

Many older adults going online to discuss, learn about sex

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Liza Berdychevsky, University of Illinois professor of recreation, sport and tourism is shown. Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

Forget those ageist stereotypes that senior citizens have little interest in sex and are befuddled by technology. Many older adults are going online to dish about the joys of sex and swap advice about keeping their mojos working well into their twilight years, a new study found.

"Many older people preserve both a high interest in sex and a high involvement in sexual activities," said researcher Liza Berdychevsky, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois

who researches sexual behavior and well-being. "The popularity of sex-related discussions in [seniors'](#) online communities suggests that, in a reality of limited alternatives for open and direct sex-related communication, seniors are finding channels to satisfy their needs for information and support."

Berdychevsky and co-author Galit Nimrod, a faculty member at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, conducted an online ethnographic study - or netnography - in which they examined discussions of sexual topics in 14 online communities geared toward adults age 50 and older. Seven of the websites were based in the U.S., four in the U.K., two in Canada and one in Australia.

Berdychevsky said online communities offer notable potential for helping people cope with the three primary sexual vulnerabilities that occur in later life: health issues and life circumstances that affect sexuality, difficulties communicating with health care providers about sex-related problems, and limited access to sexual health information.

The researchers drew their data from an existing dataset, which archived all the boards' messages for a one-year period, and they filtered the posts using various keywords related to sex. While sex-related discussion threads were a small portion of these messages, the researchers found that the threads with [sexual content](#) were quite popular, with some posts viewed as many as 5,000 times.

Seniors' discussions of sexual subjects were lively and wide-ranging, the researchers found, with participants swapping opinions and information about topics such as age differences between sexual partners, taboos, same-sex marriage, pornography, prostitution, and the use of sexual aids, toys and sex-enhancing drugs.

For some users, the online discussions provided a form of leisure

entertainment, with discussion forums that were characterized by open, lighthearted atmospheres and posts rife with sexual jokes, anecdotes and innuendos.

Some members wrote about how much they relished opportunities to engage in intellectual discussions about sex, and an especially popular topic was societal stereotypes about [older adults](#)' sexuality, the researchers found.

"Of particular interest was society's lack of acceptance of sexuality in older adulthood, the reasons for this ageist view and the importance of changing it," Berdychevsky said.

Some participants recounted bad experiences when they attempted to discuss sexual problems with clinicians who ignored or dismissed their concerns, and other seniors disclosed they were too embarrassed to even initiate such conversations.

The anonymity of cyberspace enabled some seniors to overcome shyness or embarrassment and share their uncensored thoughts about sex for the first time, according to their posts. For people who received little or no sex education during their youth, online consultations with peers enabled them to expand their sexual knowledge and overcome obstacles to sexual fulfillment.

Some seniors reported that their sex lives and relationships offline were enriched as a result of their online activity, which emboldened them to talk more freely with their partners about their sexual needs and overcome hang-ups to try new sexual practices that they previously considered sinful or taboo.

For seniors struggling with the loss of intimacy due to their partner's death or declining health, the online forums provided emotional support

and a place to vent their frustrations.

"It seems that the most significant changes from these online sex-related communications were cognitive and emotional, including a greater sense of entitlement for sexual pleasure and fulfillment, loosened inhibitions and a better understanding of the self and others," Berdychevsky said.

"Members described various kinds of reappraisal that they achieved through online [discussions](#), such as seeing sex differently or discovering strategies that affected - or had the potential to impact - their sex lives."

Despite the popularity of sexual topics, community members often clashed about propriety, the researchers found. Critics branded the sexual content offensive, pornographic and prurient, and chided participants for their frankness. Proponents characterized objectors as prudish and ignorant, vigorously defended freedom of speech and upheld the threads as interesting, amusing and informative.

Previous studies suggest that the seniors using these [online communities](#) are relatively young - with a mean age of 65 years, according to one estimate - and tend to be well-educated, healthy and affluent. Therefore, participants in the current study might not be representative of the broader population of seniors, the researchers cautioned.

The paper, which will be published in the *Journal of Leisure Research*, is available [online](#).

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