone even when she is not physically with them:

“Usually I just like to see what other people are writing sometimes. Or this is bad: I like to Facebook stalk people sometimes. It's a good way to see what my friends are doing or a guy I like may be doing -- which this is horrible. "Let me just see what he did last night. Oh, he was at a party. There's pictures." So I like to just Facebook stalk people just to see what people are up to like their pictures and statuses they post... I usually do it with a guy. If I like this guy I'm going to go onto Facebook, go on the search thing, type in his
name, hopefully have him as a friend, just go through all their pictures, just like you basically stalk them. Go in every couple of hours, see, "Oh my God, what is this person doing? Did they go to the party? Oh, status. He says he's sad. Oh man! Next one. Okay, now he's happy." I don't know it's weird. You just keep going in on Facebook over and over and over just to see what this person is up to because in a way it feels I'm with that person even though I'm not with them just because I see what they're going through on Facebook. To me that's what Facebook stalking is... I'll feel like a creeper if I go up to him and, "I stalk you on Facebook. I saw on Facebook." I'll probably say with my friends, "Oh my God, this person was doing this on Facebook. I feel sad. I should probably go text him." But it's mostly just for like my own benefit, sadly.” (Daiana, 18 years old)

Kirsten also described Facebook stalking, detailing the process she uses:

“'I’ll add people to my close friends, and it's kind of nice because I have this system if I want to stalk someone – like I met this kid, and so I wanted to see what he was like on Facebook. So I was like, ‘Well, he's going to think I'm a creep if I just add him.'” So I added like 50 of his friends, and half of them accepted me. So now he thinks I know his friends, so then he added me. So it's this whole mental cycle you've got to go through to get them to add you... People just add people, you have no idea who you're even adding. Just because you have mutual friends with them doesn’t mean anything.” (Kirsten, 18 years old)

Participants said Facebook is “part of the protocol” for starting a relationship, even if meeting a partner in person first. A couple of women used Facebook specifically to screen prospective partners they found on other dating sites, while another talked about its usefulness for meeting prospective partners without parents’ knowledge (or permission).

“'I always have them add me on Facebook, like that's another reason I have Facebook is because that -- like on the dating site you can't --- I meet them through dating sites; I don't add them right on Facebook. But on the dating site you can't like it's just a few pictures and then a short information. So you can't really tell if the person's fake or not or if they're weird or something. But then on Facebook you can usually tell because they have more pictures and some people will write on their walls and stuff like that so you can learn a little bit about them. So if they don't have Facebook I'm like, "Oh sorry, I'm not interested." I need to see that personal relation, that they seem like normal and real.” (Alyssa, 19 years old)

When these young women initially started talking to their sexual partners online, their intentions were as diverse as the online platforms where they met. Six women were hoping to meet a new friend or someone they could spend time with; an equal number said they were just
looking for a man to talk to or give them attention. Only two women said they started talking to their prospective partner with the intention of having a casual sexual encounter, and only two said they wanted to start a romantic relationship. When I asked during their interviews what their intentions or expectations were when their online relationships began, five women said they had none.

More women reported meeting local online-to-offline partners (n = 9, 43%) than long-distance partners (n = 7, 30%). Danielle, an 18 year old from Florida, made a point to say she only met partners who were from the same city as her; this played a role in her assessment of the risks meeting online sexual partners. Even more importantly, approximately half of the women (n = 12, 52%) had mutual online friends with at least one of their online-to-offline partners. The importance of this will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this chapter and the next (Chapter Five). After they initially met online, the most common trajectory for these women’s experiences was: talking on the platform where they met (often for a brief period of time, a week or less), adding each other on Facebook if that is not where they originally met, exchanging phone numbers, spending relatively more time text messaging than talking on the phone (and sometimes video chatting), and then finally meeting in person.

When it came time to meet in person, more women than not (56%) reported expecting to eventually have sex with their online-to-offline partner. For example, Kim and Erin knew they would most likely have sex with their online-to-offline partners the first time they met in person.

“I thought we both knew. It wasn't really anything that you ask a person. We knew, unless we got in person and chemistry was just super off or he said something or did something really stupid. I just kind of knew it would happen.” (Kim, 21 years old)

“So I mean it was kind of like we never really actually came out and said it, but I think we pretty much both knew like, "Okay, I'm here for a night. It's my last night here and I'm
never going to be back here again, like why not?" So it was kind of like that." (Erin, 19 years old)

However, sexual activity happened sooner than anticipated for the other women. Sharon, for example, started engaging in unplanned sexual activity with her online-to-offline partner before reconsidering.

“It was definitely spur of the moment, because I was not planning on anything. I wasn't even planning on kiss – I was planning on maybe kissing him and that was it, because I hadn't even like kissed him yet so I was not expecting anything... I was like, "Oh maybe he'll like me if I do that." It was a bad idea and I was like, "What the hell am I doing?" So I got off like I said.” (Sharon, 18 years old)

While Geneva intended to have sex with her partner, her first sexual encounter with him was still not what she was thinking would happen.

“I thought it'd be more romantic than that and it wouldn't be in my car, and it wouldn't be this soon, and it would've been more planned, more structured, because I like to – I'm a control freak, so I like to keep that control and structure over things, even intimacy, and that didn't feel like I was – I felt like I was in control, because I agreed to it, but it didn't feel like that was the right time for that to happen.” (Geneva, 19 years old)

While most women (n = 17, 74%) met their partners in person for the first time at a public place, six women (26%) reported meeting their partners for the first time at her own or his house and that was when sex at the first in person meeting was most likely.

More often than not, participants did not talk about safer sex with their online-to-offline partner(s) before having sex (n = 15, 65%). Few (n = 3, 13%) did after the fact or said it was unnecessary because condom use was just “common sense.” Most (57%) reported using condoms consistently with their partners. Some (22%), however, said they did not bring up the topics of birth control or STD prevention because they simply had no intention of having sex until “it just happened.” Even two women who did have some form of that conversation with
their partners said they would not have brought it up in person; it was something they were more comfortable talking about online or through text messaging.

Nine (40%) of the women interviewed only had sex once with their online-to-offline partner(s), and the concept of *hooking up* (having casual sex, often as a “one-night stand”) was brought up often. Several women thought that hook up encounters were more likely when meeting a sexual partner online, especially on “hook up apps” such as Tinder or Hot or Not, and one woman even commented that she thought Facebook was becoming a hook up site. While one woman said she wanted to hook up when she met her online partner in person, other women made it clear that their experiences were *not* hook ups.

“I did, like the two people, both talked to them for quite a while, and so it wasn’t just like hey, I’m going to talk to you that day and then go meet you like a hook up thing. It was always like talk to someone for a while and feel like you’d like them and then when you meet eventually doing that. It was never like first time we meet like a hook up sort of thing.” (Stacy, 18 years old)

These women’s experiences were different from hook ups because they talked with their partner more before or after their sexual encounter, they built more of a relationship with them, or they spent the night sleeping with their partner after having sex instead of one of them going home immediately. The general aversion to hooking up expressed by these women fits in with the “sexual double standard” and stigmatization of female sexuality discussed in the fourth section of this chapter.

Another interesting element of these women’s narratives was how often they brought up their parents. Seven (30%) of the women described how one or both of their parents were present or involved in their first in person meetings, while the same number of women talked about meeting their partner(s) and having sex behind their parents’ backs. Three women talked about safer sex with their parents, and two expressed their desire (but inability) to do so.
Overall, these young women had mixed feelings about their experiences meeting sexual partners online. Five women (21%) expressed unequivocal regret, but others expressed mixed feelings (n = 3, 13%) or no regret at all (n = 4, 17%). Geneva expressed her regret at the same time as describing the stigma and sexual double standard that women face:

“I regret it, because it was someone I met online. And then there’s that whole stigma of "Don’t mess with people you meet online." It’s stigmatized, and I guess that’s why I feel bad about it. It was something that happened, and I learned from it, and it’s not like I didn’t kill someone I met online. I just had a sexual encounter with them. It’s not the end of the world... Females aren't supposed to have any sort of sexual anything. And the internet – I guess some people consider it prostitution in a way, even though money's not being exchanged. It's like you're soliciting sex, even though that was never my intentions from the beginning. So, some people might feel uncomfortable with that idea.” (Geneva, 19 years old)

Kim and Brittney, on the other hand, expressed more mixed feelings. Brittney felt “split down the middle” because she wishes she could have saved herself the heartache that came with her online-to-offline relationship.

“I mean obviously I do have regrets with how it ended up turning out. Part of me does wish that I had never really gone forward with it... I probably could have saved myself a lot of heartache but at the same time at the time I didn’t regret it. At the time I really enjoyed it. So I’m kind of split down the middle because obviously it would have saved me a lot of trouble but then I would be sitting here wondering what if, what if I had actually gone and seen him, what if it had actually worked out a certain way.” (Brittney, 19)

Kim’s mixed feelings were different, though. She liked not feeling scared of meeting people in person after first meeting them online, but she also felt like she is “too comfortable” doing so.

“It's good in a sense. I don't know if you call it good. It's kind of like bad in a sense because they become – what's the word that I'm looking for? You become like numb. It becomes easier. Like the first time you probably met somebody, you're probably a little apprehensive. Like, I don't know if I should do this. You get scared about going over there, etcetera, etcetera, to now it's just like second nature. Like I'm not scared anymore. I think that's exactly what happened to me, kind of scary. Although I didn't always have sex with these people I've met, but I'm not scared to even go over there. Like my friend, one of my friends, when I'll tell her, "I'm going to see such and such," and she'll be like, "How y'all meet?" And I'll be like, "Oh, online. Like whatever website." And she'll be
like, "You're not scared to go over there?" I'm like, "No. Scared of what? What should I be scared of?" [Laughter] But in the beginning, I can remember asking my other friend, like "Oh my God. Why are you going over there? You don't know him." Now it's like second nature which is not really – I mean, it's good for me in a sense that I'm not worried about anything. I don't really feel concerned for my safety. But it's bad at the same time because I'm too comfortable with meeting people like that.” (Kim, 21 years old)

**Male Participants**

**Vignettes**

The three vignettes that follow are snapshots of the wide range of male participants’ experiences meeting online-to-offline sexual partners. Deon, from the first vignette, is a young black man from Illinois who was 19 and in his first year at the university as a second-year transfer student at the time of his interview.

_Deon had met two sexual partners online, the first on Facebook during high school. He liked her status on Facebook, she messaged him, and then they met in person two days later. They started dating and had sex one month later. Between high school and college, right before he moved from Illinois to Florida, he met another partner on MyYearbook – a phone app that was similar to Facebook but turned out to be more like a dating app. They talked online for two months while he was in Illinois and she was in Florida, and then they met in person the first week after he moved to Florida. They ended up having sex twice._

Brett is a young white man from Colorado who was 19 and in his second year at the university at the time of his interview. He described his experience as a “hook up,” which will be discussed later in this chapter.

_Brett met one sexual partner online – she was his brother’s girlfriend’s friend, and his brother’s girlfriend told him to look her up on Facebook right before he moved away for college. He thought he had seen her around their small town before, and they talked on Facebook for a week or two. Then, she came over to his house to watch a movie and they had sex for the first and only time that night._

Thad is a young white man who was 18 and in his first year at the university at the time of his interview. He met an online-to-offline sexual partner through mutual friends on Facebook,
which is a common phenomenon for many female and male participants that will be discussed more in the following sections.

Thad met one sexual partner online when he found a familiar-looking girl on Facebook in the 9th grade. He thought he had seen her around a few times and they had mutual friends on Facebook. They met in person one week after talking on Facebook, and they started dating four months later. It turned into a more distant friendship for three years, but then they ended up having sex at an after-prom house party in the 12th grade.

**Narrative Components**

The 10 men I interviewed started meeting sexual partners online earlier than the women. More than half of the men (70%) reported meeting their first sexual partner online at the end of middle school or during their first two years of high school. The rest met their first online partner later in high school. Rather than saying they used Facebook and other social media to get to know their prospective partner, most of the men (60%) talked about using Facebook to introduce themselves and get girls’ numbers – sometimes specifically girls who were otherwise “out of their league.” One even called Facebook his “surrogate friend” that he used to get introduced to his partner.

“I didn’t want to approach her, or I didn’t have enough experience. I’m not really sure. I’m not really sure what my objective was in reaching out to her on Facebook. I mean, I thought she was cute, and I wanted to get to know her, but, I guess Facebook was the really hot thing then, and I suppose it was a mixture of that and not wanting to confront her in person and just say, “Oh, hi, my name is Thad... So I guess Facebook was my way of – because I didn’t... I wasn’t good friends with any of her friends, so I wasn’t gonna go through one of them to say, “Oh, can you introduce us?” So I guess, Facebook was my surrogate friend who could introduce us. So I didn’t talk overly, like extensively, with her on Facebook. I just introduced myself and said, “Oh, well, I’ll say ‘hi’ next time I see you around.” And after about a week, I did.” (Thad, 18 years old)

Other differences were that more men (40%) had long-distance relationships with their online-to-offline partners, and more men (40%) characterized their experiences as *hook ups*. As Thad said,
“We didn’t really talk a whole lot. I mean we were friends so we were still friends, but – we both acknowledged that it wasn’t anything serious. It was kind of just a way of... We were just hooking up, I guess that’s what we call it.”

Fewer men (20%) had sex with their partners only once, but inconsistent condom use was more frequent (40%).

Similar to the women’s experiences, though, the men had mixed experiences and mixed feelings about meeting sexual partners online. Luther (19 years old) said,

“I feel like I probably wouldn't do it again. I mean it worked originally, but it didn't work out later on. So I feel like definitely it's not worth it. For me it's not worth it. I am able to meet people in person. I have the conversation skills. I'm not worried about it and so I definitely stick to not meeting people online now.”

Among the men, the most common online platform for meeting prospective partners was Facebook; 60% of men reported meeting a sexual partner on the popular social media platform. Two met their first partners on MySpace, one on Interpals.net, and one on the BlackBerry Messenger phone app. Having mutual online friends with at least one of their online-to-offline partners was also a common experience among these young men.

Furthermore, male participants’ initial online intentions were equally as diverse as the women’s. While two said they were hoping to hook up, the others’ responses varied from wanting to start a relationship, meet new friends, just wanting to talk to someone, or not really knowing what their intention was. Aidan (19 years old), who met his first ever sexual partner on MySpace the summer before he started high school, described how he was looking for someone to talk to online:

“[Online] was the easiest way to meet new people at the time. The school that I went to, they didn’t really have a lot of people that I really cared to be around. Most of the people I had met were either friends from middle school already or just people I didn’t care to be around. So the best way to meet new people was MySpace where you can find a friend of a friend so they share some interests. That’s an easy way to meet new people without it being a complete stranger.”
The trajectory for these men’s experiences was another similarity with the women’s experiences, and so were their expectations about having sex once it was time to meet their online partner in person. Half of the men said they had sex the first time they met their partner in person, while only two said their first meeting was at his own or her house.

Talking about safer sex with their online-to-offline partner(s) was uncommon among the men as it was with the women, with 40% of the men reporting they did not discuss safer sex, and one of the same reasons came up again: they simply had not intended to have sex before it happened. Or, as Deon (19 years old) stated when I asked him about his conversations about safer sex or condom use, they were just not concerned: “Did we talk about it? No, never. I never asked her how many guys she had sex with. I just didn’t ever concern myself with it.” The two who did report have some sort of this conversation said it was “in the moment” and limited to birth control – not STD prevention.

The men I interviewed also brought up their parents as did the women. Two men described how their parents were involved in their first in person meetings, and two others reported that they met their partner(s) purposefully behind their parents’ backs. While one man talked with his mother about sex, he said her advice was limited to “don’t come home with kids” and he wished he had more guidance.

RISKS IN ONLINE-TO-OFFLINE RELATIONSHIPS

Defining Risk

When participants from both phases of this study talked about the concerns or risks they faced in their experiences, two important dimensions of risk were often alluded to. First of all, six women (26%) said that risks are always unknown, even if you try to anticipate or calculate
them. While some women (17%) said this is the case for both online and in person partners, the same number of women said that there are more unknown risks when meeting partners online. Kim, a 21 year old woman who had met two partners on Twitter and Facebook, showed contrast by describing how she thought meeting partners in person first was more unknown and more risky. She prefaced it by saying it was “kind of backwards,” but she said of in person partners that “I’m scared of the unknown. I don’t know what you’re trying to do.” Hugo, who was 18 years old, talked about risks as “kinda something you have to experience yourself… it's a trial and error thing,” and that seemed to be the case across the board.

The other dimension of risk that came up in both phases of this study was the catastrophic potential of risks: how harmful participants actually perceived a risk to be. Nine of the 14 women interviewed during Phase Two (64%) rationalized taking risks to meet online partners in person with statements like, “he’s an EMT, he can’t be that bad of a guy” and “I’m never going back there [to where I met him], so why not.” They also talked about how they felt they could control the degree of catastrophic risk by controlling where and with whom they would meet their online partners in person. When three men talked about the catastrophic potential of risks meeting online partners in person, they talked about how the most catastrophic threats (e.g., murder, rape) were not applicable to them because they are men and not as easily “taken advantage of” as women. I believe this is the foundation for how all of the risks experienced and discussed in this paper are gendered, and it was key in my decision to analyze my interviews with women and men separately.

When I asked women in the Phase Two semi-structured interviews to define “risk” in their own words, the responses were overwhelmingly negative. They described risk as the bad, negative outcome when you take a chance; to them it meant any possible danger, wrong, or
harm. One woman said it was “knowing something bad will most likely happen,” and another said risk meant stepping outside of your comfort zone “risking something.” Kerry, a 21 year old woman from Florida who had met her partner on Tinder, went even further to say that that something could be physical or intangible, such as a physical safety risk versus a reputation risk. The men I interviewed during Phase Two had similar responses, saying that a risk is something that could cause harm, danger, or misfortune.

In order to explore how participants identify and manage risks related to their experiences with online-to-offline sexual relationships, the rest of this section is organized by the threats (i.e., things that could cause harm), the stakes (i.e., things that are at risk or could be harmed), and participants’ responses to those threats. The risks are examined in the order which they were typically experienced: meeting an online partner in person for the first time, having sex for the first time, and talking (or not talking) about safer sex.

Meeting in Person

Threats

When women and men from both phases of this study talked about the risks they faced when they decided to meet an online partner in person for the first time, the first and most commonly described threat was that partner’s identity being false. The majority of women interviewed (n = 17, 74%) described this threat as the man they talked to online not being “real,” being “fake,” or lying about themselves in some way. He could be a “total weirdo” or “creep,” or he could look different from his pictures online. His personality or character could be completely different, or they could simply not get along as well as they did online – a risk described in the literature on modality switching (see Chapter Two).
The second most salient threat for the women interviewed was physical violence. Rape, murder, stalking, and kidnapping were brought up by more than half of the women from both phases (61%). While many women connected this threat with the threat of a partner’s false identity, considering the risk of whether or not their online partner was a “weird, bad person” who might hurt them, other women talked about how the threat of violence was separate from the threat of a false identity. After all, a man could be “real” and look like his online picture and still disregard a woman’s objections to having sex – as Samantha had experienced (see her vignette at the beginning of this chapter).

For the men I interviewed, the threat of a partner’s false identity was the only one they considered in the context of meeting their online partner in person for the first time (n = 9, 90%). While one or two brought up the possibility of being hurt or murdered by the likes of the “Craigslist Killer,” most considered a partner’s false identity to be a threat even if they were not dangerous.

“The thing with online, there’s a lot of room for error. I feel like she just wasn’t what I expected when I got down. I’d seen pictures of her and we’d Facetimed, but when you meet them – you usually make things out to be a lot better than what they are. You just create this idea of them. You don’t pay too much attention to who they are.” (Deon, 19)

They described the risk of women lying about themselves, not being who they appeared to be online, and being “fake.”

Stakes

As the women I interviewed talked about how they thought about risk when meeting their online partners in person for the first time, the first thing they identified as potentially being at stake was their safety. Safety is an issue related to both of the threats they identified: a partner being fake or a partner being violent could potentially result in them being stalked, hurt, or – the
worst case scenario – killed. However, since that was generally considered unlikely by these young women, other stakes took priority for them: mainly their feelings and emotions. They did not want to feel disappointed, manipulated, betrayed, or awkward.

“I think either way there are definitely just risks associated with letting somebody have any control over your emotions. So you would be more willing to do things for somebody that you like and I think people that you meet in person can still take advantage of you or they can still be harmful to you. I just think if you’ve known them for a while or if you meet them in person there’s less of a chance for them to fake who they are or alter any part of themselves because you’re meeting them in real time. You’re not meeting anything that they can really manipulate in a really meaningful way whereas on their blog they can portray themselves however they want to, in a favorable way or whatever.” (Brittney, 19 years old)

Participants did not want to feel like it was a waste of their time and effort when they finally met the person with whom they had been talking online.

The stakes were remarkably similar for the men I interviewed. They talked about feelings and emotions that were in line with what the women identified; they did not want to be inconvenienced, betrayed, manipulated, or made to feel awkward or badly about themselves. As one young man put it, emotional trauma is the biggest thing at stake when first meeting an online partner in person.

“There wasn’t really a risk of like, her being someone else, or something like that. Or anything like that, ‘cause I kind of – I mean, she was kind of a – I knew someone that knew her, if that makes sense. But I think it was mainly a risk of it not working out, or it being awkward, or anything like that, really. So – it was just awkwardness or like, it not working out, ‘cause I know we were able to talk quite freely online. But obviously, face-to-face interactions, it’s quite different. So there’s potential to freeze up, or it just not really work out or go anywhere, or – so – what could be at risk – I’d say maybe how I feel about myself, if that makes sense. Because if you – I know I am – I definitely spoke to a few girls back then, and whenever it didn’t work out, or it became – or you start thinking to yourself, “Oh, is it me? That’s her problem?” “Is it just – am I just not meant to find someone or be with someone?” And then so if it doesn’t work out, you start to – there’s a bit of self-doubt that you experience, for sure.” (Elias, 19 years old)
A few men also considered how their physical safety could be at risk, but most of them (including Ron, quoted below) reported that this was not at stake for them as much as it might be for women.

“I’m not too worried about my physical safety. I think I’d be okay, as opposed to – again, not to sound sexist, but if I were a woman I’d probably be in more danger just because of the risk. But what I would lose or what I would have that would be at stake would be that all my time was wasted, that the relationship I had with this person was based on – it was falsified, that it wasn’t real. That would be pretty hard to deal with, or also that this person was doing this for some ulterior motive – that, too.” (Ron, 21 years old)

**Cultural Responses to Threats**

In response to the risks of an online partner being fake and causing emotional trauma or potentially physical harm, the women and men I interviewed described similar kinds of online vetting processes they would use. The most common response, as described by Stacy, was insisting on either video chatting or phone calls to see or hear the person before meeting (n = 15, 45%).

“Usually I’ll either talk to someone on the phone or talk to them on a webcam to see that they’re actually the person that they are seeming to be… So I think if you take precautions to, toward like not unfortunately meeting someone who is not who you think it makes things a little bit less nerve wracking.” (Stacy, 18 years old)

Participants would verify that their partner’s Facebook profile “checked out” as real (often relying on mutual friends, tags, and posted photos), and they would sometimes even ask their partner to send specific real-time pictures of themselves that were considered hard to fake. Hugo reported doing that with one of his online-to-offline partners without consciously considering it a vetting process:

“If you're talking to a girl and like you know [sic], hey, send me a selfie or send me like I don’t know, this kind of picture, like if you're asking for a sexual picture like send me a picture just like this. And they respond exactly the way you wanted to then obviously they're either geniuses and somehow Photoshop masters or something or they just you know, did. That's what happened with this girl I was talking to. I was talking to her on the
phone. I was like hey, send me this kind of picture and she did. So I was like oh, cool. And that wasn't even a test. I just asked for it but then I was thinking about it later and I was like, "Oh she must be real."” (Hugo, 18 years old)

Some participants thought it also helped to talk longer online before meeting in person in order to “feel out” whether or not their partner was real. However, as one woman explained, that sometimes could increase the emotional stakes. She preferred to meet her partner in person more quickly so as to reduce the risk of wasting her time. When it came time to meet, most would purposefully meet in a public place. Women, especially, took care to drive themselves to the meeting, take a parent or friend along, or tell a close friend where they were going. As Stacy stated,

“You know you always, I’d only meet someone if I have someone around me or if it’s in daytime and they’re not going to be this tall man that kind of comes out of the bushes when you’re supposed to be meeting someone.”

Having Sex

Threats

Reflecting on when they decided to have sex with their online-to-offline partners, participants in this study said that the threat they were most concerned with was some sort of emotional trauma. Eight women (35%) described this threat in terms of their partner losing interest if they did not have sex or once they did. Half of the men talked about this threat in similar terms of the relationship not working out after having sex and, as Thad (18 years old) explained, sex “always means something different to the other person.”

The second most salient threat both women and men talked about was the risk of contracting an STD or getting pregnant. Half of the women who brought it up (n = 6, 26%), and all of the men who did (n = 5, 50%), said this threat was in the back of their mind when they had
sex with their online-to-offline partner. It was not a threat that they were very focused on, especially not before their sexual encounter actually happened.

“Before I wasn’t thinking of having sex with him at all, I was like thinking of, ”Is he going to like hurt...” You know an STD was like a lot lower risk to me at that point than like, ”Am I going to come out of this alive?” [Chuckles] Or like, ”Is he a fake person” or something like that.” (Erin, 19 years old)

Five women (22%) also considered rape as a threat again at this point. One said it was a risk in the back of her mind that was dispelled as she started to date her partner leading up to having sex. The others, though, had experienced a sexual encounter(s) the first time they met their online partners in person. They were managing the risks of meeting their partner and having sex with him at the same time, and their experiences were very different. Kim said she dismissed the threat because she was “planning to have sex with him anyways,” but Samantha said she expressed interest in having sex when she talked to one of her partners online but then did not want to at the time it happened. Kirsten (18 years old) described how she had to navigate between what sexual activity she expressed interest in online and what she really wanted to do (or not do) in person:

“People just start flirting and saying stuff [online], and sexting is a big thing now where it’s like you’re basically having sex on your phone. It’s like, ”I want to suck your dick.” Not like that, but that’s how it goes. Honestly, it’s so prevalent now, and it’ll just start little. It’s almost like you’re having sex with them, but you’re not, which is really interesting if you think about it. But you’d obviously never say that in person, but the idea is you would do it in person. So then my problem was I would do that with guys online, but I wouldn’t want to do it in person. So I’d meet them in person, and they’d be like, ”What do you mean? You don’t want to –” “No, I don’t want to do that.” “Well you did online.” “Yeah, but that’s online.” There’s a difference to me between online and – which is interesting, too, because it’s that inhibitions thing. I wouldn’t do this in person, but I would do it online.”
Stakes

When it came to having sex with their online-to-offline partner(s), the highest priority stakes for participants were similar to those at the point of meeting their partner(s) in person for the first time. While they acknowledged that hindsight revealed how their life and health were at stake with the threats of STIs and pregnancy, at the time they were more concerned with the more immediate chance of hurt feelings and ruined relationships that could result from a partner losing interest if they did not have sex or after they did.

Cultural Responses to Threats

Condom use was described by one woman as part of the “standard protocol” for having sex with an online partner, and approximately half of all the participants (n = 17, 52%) did report using condoms with their partner(s). Mia (19 years old) said,

“Everyone thinks of, “Yeah, wear a condom. You could get STDs or you can get pregnant.” That’s the main issue, of course – pregnancy – I was way too young for that. So, we were like – and, him, too. He didn’t want none of that. So, it was, “Condom, condom, condoms,” all the time.”

Erin (19 years old) also said the decision to use a condom was more mutual: “We both were like, "Yeah, you put a condom on." [Chuckles] Like we were in a mutual thing, it wasn’t like I had to like force him or anything or persuade him.”

However, participants’ responses to the threats of emotional trauma and pregnancy/STIs were more varied than that. Women would look for an exclusive partner, wait a longer duration of time to have sex, use the pull out or withdrawal method or rely on their birth control pills, get screened for STIs, and even ask after sex: “Do you really still like me?” In one instance, Kerry (21 years old) described getting screened for STIs after having a one-time sexual encounter with an online-to-offline partner:
“I was nervous after, I guess, ‘cause, like, I didn’t know him at all. I mean, it’s sex, and then I was – we were drinking, and I don’t really, like, remember if we used a condom. So I was nervous about that... So I had to get myself checked.”

More men (30%), on the other hand, talked more about trusting their partner or a mutual friend to tell them about their partner’s promiscuity or STD status. Brett was one young man to talk about trusting a mutual friend.

“I also kinda knew that my brother's girlfriend would never put me with a - put me in a bad situation I guess. So, that was also convenient - she was good friends with this girl” (Brett, 19 years old)

Luther made a similar comment, stating that “through friends... you can find out if this person really is just sleeping with everyone.”

**Talking about Safer Sex**

**Threats, Stakes, and Responses**

If participants had a conversation about safer sex with their online-to-offline partner(s), it was often in the heat of the moment or after they had already had sex. Since more than half of all participants (n = 19, 58%) did not have a conversation about pregnancy or STD prevention with their partner(s), the threats, stakes, and responses discussed here are largely formulated from the hypothetical responses that Phase Two participants gave when I asked them what other young people may think about this topic. In all of their responses (n = 17, 95%), bringing up the conversation about safer sex was the actual threat – it could cause harm by offending or “turning off” one’s partner, or creating embarrassment, judgment, or awkwardness.

“Maybe, ‘cause sex is – it's, obviously, a natural thing to do. It's kind of like – it's not so much “forbidden” - well, with young people, it's out there, “Don't do this. Don't do that.” It's just not a topic that – you could be out in public and just talking about – it's like one of those “behind doors” conversations. And, usually, with those kind of conversations, people don't really like talking about it and it's sensitive. And it's like – I don't know. It's not a “normal” conversation.” (Danielle, 18 years old)
While most participants (72%) responded to this risk with the sentiment that the benefits of the conversation outweigh the risks, they did not initiate a conversation about safer sex in their own personal experiences. A couple of the women who actually did have such conversations (including Geneva, quoted below) said they did so carefully, “sugar coating it.”

“I thought about the whole "maybe he doesn't want to talk about that." Some guys are against using protection and I thought about the risk of him being uncomfortable talking about that... I could lose him as a person, being able to have that openness with him and even him speaking to me. ‘Cause he could feel uncomfortable about that and feel like I'm trying to disrespect him in a way and say that he has a disease or whatever. And he could feel I'm violating him as a person and have nothing to do with me. So I tried to sugar coat it, which is not something I normally do. I'm very blunt and to the point. But I did try to hold back, and ease him into being comfortable with the conversation. And then, once I got him comfortable enough in the conversation, then it was just very to the point after that.” (Geneva, 19 years old)

Chloe’s approach was to focus the conversation with her partner on the risk of her becoming pregnant rather than her partner passing her an STD.

“He hates condoms. I like condoms. Every time we have sex we have that fight because he always brings up that I’ve had sex with him without a condom before and that was the first time I had sex. So he’s like “You did it before and you didn’t get pregnant.” And he’s like “Trust me, I have control.” Like he hates using condoms and honestly he probably could pull out good ‘cause I know he’s had sex a million and one times but that’s – I’m not – I’m also worried about like STDs because he’s had sex a million and one times so it’s always like a struggle without being rude and telling him. Like I always tell him it’s ‘cause I don’t want to get pregnant ‘cause I don’t want to tell him I don’t want to catch anything ‘cause I don’t want it to be awkward and hurt feelings and anything like that ‘cause [our friend] was telling me that he’s scared to get tested because he has sex so often he’s like scared to know if he has anything.” (Chloe, 18 years old)

EMEREGENT THEMES FROM SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

**Online Place Inequalities**

A major theme related to the threat of being “fake” is the place inequalities that contextualize risk in online platforms and spaces. The majority of the women and men (17, 52%) talked about meeting partners on Facebook as the least risky platform because of the personal
information, mutual friends, and photos on Facebook. They described how profiles on Facebook are more easily verified as “real” when the person has lots of friends, there are lots of photos of the person with different people, and they have photos and posts dating back in time (their social media “history”). “Random apps” and dating site profiles that are not linked to Facebook profiles, on the other hand, were described as much more risky because they could be completely fabricated.

“I feel like it could be a lot riskier of them not being a real person if you met on a dating site. It would be a lot easier to lie about who you are on a dating site or. I don't know where else you can, you know social networks are probably safer I feel than dating sites, because you can see into their life on what they're actually doing instead of their profile that they have posted purposely to meet other people with. So that's the, if it's just a profile that they're using to meet other people... They're just a business that's trying to advertise its product and just gonna say oh, this is the best product in the world, come buy it. Like, compared to having a friend that has an iPhone and viewing how it works and seeing if it breaks down or being, you know.” (Luther, 19 years old)

If a dating site profile was linked to a “real” Facebook profile, such as on the Tinder app for example, that was considered a good sign. As one woman stated, how much can be faked on a social media profile is directly associated with how risky that platform is in terms of the “fake” threat. Similarly, one man said the degree of care put into a profile – the “investment” of personal information – was inversely related to the degree of risk. Making the same point, one woman described how making a profile on Eharmony.com takes five hours – versus the two minutes it takes to make a profile on the Tinder app.

The other place element of these online platforms that relates to the threat of a partner’s false identity or misrepresentation is the intentions of the platform or site. Approximately one-third of the women and men (n = 12, 36%) talked about how different sites have different levels of risk because of the different intentions of the people on those sites.
“I would never really go to a dating site kinda thing, ’cause to me that just seems – I mean, not that I’m against them, but I would think it would be easier to find people lying or people just trying to – someone that just wants to have sex or whatever. It seems like a more dangerous way to find people, ’cause you know what they’re looking for. ’Cause we weren’t really looking for anything, it was more trusting, I guess.” (Linda, 18 years old)

While participants agreed that people on sites such as Match.com are more heavily invested in looking for a romantic relationship, they largely shared the understanding that people on platforms like MeetMe.com and the Tinder app are more interested in hooking up.

“Tinder and Hot or Not are way riskier, I feel. I mean, I’m not – I don’t feel like a lotta people my age are on things like Match.com and eHarmony and stuff like that. My friend made an eHarmony account in high school just to mess with people. It’s terrible, but she did. So I mean, definitely people on there pretend to be people they aren’t as well, but I wouldn’t be as concerned for things like being raped or being hurt, even though I know, statistically, the risk is just as high, I wouldn’t feel like it would be.” (Terri, 19 years old)

While most participants (n = 17, 52%) agreed that the latter type of online platform is generally more risky for meeting online partners who are not “real,” women as well as men also brought up the caveat that all online platforms come with the unknown risk element. One woman even said that general social media sites like Facebook and MyYearbook.com are more risky because potential partners’ intentions are unclear. If they were on Tinder, it would at least be easier to know they would most likely be interested in a sexual encounter. An analogy offered by both a young woman and a man put meeting partners online into a continuum of places: meeting in class, meeting online, and meeting in a bar or club.

“I definitely wouldn’t feel as comfortable with someone that I met at a bar. Because it kind of reminds me of a swipy app that a lot of them are just there looking for to take on women, as compared to if you just happened to meet someone in your class, or somewhere that you -- like if you meet someone that works at the restaurant that you go to a lot or something like that. It’s kind of you automatically have something in common, and it’s just kind of by chance. It’s not like you’re both seeking out someone.” (Jenna, 20 years old)
While meeting online has more of an unknown risk factor than meeting in class, it may or may not come with more risk than meeting in a bar or club – depending on how much you get to know about the potential partners online. The nature of getting to “know” someone online is discussed in more detail later in this section.

**Benefits of Meeting Online**

Over the course of all the Phase One and Two semi-structured interviews, participants talked about the same benefits of meeting partners online first rather than in person. These benefits had a striking relationship with the threats and stakes discussed in the previous section of this chapter: women and men alike found it more comfortable and convenient to talk to the opposite sex online – or at least they did at the time they met their online partners. Kirsten described how her inhibitions were lower when communication online with potential partners:

“All of your communication really is over texting. All that, I feel like all the emotional attachment, all the things you’re sharing is mostly over texting. Because when you’re in person, you’re not as confident. I’m pretty – I’m a confident person, but the things I would say over my phone, over Facebook, over whatever site, anything that’s not face-to-face is going to be more I’m not going to have as much inhibitions as if I was saying it to their face. So I think that’s a big part of it.” (Kirsten, 18 years old)

Jamal, too, appreciated that communicating online helped him avoid “overthinking” conversations with women:

“I feel like – I have a theory, all right? In person, when you’re first meeting somebody that you like or like you’re first approaching somebody that you like, you’re going to make a fool of yourself. Like in almost every situation, you’re going to end up saying something or you’re going to end up doing something that might be embarrassing... You’re not going to trip and fall into her boobs online. I feel like when you’re usually meeting somebody online, like because I feel like you can just say whatever you want to say, and see what goes on, because I feel like when you meet somebody in person, you don’t want to say the wrong – you want to sound cool, so you kind of overthink it because you want to look cool in front of her, so it’s like you don’t know exactly what to do... You’re thinking too hard about it. But when you’re online, the first thing – With me, the first thing that comes to my mind, I say it.” (Jamal, 18 years old)
Women said they felt more confident asking questions and saying things they would not have otherwise felt comfortable saying in person (e.g., expressing their interest in sex), and both men and women said they appreciated having more time to respond to conversations without the face-to-face risk of feeling flustered, judged, or embarrassed. Both groups expressed that it was easier that way to “almost know” a prospective partner before meeting in person.

Because they felt able to talk more freely online and be themselves with less pressure than a face-to-face encounter, these young women and men talked about how easy it was to “hide behind technology” and “skip the awkwardness” of a first in person encounter. Some women (22%) talked about how being online made it easier to find people with the same interests, and one woman – and one man – talked about more easily “filtering out” people they were not interested in. Samantha referred to meeting a partner online as a “magical fairytale:”

“It's a magical, fairytale land, and there aren't real problems that you have to work through together. You don't have that connection of having to interact with them and have to work through relationship type problems and that sort of thing. It's just like, "This is great and wonderful and we talk online and on the phone and over text message. And we don't have to deal with the fact that maybe we can't put up with each other," or that sort of thing. Or the fact that, "This thing about you annoys me so bad." You just don't realize those things when you're talking to someone over social media, where in person it progresses so much slower because those are things you have to work through. It's just such a stronger connection with people in real life.” (Samantha, 18 years old)

Other men and women also said they would talk to prospective partners online who they would not approach in person. Chloe, for example, said she could be braver online:

“I think it’s less scary. I’m like more confident behind my computer. Like I would never talk to [him] in person probably or I don’t even know if he – he would probably talk to me in person. Maybe not in school ‘cause he would know I’m not really popular but I think it’s like you can be braver. Like online I wasn’t like scared like if you talk to me in person I’d be like probably like hesitating with my words and like not stuttering but I would have been like flustered. But online I had time to think of my answers and type them out, make sure it’s what I wanted to say.” (Chloe, 18 years old)
Jamal also felt like he could say whatever he wanted to say to a prospective partner, even though she was “out of his league:”

“If I wouldn’t have met her online first, I think I would never have tried to talk to her, because she was – for me it almost seemed like she was way out of my league... but like online it just seemed like she was another person. I could just say whatever I wanted to say... I guess because I didn’t look at her picture at first. I just got to know her. I didn’t just look at who she was. Just talking to her as another person. But then after I saw her in person, after I saw her picture, it was like, wow [laughter]. Wow.” (Jamal, 18 years old)

**Tradeoff**

As acknowledged by most participants (n = 24, 73%), though, that fairytale comes as a tradeoff. While meeting online was often described as being more convenient and less scary, women and men alike expressed that meeting a sexual partner in person first is often more personal, more intimate, and more “real.” It is more spontaneous, with fewer expectations but often more emotional investment and closer, stronger connections.

“The ones that I met online – with [one] I got more time to spend with him but I felt like I already knew so much about him from his Tumblr that a lot of our time that we spent together wasn’t getting to know each other. It was just like just spending time, enjoying each other’s company. But I’m still learning things about [the partner I met in person] like now. It’s just very interesting. It’s very fun and exciting for me to learn more about him as I spend more time with him. It’s just a totally different dynamic like meeting him in person versus like meeting him online.” (Brittney, 19 years old)

One young man said there is “more integrity” in meeting a partner in person, since it is harder to lie or hide a part of yourself in person compared to online; others were in agreement that it is easier to tell if someone is lying in person. Since it requires “raw conversation” skills, participants from both groups said it is easier to know sooner whether or not you and your prospective partner “click.” As one young woman put it, meeting in person is the “more intimate, normal way to work through the awkwardness” of getting to know each other.
Knowing Someone Online

Both Phase One and Phase Two participants talked about getting to know their online-to-offline partners online, but the dynamics and feasibility of doing so became much more complex when I probed this topic specifically in Phase Two. The women and men I interviewed had mixed thoughts about how well you can know someone when you have only interacted with them online. The idea that “I know you, but I don’t know you” came up in both groups, and both talked about “knowing” online being less intimate, personal, and genuine than “knowing” someone in person. Samantha described this issue of knowing in terms of how a person’s character can be different online versus in person.

“You don't really know the person that you're going to meet. It's very rare that you're going to meet the same exact person that you talk to online and that it's going to be genuine and that they're actually going to be who they say they are. You can show up and they look like who they say they are. And at first they act like who they say they are. But eventually there are things you're going to find that are not – I guess they're not the character that you thought they were going to be.” (Samantha, 18 years old)

Geneva’s comments were along the same lines, and she pointed out that a person’s negative attributes are what do not get conveyed online.

“You don't really know that person online, because everyone online is what they want you to see. The bad parts, the ugly parts, you don’t see that online. Yeah, he told me about the little quirks about him, and I got to know that not as well as I would like to, but I did get to know it. But the person online – online, he's this soldier that parties and has fun, and in person, he's just a big, goofy kid that likes to watch Netflix with his mom. So, there are two different sides to everyone. There's your online persona and then there's you as a person... I felt like I knew him enough, like how I would know a friend of a couple months, not how I would know a friend of several years. With someone online... it's gonna take a lot longer [to get to know them], because you have to strip away what you see online and what that person gives you of themselves, because what you see online, odds are nine times out of ten, that is not the exact same person. Physically, it is, but mentally and emotionally, and spiritually, it's not the same.” (Geneva, 19 years old)

Elias described how he thought online communication should come after getting to know someone in person.
One young woman put the difference between knowing in person versus online in terms of an active versus passive process. Getting to know someone in person is more of an active process. You ask them questions and are a part of their interactions. Getting to know someone online, on the other hand, is more passive. You observe what you can see or read: the personal information that they display on their profile, their posts, tags, and pictures. Because much of that depends on how much a person wants to share with you, there are “definitely a lot of ways you can not know a person even though you talk to them every day” (Luther, 19 years old).

Both the women and men I interviewed also acknowledged, though, that “knowing” is a subjective, individual experience. More of the women than the men said they felt like they already knew their prospective partner(s) before meeting them in person. Chloe, an 18 year old woman, said of her partner that she “felt like [she] knew him and he didn’t care to know [her].”

“It wasn’t awkward or anything like because I felt like I pretty much knew him already because we talk so much like on Facebook and stuff like that... like when we talked when he was in the Navy we would talk like 24/7 like all the time, like I’d probably sleep five hours and then like talk to him because what he was doing was like he was like a guard overnight so he would have to stay up from 8:00 p.m. to like 8:00 a.m. So basically I would just like stay up talking to him most of the time. So that’s how I feel like I knew him so I didn’t feel like it was like weird and stuff like that.” (Jasmine, 18 years old)

Furthermore, although both women and men brought up the idea of emotional connection being part of knowing someone, the women I interviewed talked about being able to make such
connections online – albeit not as strong as in person – and the men did not. Aidan was one young man who described this:

“I guess the connection happens a little bit quicker [when meeting in person first] just because you’re actually seeing them face to face more often. Then you don’t have to spend a whole lot of time just building up a relationship through just talking, yeah... With an online relationship, it’s pretty much just all communication that you have to work with. But if you meet someone in person, then you can go to a movie together or do things together like bonding experiences that make you feel a little bit closer.” (Aidan, 19 years old)

Michael also thought emotional connections were more easily forged in person:

“I’d rather meet them face-to-face. Online I guess you really won’t be able to get a connection at first. That’s kind of slower starting or will escalate way too quickly. It just depends on the person... I mean I guess you’re not really getting a connection when you just first meet online. If at first – well, you can really lie about yourself, honestly.” (Michael, 19 years old)

Women talked about forging emotional connections online that preceded physical connections in person, and Facebook and other social media platforms like Tumblr helped women build “little relationships online” (Kirsten, 18 years old).

Trust was another element of knowing that both women and men brought up, and trust, connection, and knowing seem to be entangled pre-requisites for meeting in person and having sex with an online-to-offline partner. As Terri described, she thought she may have trusted her online-to-offline partner too much before meeting him:

“I knew it was gonna happen, and so just planning the night, I didn’t really think about the sex. I was like, “Oh, well, if I trust this person enough to go to their place and have sex with them, I’ll be good.” The only risk, really, was an STD... Because I knew [he] was really sweet, like, through texting, I trusted him a little more than I probably should’ve.” (Terri, 19 years old)

Thad, on the other hand, did not consider it possible to start trusting someone until he could see them in person.
“I tend to trust my instincts, and I infinitely prefer meeting people – well, I prefer getting to know somebody in person or... No, I can’t really say that I do get some people over text. I do interact over text, but it’s really hard to establish trust with the idea of a person. So until you actually see them with your own eyes and experience them, it’s hard to begin that cycle of trust. It doesn’t seem real until you’ve actually met them, I guess.” (Thad, 18 years old)

Like knowing someone, trusting someone is more difficult online than in person, and Elias was another participant to describe this.

“I think it would’ve been definitely different if I knew her in person first. You know, you definitely get more of a feel for who actually they are, so there’s a lot less risk involved in them – say, if you met them in person and you got to know them, and they know you, and then you start to feel like, “Right, I trust them. I can open up to them.” And then you – you can have these sort of relationships. Whereas I feel like online, you’re never going to get that degree of trust or openness with a person.” (Elias, 19 years old)

Participants talked about trust as both a pre-requisite for and outcome of getting to know someone online. In the latter scenario, trusting someone who you do not yet know well enough opened both female and male participants up to the risk of having their trust betrayed by a partner who was not the same online as in person.

**Stigmatization**

In addition to the interpersonal social risks that these young people faced when meeting sexual partners online, my interviews with them also made it clear that they also face the risk of more community-level stigma – especially the women. Despite the popularity of the MTV show *Catfish*, which 11 (33%) of my participants referenced by name, nearly all of the women I talked to (n = 20, 87%) described the negative stigmatization of meeting sexual partners online.

“Crazy,” “kinda weird,” “dirty,” and “desperate” were all words they used to describe the conclusions their peers or family might “jump to” if they knew these women had sex with online-to-offline partners. They attributed this “automatic” stigma to the reputation of hook up
sites and apps, and many of them said they would feel embarrassed or judged if anyone knew of
their experiences – even if they were not on one of those sites or apps.

“I was with my friend when I was filling it out, and she was just like, “I wish I was
eligible,” and I was like, “Well, I actually am,” and she kind of gave me a look like,
“What? How?” And I’m just like, “Oh, well, there’s this app called Tinder.” [Laughs]
And she was like, “Oh my God, you didn’t.” I was like, “Well, I didn’t mean it to
happen.” … It’s just like – I feel like, I don’t know, there’s a lotta judgment from that,
that, “Oh, okay, you’re so introverted that you can’t get guys to like you in person.” It’s
like, it didn’t even start off as that, you know?” (Terri, 19 years old)

Seven (30%) of the 23 women I interviewed said they knew a friend who had also met a sexual
partner online but, since most of them only told their closest girl friends about their own
experiences, Samantha’s comment that more “secret relationships online” are probably more
common may reflect more young women’s experiences.

Aware of this stigma, some of the women I interviewed (n = 4, 17%) commented that
their experience(s) turned out better than they expected or thought possible. Alyssa, for one, was
surprised to discover that the men she met online were cool, normal people like her.

“It's surprising because when you hear online dating it's a very skeptical like, "Oh this
person must be -- they must not be able to find someone in real life and that's why they’re
resorting to online dating." I mean that's always a case for a few people but all the guys
I’ve taken the time to get to know and meet, almost all of them have been really cool
people. I feel like I’m normal too, I have some issues I guess just like everyone does. But
yeah, so a lot of the people are just cool people who realize online dating can work out.
So I think that's cool.” (Alyssa, 19 years old)

Linda also realized that meeting online-to-offline partners is not as risky as she once thought.

“I guess I used to be more thinking that online relationships were more risky, because of
the likelihood of actually getting to meet them and things working out and that it was just
not a good idea. But since I’ve been through it now, I realize that it’s not as unrealistic as
it used to seem before.” (Linda, 18 years old)

On the other hand, most of the men I interviewed (60%) did not seem as surprised. They told me
that most young people meet on Facebook or Twitter before meeting in person, and that “in the
age of technology we live in now, it’s a perfectly fine way to meet someone” (Hugo, 18 years old). Hugo went on to say about his own experiences,

“I guess they were in hindsight they were valuable experiences because in the day and age we live in now, especially for my generation, our generation I suppose, like technology is playing a bigger factor, a bigger role in our lives every day so feel like a lot of people are bound to meet someone off the Internet at some point in their life. So it's – I feel like it's good that I know like basic knowledge of how to approach the situation or what to ask them and how to think about things so I present minimal risk to myself.”

They did not consider meeting sexual partners online a “big enough deal to hear about,” and as Jamal put it, their friends could not say anything negative about it because they do the same thing.

PARTICIPANTS’ RECOMMENDATIONS

Semi-Structured Interviews

During the Phase One semi-structured interviews, I asked participants about the acceptability of using different social media platforms for disseminating health promotion messages aimed at helping young people protect their sexual health while meeting partners online. All of the participants had mixed responses in terms of the acceptability of Facebook advertisements, a text messaging service, and YouTube videos. For Facebook, while more participants than not (67%) thought a Facebook page rather than advertisements could be useful for reaching young people, some (20%) pointed out that Facebook might not be the right platform since teens are using other social media platforms more. Facebook is reserved as a place to connect with family and friends – not a place to look for sexual health information. Furthermore, since many young people access Facebook from their mobile phones, it is important to note, as one participant did, that there are no advertisements on the Facebook phone app. As for a text messaging service, a few participants (20%) thought it would be bothersome or
annoying, but others (60%) considered it acceptable because they had experienced similar text messaging services related to tobacco cessation and other campaigns. Some participants (53%) also said short, attention-grabbing YouTube advertisements would be acceptable if they were similar to the “Get Tested” commercials that air on MTV, although other participants (20%) stressed that young people do not search for YouTube videos and they only become well-known if they go viral. Overall, as one young woman pointed out, the key to any kind of health promotion using social media is keeping up with the most popular phone apps and websites since no one app or site will reach everyone.

In addition to discussing the acceptability of these different social media platforms, Phase One as well as Phase Two participants offered other recommendations during their semi-structured interviews. Most commonly, participants expressed the need for more sexual health education with an emphasis on personal decision-making and interpersonal communication about the risks of navigating online relationships as well as sexual encounters.

“Just [teach] them people skills. If all they know how to do is text, they’re going to be ineffective or unable to speak to somebody in person. That’s just how it is. If you don’t practice speaking to people, you’re not able to do it… I guess in regards to the whole internet thing, if you’re not – I guess also if you feel like you can speak to people, you’re probably going to be more self-confident and not willing to just hook up with whoever. But really, you just get to judge a person firsthand on their character, decide if it’s a person you want to be interested in or not... And also, if you can speak to them about – or just get to know them in a conversation, you can obviously speak to them about being safer sexually.” (Deon, 19 years old)

While one young man said that the “use protection” message has been overused and shoved down young people’s throats, both women and men said that more messages about the unknown factors of STD risks and online relationships would be beneficial. They said such messages encouraging more open communication about safer sex and STD history/status should be aimed at young people in middle school and high school, and some women and men suggested that
interpersonal modes of outreach (such as peer testimonies) could be more effective than online efforts.

“I really think that people need to get more – I know I wasn't and I can't speak for my experiences but I think people need to get more comfortable with their sex partners, especially when they meet them online. You need to be comfortable enough to the point when you're having sex with someone to be able to say, "This is something we need to talk to about. We need to see – We both need to be clean. You need to be disease free, have no STDs, whatever, before I sleep with you." That's a conversation that needs to be had. I mean I didn't have that conversation with my online partners and I'm sure a lot of other people didn't have that conversation with their online partners. But people need to realize, and as I've realized as I've matured and gotten older, is there is nothing more personal than having sex with someone. And if you can't even ask them about their past and you're getting that personal with them, you shouldn't be having sex with them.”  
(Samantha, 18 years old)

**Group Interviews**

During Phase Two I conducted two small group interviews with two women and two men to verify the validity of my analyses, and the responses from those two pairs of participants echoed my findings from the semi-structured interviews. Both the women and the men agreed that the risks (i.e., threats and stakes) I summarized were accurate and represented the key risks that young people face while meeting sexual partners online. Furthermore, they brainstormed responses to each threat that echoed the most common responses from other participants (e.g., asking for “proof” to reduce the risk of an online partner being fake, bringing condoms to reduce the risk of getting an STD). While both groups thought that the risks related to physical danger, STDs, and pregnancy should come before emotional risks in terms of importance, they both acknowledged that the emotional risks (e.g., rejection) are more commonly prioritized concerns among young people. They said this is because the emotional risks seem more probable and relatable to young people versus the risks of STIs and pregnancy, which are more sensitive topics that seem more improbable anyway.
When I asked the group interview participants to decide what the most important health promotion message would be for young people meeting sexual partners online, both the women and men wanted to combine messages about the reality of partners being fake online and the possibility of getting an STD or becoming pregnant. They thought the latter should be easy to cover because of the amount of STD and pregnancy prevention information that is already “out there.” To get the message across that young women should be fully prepared when meeting an online partner in person, the pair of women I interviewed came up with the message “He might be a murder or Mr. Awesome… so bring protection either way.”

When I asked them how and where these messages should be delivered to young people, both groups agreed that such health promotion messages should target middle or high school aged young people. They thought peer testimonials (in person or online) from young people who had experienced some of the negative outcomes from an online-to-offline relationship would be most effective, and they said the tone of such messages should be more advice rather than scare tactics. Whether or not these messages were delivered in a school health class setting, both groups thought a campaign through social media advertisements (e.g., Facebook, Tinder, Pandora, and Spotify) would be beneficial reinforcement. The women even suggested running such an advertisement along with Catfish.

SUMMARY

This chapter has recounted participants’ experiences by first outlining their demographic information, sharing how they described their experiences in short vignettes, and then examining how they identified and managed risks in their experiences. The five major themes that emerged from their stories revolved around the place inequalities they perceived online that made some platforms seem less risky than others for meeting partners; the benefits they saw in meeting
partners online and the tradeoff that accompanied them; how knowing, trusting, and connecting with someone online was an important part of their experiences and conceptualizations of risk; and how their views of the stigmatization of online-to-offline sexual relationships may or may not have changed due to their person experiences. Participants’ recommendations for health promotion efforts aimed at reducing the risks discussed earlier in chapter were introduced in the last section, and they will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Five.
Chapter Five: Discussion

This study offers substantially more formative, qualitative data than typically seen in public health intervention research. To synthesize and make sense of these data, this chapter first summarizes the results from the previous chapter in regards to this study’s two research questions: how young people who have met sexual partners online identify and manage risks related to their experiences with online-to-offline sexual relationships, and how those young people want to see the risks they perceive addressed by public health promotion efforts. In doing so, this discussion employs the relational theory of risk from anthropology and connects this study’s findings to other literature on risk perception. Then, the second section of this chapter positions the findings in relation to the other segments of the anthropological and public health literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The third section summarizes the overarching contributions that this study makes in applied anthropology and its recommendations for public health education, and the fourth section provides recommendations for future research. Before offering concluding thoughts in the last section, I also review the limitations of this study.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Perceptions of Risk in Online-to-Offline Sexual Encounters

The primary research question for this study is, how do young people who have met sexual partners online identify and manage risks related to their experiences with online-to-offline sexual relationships? To answer this question, I have framed my thematic analysis with concepts from the relational theory of risk. When explaining the basis for this theory, Boholm describes two kinds of risks that individuals perceive and respond to: “known risks which people
are prepared for and which they have adopted strategies to mitigate” and other, unfamiliar risks that people respond to with “more culturally informed strategies” (Boholm 2003, 168). Each risk situation involves a “risk object” (the threat), an “object at risk” (the value at stake), and a relationship between the two. According to this theory, the process of risk communication and successful risk management starts with “identifying what is at stake, what is a threat, how one relates to the other, and why” (Boholm and Corvellec 2011, 187).

As discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, the main threat or risk object that concerned study participants in their experiences meeting online-to-offline sexual partners was a potential partner misrepresenting themselves or being “fake” in some way. Even at the time of their first sexual encounter after meeting their partner(s) in person, a similar social risk was the most forefront concern: one or both partners could lose interest.

According to participants’ accounts, their emotions and feelings were the values most at stake in situations meeting online-to-offline sexual partners. In such situations, the young people I interviewed were most concerned with avoiding feelings of disappointment, betrayal, or awkwardness. While they acknowledged in hindsight that their life and health were at stake with the threats of STIs and pregnancy at the time of their sexual encounter(s), they were more concerned at the time with the more immediate chance of hurt feelings and ruined relationships.

According to the literature on risk perception, “people are more likely to avoid risks that are new or unknown, whereas risks that are familiar, perceived as controllable, or self-chosen are less feared” (Larsman, Eklöf, and Törner 2012, 1741), and this helps explain the relationship between the threats, values, and responses that study participants identified and discussed with me. According to participants, the threats of STDs and pregnancy did not take priority for them because they knew how to respond: they described condom use as “standard protocol” for having
sex with an online partner, and most participants did report using condoms with their partner(s). Additional responses included using the pull out method, relying on birth control pills, and getting screened for STDs.

The more unknown, and therefore more prioritized, threat was that of partner misrepresentation, and study participants discussed using a number of culturally informed responses to this threat. As one participant described, navigating online-to-offline relationships and this threat in particular is “something you have to experience yourself… trial and error.” Through such trial and error, young people have developed similar kinds of online vetting processes which included video chatting, phone calls, and/or verifying the authenticity of a potential partner’s Facebook profile – often through mutual friends, tags, and posted photos. When it came time to meet, most would purposefully meet in a public place. Women, especially, took care to drive themselves to the meeting, take a parent or friend along, or tell a close friend where they were going.

Since the threat of physical misrepresentation (i.e., a partner not appearing as they did online) could be more controlled through strategies such as Facebook verification and mutual friend vetting, I believe the truly new/unknown element of this risk situation that demands young people’s attention is the threat of emotional misrepresentation: the potentially false emotional connections/intimacy that young people may develop online. As one participant explained, this is the threat of “letting somebody have any control over your emotions,” and none of the study participants had tried and true strategies for managing that threat.

Because such emotional risks seem more probable and relatable to young people versus the more familiar, controllable risks of STDs and pregnancy, it seems as though public health risk communication may have come to an impasse with this generation immersed in technology.
So much emphasis has been put on the risk of STDs in health promotion messages that young people perceive them to be familiar, controllable, or even inapplicable to them. The threats that most concern public health are much less prioritized by young people. Furthermore, the response advocated for by public health (talking about and practicing safer sex) was actually perceived as an additional threat to what participants valued most – their emotional health. Bringing up conversations about safer sex could cause harm by offending or “turning off” one’s partner, or creating embarrassment, judgment, or awkwardness. Since young people may perceive this threat as increasing their risk of emotional trauma, public health messages promoting sexual health must take this into consideration.

**Recommendations for Sexual Health Promotion**

Pliskin argued in the late twentieth century that because “we were never socialized regarding how or when to talk about sex or STDs with potential partners in an easy, straightforward manner” and we lack “language with which to discuss this intense social, physical, and emotional experience,” public health education programs must help develop a “cultural language” for overcoming our societal taboos on talking about sexuality, safer sex, and STDs (Pliskin 1997, 102). Fast-forward to the context of the twenty-first century when young people are meeting sexual partners online, and a similar recommendation could be given in response to my second research question for this study: How do young people who have met sexual partners online want to see the risks they perceive addressed by public health promotion efforts? According to the young people I interviewed, the “cultural language” utilized in public health efforts must address the emotional and social risks that young people perceive in addition to – or even ahead of – the physical sexual health risks.
Both female and male participants across both phases of this study expressed the need for more health education messages that go beyond the “use protection” message to increase individuals’ communication and decision-making skills as they navigate the social-emotional aspects of both online relationships and sexual encounters. They said that “people skills” are the most important, and confidence and communication skills help facilitate more open discussions about sexual histories and safer sex practices such as condom use.

While participants suggested that health promotion messages emphasize the unknown factor of online relationships and the risk of partner misrepresentation, they said such messages do not have to only include the social-emotional risks. Participants said public health messages could easily cover STD and pregnancy risks at the same time. To play on both the more salient social-emotional risk as well as the physical risks that were perceived as less likely, the women from the Phase Two group interview came up with the message: “He might be a murder or Mr. Awesome… so bring protection either way.” Leaving more room for an emphasis on practicing communication skills, though, I would recommend changing “bring protection” to “be prepared.”

Since the threat of potential partners misrepresenting themselves online was prioritized most by study participants, an important part of helping young people be prepared in online-to-offline sexual encounters may be encouraging modality switching earlier rather than later in their online relationships. Earlier modality switching is in line with the literature on adults’ experiences meeting on dating sites, and it also addresses the tradeoff perceived by many of the young people in this study. Female as well as male participants from both phases said meeting in person makes it is easier to know sooner whether or not you and your prospective partner “click,” and it also makes it easier to tell if a prospective partner is lying.
However, since such face-to-face encounters require more “raw communication skills,” health promotion messages could encourage young people to start conversations about safer sex while they are still communicating online – when the stakes are lower. Both women and men said that communicating online made them feel more confident and less flustered, judged, or embarrassed. While the conversation should continue in person, it may be easier for young people to practice asking questions about sexual histories and STD statuses online.

In terms of when, how, and where such messages about being prepared should be delivered to young people, participants in this study were in agreement that reaching youth in middle school and early in high school is key. Some participants thought that face-to-face programs would be most beneficial, such as a school health course that covered online and in-person sexual relationships and included peer testimonials from young people who had experienced the various consequences of online-to-offline sexual encounters. Some also thought that online health promotion could be beneficial reinforcement for such face-to-face interventions. Social media platforms and apps such as Tinder were suggested as channels for such messages, as well as advertisements on online music players such as Pandora and Spotify. As a potential part of a multi-media campaign, the women from the Phase Two group interview even suggested creating a public service announcement type of commercial to air with MTV’s *Catfish: The TV Show.*

The variety of channels suggested by participants mirrors the variety of their opinions on the acceptability of different platforms (Facebook, text messaging, and YouTube) for health promotion efforts. There was no consensus on which platform would be the most successful at reaching young people, and participants pointed out strengths and weaknesses for each. What did seem to be commonly affirmed was the idea that to be successful a health promotion campaign
would need to cover multiple platforms in the hope of “going viral.” The need to go viral adds to the importance of keeping up with which websites and apps are most popular and experimenting with more feasibility and acceptability trials for online health promotion interventions.

The bulleted list below summarizes the recommendations discussed in detail in the preceding paragraphs and earlier in Chapter Four:

- In addition to the physical risks that are already prominent in risk communication on this topic, public health promotion messages should address the social-emotional risks perceived by young people (e.g., the threat of potential partners misrepresenting themselves or lying online).
- Such health promotion efforts should focus on promoting and strengthening young people’s communication skills – both online and offline.
- Health promotion efforts should also encourage young people to start conversations about safer sex online as a way to “break the ice” on topics such as STDs, sexual histories, and condom use.
- Efforts may also promote modality switching (meeting an online prospective partner offline) as a way for young people to assess risks in person, continue safer sex conversations, and know sooner if they “click.”
- These efforts should target young people in middle school or early high school.
- In line with the best practices identified in Chapter Two, mixed modality interventions with a peer-to-peer component in person as well as an online component may be most acceptable to some groups of young people.
- Also in corroboration with the best practices identified in Chapter Two, online health promotion efforts may be most effective when disseminated across multiple platforms or media, such as advertisements on music streaming sites, phone apps, and popular TV shows.

ADDITIONS TO THE LITERATURE

By using an anthropological lens to approach young heterosexual people’s experiences navigating online-to-offline sexual relationships, this study helps address some of the gaps in the research literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The experiences of these young people who self-identify as heterosexual make a unique contribution to the existing literature because for the most part, unlike the growing literature on adults’ online dating experiences, they did not originate on
traditional dating websites, they were *not* initially intended to be romantic, and they did *not* initially intend to meet in person.

First of all, this suggests that place inequalities are not unique to environments and communities built in the physical world (Cutter, Boruff, and Shirley 2003). Social media platforms, phone apps, and dating sites all have characteristics that young people recognize as contributing to their social-emotional vulnerability and level of risk. The majority of study participants identified Facebook as the least risky platform because of the profile structure that highlights personal information, mutual friends, and photos – providing a glimpse into users’ “real” lives and social history. “Hook up apps” such as Tinder and dating sites that do not link to Facebook, on the other hand, were considered much more risky because they require much less investment of personal information and profiles are often built around pictures of users rather than descriptions or conversations.

Study participants commonly understood that users’ level of investment, their intentions, and the general demographics of different sites contributed to the risk inherent in those online environments. Participants agreed that people on sites such as Match.com are more invested in romance than people on MeetMe.com, and such place inequalities suggest important differences between these young people’s experiences and the adult experiences on dating sites described in the research literature. As part of that difference, young people may feel more pressure to misrepresent themselves in more positive ways on social media as opposed to adults on dating sites. While studies have shown that adults on dating sites are relatively honest about their self-representations (Buhi et al. 2014; Cali, Coleman, and Campbell 2013; Ellison, Hancock, and Toma 2012), the study with teens and technology recently done by the Pew Research Center
suggests more young people feel pressure to post “only content that makes them look good to others” or “will be popular and get lots of comments or likes” (Lenhart et al. 2015, 7).

The different online places in which young people are meeting online-to-offline sexual partners also indicate more nuanced processes leading up to modality switching in such relationships. As mentioned in Chapter Two, most online friendships among young people stay online and modality switching never happens. While modality switching has been associated with less uncertainty and more positive relational outcomes (e.g., intimacy and trust) for adults (Ramirez et al. 2015), participants in this study took steps to reduce uncertainty and the risk of misrepresentation before ever meeting their prospective partners in person. Some thought it helped to talk longer online before meeting in person in order to “feel out” whether or not their partner was real, and intimacy and trust – or virtual nearness – was built through platform switching before modality switching. For example, if a prospective partner was met on a different social media platform or app, transitioning the relationship to Facebook was an important way to verifying that they were “real.” The advantages of Facebook included vetting them through online mutual friends, and even Facebook stalking them through pictures and posts.

Using platform switching to verify the authenticity of a prospective partner relates back to the first section of this chapter that discussed how study participants perceived of risks during their online-to-offline sexual relationships. What was most at stake for participants was hurt feelings, ruined relationships, and “emotional trauma” in general. While anthropologists have defined social risk as “the danger posed by health problems or behaviors to valued social relationships, both actual as well as desired, imagined, and hoped for” (Goldade and Nichter 2010, 196), participants’ narratives highlighted the importance of social-emotional risks in
relationships before physical sexual health or behavior is even being considered. What follows is an important contribution of this study: an individual’s emotional health and perceptions of emotional risks are distinct from – albeit related to – their physical sexual health and perceptions of physical risks.

Since the late 1990’s, scholars after Pliskin have been discussing the social risk of communicating about sexuality and negotiating the sexual self and other in terms of verbal/nonverbal communication between sexual partners about consent, condom use, and STD self-disclosure (Wright, Randall, and Hayes 2012; Bowleg et al. 2010). In this study, I have taken a step back to examine the nature of social-emotional risks within sexual relationships that begin online. After using the benefits of online modalities to avoid threats to their own emotions and their emerging relationships, most participants did not talk about safer sex with their online-to-offline partner(s) before having sex. Even a few of the women who did have some form of that conversation with their partners said they would not have brought it up in person; it was something they were more comfortable talking about online or through text messaging.

Regarding how people weigh social-emotional risks versus physical risks related to sexuality, this study extends the literature into the technologically-mediated sub-culture of young people today.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO ANTHROPOLOGY AND PUBLIC HEALTH

**Anthropology**

Overall, this study contributes to anthropology by advancing our understanding of a relatively new American sub-culture: the simultaneously online and offline culture of young people in era of mobile technology. More specifically, this study expands our understanding of the cultural nature of risk in the context of this sub-culture and, in particular, it reifies the
importance of emic perspectives in understanding the cultural meaning of health risks. By using the relational theory of risk from economic anthropology to expand the concept of social risk from medical anthropology, this study also adds a new dimension to the anthropological study of sexuality and sexual health in the United States.

As more and more of young people’s behaviors and beliefs are constructed and enacted online, their perceptions and management of risk are undoubtedly shaped in that context as well. The relational theory of risk provides a useful framework for delving into risk perception in this sub-culture, and it has not been applied in this way before. In the field of risk perception and risk management research, the relational theory of risk has been applied in various contexts such as sustainable urban water systems, healthcare systems, and other situations of environmental risk analysis (Dobbie and Brown 2014; Barrelet et al. 2013). In those cases, the objects at risk (i.e., what is at stake) and risk objects (i.e., what is a threat) vary among the different institutions and groups of stakeholders involved. For example, in the case of urban water system design and implementation, a new technology may be a threat to profitability (Dobbie and Brown 2014).

I, on the other hand, have used the relational theory of risk in my research to frame and understand a component of these young people’s sub-culture that is much more intimate and interpersonal: risk perception in online-to-offline sexual relationships. By doing so I realized that whereas other medical anthropologists have investigated social versus physical risks related to sexual health (Goldade and Nichter 2010; Chapman 2006), my participants’ emic understandings of what constituted risks for them were even more complex than that. Rather than simply being an issue of valued relationships versus physical health, my findings show that young people may perceive more intrapersonal *emotional* health risks in addition to interpersonal *social* risks. This
conclusion opens the door to more discussion about how sexual health risk perception can be understood as the cultural balance of social-emotional risks and physical risks.

This study offers a new connection between the more technical risk analysis research in economic anthropology and the more socio-cultural concept of social versus physical risk in medical anthropology, and it is also a new area for the anthropology of sexuality and sexual health. Much of the work done by anthropologists on the topics of sexual health and risk perception has been in different countries and sub-cultures in the U.S., and this study is one of the first to examine online-to-offline sexual relationships among young people in the United States.

**Public Health**

Because public health is already primed for interdisciplinary teamwork and mixed methods, this study is also well-suited to contribute to public health education efforts. In a recent exploratory review of online HIV prevention efforts (i.e., a more specific type of the kind of technology-based sexual health promotion program that could come from this study), a colleague and I realized two important opportunities for anthropological contributions: a need for more publishing on qualitative methods, especially on formative work in online health promotion program design and implementation; and an opportunity for more anthropological theory to guide those methods (Miller and Powers 2013). Since all of the literature in this area of health promotion has come from outside of anthropology and almost entirely from researchers in public health, it represents a new opportunity for anthropologists to contribute their theories and methodologies to the success of organizations trying to develop online/technology-based sexual health promotion programs for local communities.
Many of the articles about emerging online sexual health promotion programs cited public health theories that underpinned their studies overall, such as the health belief model which includes the concept of risk within the construct of perceived susceptibility. However, very few researchers discussed any theoretical underpinnings for their formative work with participants. Examples such as participatory action research or grounded theory, which can help construct intervention concepts and definitions based on participants’ own experiences, were rare. Furthermore, very few authors explained how they tailored interventions and health promotion messages for participants – which is perhaps the most important part of formative research that lays the groundwork for interventions. Only two articles mentioned interventions being “developed by and for” the target population (Rhodes et al. 2010; Hightow-Weidman et al. 2012).

That is where anthropological theory and methodology can come into play, with its more general attentiveness to the emic perspective and a toolkit of more specific theories such as the relational theory of risk. Attentiveness to the emic understandings of local realities and priorities can guide formative research in identifying/defining local cultural constructs that are important to any health promotion program and the design of culturally-appropriate messages. More in-depth, qualitative work needs to be conducted and disseminated for such programs and, given its experience working with underserved/vulnerable communities and its expertise in ethnographic methods and eliciting emic perspectives, applied anthropology has much to contribute in terms of methodologically informing such formative work. This study is meant to be an entrée into more anthropological inquiry in this area of public health.
Applied Anthropology

Reaching between the intra-disciplinary silos of anthropology as well as the interdisciplinary boundaries of anthropology and public health, this study also contributes to applied anthropology because it exemplifies how applied anthropologists not only generate but also use anthropologically-derived knowledge that is useful in “real world” problem-solving. All anthropologists purportedly use holistic, culture-sensitive, and oftentimes, critical paradigms and methods to understand patterns of human behavior, but applied anthropologists use these approaches to help induce some kind of positive change in a specific community.

In this case, my intention has been to serve two particular communities: the young people who are navigating sexual relationships in evermore technologically-saturated social environments, and the public health educators who are trying to reach and develop effective programs for those young people. By using a holistic lens to review the current research and theoretical stances, and by using in-depth anthropological methods to delve into the sub-culture of young people in the U.S., I have gleaned cultural knowledge that I can offer to public health education specialists that are developing interventions and health promotion messages in this area. By sharing my findings with my participants and seeking out a place to publish these findings where other young people can access them, I also hope to get this information into the hands of young people going through similar experiences. As many of my participants expressed, the best outcome of this applied work would be for other young people to learn from their experiences.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As to be expected from formative exploratory research and the kind of qualitative data that I collected, this study has perhaps resulted in more questions than answers. While the list of
recommendations in the first section of this chapter may be a useful starting point for health education intervention projects, different kinds of studies could shed even more light on the nature, processes, and outcomes of online-to-offline sexual relationships.

For example, more mixed-methods studies with larger samples of young heterosexual people could be done to investigate condom use within online-to-offline sexual encounters versus encounters that are initiated face-to-face. While condom use varied among participants in this study, larger studies and meta-analyses comparing groups of young people who had or had not met sexual partners online could help determine the effects of online-to-offline sexual communication (or lack thereof) on condom use. Such comparative studies could also contribute to our understanding of the relationship between young people’s risk perceptions and risk behaviors in different contexts. As discussed in Chapter Two, the current literature reports mixed conclusions and further study could delve into how much social-influence groups and stigma play a role in those perceptions and risk-taking behaviors.

In line with my earlier discussion in this chapter dealing with how platform switching is a nuanced step in the process of modality switching for young people meeting sexual partners online, another direction for more research could be building on other modality switching studies with heterosexual adults. Platform switching may also be part of the uncertainty-reduction process for adults meeting sexual partners on traditional dating sites. Furthermore, adults may have different experiences all together when meeting sexual partners on social media platforms rather than official dating sites. The observation that adults may have different experiences is something that was brought to my attention by older acquaintances and friends; they raised questions for me about whether or not risks are perceived similarly or differently in the same
online spaces among different age groups. Given what we understand of how contextualized risk perception is, I would postulate enough differences exist to warrant investigation.

Interesting opportunities for gender studies research have also emerged from this study, although I could not fully attend to them because of the small number of men compared to women that participated. The men I did interview brought up issues related to gendered communication styles, such as bonding with partners better through activities rather than verbal or computer-mediated communication; normative messages about sexuality and sexual behavior that differ for young men and women, such as how one young man wished he had more guidance from his mother than the “don’t come home with kids” message he received; and the less catastrophic risks that men faced when meeting partners online because they are not as easily “taken advantage of” as women. On the other hand, the women I interviewed talked about experiencing more community-level stigma related to meeting sexual partners online, and all of these issues could be better explored with larger studies with more male participants.

For all future research in this area, the one ethical consideration that I reflected on most during this study is pertinent: whether or not IRB-approved consent and interview procedures are enough to account for the potential emotional distress that participants may feel during or after their interviews. While none of my participants became visibly distressed and none of them stopped their interview, some of them did express that it was difficult to talk about the “ugly sides” of their experiences – the abuse they experienced, the bad feelings they had – sometimes it was outright “shitty” to talk about. Everyone who said that, though, also expressed how they either appreciated the opportunity to talk through their experiences or how they had prepared themselves emotionally to talk about it because they wanted to share their story. In hindsight, since most participants did not verbalize such feelings, I wish I would have preemptively
provided a page of information for all participants that included STD counseling/testing as well as mental health/wellness resources. When probing into sensitive topics that may have unanticipated effects on participants, such as sexuality, it would be prudent to make offering such resources part of the standard IRB protocol.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

As discussed in Chapter Three, recruitment challenges limited this study in terms of the number of women and especially the number of men who participated and the amount of time it took to recruit for and conduct each phase. Based on my recruitment efforts with young university students, the prevalence of meeting sexual partners online appeared much lower than indicated in other related research studies (Buhi et al. 2012). Although it is unknown whether this phenomenon was truly underreported or not, the stigma identified by participants – especially female participants – suggests it may have been. For that reason, more anonymous data collection methods (e.g., computer-based surveys) have an advantage and mixed-methods studies are important in sensitive research areas such as this.

As another effect of the stigmatization surrounding young people’s experiences meeting sexual partners online, self-selection bias may have had some effect on the findings presented in Chapter Four. More than one participant said they were honest on their eligibility screening survey because they knew other young people would not be, and therefore some themes may have been underestimated or unrecognized due to participants being more comfortable and willing to talk about their experiences than other young people might have been.

Furthermore, as brought up in Chapter Four, the lower participation rate of men for this study is especially perplexing since male participants talked less about stigma in their experiences than women. While stigma may or may not help explain the reason for men’s lower
participation rates, the sensitivity of talking about sexual encounters with a female researcher may have been part of it. While most of the men I interviewed seemed genuinely comfortable talking about their experiences with me, one of them talked about his experiences with both online and offline partners with such enthusiasm it made me reflect on the possibility that he may have been bragging or exaggerating for my sake. That made me wonder if other men might be less forthcoming because of that gender difference.

Besides the time it took to recruit participants for this study, another timing limitation was the length of time between the Phase Two semi-structured and group interviews. Conducting the semi-structured interviews at the beginning of the fall semester and then the group interviews at the beginning of the winter semester limited participation in the latter because many of the participants who did not have a job at the time of their interview in the fall did by the time of the group interviews in January. This issue of timing also raised the question of whether or not there were more eligible students for this study who did not report their eligibility or interest because of their work or other scheduled commitments.

Another limitation of this study, although not a complete one, is the range of time between when participants met their online-to-offline sexual partner and when I interviewed them. While having participants with a wide range of experiences strengthened the exploratory value of this study – with some participants reporting experiences from five years ago when they were in middle school and others sharing their experiences from just one month before their interview – it also inevitably introduced some recall bias. Some participants did have a difficult time remembering details of their online-to-offline relationships. In order to limit recall bias it would be helpful to interview young people within a set timeframe, but the recruitment challenges and time constraints of this study would not allow for that. Another useful approach,
if allowed by an IRB, would be to interview younger people in middle school or high school as that is when some participants met their partners.

CONCLUSION

By weaving together strands of the relational theory of risk from economic anthropology and the concept of social versus physical risk from medical anthropology, this study provides important insight into how young heterosexual people perceive of – and prioritize – risks in online-to-offline sexual relationships. While public health efforts have focused on physical risks such as STDs, the participants in this study have revealed how complicated it is to navigate online-to-offline relationships on top of – and, for the most part, before – navigating sexual encounters. Because more basic emotions and social relationships were at stake in their experiences, these young people were more concerned with social-emotional risks related to getting “catfished” rather than more physical sexual health risks. The prominence of such social-emotional risks is indicative of how important the relationship between emotional health and physical health is for sexual health overall; the relationship between these two dimensions warrants more health promotion messages that address both. As more studies and interventions are developed around this topic in public health, it is also imperative to include formative work such as this – as well as more anthropological studies like it – in the discussion. Furthermore, as exemplified in this study’s design and recommendations, it is even more crucial to guide such projects with young people’s own emic understandings of both the online and offline subcultures around them.
References


Appendices

APPENDIX A: PHASE ONE EXPLORATORY INTERVIEW GUIDE

Let me tell you a little about why we invited you, in particular, to be interviewed. You acknowledged, on a survey you took that you have done certain things we’d like to learn more about. We want to know more about your online experiences, especially those regarding meeting people and romantic and/or sex partners online.

Let me define some of the words that I will be using throughout this interview. When I refer to “sex partners” I mean anyone you have had any type of sex with, so that means oral sex, anal sex, and/or vaginal sex. This can be someone you had a relationship with, someone you went on a few dates with, or someone you just met up with for sex. When I refer to “online” partners I mean someone who you originally started contact with online (for example, a social networking site like Facebook, an instant messaging system, or a dating site), even if you met them face-to-face at a later date. When I refer to “in person” I mean someone with whom your first contact was face-to-face (for example, someone you met at school or party or coffee shop), even if you communicated with them online after that.

Do you understand these definitions?

To start, I’d like to get to know a little about you. Build rapport by asking questions like:

- What race or ethnicity do you consider yourself?
- What grade are you in?
- What do you like to do in your spare time away from school?
- What about school…what parts do you enjoy?

Let’s talk a bit about the technologies that you use for communication and entertainment.

What is your favorite social media or social networking website?

- How often do you visit this site?
- What do you usually use it for?
- What do you like about it, and why?

What’s the coolest new (fill in the blank: website, social networking site or features, phone, app) you’ve tried recently? What makes it so great? (trying to tap into emerging trends)

Do you own a mobile phone or media device (e.g., iPhone)?

- What type of phone do you own and why? (Features, cost, coolness?) PROMPT: if cost wasn’t an issue- what phone would you choose and why?
- What features does it have that you like most?
- What features of your phone are most important to you? Which do you use the most?
What must you absolutely have?

Ok, now we’re going to talk about some of your sexual and romantic experiences. Remember, we’re only asking about experiences you had willingly.

(Verify reason for teen’s inclusion as interviewee: reported use of internet to seek out sex partners or offline sex with someone initially met online or both. Tailor opening of interview to this information)

On the survey you took, you said that you have used the Internet to look for sex partners/had sex with someone offline that you first met online (if both, address each one separately). How many times (partners, encounters) has that happened? Could you tell me about that/those experience(s)?

Questions to be sure to ask of interviewees who reported using the internet to find sex partners:

Did you get online specifically to find someone to have sex with? What made you decide to use the Internet to look for partners?

PROMPT: For example, sometimes one thing happens that makes you do something in a new or different way. Did you experience something like this? If so, what was it?

When you decided to use the internet to look for sex partners, what did you expect would be the benefits of looking for partners this way? (If prompt needed: What were you hoping to get by meeting sex partners online that you couldn’t get from meeting them in person?) Follow-up: Looking back on your experience, do you think those benefits are real (i.e., did they really happen)?

When you decided to use the internet to look for sex partners, did you have any concerns about looking for partners this way? Follow-up: How do you feel now?

Is anything better about meeting partners in person?

Have you also had sex with someone (offline) after meeting them online, even though that wasn’t necessarily your reason for meeting that person?

For those who report having sex offline with a partner initially met online:

Are there benefits of meeting partners online, compared to meeting partners in person? (If prompt needed: Is there anything you get from meeting sex partners online that you can’t get from meeting them in person?)

Do you have any concerns about finding partners this way?

Is anything better about meeting partners in person?

Think about the time(s) you’ve met someone online and later had sex with them offline. How was/were that/those situations different from times you met people online but didn’t later have sex with them offline?

Have you ever gotten online specifically to find someone to have sex with? If not, would you? Why or why not?

For all interviewees:
Which websites did you visit in the situations we’ve talked about so far? **PROMPT:** How did you decide which websites to use?

**PROMPT:** There are many websites you could use to meet partners, why did you choose these ones over others?

**PROMPT:** What other things did you think about when choosing some websites and not choosing others? (i.e., reputation of the website?)

**PROMPT:** Which of these websites have you, or would you, use again and why?

**PROMPT:** How did these websites compare to websites you used but did not meet a sex partner from?

Think about the times when you met people online, aside from the website you met them on. What other technologies did you use to communicate with them? (For example: telephone, texting, mobile phone talking, e-mail, etc.)

Think about when you’ve met sex partners online; did things progress differently than when you met a sex partner in person? If so, how?

**PROMPT:** You may have met more than one sex partner online, in this case, please describe your general experience. If you’ve had different/varying situations, please describe those. For example, you could say something like “generally, I experienced… But one time….”

**PROMPT:** Tell me about a time or a situation/scenario with someone you met online that would have gone differently if you had met them in person.

Did you discuss having sex prior to actually having sex? If yes, did you discuss sexual activities including safer sex behaviors and condom use?

**PROMPT:** If you’ve had both experiences when you did and did not discuss prior, please explain what differed in those situations that may have caused you to discuss it in one instance but not in another.

**PROMPT:** Was this discussion right before engaging in sexual activity (i.e., when you were already in person and in the bedroom for example? or was it earlier?).

**PROMPT:** Was the sex planned ahead of time (did you know or suspect you would be having sex with them that time) or was it “spur of the moment”?

What do your friends think about you meeting partners online?

**PROMPT:** If your friends don’t know, then what do you think they would think?

What do your parents think about you meeting partners online?

**PROMPT:** If your parents don’t know, then what do you think they would think?

[Some interviewees may have already noted this, but] Do you feel there are risks with meeting people online, compared to meeting people in person?

Without providing names, who do you know who has met a partner online before? **Note:** something like “my best friend”, “guys in my school”, “a friend of a friend”, etc.”
Are there sexual activities/behaviors you would be more comfortable doing with someone you met online than someone you met in person?

PROMPT: What is it that would make you more comfortable doing this with a partner you met online?

Are there sexual activities/behaviors you would be more comfortable doing with someone you met in person?

PROMPT: What is it that would make you more comfortable doing this with a partner you met in person?

I'd like to spend the remainder of our time together talking about the findings from our research with youth. In the spring, summer, or fall of 2010, a group of teens participated in our survey regarding sexual behaviors. In that study, we found that more teens who met sex partners online tested positive for a sexually transmitted disease, or STD, compared to teens who reported having offline sex partners.

Why do you think more teens with online partners had STDs than teens without online partners?

PROMPT: Why do you think these teens got an STD?

Is there something about having online partners that makes these teens more likely to have an STD?

Could anything be done to help protect these teens from sexual health problems? (Ask for specific details—what would be done, who would be involved, when might it work, etc.)

(If necessary) Often, when people get an STD they haven’t been using a condom when having sex. Is there a way to encourage teens to have “safer sex”?

PROMPT: How would you feel about taking the action you suggested?

PROMPT: Do you think there are any changes you could make in your life that would help you protect your sexual health? You must have reasons for not making them—why is that? Is there anything that might make these changes easier for you?

Think back to a time when you didn’t use a condom, or didn’t get an STD test, can you tell me about that? What specific factors influenced your decision? Can you imagine a way this scenario might have played out differently?

Do you know what a “banner ad” is? Can you think of any that have caught your attention or stood out to you in the past? What are they like?

What do you think about using banner ads on websites like (mention some websites they told us about earlier) to provide messages about sexual health to these teens?

PROMPT: What might those messages look like? (Encourage participant to sketch)

PROMPT: How could we design these ads to stand out from others and get people to click on them?

What do you think about using text messaging to provide information and encourage teens to protect their sexual health?

PROMPT: How might you go about getting people to sign up for such text messages?

Would you use a service like this?
What do you think about using YouTube videos to provide messages to these teens?  
PROMPT: What might these videos show or consist of?

What other ideas or recommendations do you have for using new technologies to help teens stay sexually healthy?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Could we contact you for follow up on these new materials if we decide to create them?
APPENDIX B: PHASE TWO IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

To start, I’d just like to get to know you a little bit (build rapport by asking questions like):
- What year are you in at [UNIVERSITY NAME]?
- What is your major/minor?
- How did you end up choosing to come to [UNIVERSITY NAME]?
- Do you live on campus?
- Are you working your way through college, or is someone helping you financially?
- What do you dislike/like about [UNIVERSITY NAME] so far?

So now let me tell you a little about why we invited you to be interviewed. We want to know more about your online experiences, especially your experiences meeting people online, then meeting them in person, and then having sex with them. Please remember that we’re only asking about experiences you had willingly, and we’d like to learn about your experience meeting sexual partners online regardless of the reason you met them in the first place. By sexual partner, we mean anyone you’ve had any type of sex with (oral, vaginal, or anal). You could have met them through a social media site like Facebook, a game site, or a dating site or app.

- Do you have any questions for me at this point?
- So you said on the survey that you took in class that you have had sex with someone that you first met online. Is that right?

1) How many people has that happened with (that you met them online, then met them in person, and then had sex with them)?

2) Could you tell me about how that/those experience(s) happened? Probe for [if multiple partners, probe for experience in general]:
   - Where did you meet partner(s) online
   - How long ago did you meet them online (clarify year)
   - How did the relationship(s) begin online
   - Expectations for the online relationship (what did you think would happen, did that happen)
   - How long talking online before meeting in person (How much time passed between when you first met online and when you first met in person)
   - What kinds of technologies did you use to talk online (Skype, instant messaging, etc.)
   - Did any sexting or online sex happen before meeting in person
   - Who asked who to meet in person and why
   - Where met in person
   - Expectations for meeting in person (what did you think would happen, did that happen)
   - When did first sex happen (how long since meeting in person, confirm since meeting online)
   - Where did first sex happen
   - Was the first sex planned or spur of the moment (did you know or suspect you would be having sex with them that time, how did you know)
   - Expectations for first sex (feelings or emotions before, feelings or emotions after)
   - How many times having sex after first sex
• How long relationship lasted since first having sex (Confirm how long relationship lasted since meeting in person and meeting online)
• Why relationship ended

So now I’d like to talk with you about any risks you might have thought about or felt during your experiences meeting people online, meeting them in person, and then having sex with them.

3) But first, when you hear the word risk, what do you think of? (What does it mean to you?)

4) Thinking about when you decided to meet someone in person after first meeting them online, what risks did you think about? (Can you remind me what you said about this specifically?)
• (If none, ask about looking back or what risks other young people might think about)
• Can you tell me more about what you mean by [risk(s)]?
• Why did you think that is (or isn’t) a risk for you personally? (i.e., what might be at stake for you when meeting someone in person?)
• So what did you do about that risk? (i.e., did that risk affect your decisions/actions when you were deciding to meet in person? Would you say that risk affected your relationship with that partner? How could/should it have affected your decisions/actions?)

5) (When you decided to meet someone in person after meeting them online) would you think about different risks depending on which website or app you met them on?
• What makes some websites or apps riskier than others?

6) (When you decided to meet someone in person after meeting them online) would you think about different risks depending on which technologies you used to talk to them online (e.g. instant messaging or Skype)?
• What makes some riskier than others?

7) When you decided to have sex with someone after you first met online and then met in person, what risks did you think about?
• (If none, ask about looking back or what risks other young people might think about)
• Did the risk feel the same or different from the risks we talked about for deciding to meet in person? (If none personally: Is that different from the ones you said before?)
  o If different: So you didn’t think about that when deciding to meet in person?
  o If different: Can you tell me more about what you mean by [risk(s)]? Why is that a risk for you personally?
• So what did you do about that risk in terms of deciding to have sex? (i.e., how did that risk affect your decisions or actions? Would you say that risk affected your relationship with that partner? How could/should it have affected your decisions/actions?)
• Thinking about when you’ve met someone online and then decided to have sex with them, versus when you’ve met someone in person first and decided to have sex with them, do you think about the same risks or different risks?
  o Why?
8) So when you *decided to have sex* with someone after meeting them online and then meeting in person, would you think about different risks depending on which website or app you used to meet them?
   - What makes some riskier than others?

9) *(When you decided to have sex with someone after meeting them online and then meeting in person)* would you think about different risks depending on where you first met them *in person*?
   - What makes some places riskier than others?

10) *(When you decided to have sex with someone after meeting them online)* would you think about different risks depending on how long you knew them?
   - Can you tell me more about what “knowing someone” means to you personally?
   - Is knowing someone online different from knowing them in person?
   - How long does it take to get to know someone you first met online versus someone you first met in person?
   - So did you think about different risks depending on how long you knew them online or how long you knew them once you met in person?
   - If not talked about already: Did that affect your decisions or actions in meeting/having sex with someone you first met online?

11) In the experience/experiences we’ve talked about, did you ever talk about safer sex?
   - Why or why not?
   - Who brought this up?
   - When was your conversation? (i.e., was it right before having sex or was it earlier?)

12) (If not already mentioned) Did you ever talk about condom use?
   - Why or why not?
   - Who brought this up?
   - When was your conversation? (i.e., was it right before having sex or was it earlier?)

13) (If not already mentioned) Did you ever talk about birth control?
   - Why or why not?
   - Who brought this up?
   - When was your conversation? (i.e., was it right before having sex or was it earlier?)

14) When you *decided to talk about* (or not talk about) safer sex/condom use/birth control, what risks did you think about?
   - (If none, ask about what risks other young people might think about)
   - Can you tell me more about what you mean by [risk(s)]?
   - Why did you think that is (or isn’t) a risk for you? (i.e., what did you think you could lose? What threatened that?)
   - So what did you do about that? (i.e., how did that risk affect your decisions or actions?)

15) So how do you feel *now* about having had sex with someone you met online first?
16) So now that we’ve talked about risk a lot, have your ideas about risk changed at all in terms of what risk means to you? (Do you have any other thoughts on what risk means?)

○ Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?

○ Just to make sure I understood everything we talked about today, here are some of the notes I took ... [Review #4, 7, 12, notes with participant.] Does that sound right?

Thank you so much for doing this interview today! Based on this interview and others like it, we would like to do focus groups with young people like you to brainstorm how to help young people protect their sexual health while meeting people online. We would like to use those discussions to help create health promotion materials. Would you be interested in being in one of those focus groups this fall? Could we let you know when we are scheduling those focus groups?
APPENDIX C: PHASE TWO GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hi, everyone, thanks again for coming to participate today. You have all volunteered for previous research projects at [UNIVERSITY NAME], and the study we are working on today is about sexual behavior and the role of the internet in beginning some kinds of relationships. This is a focus group, so we will just have an open conversation about your ideas in general and your ideas about some patterns that have come up from previous research.

This focus group will last no more than 2 hours, and we will use a digital voice recorder to record your answers for later analysis. Please remember that this is a private conversation with only the people in this room, and you do not have to talk about anything you do not want to. You do not have to share your own personal experiences. You do not have to say your real name or the real names of other people you may know. Everyone has chosen a name for their nametag, so please address each other by these names. If you know each other from outside of this room, please remember to keep this conversation confidential. This means that what is said in this room stays in this room.

Please also keep in mind the basic ground rules of brainstorming and talking with a group: everyone should feel free to talk openly, but please respect each other by trying to not interrupt or “yuck someone’s yum” by putting someone down or making them feel badly about something they say.

Opening Question 1: Since we are going to talk a lot about how young people interact and meet each other online today, let’s start by just going around and saying what you like about social media.

Probe: Social media can be anything you think of in terms of websites or apps that you use for social networking or socializing online.
Follow up question: Why do you like that?
Follow up question: Is there anything you dislike about social media?

Question 2: What about advertisements or messages that you see online, what comes to mind?

Probe: Have you seen any on Facebook, or YouTube, or any ads that come up on apps?
Probe: How do they target young people?
Follow up question: What do you like or dislike about those ads or messages?

So, today we’d like to brainstorm how to help young people protect their sexual health while meeting people online. We’d like to create some sort of health promotion materials. In a previous
study with other young people, these are the main risks/concerns that young people identified in terms of meeting sexual partners online [introduce de-identified list of risks from interview analysis on easel paper].

Introductory Question 3: What do you think about these risks, do they match what you think young people experience/face when meeting people online? Remember, you do not have to share any personal information or personal experiences; you can talk about young people’s experiences in general and not say any names.
   Probe: Do you think these risks are the main risks that young people face?
   Follow up question: Are there other risks that are not on this list?
   Follow up question: If so, how do they affect young people? [Add with second marker]

Key Question 4: How do you think young people could reduce each of these risks?
   Probe: What do you think is the best way to reduce each of these risks?

Question 5: What messages would you send to young people to help reduce these risks? Let’s brainstorm message ideas for each. [New column with third color]
   Follow up question: Who should that message come from?
   Follow up question: When should young people get that message?
   Follow up question: Where should young people see that message?
      Probe: Somewhere online, in person, over text messaging, other media or somewhere else?
   Follow up question: How should that message look?
      Probe: What should it look like in terms of format, colors, font?

Closing Question 6: If we create these messages, how do you think other young people would react?
   Follow up question: How would other people react?
      Probe: Parents or family, other community members, politicians or government?

Question 7: If you got to be in charge of creating these materials, which one would be your first choice? [Circled numbers with 4th color]
   Follow up question: Second choice?
   Follow up question: Third?
12/18/2013

Eric Buhi, Ph.D.
Community and Family Health
13201 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC 56
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00015346
Title: Communication, Health, and Teens

Study Approval Period: 12/18/2013 to 12/18/2014

Dear Dr. Buhi:

On 12/18/2013, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol
Document(s):
FDOH IRB Protocol H09052

Consent/Assent Script(s):
Assent Consent & Fact Sheet Version 2

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review categories:
(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Per CFR 45 Part 46, Subpart D, this research involving children was approved under the minimal risk category 45 CFR 46.404: Research not involving greater than minimal risk.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the process of informed consent (parental consent only) as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.116(d) which states that an IRB may approve a consent procedure which does not include, or which alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.117(c) which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board
11/18/2014

Elizabeth Powers, B.A.
Community and Family
Health
13201 Bruce B. Downs Blvd
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: Expedited Approval for Continuing Review
IRB#: CR1_Pro00015346
Title: Communication, Health, and Teens

Study Approval Period: 12/18/2014 to 12/18/2015

Dear Ms. Powers:

On 11/18/2014, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol
Document(s):
Protocol_USFversion2_8.5.14.docx

Research Involving Children as Subjects: 45 CFR §46.404.
This research involving children as participants was approved under 45 CFR 46.404: Research not involving greater than minimal risk to children is presented.

The IRB determined that your study qualified for expedited review based on federal expedited category number(s):

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history,
focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

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We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board