chapter **two**

SOCIAL MEDIA & SEXUAL HEALTH

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this chapter, students will be able to:

- understand how social media can affect sexual communication;
- describe means by which we can communicate with each other through social media.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS USED IN THIS CHAPTER

HIV   **h**uman **i**mmunodeficiency **v**irus
IM   **i**nstant **m**essaging
LOL   **l**augh **o**ut **l**oud

SOCIAL NETWORKS

The past decade has seen an explosion of social media that did not exist when your parents were teenagers or young adults! Blogging, profile-based sites, instant messaging, using Instagram, tweeting and texting have all become part of daily life for millions of people around the world. In the United States, 79 percent of American adults go online (Zickuhr, 2010). Yet, that percentage increases to 95 percent for adults between the ages of 18–33 years old and decreases to 30 percent for adults 74 years old and older. According to the Pew Research Center (Brenner & Smith, 2013), 72 percent of American adults who are Internet users also use social networking sites. And women slightly outnumber men (74 percent versus 70 percent, respectively). By the end of 2013, Facebook had reached over 1.2 billion users on its social networking site (Facebook, 2014). Even though, email remains the most popular form of communication online for all ages (Zickuhur, 2010), some researchers argue that texting is the most frequently used method of communication for adolescents and young adults (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Madden et al., 2013). Given the rapidly changing social media platforms that exist today, some platforms that are discussed in this chapter may be irrelevant five years from now and new platforms will take their place that haven't even been invented yet.

Imagine a world without the ability to text anyone, almost anywhere in the world day or night? Imagine not being able to tell the world on Facebook, Vine or Instagram something great that just happened in your life? This newfound freedom to express ourselves to others has its pitfalls, though. Sexual regrets are nothing new, but having your web-based world witness your regrets can be embarrassing to say the least. Navigating what people post or say online or via their phones can be tricky, especially if there's perceived external pressure to conform. For example, what if all your friends post pictures online of their new romance, yet you don't feel comfortable in doing so? How easy is it for others to explain a change in their "relationship status," especially if the relationship ended badly?

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In the United States, a majority of adolescents and young adults have grown up with Internet-based communication as part of their daily social interactions. Thus, the Internet and the technology needed to surf the web are a ubiquitous part of their existence. Marston and King (2006) assert that social factors help mold our sexual identity. How do you think the Internet has shaped individuals' ideas about gender, sexuality, and relationships? How has this attractive communication medium helped construct a person's view of sexuality? Online environments are ideal for providing instant communication. It has been proposed that this may encourage the expression of repressed desires, such as sharing intimate information about oneself or seeking sexual partners online (Ross, 2005). Moreover, sexual boundaries can become skewed online. For example, can a person cheat on their sexual partner online even if they never touch another person? Can a couple experience sexual pleasure with one another online? Is it becoming acceptable to end a relationship via a text or email instead of face-to-face offline? Moreover, these instant online interactions can also encourage a false heightened sense of trust and familiarity (Ross, 2005). For instance, what if we had been communicating with someone online who we believed was a 22-year-old woman from England and found out it was a 43-year-old man living three blocks from our neighborhood? Also, what is "said" online stays online! Keep in mind that certain social media, such as Facebook, IM (instant messaging), texting, and Twitter, allow messages to live online long after the conversation is over.

A relatively new concept in using social networking sites is in providing education or interventions in sexual health (Bennett & Glasgow, 2009). Governments and organizations have been creative in developing online strategies to influence specific behaviors to improve sexual health (Gold et al., 2011). For example, online interventions have focused on decreasing HIV exposure in youth (Bull, Pratte, Whitesell, Rietmeijer, & McFarlane, 2009), and decreasing exposure to syphilis or HIV among men who participate in sexual activity with other men (Klausner,
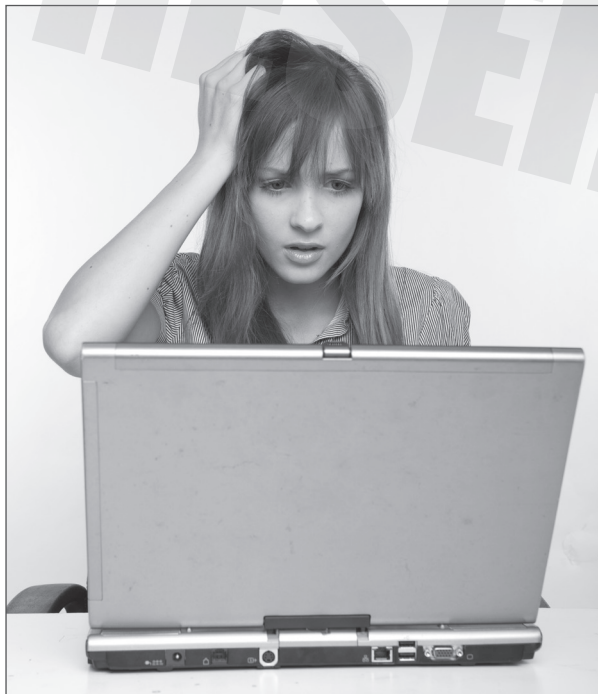
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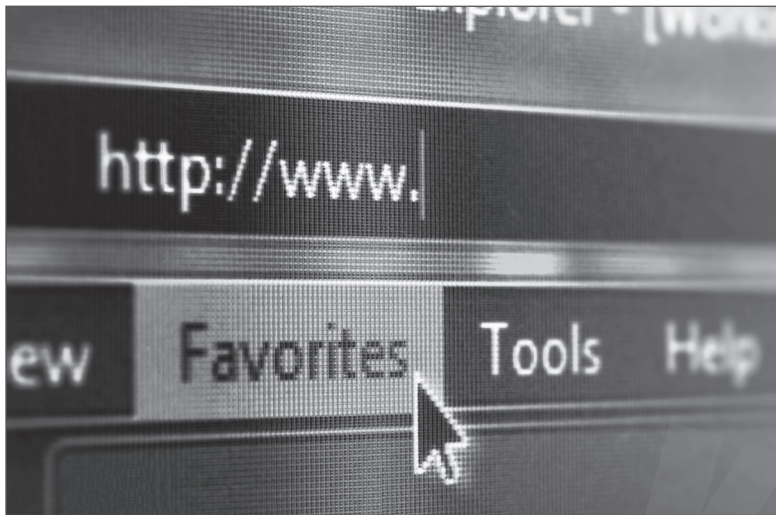
Levine, & Kent, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2010) by providing education or available services on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or chat rooms. The Internet has been used to help individuals obtain anonymous sexual health advice (Lee et al., 2009), as well as to notify sexual partners of clinic patients of possible exposure to a sexually transmitted infection (Levine, Woodruff, Mocello, Lebrija, & Klausner, 2008). As online technology evolves, so will the methods, topics, and targeted populations for sexual health promotion.

Profile-Based Sites

The first multimedia online identity formats were typically personal homepages (Marwick & boyd, 2010), which can be developed on websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. These homepages are highly self-managed about how we want others to "see" us, and are limited (to some extent) in how others can change the content (Papacharissi, 2002). These sites have the capacity to facilitate private and public messaging, enable live updates, and allow photo, video, and other content sharing (Gold et al., 2011). In 2013, 89 percent of Internet users in the United States between the ages of 18–29 had a profile on a social networking site compared to 78 percent of 30–39 year olds, 60 percent of 50–64 year olds and 43 percent of adults 65 years old and older (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Sixty-seven percent of Internet users had a Facebook page, with women outnumbering men 72 percent to 62 percent (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Over 80 percent of daily Facebook users are outside the United States and Canada (Facebook, 2014). In early 2014, Facebook began allowing its 160 million American users to choose from 50 different terms to identify their gender, such as, bi-gender, intersex or gender fluid (Mendoza, 2014). Facebook also added a third pronoun choice, "them", along with "her" and "him". Over half of all social network users had two or more online profiles, usually to separate their personal (e.g., Facebook) and professional (e.g., LinkedIn) lives. Founded in 2003, LinkedIn has an estimated 277 million members worldwide (LinkedIn, 2014).

What do profile-based sites have to do with sexual health? Some people use these sites to communicate to others about their relationship status—new relationship, married, divorced, single-and-looking, dissolving a relationship, etc. Ending a relationship is hard enough, but publicly sharing the reasons for the breakup or feeling the need to reveal unflattering information about the other person online should be strongly discouraged. Furthermore, disclosing personal information about others ironically divulges more about the person you are and how you treat others. Discretion is the best policy to follow. You cannot easily take back what you write or images of yourself or others that you display online!

Many people use profile-based sites to stay connected to family, friends, and colleagues. Individuals may also use these sites to seek casual sexual relationships or to find a partner for a more long-term relationship (Bauermeister, Leslie-Santana, Johns, Pingel, & Eisenberg, 2011; Dedobbeleer, Morissette, & Rojas-Viger, 2005). Even so, caution is warranted about the possibility of experiencing illusory feelings of closeness and mutual familiarity when seeking potential sexual partners online (Sevcikova & Daneback, 2011). Influenced by their own desires, some may erroneously read more into the intent of an online flirtation.

Others use these sites to promote particular views on social issues—for or against abortion, same-sex marriage, reproductive-assisted technology, contraceptive use, etc. These sites have also helped numerous groups mobilize hundreds of thousands of people to attend rallies, sign petitions, and increase awareness of specific social issues affecting their neighbors as well as strangers a thousand miles away (Liang, Commins, & Duffy, 2010).

Search Engines

The top three Internet activities popular across all age groups are (1) email; (2) search engine use; and (3) seeking health information (Zickuhr, 2010). Bing, Google, and Yahoo! are search engines that allow the online user to search the Internet for practically anything of interest. Cyberspace is a vast information system that can be used to search for sensitive information anonymously, depending on the country (China has strict Internet-use laws) and topic (most countries have restrictions on accessing child pornography or other material considered inappropriate for their citizens). Have you ever googled information on your sexual health to learn about symptoms related to sexually transmitted infections, premature ejaculation, "normal" sexual desire, or where to purchase a vibrator? For many individuals, accessing the Internet is quick and discreet, allowing them to gain information about their health or a particular topic of interest. But are all sites containing sexual health information medically accurate? How do you know you visited a site that contained accurate information?

Table **2.1**	**TOP 10 INTERNET SITES FOR MEDICAL INFORMATION**	
1. WebMD		**4.** Health A to Z
2. Health Central		**5.** CDC Health Topics A to Z
3. Wrong Diagnosis		**6.** Dr.Koop.com
7. The Merck Manual		**9.** MayoClinic.com
8. Medicine Online		**10.** Yahoo! Health

www.medical.nettop20.com, 9/1/14

The Medical Net Top 20 provides a list of the most popular and highest-rated sites for medical information on the Internet in 2014. Only the top 10 are included in Table 2.1. To review the whole list, visit www.medical.nettop20.com/.

Blogs

A blog is another method to communicate via the Internet. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (2008) defines a *blog* as a website that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer. Blog hosting services such as Blogger, LiveJournal, TypePad, and Xanga help individuals create Web space in which finite thoughts and ideas can be shared with the world (boyd, 2006). These thoughts and ideas can be broad and disconnected to the writer or very passionate and personal to the blogger. Many times bloggers write for a targeted audience, such as people empathic to a specific social cause, yet this imagined group of readers may not actually read the blog (boyd, 2006).

What does blogging have to do with sexual health? People write or read blogs for various reasons. For example, individuals may be compelled to write a blog on transitioning from a male to a female. One reason for revealing this private process online (thus sharing it globally) is to help others realize the

struggle, as well as to normalize the people experiencing it. Access to news and information through blogging has been found to be a new medium to share and receive news updates, as well as a means to promote a specific angle on a social issue (Hargittai, 2008).

Twitter

Originally created for mobile phones, Twitter was developed to let individuals post short, 140-character text updates or *tweets* to a network of others (Marwick & boyd, 2010). This microblogging site prompts users to answer the question, What are you doing? This creates a timeline that can be constantly updated and the stream of short messages can range from humor, to reflections on life, to links, to breaking news stories. Tweets can burst with an astonishing frequency and intensity.

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People choose what Twitter accounts to follow on their stream and they in turn can have their own group of followers (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Moreover, users can repost tweets (their own or others) to Facebook, MySpace, and blogs or forward via email to broaden their content to new audiences (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010).

People can restrict access to who sees what content sent on Twitter, yet as a public domain, most tweets can be viewed by anyone or the respondent can forward the tweet to others. Thus, if a friend wants to share something personal with another friend, then tweeting the information should be strongly discouraged. According to Twitaholic.com, the top five most followed Twitter accounts in 2014 were: (1) Katy Perry (with 56 million followers); (2) Justin Bieber; (3) President Barack Obama; (4) Taylor Swift; and (5) Lady Gaga.

What does Twitter have to do with sexual health? People can tweet to announce a new relationship, an end to one, or that one is in search of a new partner. Even though it is not common knowledge how tweeting sensitive information (i.e., containing sexual content) affects the majority of society, some politicians, celebrities, and influential businesspeople have all regretted a tweet or two!

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Texting

In 2011, over 75 percent American young adults texted on a daily basis (Lenhart, 2012). The average amount of text sent on an average day rose from 50 texts in 2009 to 60 texts in 2011. Young women are more likely to average 100 texts a day compared to an average of 50 texts for young men. Over 60 percent of adolescents report texting as their main method of communicating on a daily basis (Lenhart, 2012). A cell phone is no longer used just for talking to someone over the phone, but also to text, access the Internet, and take or share photos and videos. Sometimes individuals may share sexually suggestive images or texts to sexual partners, potential sexual partners, or friends (Lenhart, 2009b). According to Lenhart and Duggan (2014), around 56 percent of American adults own a smart phone. That number rises to 80 percent if we focus on Americans aged 18–29. Smartphone owners are much more likely to *sext* when compared to other cell phone owners. *Sexting*, or sending sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photos and videos via cell phone (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014), continues to increase in the United States. Younger adults continue to be more likely than older Americans to send, receive, and forward sexts. The thought that these private images will be forwarded to an unintended audience in the future is not a salient concern to many individuals (Lenhart, 2009b). The sender is no longer in control of any material (sexually explicit or otherwise) sent to others. Thus, their own words or images can be forwarded to countless individuals, even months after it was sent! Moreover, because of the concern of abuse and reaching children, laws throughout the United States and in other countries have been enacted to restrict the use of sharing sexually suggestive images and sexting to minors. U.S. states vary in the penalties in sending or receiving sexually explicit (the definition of "sexually explicit" varies from state to state) photos via texting of individuals younger than 18 years old (Hoffman, 2011). Some states view sexting as possession or distributing of child pornography, whereas other states have tried to redefine sexting to give minors a lesser offense than prison or being listed as a sex offender. In a recent study, Strassberg and his colleagues (2013)

found that nearly 20 percent of adolescents reported sending a sexually explicit image of themselves via a cell phone and almost twice as many indicated receiving such images. Moreover, over 25 percent revealed forwarding these pictures to others. In 2013, Lenhart and Duggan (2014) found that 20 percent of cell owners received a sext of someone else they knew on their phone. Young adults (aged 18–24) were more likely to receive a sext message, whereas adults over 55 were the least likely to receive a sext (44% vs. 4%, respectively).

Has it become part of the social norm to ask someone out on a date through texting? Ever broken up with someone through texting? What if she/he says they never got your text (LOL—laugh out loud)? The lingo created for this form of communication has allowed individuals or groups of individuals to correspond with each other frequently and efficiently. Texting has allowed us to communicate with each other any time of the day or night, regardless of where we are and with minimal distraction to others (even though you may find it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand).

What does texting have to do with sexual health? Sexual communication has changed considerably given the advances in technology. We can express our love or hate through a text without ever having to be in front of the person. Yet, what we text can be easily misinterpreted, either because it was perceived as lacking in emotion or overflowing with it! Our body language and tone of voice are helpful in getting our message across, but neither form of communication is available through a text, thus, we may misread what another's intent was. Moreover, texting allows someone to avoid experiencing an uncomfortable situation face-to-face offline. At the same time, though, this form of communication may be the only way some individuals can easily express themselves to others.

Accessing Sexually Explicit Material Online

There are numerous websites that are sex oriented and intended to provide the viewers with sexually explicit material that can induce solitary arousal that may lead to masturbation, or partnered arousal that may lead to sexual activity with another person (Sevcikova & Daneback, 2011). Each of us needs to decide what we find comfortable when viewing sexually explicit images and what we don't. We need to realize how erotic material can enhance our sexual gratification. It can help us realize what arouses us and what doesn't. But it can also provide a false sense of reality in what is sexually pleasing to women and/or to men. This topic is discussed at length in chapter 14.
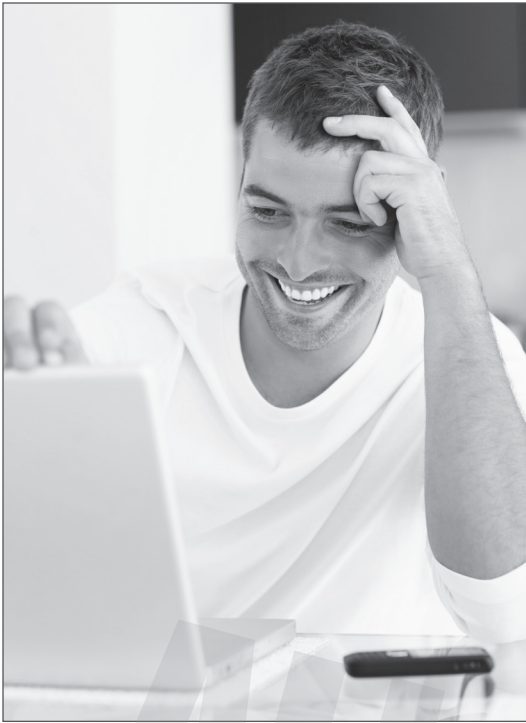

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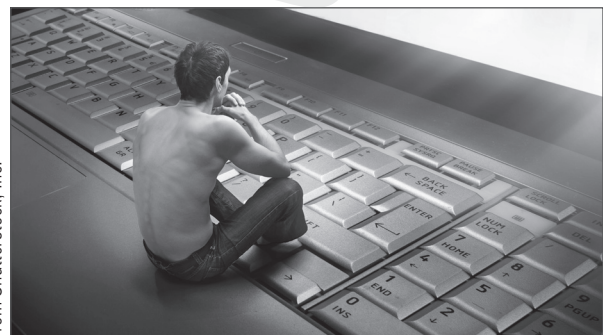
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Soliciting Sexual Partners Online

Would you find it easy to approach a total stranger and initiate a conversation regarding the possibility of becoming sexually intimate with one another? Would you find it easier if it was done online instead of face-to-face offline? Even though some individuals have no inhibitions in propositioning a total stranger, most of us do—shying away from fear of rejection, or worse, enduring a public spectacle. Most of us, at this time, would not approach a stranger regardless if it was on- or offline. Some people who wish to engage in less traditional sexual activity or have few opportunities to approach a person face-to-face offline take advantage of what the online world has to offer (Ross, 2005).

Men tend to look for sexual partners online more often than women. Men are more likely to visit Web contact sites and respond to sex ads (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2010). Yet women are more likely than men to meet an online sexual partner offline (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2006). Pursuing or being pursued as a potential sexual partner online may precede meeting them face-to-face (Daneback, Mansson, & Ross, 2007). For example, studies have shown males who are interested in participating in sexual activity with other males go online to learn about their sexuality and to meet potential sexual partners (Franssens, Hospers, & Kok, 2010). Studies (Adams & Neville, 2009; Reisner et al., 2008) have also found that men looking for unsafe sex were more likely to use the Internet to find partners compared to other modes of contact.

Finding "Love" Online

Online dating has become a phenomenon that is changing the landscape for the formation of romantic relationships (Aron, 2012). Online dating sites like Match.com, Chemistry.com, and eHarmony.com help individuals find potential partners for platonic or sexual relationships (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). The user is able to control how they are perceived by others on the site and whom they choose to reach out to (Whitty, 2008). Online dating is not for everyone, but for individuals who do not have time or do not want to make time to find a partner offline, online dating sites may be an area to explore.

Reflections

Depending on where you live, you may be surrounded by the use of technology for personal use. We have computers, laptops, cell phones, texting mobile devices, and a variety of tablets or pads to communicate with others on cyberspace. The wealth of information on the Internet continues to expand at an astounding rate, with no end in sight. For example, we don't need to physically go to a doctor or visit a library to receive information on a variety of sexual health topics. Moreover, with Internet access, we can retrieve this information anonymously from the privacy of our own home or mobile device. Even so, medical misinformation is abundant on the Internet and the user needs to search for answers with caution. Moreover, a real visit to a doctor should never been seen as a last resort, and you can always use the Internet to find a reputable doctor or clinic nearest you!

Social media can be used to help us to find new ways to sexually express ourselves with others, as well. This field of study is in its infancy but the more generations take advantage of these innovative forms of communication, the more society will want to understand how individuals integrate them into their lives. Whatever the medium of expression, we need to realize the possible negative and positive outcomes of what we write or images we send online.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How have relationships changed because of social media?

2. Does social media make it more challenging to maintain our individuality, by promoting adoption of behaviors from others in our network?

3. How does social media enhance sexual communication and how can it negatively affect it?

4. Has social media sacrificed the quality of our interpersonal relationships by broadening our circle of friends?

5. How do you think social media will change in the next 10 years?

How Much Do You Remember from the Chapter?

1. What age group was more likely to receive a sext message?
   a. 15–17
   b. 55+
   c. 18–24
   d. 25–34

2. What is the average amount of texts a young woman sends on a daily basis?
   a. 10
   b. 100
   c. 50
   d. 250

3. As of 2014, what individual is the most followed on Twitter?

    a. Katy Perry   **b.** President Barack Obama

    c. Justin Bieber   **d.** Lady Gaga

4. What social networking site has the most users?

    a. Instagram   **b.** Vine

    c. Twitter   **d.** Facebook

5. What is the most popular Internet site for medical information?

    a. CDC Health Topics A to Z   **b.** WebMD

    c. Wrong Diagnosis   **d.** MayoClinic.com

ANSWERS CAN BE FOUND ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES: Q1: pg. 33; Q2: pg. 32; Q3: pg. 31; Q4: pg. 26; Q5: pg. 30

Challenge Yourself!

Go online to find your state's laws on sexting. Pick another state across the country from your own and compare how the laws (if any!) might differ. What assumptions can we make if one state has stricter laws on sexting than another state?

Websites

www.aasect.org/
American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists

www.answer.rutgers.edu/
ANSWER, Sex Ed Honestly

www.sexscience.org/
Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality

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