

“Any Girls Want to Chat Press 911”: Partner Selection in Monitored and Unmonitored Teen Chat Rooms

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ABSTRACT

We examined the search for partners by participants in two teen chat services having different ecologies. Over 12,000 utterances from monitored and unmonitored chat rooms were analyzed to assess online partner selection attempts and to see how such attempts may be influenced by the presence of an adult monitor. We found that the search for partners is ubiquitous in adolescents' online haunts, just as it is in their offline lives, and approximately two requests for a partner occur each minute. Although partner selection appears to be an important activity in online teen chat rooms, there are differences in frequency and format (e.g., the use of numerals, sexualized requests) as a function of participants' age and gender, and chat room ecology (monitored vs. unmonitored).

INTRODUCTION

THE COMMUNICATION APPLICATIONS of the Internet such as chat rooms and instant messaging have become tremendously popular among adolescents,^{1,2} and the Internet is emerging as an important social context in their lives.³ Adolescence is a period of tremendous change, and research suggests that adolescents are using this newest context to deal with some of the changes in their lives such as their developing sexuality and emerging identity.⁴⁻⁷ In this paper, we examine another adolescent concern, partner selection, in the context of teen chat rooms.

Chat rooms and adolescents

Chat rooms are online spaces, where participants can have conversations in real time with other participants in the room. According to the Pew Internet Project,⁸ about 55% of online teens in the United

States had reported ever visiting a chat room. In a survey of Canadian youth in 2001, 72% of 15–17-year-olds reported visiting chat rooms, with at least 60% visiting private and adult chat areas.⁹ Similarly, in a 2005 survey of youth in the Czech Republic, 29% of online teens reported visiting chat rooms weekly.³ This paper focuses on text-based chat rooms, where participants are anonymous and disembodied to each other, and typically do not have information about other participants' bodies, such as their age, gender, and physical appearance (e.g., height, weight, hair color). The anonymous and disembodied nature of chat rooms make them a perfect venue to study a sensitive topic such as adolescent partner selection.

Connecting chat rooms to developmental processes

Recent studies have begun to explore the connection between chat rooms and developmental

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processes, such as the construction of identity and sexuality. Online teen chat rooms provide adolescents with an anonymous social context to discuss issues related to their identity and their developing sexuality.⁴ In a study of chat conversations, more than half of the 583 participants (identified by a distinct screen name) communicated identity information, most frequently their gender.⁶ Of the 12,000 chat utterances that were analyzed in that study, sexual themes constituted 5% of all utterances, with one sexual comment occurring per minute.⁶ More importantly, monitored teen chat rooms contained less explicit sexuality and less crude language.⁶

There are indications that chat rooms may be used for yet another important adolescent concern: finding a romantic partner and establishing a romantic relationship.⁴ Romantic partners serve the important adolescent need for intimacy and companionship¹⁰ and romantic relationships are a major topic of adolescent peer conversation.¹¹ In fact, peer relationships provide an important context for the development of adolescent romantic relationships.^{12,13} As teen chat rooms allow for public interactions with peers, they can make this process potentially visible to researchers for the first time. Although there is limited research on this topic in connection with chat rooms, studies suggest that adolescents use the Internet to address concerns about romantic relationships; analysis of a bulletin board on a popular health support web site for teens revealed that questions about romantic relationships were the second most frequently posted questions, after questions about sexual health.¹⁴ The evidence suggests that some adolescents may use the Internet to form casual relationships as well as for dating, partner selection, and online romances.^{15,16} Researchers have concluded that "forming online relationships might be one of the most generally appealing aspects of Internet use among young people, given that forming relationships is a developmental imperative of adolescence."¹⁵

How are partners selected in chat rooms?

Despite its importance, adolescents' partner selection is not a well-understood aspect of their romantic relationships¹⁷ and is even less understood in online contexts. In the absence of visual cues about physical appeal and cues such as gesture and gaze that convey interest, how is partner selection accomplished? It appears that participants search for partners actively by making "partner requests" in the public space.⁴ Such partner requests frequently contain the age/sex/location (a/s/l) chat code and may not have a specific addressee (e.g.,

any body wa nna chat) or may be specific and contain details related to identity (e.g., *if there r any m/13/Tx in here if so im me*). Others contain identity information with a request for a numeral to indicate interest (e.g., *who wants to chat with a hot and sexy 13/ff/ct press 12345*). Finally, they may not contain identity information but may contain a topic of common interest such as a music group (e.g., *hey anyone in this room like Eminem, nelly, Good Charlotte, Shaggy, Britany Spears press 4*).⁴

Although we now have a basic understanding how partners are selected in chat rooms, many questions remain. For instance, how commonly do partner requests occur in chat rooms? Are participants with certain identities (e.g., age, gender) more likely to make such requests? Are requests for partners having certain identities (e.g., females) more common than others? To what extent are partner requests sexualized? Finally, do requests for partners change as a function of the chat environment (teen chat rooms with adult monitors versus those without adult monitors)?

METHODS

In order to address these questions, we analyzed the partner requests made in a large sample of conversations from online teen chat rooms. To test the generality of our findings regarding adolescent partner selection, we selected chat rooms from two teen chat services having very different ecologies. One teen chat service required a subscription fee and had adult monitors (Service 1), whereas the other was free and did not have any adult monitor (Service 2). To assess how adolescent partner selection may be impacted by an adult's presence, we compared the conversation from monitor-present periods with that from monitor-absent periods for the monitored chat rooms. Thus, we hoped to study how the quintessentially adolescent activity of partner selection is impacted by the presence of an adult.

Sample

A total of 20 chat sessions were analyzed. This sample is the same as that analyzed in previous work⁴ and was obtained from a larger sample of 38 sessions.¹⁸ It consisted of 10 sessions from each kind of chat service on the same day of the week (weekdays and weekends) and at approximately the same time during May 2003. In order to ensure comparable samples, conversations were recorded from both services only at times that the monitored chat rooms were open (daily from 12 to 9 p.m. PST). The

chat sessions were recorded by a researcher who entered the chat rooms on the appointed day/time and remained there for one half hour (or until 15 pages of text were collected). Throughout this time, the researcher was a passive observer and did not initiate or engage in any interaction with the other participants. At the end of 30 min, the log of the conversation was copied and pasted into a Word document for further analysis; to protect the anonymity of participants, nicknames have been changed.

Coding

Host/no-host coding for chat service 1. Because a single monitor (called a “host”) supervises multiple chat rooms in Service 1, an adult monitor is not always present in a chat room on that service. Tynes et al.¹⁸ have suggested that this results in the chat rooms becoming functionally unmonitored in the temporary absence of the monitor. Therefore, all transcripts from Service 1 were coded for the presence versus absence of host; inter-rater reliability was calculated by having two coders code all 10 transcripts from Service 1. An acceptable kappa of 0.873 was obtained.⁶

Utterance coding. As there were over 12,000 utterances to be coded, two coders each coded half the sample. The coders were trained on 18 transcripts that were not part of the sample for this study. Inter-rater reliability was established on this training sample, and the kappas for the coding categories were 0.79–0.92 for Service 1 and 0.84–1.0 for Service 2. All utterances were coded as to whether they contained content related to pairing-off/romantic partner selection (e.g., *Ladies If Ya Sexy Press 11, hey any one wanna chat witha hot 13ff/oh blond hair blue eyes 5'2 im me*). They were further sub-categorized if this request involved the a/s/l chat code (*a/s/l lilcow*) and/or requested a numeral (*Ladies If Ya Sexy Press 11*). Partner requests were also coded with regard to the nature of the request—specifically whether they were sexual (*Ladies If Ya Sexy Press 11*), non-sexual (*skins im me*), contained requests for a picture (*any guys pic on pro*), and were sexual and contained requests for a picture (*any hot girls with pics press 555*)

Statistical analysis

We analyzed the data at two levels—at the level of the chat room, and at the level of individual nicknames or participants. For the former, each individual utterance is the unit of analysis regardless of who uttered it. Chat room or utterance-level analyses are informative about the utterance environment

within a chatroom. For the individual-level analyses, we coded whether or not a participant (identified by a particular nickname) contributed a particular kind of utterance (e.g., partner request, gendered partner request) at least once; regardless of whether a participant had made one, two, or multiple utterances of that kind, he/she was considered to have made that kind of utterance and contributed only one data point to the chi-square analysis.

RESULTS

In order to give the reader a sense of who (e.g., age, gender) was in the chat rooms and how they presented themselves, we briefly summarize the relevant results from the earlier study.⁶ There were 583 nicknames in the transcripts from Chat Service 1 (monitored) and 567 nicknames in the transcripts from Chat Service 2 (unmonitored). These participants produced a total of 6702 utterances in Chat Service 1 [M (utterances) = 11.50] and 5556 utterances in Chat Service 2 [M (utterances) = 9.80]. Analysis of participants' declarations regarding their identity—mostly their age and gender—showed that participants in the monitored chat rooms presented themselves as younger and female compared to participants in the monitored rooms.

Romantic partner selection

Pairing-off and romantic partner selection, quintessential adolescent activities, are found online just as they are ever-present in the offline world (Table 1). Across the two services, 10.8% of utterances consisted of requests for partners (e.g., “any ladies wanna chat im me” or “any cute guy want 2 chat”); 53% of nicknames or participants made at least one request for a partner, and participants who uttered a partner request made an average of 2.2 requests. In contrast, a/s/l requests directed to the room as a whole or to particular individuals were much more infrequent (1.6% of chat lines) and so were not analyzed further.

In order to assess the influence of the host on partner selection in Service 1, we compared utterances contributed in the host's presence with those contributed in the host's absence. Second, to assess how partner selection was influenced by the service independent of the host, we compared utterances from Chat service 2 (unmonitored) with those from Chat Service 1 (monitored), eliminating all utterances from Service 1 when a host was present. Chi-square tests revealed no differences in the occurrence of partner requests in Service 1 as a function

of the host's presence [$\chi^2(1, N = 6702) = 0.176, p = 0.185$] as well as no differences between Service 1 (no-host lines) and Service 2 (all lines) [$\chi^2(1, N = 9387) = 0.221, p = 0.638$].

Age and gender effects in partner requests

To assess whether there were any age and gender differences in the tendency to make partner requests, we coded whether a nickname made a partner request; only participants who provided their age and gender were included in this analysis. We found no reliable age (10–13, 14–15, 16–17, and 18–24 years) effects [$\chi^2(3, N = 406) = 1.3, p = 0.73$], suggesting that a similar percentage of nicknames in each age group made a partner request at least once. However, of those who uttered a partner request at least once, we found age differences in the percentage of such requests [$\chi^2(3, N = 5667) = 24.56, p = 0.000$]. For participants who stated that they were 10–13 years of age 13.1% of utterances were partner requests, for those who stated that they were 14–15 years of age 11.1% were partner requests, for those who stated that they were 16–17 years of age 16.4% were partner requests, and for those who stated that they were 18–24 years of age 9.5% were partner requests. With regard to gender differences, a similar analysis revealed a tendency for a greater proportion of declared females to make partner requests compared to declared males [$\chi^2(1, N = 524) = 3.28, p = 0.070$]. Among participants who stated that they were male 65% uttered a partner request, whereas among participants who stated that they were female 72% uttered partner requests. This trend was strongest among those who stated that they were 10–13 years of age [$\chi^2(2, N = 92) = 8.97, p = 0.011$]; 77.6% of declared females uttered partner requests compared to 56.0% of declared males. Participants who said they were female also uttered a greater proportion of partner requests [$\chi^2(1, N = 7021) = 3.83, p = 0.027$]. For nicknames who stated they were female, 13.5% of all utterances were partner requests, whereas amongst those who stated that they were male, 11.9% of utterances were partner requests.

Requests for numerals

From prior work, we know that chat participants use numerals to identify potential conversation/romantic partners.⁴ Across the entire chat corpus, 3.1% of utterances contained requests for numerals from potential partners (to put this in perspective, numeral requests made up 28.1% of partner requests), and 21% of participants uttered at least one request for a numeral. The majority of these requests

were nonsexual (2.9%). Only a small proportion of numeral requests were sexualized (0.2%; “press 66 if u want to talk to a hot girl”), and some even contained the number 69 (“ANY GIRLS WANNA HAVE PHONE SEX PRESS 69 OR IM ME PLZZZ”)—a code for the 69 sexual position and hence considered a sexual number.

Sexual versus non-sexual partner requests

Partner requests were also coded as to whether they were sexual, nonsexual, and only contained pictures. Across both services, the majority of partner requests were nonsexual in nature (77.2%), followed by sexualized requests (16.2%). Requests for pictures (3.8%) and requests that were sexual in nature and contained request for pictures (1.1%) were very infrequent and were not analyzed further. Although most partner requests were nonsexual, they were more sexualized in nature when compared with the other kinds of utterances in our chat corpus [$\chi^2(2, N = 12258) = 698.34, p = 0.000$]. Among partner requests, 12.7% of utterances were implicitly sexual and 5.7% were explicitly sexual; for all other utterances, 1.3% were sexually implicit and 2.3% were sexually explicit.

Chi-square analysis revealed no reliable difference in the sexual versus nonsexual nature of partner requests in Service 1 as a function of the host's presence versus absence [$\chi^2(2, N = 705) = 0.89, p = 0.35$]. Although not reliable, there was a trend toward a greater percentage of sexualized partner requests in Service 2 (all lines; 20.3%) compared to Service 1 (no-host lines; 15.7%) [$\chi^2(1, N = 940) = 3.28, p = 0.070$]. There was also no reliable difference in the distribution of sexualized and nonsexualized partner requests as a function of stated age (10–13, 14–15, 16–17, 18–24 years) [$\chi^2(3, N = 673) = 3.70, p = 0.30$] and stated gender [$\chi^2(1, N = 858) = 0.84, p = 0.36$].

Partner requests specifying gender

Across both services, 3.8% of partner requests specified partner gender (2.1% requested female partners, and 1.7% requested male partners). Chi-square analyses revealed no reliable differences in the gender of the partner sought as a function of the host's presence in Service 1 and [$\chi^2(2, N = 6702) = 4.70, p = 0.096$] and as a function of service (Service 1, no host lines, vs. Service 2, all lines) [$\chi^2(2, N = 9387) = 5.03, p = 0.081$]. However we did find differences in the gender of the partner sought as a function of participants' stated gender. As can be seen in Figure 1, declared males not only asked more often for female partners, but they did so more

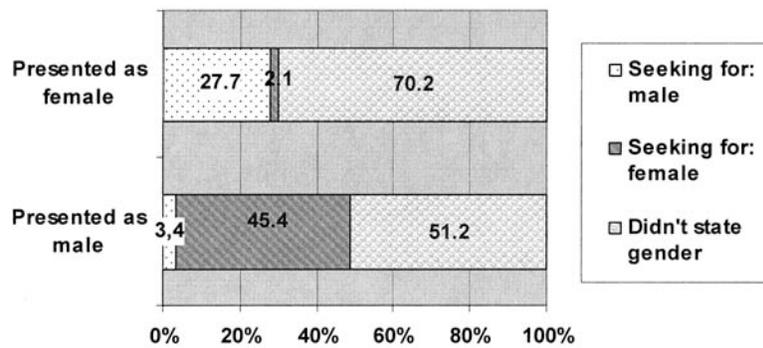


FIG. 1. Presented gender of adolescents and gender of partner sought in percentages.

often. Although declared females asked more often for male partners, they were not as explicit as declared males in specifying the gender of the partner they were seeking [$\chi^2 (2, N = 899) = 288.24, p = 0.000$]. We also found that participants who stated they were older (16–17 and 18–24 years) specified the gender of the partner they were seeking more often (about 50% of the time) compared to those who stated they were younger (10–13 and 14–15 years; about 30% of the time) [$\chi^2 (6, N = 701) = 37.01, p = 0.000$].

DISCUSSION

We undertook this study to examine how one Internet venue, teen chat rooms, is used by participants to deal with a fundamental adolescent concern, partner selection. We asked how participants address the problems created by the medium and how they take advantage of the medium's opportunities to find a romantic partner. Our results suggest that the search for partners is as salient in adolescents' online haunts as it is in their offline ones.^{10,11} Almost 11% of the 12,258 utterances in our corpus were directed towards finding a partner. In effect, there were two partner requests each minute; in prior work, we found that there was one sexual utterance per minute and one obscene comment every 2 min.⁶ A little less than a third of these partner requests asked interested parties to *press* a particular string of numbers. Typically, these numbers were ones that were easy to remember and easily recognizable, such as 911, 345, and 456. Such numeral strings stand out visually in the chat space, and numeral requests are a good example of how chat participants take advantage of the medium's opportunities when finding a partner.¹⁹ How frequent are partner requests compared to other kinds of utterances in chat rooms? Collapsing across both services, the three most frequent utterance kinds

were information about the self (12.3%), partner requests (10.8%), and greetings and goodbyes (9.2%).^{6,20} Since information about oneself and partner requests are critical to pairing off, we suggest that a major motivation for visiting teen chat rooms is pairing-off with a partner.

Another set of questions that motivated this study was with regard to age and gender differences in partner requests. Participants who stated they were 16–17 years of age most actively searched for a partner. Participants who declared they were older were also more likely to specify the gender of the partner they were seeking. These findings are consistent with older adolescents' increased sexual concerns^{21,22} and consequently their greater need for intimacy and romantic involvement.²³ This is also the time during adolescence when group boy-girl relationships of earlier years lead to paired relationships between romantic partners.^{24,25}

With regard to gender differences in partner selection attempts, participants who stated that they were females were more likely to utter partner requests. The gender difference was strongest among those whose declarations of age suggested that they were the youngest participants. Given that sexual maturation during puberty occurs earlier in girls than boys,²⁶ it does not seem surprising that, among participants whose declarations suggested that they were the youngest, those who stated they were females more actively searched for a partner than their male counterparts. Although declared females more actively searched for partners, they were less likely to specify the gender of the partner sought compared to declared males, who were more likely to ask for female partners. This could have been because participants who declared they were male were actively seeking a partner of the opposite sex as a romantic partner, whereas participants who declared they were females were simply looking for a conversational partner. Although we found that declared females more

actively sought partners, we found no gender differences in sexualized partner requests. These findings run counter to the stereotype that males are more interested in sex and more actively seek partners for this purpose; we think that the anonymity afforded in chat rooms has a liberating influence on adolescent girls when it comes to looking for partners and displaying interest in sex.⁴

Finally, we asked whether there would be differences in partner requests as a function of the chat environment, specifically as related to the presence of an adult monitor. Interestingly, the presence of an adult monitor in the monitored chat service had no effect on the frequency with which participants searched for partners, the frequency of sexualized partner requests, and in the gender of the partner sought. There was also no difference between the two services with regard to the frequency of partner requests and the gender of the partner sought. However, in comparison to the monitored service, the unmonitored service had a trend toward more sexualized partner requests; the unmonitored service had participants who declared they were older and so may simply have been more interested in sex.²² Finally, requests for numerals were more frequent in the monitored service; this could be because this service had participants who stated they were younger, who may have been more prone to use numeral requests, or it could simply be because such utterance were part of the culture of this chat service. We suggest that the search for partners is an important adolescent activity common to teen chat rooms of different ecologies, although there may be minor differences in how it is accomplished (e.g., use of numerals, sexualized request) as a function of participants' age, gender, and the nature of the communication environment (monitored or not).

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