

“Let's Talk about Sex”: Discussions in Seniors' Online Communities

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Abstract

Seniors' online communities offer them a safe sphere for discussing sex-related concerns. This netnographic study explored the characteristics of sex-related discussions in such communities and followed online sex-related discussions that took place in 14 leading English language-based communities during one full year (2,534 posts). Analysis revealed that the discussions were simultaneously a source of valuable information and entertainment, and that they had an effect on members' attitudes and offline sexual behavior. Battles between the discussions' protagonists and antagonists provided additional “spice” to the rather amusing yet educational and beneficial discussions. Overall, results indicated that in a reality of limited alternatives for sex-related communication, seniors have found a channel to satisfy their needs for sex-related information and support.

Keywords: *sex-related discussions, online communities, old age, sexual education, disinhibition, empowerment*

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Introduction

Seniors' online communities are groups of older adults who interact online through diverse applications such as chat rooms and forums. Such communities seem to be increasing in popularity, and some of them already have hundreds and even thousands of members. A study exploring the content and characteristics of seniors' online communities demonstrated that the communities serve as a platform for discussing every possible subject, including private and public concerns, serious and casual issues, and many general matters as well as topics exclusive for seniors such as aging and retirement (Nimrod, 2010). The aforementioned study also showed that the communities enable the expression of a wide range of emotions, ranging from very negative to very positive (Nimrod). To date, the potential roles of seniors' online communities with respect to sex-related communication have not been explored.

Freely chosen sex is an important pleasurable leisure experience (Freysinger & Kelly, 2004; Godbey, 2008; Meaney & Rye, 2007) that may provide older adults with many physical and psychological benefits (cf. Laumann et al., 2006; Lindau et al., 2007). However, some factors associated with old age, such as health conditions and widowhood, may constrain seniors' ability to have and/or enjoy sex (cf. DeLamater & Moorman, 2007; Taylor & Gosney, 2011). As many older adults avoid sharing their sexual problems with their physicians (Foster, Clark, Holstad, & Burgess, 2012; Lindau et al., 2007), they are often left with no solutions.

A recent study of online communities for people with depression found that, among other functions, participants employed this channel to search for sex-related information, give and receive advice, share, and vent (Berdychevsky, Nimrod, Kleiber, & Gibson, 2013). Similarly, by allowing for anonymity and invisibility, seniors' online communities may offer older adults a safe sphere for discussing sex-related concerns. This study aimed to explore whether members use seniors' online communities for the discussion of sexual topics, and what characterizes the sex-related discussions in these communities.

Literature Review

The purpose of this section is to show evidence that many older adults are sexually active, but ageist stereotypes fuel the tendency of neglecting this topic. This paucity of research is absurd since various benefits of sexual activity as well as constraints taking tolls on the seniors' sexuality should position it at the core of the researchers' and practitioners' attention. Additionally, this section discusses the role of the Internet in light of seniors' limited options for sex-related communication and education.

Studies of sex in later life have demonstrated that many older adults are sexually active and that people continue to feel sexy and are able to physically express their sexuality beyond their reproductive years (Cooperman, Arnsten, & Klein, 2007; DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Lindau et al., 2007; Marsiglio & Donnelly, 1991; Walz, 2002). Although some studies suggest that age negatively affects sexual desire, it is not considered a critical factor until age 70 and over (DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Hillman, 2008), and many older adults tend to maintain levels of sexual activity they established earlier in life (Walz, 2002). Moreover, Loe (2012) found that even the very old (aged 85+) enjoy intimacy and achieve both familiar and new forms of pleasure and sensuality.

The role of sexuality for older adults is gradually getting more attention and becoming more socially acceptable than in the past (Bouman, Arcelus, & Benbow, 2006; Jung & Schill, 2004). Many studies have documented the importance and health benefits of sexuality and intimate relationships in later life (Bonifazi, 2000; DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Lindau et al., 2007; Nicolosi et al., 2004), and some have shown that sex is often associated with a sense of

vitality as well as feeling young and healthy (Loe, 2006). Research has also shown that subjective sexual well-being contributes to happiness in older adulthood (Laumann et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, studies of sexuality in later life are still rather scarce (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2009; DeLamater & Moorman, 2007; Foster et al., 2012). Moreover, they tend to adopt a biomedical perspective, ignoring the importance of psychological and social influences on sexuality (Carpenter, 2010; DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Hillman, 2008). The fact of the matter is that very limited research attention has been given to seniors' satisfaction with various physical and emotional aspects of their sex lives (Carpenter et al., 2009).

To an extent, the general neglect of older adults in sexual health research reflects the ageism in modern society, which views older people's sexuality as negligible and unimportant (Bouman et al., 2006; Walz, 2002). This neglect is fueled by the myth that older people are either asexual and/or not engaging in sexual risk-taking (Bonifazi, 2000; Henderson et al., 2004; Lai & Hynie, 2011; Taylor & Gosney, 2011), and by the assumption that the consequences of sexual risk-taking for older adults are less prevalent than for younger adults (Gott, 1999). Such perceptions lead to the marginalization of the sexual health needs of older adults (Bouman et al., 2006; Gott, 1999). Yet while certain sexual experiences might indeed be more common at certain life stages, sexual behaviors and attitudes, sexual risk-taking, sexual decision-making, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), family sex life, sex education, and mate selection are by no means restricted to any particular age or life stage (Hock, 2010).

One might argue, in fact, that older adults should receive more attention from sexual health researchers and practitioners than younger age groups because they are somewhat more vulnerable with regard to sexual health. The reasons for this are threefold. First, age is associated with an increased frequency of physical and psychological health conditions related to sexual problems and with life conditions (e.g., widowhood) affecting sexual activity (Gott & Hichliff, 2003; Lindau et al., 2007; Taylor & Gosney, 2011). Compounded with these issues, negative socio-cultural views of elders' sexuality frequently evoke feelings of discomfort about sexual desires, romances, and dating habits (Bonifazi, 2000; Hillman, 2008; Hock, 2010; Lai & Hynie, 2011; Taylor & Gosney, 2011). Such problems and views may lead older adults to perceive themselves as too old for sex and quit sexual activity (Bouman et al., 2006; Nicolosi et al., 2004).

A second reason for seniors' greater vulnerability is the restrained and often biased communication regarding sex between them and healthcare providers (Foster et al., 2012; Hock, 2010). Although sexual problems are common among older adults, they are not frequently discussed with physicians (Henderson et al., 2004; Lindau et al., 2007). While older adults are often too embarrassed to discuss sexual issues with healthcare providers, it is also often the case that professionals do not actively try to foster communication about sexual issues with their older patients (Bonifazi, 2000; Bouman et al., 2006; Foster et al., 2012; Henderson et al., 2004; Taylor & Gosney, 2011). Moreover, STIs are frequently misdiagnosed and mistreated as healthcare providers automatically assume that older clients are not engaging in sexual risk-taking (Hock, 2010; Latini & Coon, 2003). Other issues arise due to the fact that staff members in seniors' residential facilities often ignore residents' sexual needs and rights (Bonifazi, 2000; Bouman et al., 2006).

Third, many older adults born in the early to mid-20th century did not have access to professional sexual health education earlier in their lives (Henderson et al., 2004; Illa et al., 2008) and are typically ignored as a target audience for contemporary sexual education and HIV/AIDS prevention/interventions programs (Cooperman et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2004; Hock, 2010; Illa et al., 2008; Latini & Coon, 2003). As a result, some older adults feel ambivalent about

their sexuality (Bouman et al., 2006; Walz, 2002), and some partake in sexually risky behaviors associated with the expansion of STIs (Cooperman et al., 2007; Gott, 1999; Hillman, 2008). This risk is exacerbated by older adults' tendency to view condom use as unimportant (since there is no fear of pregnancy), their difficulties with using condoms correctly, and their belief that they are unsusceptible to HIV/AIDS (Foster et al., 2012).

Using the Internet for sex-related information and support is not a panacea for all these concerns. Yet the role of the Internet in educating elderly people on sexual issues should not be underestimated as (1) seniors are a rapidly growing demographic segment among Internet users (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011; Pew Internet and American Life Project [PIALP], 2014), and (2) they might be more willing to self-educate on sexual issues online because the Internet offers anonymity and comfortable sharing as well as eliminates, or at least minimizes, the risk of being embarrassed, shamed, or socially sanctioned (Adams, Oye, & Parker, 2003; Hillman, 2008).

The theory of the Online Disinhibition Effect describes Internet users' tendency for greater self-disclosure and for a higher frequency and intensity of social action while online compared with their normal behavior in their daily lives offline (Suler, 2004). Six interacting factors explain this effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection (i.e., a sense that one's mind merges with the online companion's mind), dissociative imagination (i.e., a sense that one's online character exists in a make-believe dimension, separate from the real world), and the minimization of authority (Suler, 2004). These factors, along with the Internet's accessibility and affordability (being relatively inexpensive, at least in most developed countries), may explain the relatively free sexual expression via the Internet (Cooper, 2013). The Internet also has the ability to affect societal sexual attitudes (Fugère, Escoto, Cousins, Riggs, & Haerich, 2008). Thus, fostering the dialogue regarding sexuality in older adulthood on the Internet can prompt positive changes both at the individual (e.g., self-education on sex-related issues and sexual self-expression) and social levels (e.g., dispelling ageist stereotypes and the myth of asexuality in older adulthood) (Adams et al., 2003).

Unlike formal sexual health websites targeting the general population and/or older adults, seniors' online communities have two considerable advantages. First, they offer interactive communication and peer-support, so members can ask for and provide advice. Second, members are of similar age and thus may be able to better understand and support each other. Several studies explored the benefits of participation in seniors' online communities and demonstrated the communities' general ability to provide instrumental information (Camarinha-Matos & Af-sarmanesh, 2004; Pfeil, 2007; Xie, 2008), intellectual stimulation (Nimrod, 2014), emotional support (Furlong, 1989; Ito, O'Day, Adler, Linde & Maynatt, 2001; Pfeil, 2007; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2009; Wright, 2000), companionship (Kanayama, 2003; Nimrod, 2014; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2009), a sense of belonging (Burmeister, 2012), and joyfulness (Nimrod, 2014). So far, however, there seem to be no studies exploring the communities' role as a sphere for discussing sex-related issues. This study aimed to bridge this gap in the body of knowledge and to explore the communities' potential to compensate for what society and particularly healthcare professionals currently fail to provide.

Method

This study was based on an online ethnographic approach frequently described as "netnography" (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is a research method based on observations of technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities and the culture (or

“cyberculture”) shared among these networks and communities (Hine, 2000; Mann & Stewart, 2000). Adapting many traditional ethnographic research techniques, netnography is distinguishable from traditional approaches by the fact that it is mostly based on published texts, relies on archives, examines a unique form of private interactions that take place in a public space, and observes the behaviors of particular interacting people while the individuals themselves remain unobservable. In addition, netnographic studies may be purely observational, wherein the researcher is a specialized type of “lurker” who only observes the online communication but does not take an active part in it (Kozinets, 2010). This ensures that the examined culture is not influenced by the researcher’s presence (Dholakia & Zhang, 2004).

Data Collection

Seniors’ online communities are typically made up of various sections (e.g., Health and Well-being, Politics, Hobbies, etc.). Users can simply choose a topic, then browse the various threads (i.e., streams of posts concerning the same topic and pertaining to the same opening post) within that topic and join the online discussion(s). Alternatively, they can open a new thread. A brief review of more than 40 online communities explicitly targeting seniors revealed that most communities do not have sections dedicated to sex, and that sex-related discussions and threads are scattered in various sections such as health, family/relationships, and general discussions. As a result, locating sex-related discussion became a rather difficult task.

To overcome this difficulty, this study used an existing dataset that included 686,283 messages posted by 79,665 members of 14 leading English language-based communities during one full year (Nimrod, 2010). Seven communities were from the United States (*Senior-Net*, *Retirement Community*, *The Over 50 Golden Group*, *Cool Grandma*, *Early Retirement Forum*, *Florida Retirement Forums*, and *The Little-Brown-Jug Forum*), four from the United Kingdom (*Age-Net*, *IDF [I don't feel] 50*, *Pensioners Forum*, and *Retired Magazines*), two from Canada (*50 plus* and *Seniors Daily*), and one from Australia (*About Seniors*). Yet, with one exception (*Florida Retirement Forums*), all the communities targeted a global audience. As suggested by their names, these communities served adults aged 50 years old and over. Indeed, a recent survey conducted with their users revealed that most community members were 55-75 years old, and the mean was 64.7 years (Nimrod, 2014). Communities’ names also made them easy-to-locate by interested seniors, who could find them by a simple Google search. Posts that included keywords related to sex (e.g., sex and its derivatives, intimacy, libido, romance, love, lust, etc.) were filtered, resulting in a preliminary dataset of 6,712 posts (with occasional overlaps between the posts and linguistic inaccuracies) ranging in length from a few lines to several paragraphs. All of the posts were then read and sorted based on their content into relevant and irrelevant categories, resulting in a final dataset of 2,534 relevant posts. Posts published in the same thread carried the same title, enabling the researchers to follow not only the content, but also the characteristics of specific discussions.

Analysis and Interpretation

The final dataset was analyzed by drawing upon constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Constant comparison strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used to identify the content, dynamics, and characteristics of the sex-related discussions. As a first step, each post was carefully read and descriptive codes and categories were generated through open coding (e.g., “sex is what seniors want and deserve,” “sexual ignorance as degrading,” “sexual knowledge as empowering/helpful,” “loosening inhibitions,” “gaining perspective on sex,” “we were innocent, but the world has changed,” “we were able to explore sexual desires before AIDS,” “societal lack

of acceptance of sexuality in older adulthood,” “feeling old and shy to talk about sex with the doctor,” “sharing about sex in a safe place,” “interest in online sex conversations,” “freeing anonymity,” and “sex-related online conversations are fun”).

After having established this initial coding framework, focused coding and axial coding were implemented to identify the major characteristics of sex-related discussions in seniors’ online communities. Writing thick descriptions of the axial codes and constructing Clarke’s (2005) situational maps facilitated the axial coding. Finally, theoretical coding concluded the analysis, moving from description to conceptualization and integration. Analysis was supported by the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti7.

Throughout the analysis process, the research team moved back and forth in collaboration between preliminary subgroupings and revised versions to refine the codes and to settle on sub-categories. Constant comparisons between investigators’ interpretations, between different texts of a specific discussion, and between different discussions generated preliminary and refined sub-categories and axial links. Reflexive and theoretical notations were also used to refine the analysis and shape interpretations. As the dataset included only posts and thread titles, as well as due to the anonymity in the online communities, there was no way to describe the number and the characteristics of the authors of the posts. Thus, no socio-demographic details can be provided in this study. Considering the absence of this information in this study and the number of posts, no pseudonyms have been attached to the brief quotes provided in the findings section.

Findings

The findings can be captured by the combination of the following themes: (1) debate over appropriateness of discussing sex-related matters in seniors’ online communities (i.e., anti-sex vs. pro-sex voices); (2) the functions of sex-related discussions, such as being a source of concrete advice, emotional support, and intellectual exchange; (3) the leisure qualities of these discussions; and (4) the impacts of sex-related online communication on seniors’ offline sex lives.

Debate about the Legitimacy of Online Sex-Related Discussions

Analysis revealed that while the sex-related threads comprised a small volume of the overall text published in seniors’ online communities, many community members were following these discussions. In fact, some of the threads were so popular that the posters (i.e., community members that took active part in the online discussions) commented about the large number of “lurkers”—members who followed the online conversations but did not post. For example, one poster stated, “Sure was an interesting topic. See where there are 2,133 viewers reading your subject (more so than other specific conditions), sure shows that more people are still interested in sex than chronic pain or other problems stated here.” Similarly, another post author argued, “Personally I find sex beautiful. I assume the other posters find it beautiful as well. Otherwise there would not be close to 5,000 views on this thread. ... If this thread helped just one person, it was worth it!” Another community member indicated, “It [the thread] has become larger than life and taken on one of its own. ... I am very surprised this thread has remained viable and not been closed. Guess it’s something that we all can relate to.”

In spite of their popularity, there seemed to be a great ambivalence about the appropriateness of sex-related conversations in seniors’ online communities, and posters were generally split into *antagonists* and *protagonists* when it came to discussing sexual matters online. The antagonists found some sex-related discussions inappropriate and described them as “impolite,” “unclean,” “offensive,” “revolting,” and “disgusting.” For instance, one antagonist wrote, “Some of this talking about sex was utterly disgusting. I feel talking about playing with those battery oper-

ated things, masturbating, and stuff like that should be left out of any forums. It degrades most of us and the forum.” Echoing these sentiments, another antagonist wrote, “I wonder just how much more disgusting this thread is permitted to get before it is deemed offensive!” Moreover, some community members perceived such discussions as pornographic, arguing, “This is nothing but soft porn from some raunchy sexually unfulfilled seniors dreaming about what they wish they had.” Even some members who did not mind the topic expressed reservations, one of whom stated, “Some of the sex could have been left out (guess my prude-o-meter was working overtime here!!), but otherwise it [the thread] was an interesting read.”

Privacy was another argument antagonists used against the sex-related discussions, one poster writing, “What we do for pleasure sexually, I think this is a very private and personal THING not to be discussed in public.” Some post authors even chastised the others for their sex-related frankness, writing posts like, “Everyone needs to put little chastity belts on their mouths and maybe some little chastity gloves (leather mittens) on their typing fingers.” Responding to another post, one antagonist wrote, “I can’t believe you did that. Your wife’s orgasms belong to her and should not be discussed by you in public. Shame on you.” The most extreme antagonists even demanded that administrators ban the posters and/or eliminate the sex-related threads.

The protagonists did not relent and defended their rights to share and solicit information about sex-related matters. Some of them leaned on the argument of maturity, stating, for example, “In a forum where everyone is over the age of 50 it seems silly to get bent out of shape on the subject of sex.” Another poster similarly asserted, “I want to say that in this forum we are old enough to decide what is good for ourselves and that we should be able to discuss it without being chastised.” Another frequently used argument was the freedom of speech. Protagonists argued with statements like, “I doubt that any of us need a watchdog to monitor our sex lives” and “I see nothing wrong with exercising our freedom of speech and discussing intimate issues on this forum.”

The protagonists not only defended their rights, but also hit back the antagonists. Their attacks often portrayed the antagonists as conservative, narrow-minded, and “not fun.” For instance, one protagonist wrote, “I find it disgusting that someone would repeatedly barge into this popular thread with a bestial grumbling and spoil very interesting discussions.” Likewise, another wrote, “Those who have no sense of humor whatsoever or who have nothing constructive or funny to say should stay away from this thread. Do not post your disruptive trolls [*sic*] here! Go to your closet and do your favorite thing there!” Another community member stated, “The only ones who need to duck are those who come in with flame throwers to disrupt what was an interesting, informative, and fun thread—FOR SHAME!!”

In addition, the protagonists often accused antagonists of being ignorant. For example, one poster stated that antagonists were “[a]llowing the world to see how woefully ignorant and uptight it is possible to be. How embarrassing is that!” Expressing similar sentiments, another protagonist wrote, “Ignorance, innocence, [and] dignity are not the same thing. Subjects about bodily functions should be in forums. To be kept in ignorance is degrading and to be ignorant by choice is incredible!” Often, accusations of ignorance were mixed with arguments regarding maturity and/or the freedom of speech. For example, one person wrote, “At our age, over 50, what is degrading is ignorance. At our age, those little charades of prudishness just sound hollow and ridiculous.” Another wrote, “If one wishes to keep ignorant about sexual matters it is one’s choice, but one does not have the right to deny the right to know to others.”

Furthermore, the protagonists argued that the Internet offers a choice in the sense that a viewer does not have to read every thread they stumble upon, one person stating, “This is

an open forum and if someone does not like what he is reading then SOB ‘scroll on by.’” Thus, the chastising remarks of the antagonists were frequently encountered in the following manner: “Nobody forced you to read the thread. You have to learn to control yourself instead of trying to control others.” Another suggested option was to put the antagonists on the “ignore list,” and some protagonists even offered to launch separate sex-related sections to facilitate open sharing. One suggestion read, “Well if people are so squeamish about sex maybe there should be a private sub-forum with a password where people could discuss it openly. Just to protect the innocent.”

A Sphere for Consultation and for Intellectual Dialogue

Despite (or maybe because of) the debate regarding the legitimacy of the online sex-related discussions, one of their main characteristics was frequent commenting about the discussions’ role as a sphere for *consultation* and *intellectual dialogue*. Defending the educational potential of the online discussions, some post authors emphasized their lack of exposure to sexual education earlier in their lives due to the sociocultural and historical circumstances in which they grew up. For instance, one of the posters admitted, “My mother never even told me a thing about sex, what it was, or what not to do!” Another poster claimed, “I belong to the last birth cohort that could grow up without even hearing of herpes or HIV, let alone catching one of them,” and as such, “the sexual revolution predated me, but then I was able to explore my own ‘body desires’ before AIDS, even herpes, became such issues.”

Although many community members were grateful for the circumstances in which they lived as young adults (e.g., “I grew up right in that perfect little window—right after the invention of the birth control pill and before AIDS. Aaaaah, life was good!”), they also recognized that these circumstances created a situation where “an average modern child knows more about sex than the average grandma. Most of them know the proper names of the body and their function. But the same cannot be said about some members of the forum.” Making a similar point, one community member stated, “I am dumbfounded that we still have women in our age group with the hang ups they have. Basically they seem to not understand their own bodies, their own biological makeup.” These notions were also tied to health issues, as one community member commented, “Many older adults don’t think they’re at risk for STIs or HIV/AIDS. This is not true!”

Community members also recognized the obstacles in expanding their sexual education due to healthcare providers’ stereotypical views of seniors as asexual individuals. They complained that although many sexual issues associated with age and/or deteriorating health are “entirely treatable,” professionals either ignore them or do not take them seriously (e.g., “...the doctor tried to say: ‘What do you expect at your age?’”). This was exacerbated by the seniors’ own shyness and unwillingness to discuss sexual issues with healthcare professionals. For example, one member posted, “It hurts him [the poster’s husband] emotionally that, to use his own words, he is no longer a man. Yet he is so shy that he won’t go and talk to a sex specialist about his erectile problem.” Similarly, another poster remarked, “He [the poster’s husband] says that he is absolutely too old and he feels deeply embarrassed and mortified at the prospect of talking about his penis with his doctor.”

Community members pointed to this complexity as one of the factors emphasizing the importance of sex education for older adults. They argued that “contraception and education are what’s needed, not shaming and blaming people for being all too human.” As one person explained:

We are living a lot longer. So, if things slow down or stop when a man is in his sixties, that is a long-long celibate life to expect to have to live. What a drag. DH [Dear Hus-

band] and I did not want to live out our mature years like that. We got educated about ED [erectile dysfunction] and we as a couple took action to address the changes going on with both of us and I am glad we did. We hope to be a scandal well into our nineties.

The combination of the older adults' sex-related educational needs and their limited communication with relevant specialists led members to perceive the Internet in general and online communities specifically as a valuable source of sexual self- and peer-education. As one member argued, "Not all seniors care to discuss different problems in intimacy, but if the truth is out in the open, some will garner knowledge they are not going to otherwise. That is the wonder of cyber land."

Accordingly, members turned to their communities to consult with their peers and find answers to sex-related issues that bothered them. The main concerns discussed were the safety, appropriateness, and pleasure potential associated with anal and/or oral sex; "optimal" frequency and the "best" time of the day to have sex; diminishing or growing sexual desire; dating and/or remarrying after the loss of a partner; contraception and STIs; sexual health issues; performance anxiety and sexual expectations; the importance of foreplay and various strategies, aids, toys, and sex-enhancing medications to improve and/or enable sex.

The post authors described the consultations regarding these issues as a valuable source of support and safe venting. For example, one community member, discussing the effects of her partner's Alzheimer disease on their life in general and sex life in particular, concluded, "You make me feel part of instead of feeling as 'why me'... [Community name] is actually a haven sometimes." Another person wrote, "I applaud the administrators for their great understanding and for their generosity in allowing us to openly discuss various aspects of sex life and address our major concerns in this area and special needs that only come with age."

While serving as a source of information and support, the sex-related conversations also provided an opportunity for the exchange of opinions and views regarding sex-related topics members perceived as meaningful. As one community member argued, "Sex is a natural and very enjoyable function for most people and it needs to be discussed openly not just for those having problems, but for those who want to exchange views." Another person noted, "This thread is amongst the most civilized discussions about sex on the Internet without getting into the prurient practices and pictures. A truly meaningful discussion about sex is hard to come by. ... Enlightenment frees the mind and spirit."

The main topics that came up during sex-related intellectual exchanges included views regarding age differences in sexual relations, sexual taboos, infidelity, abstinence, homosexuality and same-sex marriage, sexual education, sexual risk-taking and (ir)responsibility, abortions, prostitution, pornography, pedophilia, polygamy, prudishness and social inhibitions surrounding sex, and the links between sex, life, death, and spirituality. Of particular interest was the lack of societal acceptance of sexuality in older adulthood, the reasons for this common ageist view, and the importance of changing it. Some community members argued that the "fact that elders are sexually interested and active is just not talked about widely" and changing this is important since, "if nothing else, it would legitimate Sr [senior] sexuality for middle-aged adults [as something] to look forward to." Conversely, other seniors adopted the attitude, "We can't change the world and at this stage of life have no aspirations even to try!" Another contrary argument was that drawing attention to senior sexuality might sensationalize it "because it's something new for many who don't think of [elders] in that way. Seniors who act like normal people are NEWS worthy [*sic*] for doing it."

Online Sex-Related Discussions as a Leisure Activity

The sex-related discussions in seniors' online communities were described by the post authors not only as informative and helpful, but also as an *enjoyable* and *meaningful* leisure activity. Describing the enjoyment in following and/or taking active part in discussions, members often simply described them as "fun." For instance, one member wrote, "For God's sake, don't we all live in modern times! Can't we have a little bit fun when posting here? I think we can and we should." Another poster expressed a similar notion, asking, "So if we have a little fun while we talk about sex, where is the harm? We might be over the age of 50 but are not dead yet!" Likewise, in response to one of the chastising remarks by an antagonist, one post author wrote, "Don't spoil a very friendly and joyous atmosphere of the party! We don't need fun spoilers in this thread. Our discussions are very informative, funny, and lively."

The common perception of online sex-related discussions as fun resulted mainly from the humoristic nature of many of the posts. Humor often set a light tone in the sex-related discussions and facilitated the exchange of information and advice in an open and lighthearted manner. As one poster argued, "Sex is an extremely important aspect of life [and] injecting a little bit of humor certainly makes this forum more lively [*sic*] and more interesting." In fact, the discussions analyzed in this study included hundreds of sex-related jokes, anecdotes, and humorous, sarcastic, and playful remarks and innuendos. As one person noted, "I'm treating this thread like funny joke Thursday and anyone who reads the name of the topic should know what they are getting into." Community members also shared that some sex-related conversations made them laugh, one example being, "I love this discussion. I laugh a lot as one [post] is funnier than the other."

Humor and open-mindedness were even stated by the community members as a prerequisite for participation in sex-related discussions. As one person argued, "Purists [with] no sense of humor [and] backwards [people] of all kind and stripe should stay away from this thread!" Another post author observed, "Most of the posters in [the sex-related] thread are known for their frankness. They call a spade a spade and they don't go about using infantile euphemisms. My oh my! Someone said vagina! How degrading, they should have said 'down there!'"

Along with this frankness, community members discussed the self-expression associated with posting, emphasizing a more meaningful dimension of participation in online sex-related discussions as a leisure activity. Highlighting this profundity, one poster wrote, "We have had great fun, but there is a strong underlying truth to that fun. Many of us learned and many got to express how they felt. On the whole it has been a very healthy experience." In a similar vein, another poster remarked, "It is a fun thread and so far everyone has been very careful not to offend. It is nice to discuss openly an act that is a natural part of life." The main explanation given for this perceived self-expression and openness was the anonymity and invisibility characterizing online interaction. Community members argued that "it is easier to ask questions anonymously in a forum than to ask a Physician who as a rule does not know everything or wants to impose his values." Likewise, another poster stated, "The folks on this forum are very open and honest" because the "anonymity of the Internet helps many people to overcome their shyness and fear of embarrassment even at the very thought of raising these [sexual] issues with their priest or spiritual leader."

Members believed that the liberating online anonymity prompted discussions that might not have happened otherwise. For instance, one poster expressed, "Maybe I am only different because I am a man and should not expose my feelings, but only in this medium do I feel comfortable in sharing my uncensored thoughts." In turn, this honesty (even if chastised by some) was often appreciated by other community members; as one person described, "It was a really

interesting discussion and the level of honesty was often quite heartwarming.” Finally, this anonymity was portrayed as conducive to a sense of comfort and humorous, fun atmosphere—essential leisurely qualities of these conversations, as reflected in the following post:

The nice thing about the Internet [is that] one can talk about problems techniques toys without the all over blush of embarrassment. This thread was NOT disgusting and probably a few got a bit ribald in their jokes near the end, but it was still not disgusting, only mildly more earthy than what many of the shy ones felt comfortable with. It's had a long run and many of us got some information, advice, and enjoyment out of it.

Impacts on Community Members' Offline Sex Lives

Based on posters' testimonials, online sex-related discussions influenced their offline sex lives in various ways that could be classified into either tangible impacts that led to some *behavioral changes* or less tangible impacts associated with *cognitive and/or emotional changes*. One discussed behavioral change involved community members talking more freely with partners, friends, and professionals about sexual needs and concerns as a result of discussing these matters online. One poster expressed her/his gratitude for this change by writing, “Thanks to you folks [i.e., the poster's online peers], I have begun to feel liberated and more comfortable talking [offline] about various issues concerning sex and sex life.” Another person stated:

It is thanks to this forum that I have overcome my embarrassment and started slowly asking some questions that were bothering me and him [her husband] for a long time. ... I was even too shy to ask my own family doctor (who like me is a woman) about some very important sex issues that I care about.

Another behavioral change described was the adoption of strategies to actively seek and achieve sexual pleasure. For example, one community member argued, “By the time we enter the last phase of life we all deserve the best,” adding, “When I have a Jacuzzi bath, it is definitely a physical pleasure that can be either a great massage for the body or something more. I do not feel guilty for indulging myself in either case.” Likewise, another person shared, “Thanks to you folks, I am no longer frightened that it might be sinful to engage in pleasurable oral sex. I think I should start experimenting with some other means of sexual gratification too.” Another person posted, “My next step will be to convince my hubby to go shopping for some sex toys together. I know I will have to drag him because of his shyness, but I think I can handle my shyness much better now thanks to you folks [i.e., online community members].” Sometimes, community members explicitly described the purpose of the sex-related discussions as having a meaningful impact on their offline sex life. For instance, one wrote, “We openly talk about everything that either can improve our sex life or make it at least partly possible.”

Yet it seems that the most significant changes described were cognitive and emotional, reflected in a greater sense of entitlement for pleasure, various sorts of reappraisal, loosened inhibitions, and a better understanding of both the self and others. Community members argued that online sex-related communication played an important role in realization and gaining confidence and a sense of entitlement for sexual pleasure. As one member wrote, “Thanks to this forum I came to realization that there is nothing wrong in seeking sexual fulfillment at older age.” Another poster argued, “Everyone should be enjoying their sexual relations no matter what age. ... It's healthy...it's fun...and it keeps us young.” Along the similar lines, people stated, “There should be NO embarrassment and it is about time that sex as pleasure came OUT of the closet,” and “Seniors need to loosen up and get pleasure out of sex and life.” Another person claimed, “My goodness, sex is exactly what most seniors want and deserve. If there is no partner, why not

instant gratification in the form of the great toys that are available? Because we are old, we are NOT dead!!”

In addition, members described various kinds of reappraisal with respect to sex that they were able to achieve through the online communication. Some people shared that the discussions helped them to see sex differently, as the following quote illustrates: “I also want to say a big thank you to friendly souls on this board for helping me gain a new perspective on sex as well as for your encouragement and for all the very useful advice.” Some participants saw these discussions not only as a source of information, but also as a potential source of disinhibition. One poster expressed this by stating, “I finally started to get rid of some deeply rooted inhibitions that were imposed on me by my ultra conservative upbringing.” Another person wrote:

Too bad so many parents impregnated their children with prudishness before realizing that sexuality is a most important and vital part of existence even into later life. At least here [the online community] we can joke and enjoy a bit of older persons’ raunchiness. So many of the hang-ups about sex are often put in reasonable perspective as we grow in maturity.

Beyond constructing better self-understanding, some community members also learned tolerance and acceptance of others through online sex-related discussions, as reflected in the following quote:

It is thanks to this forum that I became more comfortable with asking some important questions without fear of being embarrassed. My greatest personal achievement, among others in recent years, is to come to a greater understanding and acceptance of gay people. ... I am not gay and never have been gay, but I WAS a bigot. There are still many bigots out there. But the world is changing.

Community members deeply appreciated the various behavioral and cognitive changes achieved due to the online discussions. They were consistently thanking the forums and their participants in general, and tended to personally acknowledge specific members for introducing them to the strategies that affected (or had some potential to impact) their offline sex lives. Overall, they perceived online sex-related discussions as *educating* and *empowering*, as argued in the following post: “To gain knowledge even if that knowledge is never put to practical use is not degrading but empowering. As children we were kept ignorant about sex. Let’s not be ignorant as we mature.” Additionally, community members felt empowered to celebrate sex as an expression of their masculinity/femininity regardless of their advancing age. As an example, one poster described sex as essential at any age, “Especially for many men, they never outgrow it. It is a measure of their manhood!” In a similar vein, another poster asserted, “We deserve to be desired, to be made love to, to feel passion. Women for the most part retain their sexual activity to a very old age ... no shame or embarrassment ... that is the nature of being a feminine creature.” As one member summarized, “We each have our seasons. No longer are we dried leaves on the forest ground. We are the beauty of fall, the crisp smell of winter.”

Discussion

Members of seniors’ online communities are by no means representative of the older population as they are typically relatively young (mean age = 65), educated, healthy and well-to-do (Nimrod, 2014). Nevertheless, their online discussions of sex-related issues echo what was found in previous research on sexuality in the general aging population—specifically, that older in-

dividuals preserve both a high interest in sex and a high involvement in sexual activity (e.g., Cooperman et al., 2007; DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Hillman, 2008; Lindau et al., 2007; Loe, 2012). The popularity of the discussions, as reflected in the unusually high number of views, suggests that in a reality of limited alternatives for open and direct sex-related communication, seniors found a channel to satisfy their needs for sex-related information and support.

The combination of entertainment and education made participation in online sex-related discussions a casual leisure activity that is both enjoyable and meaningful at the same time. Using Stebbins' (2001) categories of casual leisure, this activity may be defined as "edutainment." The benefits of this activity, as suggested by the participants' reports, are similar to those characterizing the participation in seniors' online communities in general, including instrumental information (Camarinha-Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2004; Pfeil, 2007; Xie, 2008), intellectual stimulation (Nimrod, 2014), emotional support (Furlong, 1989; Ito et al., 2001; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2009; Wright, 2000), and joyfulness (Nimrod). As found in previous research of seniors' online communities (Nimrod), the benefits of participation in online sex-related discussions are realized not only online, but also permeate into members' offline lives.

The findings of this study reveal that the sex-related discussions in seniors' online communities have a notable potential to help older adults cope with all three main sex-related vulnerabilities in later life. With regard to the first vulnerability—namely, the increased frequency of health concerns and life conditions related to sexual problems (Gott & Hichliff, 2003; Lindau et al., 2007; Taylor & Gosney, 2011)—the communities offer their members reassurance that they are not alone and that whatever they experience is faced by many others in their age group. In addition, they provide members with a channel for sharing their difficulties, gaining first-hand knowledge, and exchanging advice. To an extent, it might be said that the communities offer frail seniors an opportunity for communal coping (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998), a cooperative problem-solving process in which community members cope together with a problem that is perceived as a common one (i.e., "our" problem vs. "my" or "your" problem).

With regard to the second reason for seniors' greater sex-related vulnerability—their limited communication regarding sex with healthcare providers (Bonifazi, 2000; Bouman et al., 2006; Foster et al., 2012; Henderson et al., 2004; Hock, 2010; Taylor & Gosney, 2011)—the discussions, especially those that are dedicated to consultations, offer a safe sphere for seniors to discuss their sexual problems and concerns. The wide range of discussed concerns included very private and sensitive worries (e.g., erectile dysfunction, diminished desire), and members exhibited a very high level of self-disclosure, which was explained by the anonymity in the communities. Hence, the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) enabled the relatively free sexual expression exhibited by community members. Moreover, as one of the main reported changes in members' offline lives was talking more freely with partners, friends, and professionals about sexual needs and concerns, it seems that the discussions played an important role in liberating seniors from various offline communication constraints.

Furthermore, the open discussions offered members some solution to their third vulnerability—namely, the limited access to sexual health education they had both earlier in their lives and in their later years (Cooperman et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2004; Hock, 2010; Illa et al., 2008; Latini & Coon, 2003). The educational value of the discussions resulted from both types of information exchange (the consultations and the intellectual dialogues) and, based on members' reports, led to many durable outcomes including a better understanding of the self and others, a greater sense of entitlement for pleasure, reappraisal and loosened inhibitions. Members also

reported behavioral changes, which seemed to result from the cognitive and emotional changes. Therefore, the informal education provided online empowered members to enjoy sex in their later life and the many physical and psychological benefits it could yield (Laumann et al., 2006; Lindau et al., 2007). It is unclear if this education had an effect on sexual risk-taking, but issues related to safety (e.g., STIs, sexual risk-taking, and responsibility) were certainly widely discussed.

In addition to the above, the study revealed a fourth vulnerability, which may be described as a general dissonance concerning what is considered socially-appropriate or acceptable with regard to sex-related communication. This was reflected in the rather extreme tension between the antagonists and the protagonists of the discussions. This tension will probably only characterize the current population of older adults, however, since they are functioning as a “transition generation” between the many sexually-conservative generations that preceded it and the more sexually liberated generations that followed. Furthermore, the effects of this tension are not necessarily negative. It may have had some negative effects on the antagonists, whose values, beliefs, and personalities were somewhat ridiculed. However, it seems that this tension only added to the overall entertainment and educational values of the discussions, as members (mainly the protagonists) seemed to enjoy and learn from the battles about the appropriateness of the discussions.

Additionally, as with other online communication, sex-related discussions may have an effect not only on active posters, but also on the lurkers just following the discussions. Although new-media literature has demonstrated that lurkers tend to benefit from their membership in online communities less than posters (cf. Mo & Coulson, 2010; Nimrod, 2013; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008), it is reasonable to assume that the numerous community members who only followed the online sex-related discussions also received a good share of both information and entertainment.

Lastly, it is possible that all protagonists, regardless of whether they were active posters or passive lurkers, received an additional benefit in terms of self and group image. By discussing sex in such a free and humorous manner, they portrayed themselves as open-minded, modern, progressive, adventurous, funny, and “cool” older adults. This image may have helped them cope with aging and resist internalized negative socio-cultural views of elders’ sexuality (Bonifazi, 2000; Hillman, 2008; Hock, 2010; Lai & Hynie, 2011; Taylor & Gosney, 2011). As the discussions were most likely followed mainly by older people, their positive effects on attitudes were probably limited to the community members and their immediate social environment. The extent to which these positive effects permeated to the societal level and dispelled ageist stereotypes of asexuality in older adulthood (Adams et al., 2003; Fugère et al., 2008) remains unclear. Yet we agree with what the previously-quoted poster wrote: “If this thread helped just one person, it was worth it!”

Limitations and Future Research

While this study illustrates the potential of netnography for exploring cybercultures and leisure behavior, it has limitations and delimitations. Since the information about the sociodemographic characteristics of the posters is unavailable it is impossible to establish any tendencies in terms of the posters’ attitudes and behaviors based on their sociodemographic profiles. Another potential limitation is bound with using filtering terms based on standard sexual terminology. While the list of filtering words was rather comprehensive, it is possible that some relevant discussions and/or posts were missed simply because they did not include the sex-related keywords used for selection.

Furthermore, despite the multinational composition of the included seniors' online communities, most participants in English-based communities live in English-speaking Western countries (Nimrod, 2014). Therefore, future research should investigate seniors' online sex-related discussions across a broader range of cultures and, of course, how they are perceived by elders who do not participate in online communities. It should also examine potential differences between older adults with different socio-demographic characteristics such as gender and age. Finally, in addition to examining available texts, the exploration of what roles online sex-related discussions play in members' lives should involve direct qualitative and quantitative investigations. To conclude, this study revealed that some older adults are seeking sex-related information, advice, education, and fun in seniors' online communities. This communication proved to be enabling at least for some older adults. The study also illustrated generational silences about sex that need to be addressed in future research and further health education efforts.

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