

**Learning the Horizontal Tango: How Do Queer Identifying and Autistic Adults Use the  
Internet to Explore Sexuality?**

A thesis proposal submitted by

Emma G. Gatlin

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Child Study and Human Development

Tufts University

February 2023

Adviser: Eileen T. Crehan, Ph.D.

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

**Abstract**

Autistic people express an interest in dating, sex, and marriage, and engage in these behaviors at a similar rate compared to their neurotypical peers. The internet has been a tool for dating and relationships due to the easy access and relaxed social demands. Additionally, for people with queer sexual identities, the internet can be used to meet like-minded people. Using data from a larger study, 132 participants completed surveys measuring autistic traits, sexual attraction, self-identification, and internet use behaviors related to sexuality. Sequential linear regressions were used to examine how a participant's neurotype and sexuality are related to specific internet use behaviors. Self-identification and sexual attraction were consistently significant predictors for internet use. Overall, neurotype was found to be not significant, which suggests that people with queer sexualities are more likely to engage in online sexual behaviors, no matter if they're autistic or neurotypical.

*Keywords:* autism, sexuality, internet, online, dating, queer

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

**Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	2
Introduction .....	4
Autism and Sexuality .....	4
Using the Internet to Explore Sexuality .....	7
Autism and Internet Use Experiences .....	9
Ferrante and Oak Model .....	12
Positionality Statement .....	15
Current Study .....	16
Method .....	17
Results .....	23
Discussion .....	30
Limitations .....	36
Implications and Future Directions .....	39
References .....	43

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

### Learning the Horizontal Tango: How Do Queer Identifying and Autistic Adults Use the Internet to Explore Sexuality?

#### **Autism and Sexuality**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is one in every 68 children (Hillier et al., 2020). ASD is a developmental disability characterized by differences in social functioning. These neurological differences impact the way a person thinks, communicates, and experiences or processes emotions/information and can manifest through restricted, repetitive behaviors/interests (Mogavero & Hsu, 2020). Because autism is expressed on a spectrum, a variety of traits can exist at various levels, so each autistic person can look a lot different from another. It is important to note that relationships, gender, and sexuality have primarily been studied in verbal populations (Holmes et al., 2019) which does not incorporate the relationship and sexuality experiences of a considerable proportion of the autistic community. Sexuality, or sexual orientation, is an intrinsic emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people (*Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions*, 2022). In this paper, queer will be used as an umbrella term to recognize all LGBTQIA+ identities.

Many autistic people express frustration that they have less access to social relationships, such as friendships, or romantic relationships, which are considered key experiences of social development (Mogavero & Hsu, 2020). Sexuality is inherently social because healthy sexual relationships rely on communication. Sexual development happens in a sociocultural context, so being able to communicate and interact with others in a socially and culturally appropriate way is crucial (Holmes et al., 2016). When investigating the sexual/relationship satisfaction and sexual well-being of autistic adults, results showed that higher total autism traits as assessed by the

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ) were associated with lower scores on measures of satisfaction (Byers & Nichols, 2014). When surveyed, most autistic adults with some level of experience in romantic relationships felt a stronger sense of community and belonging than those who have none (Byers, Nichols, & Voyer, 2013; Pearlman-Avni et al., 2017).

Autistic people express an interest in dating, sex, and marriage, and engage in these behaviors at a similar rate compared to their neurotypical peers (Mogavero & Hsu, 2020). Not only do autistic people engage in solo and partnered sexual acts, but, when compared to the general population, a high percentage report experiencing non-heterosexual attraction and identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community (Byers, Nichols, Voyer, et al., 2013; Dewinter et al., 2017). Earlier theories surrounding sexuality in autistic people suggest that the majority are asexual (e.g., “ace”), which is influenced by the desexualization of disabilities and is not empirically based (Dewinter et al., 2017). To be clear, not every autistic person is ace, but there are some individuals who identify as asexual. For the sake of this study, asexuality is considered to be a queer identity.

The U.S. National Institutes of Health categorized sexual and gender minorities as a health disparity population (Oswalt & Lederer, 2017). For example, queer people, those with identities other than cisgender and heterosexual, are at a higher risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and other mental health disorders (Cain & Velasco, 2021). Additionally, people with a disability and/or a gender/sexual minority identity face biases and stigmas that place them at an increased risk of having negative school experiences and poor educational outcomes (Oswalt & Lederer, 2017). It’s been estimated that around 10 million people, or ~4.1% of the U.S. adult population identified as LGBTQIA+, or queer (Hillier et al., 2020). This is of particular importance in the autistic community because autistic adults report

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

experiencing non-heterosexual attraction more often than their peers in the general public (Dewinter et al., 2017; May et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, there are sex education disparities amongst all students, not just those with disabilities. There is not a reliable estimate of autistic individuals who identify as queer, but in addition to the marginalization they face in health and social services, people with disabilities receive limited and inadequate sex education (Hillier et al., 2020). Based on summaries conducted by the Human Rights Campaign, only four states and the District of Columbia provide queer inclusive sexual health education and eight states have prohibited inclusive sexual health education from even being taught in public schools (Cavanaugh & Peters, 2019). This is especially problematic because lack of sexuality and relationship education can increase the risk of sexual abuse (Crehan et al., 2021) and compared to their heterosexual peers, queer adolescents are more likely to start having sex with multiple partners at an early age and are at a higher risk of experiencing physical, psychological, sexual, or cyber contexts of dating violence (Cavanaugh & Peters, 2019).

A study that surveyed parents of autistic adolescents found that the most commonly discussed topics for parents of children with a parent-reported average or above IQ were privacy and private body parts, what kinds of touch are okay or not okay, hygiene, and topics that are okay to talk about in public versus private settings (Holmes et al., 2016). The least endorsed topics to discuss were sexual activities other than intercourse, symptoms of sexually transmitted infections, how to use a condom, and how to choose a method of birth control (Holmes et al., 2016). When autistic and queer adolescents are not receiving proper sex education and a majority are reporting they do not have trusted adults they feel comfortable talking about sexual health with, turning to outside sources is a likely next step (Cavanaugh & Peters, 2019). It is important

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

to note that autistic adults might have less access to sexuality and relationship education and are therefore more likely to use nonsocial sources of information, such as the internet, to learn about sex rather than consulting with friends, parents, siblings, or otherwise social sources (Teti et al., 2019).

### **Using the Internet to Explore Sexuality**

Due to the complex subtleties of modern dating rituals, autistic people might feel disconnected from their peers as they try to pursue romantic and sexual relationships. For example, in a survey of autistic adults, respondents reported having difficulties picking up on social cues (Stokes et al., 2007). Because of the obstacles related to face-to-face dating, autistic people might be inclined to try out alternative methods of communication, like the internet. The most common use of the internet for the general population is for communication and it is not surprising that when the internet was introduced to the public, sex quickly became one of the most searched words (Daneback, Månsson, Ross, et al., 2012). Using the internet as a guide for sexual behaviors has become commonplace, such as seeking out information about sex, watching/looking at pornography, online dating/meeting sexual partners, or buying sex toys or other sexually related items (Daneback et al., 2007, 2011; Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2012).

Computer mediated communication, like dating, has become fairly customary with the rise of opportunities to interact with people online (Gavin et al., 2019). Online dating can be defined as using websites or applications that offer access and communication to other users to form interpersonal connections (Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2012; Gavin et al., 2019; Lykens et al., 2019). A person with an online dating profile gets to create their first impression by curating the pictures and personal information potential partners get to see. In person, talking to someone for the first time requires specific social skills, like evaluating reactions and body

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

language throughout the conversation. Additionally, if during a conversation someone is at a loss for words or does not know how to respond there can be uncomfortable silences or barriers that can restrict further connection with others. Talking online allows people to take the time they need to respond adequately and appropriately, something autistic people can utilize to optimize their social interactions.

While the literature about online dating within the autistic community is sparse, according to one study, 53% of autistic participants had tried online dating and 44% reported having a long-term relationship with someone they met online (Roth & Gillis, 2015). In fact, autistic people use online dating methods more frequently than the neurotypical population (Gavin et al., 2019). Research suggests that online dating is appealing to autistic populations because it provides control over self-presentation, fewer nonverbal cues to interpret, and more time to process information (Gavin et al., 2019). Even with the benefits of dating with reduced social demands, autistic people can still have issues constructing online profiles, for example, like deciding what to say in a bio, how to express themselves, or if they should disclose their diagnosis (Gavin et al., 2019). For instance, when describing themselves in the biography section of their profile, autistic men tended to use self-deprecation like, “I have a weird and strangely annoying personality.” (Ma et al., 2011).

Heteronormative misinformation or age-inappropriate content can potentially misinform queer adolescents seeking information about dating and sexual practices. Adopting false, possibly harmful, stereotypes as an attempt to independently navigate dating and sex seems unhealthy and avoidable (Cavanaugh & Peters, 2019). When facing challenges related to marginalized identities, queer adolescents are likely to seek out peers within their community who experience similar struggles or stressors. Depending on the degree of acceptance and



## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

inclusivity of the immediate environment, queer adolescents might seek out other communities through alternative online platforms like dating/hookup apps or social media. In doing so, queer adolescents are able to create connections to cope with their stressors, but also find an escape from their potentially nonaccepting or even threatening current circumstances (Cavanaugh & Peters, 2019). One study about online dating found that online spaces, such as social media or dating apps, were popular amongst young adult focus groups (Overbeek et al., 2018).

Experiences with online exploration of sexuality and relationships varied between positive and negative, but LGBTQ+ respondents thought more highly of online dating and revered it as a place to find similar, like-minded people (Lykens et al., 2019).

### **Autism and Internet Use Experiences**

With the unpredictable advancement of technology there are clear benefits and risks when using the internet to learn about or explore sexuality. The internet is an endless stream of knowledge and can make things like entertainment, learning new things, engaging with, and enjoying personal interests, and socializing with the world easy and available. For example, by using the internet to search for information regarding sex, people can maintain privacy, use it anonymously, and avoid talking to anyone face to face about potentially uncomfortable topics (Lykens et al., 2019; Roth & Gillis, 2015). For people with autism the internet can be a way to interact with the world and be seen for who they really are, without the usual social hindrances.

With the power to remain unseen and unknown, people are able to behave in a way that they normally would not, such as engaging in sexual behaviors that are considered unacceptable and outside of societal norms, or even illegal (Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2012). Additionally, people consume sexually explicit content, like porn, on a regular basis (Stark et al., 2017). This is where the negative side of the internet can rear its ugly head. With high demand, unlimited

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

access, and anonymity, there are harmful consequences such as the exploitation and mistreatment of sex workers and the spread of child sexual abuse material. For example, in 2019 the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported over 65 million images and videos of child sexual abuse material/imagery (Abel & Ludeke, 2020; Gurriell, 2021).

Another easily performed and accessible sexual behavior thanks to the internet is sexting. Sexting is the act of sending or receiving sexually explicit messages or images and has risen in popularity with the advancement of online communication. While sexting can be a way to sexually connect with partners, coercive sexting can occur when someone is pressured or forced to send sexually explicit photos (McCabe, 2019; Mckinlay & Lavis, 2020). A risk of sexting, especially following relationship breakdowns, includes the possibility of intimate images being shared online without the individual's consent or knowledge. This is known as revenge porn. Unfortunately, cases of revenge porn are hard to detect, lie outside of police jurisdiction, and exist in cyberspace where laws are difficult to enforce (McCabe, 2019). This digital harassment largely affects women and can have extremely negative emotional outcomes like posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, and suicidal thoughts accompanied by a heightened risk of suicide. Despite nude images being shared without an individual's consent, studies show that revenge porn victims are likely to be labeled as promiscuous and blamed for their actions with justifications like, "why did she take/send the picture in the first place?" (Mckinlay & Lavis, 2020).

Trying to navigate the various ways to sexually engage on the internet without the guidance of how to spot warning signs in potential partners is potentially hazardous. When investigating hesitations in trying online dating, 81% of participants reported having safety concerns (Roth & Gillis, 2015). Autistic people can have social vulnerabilities that increase

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

naivety and lessen their ability to detect threats. Research found that adults with disabilities, like autism, are at an increased risk for physical or sexual abuse, robbery, personal theft, and assault (Fisher et al., 2013). This explains that with online dating family members or care staff can be wary of people with intellectual or developmental disabilities using the internet to date or explore sexuality for fear of being misled, mistreated, or taken advantage of (Kim et al., 2009; Reiner et al., 2017).

A study investigating the sexual well-being and quality of life among autistic adults found a correlation between intimate relationships and independence/empowerment. This means that as sexual well-being increased so did productivity and that as sexual worries increased productivity decreased. Autistic adults that were in relationships reported higher levels of social participation than autistic adults that were single (Pearlman-Avni et al., 2017). Unfortunately, because a lot of research utilizes parent or caregiver observational accounts rather than self-report data about the sexuality and dating behaviors, we do not have a real insight to autistic people's private thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Byers, Nichols, Voyer, et al., 2013).

For autistic individuals who need assistance with the activities of daily living, a parent or caregiver can be granted guardianship by a judge. Being the guardian of someone with a disability means you make decisions for that person. Full guardianship regards all decision making while a limited guardianship is for certain kinds of decisions, like how to spend money ("Ending Guardianship," 2020). Guardians who fail to recognize or blatantly disregard that people with disabilities engage in sexual activity and explore intimate relationships are not allowing for the opportunities to meet potential partners, to have the privacy for intimacy, or to be exposed to diversity (Hillier et al., 2020).

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

### **Ferrante & Oak (2020) Model**

Ferrante and Oak examined 265 published articles on global sex education programs specifically for students with intellectual disabilities covering the period 1987-2015. Based on this research, their model advocates for the sexual autonomy of all people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Everyone deserves the right to have healthy, satisfying sexual relationships that positively affect their overall wellbeing. Unfortunately, disabled peoples' sexualities have historically been associated with sexually deviant stereotypes like public masturbation, pedophilia, or lack of boundaries that are only exacerbated by the hesitancy of health/social care professionals to discuss these topics. For example, medical education still teaches the medical model of disabilities, which views conditions like autism to be a personal tragedy or an impairment that needs to be "fixed." This not only leaves medical providers with prejudices, but also enforces generalizations about disabled people that can lead to misunderstandings (Peña-Guzmán & Reynolds, 2019).

Arguments against the sexual autonomy of adults with disabilities are usually informed by IQ test results associated with "cognitive impairments". This ill-informed belief that disabled people cannot equally participate in or fully consent to sexual relationships is challenged by Ferrante & Oak (2020) explaining, "We continue to use subjective measurement tools [IQ test] that are biased against individuals with intellectual disabilities by improperly assessing their capabilities and then use the results of these tools to deny them their rights to sexual expression."

---

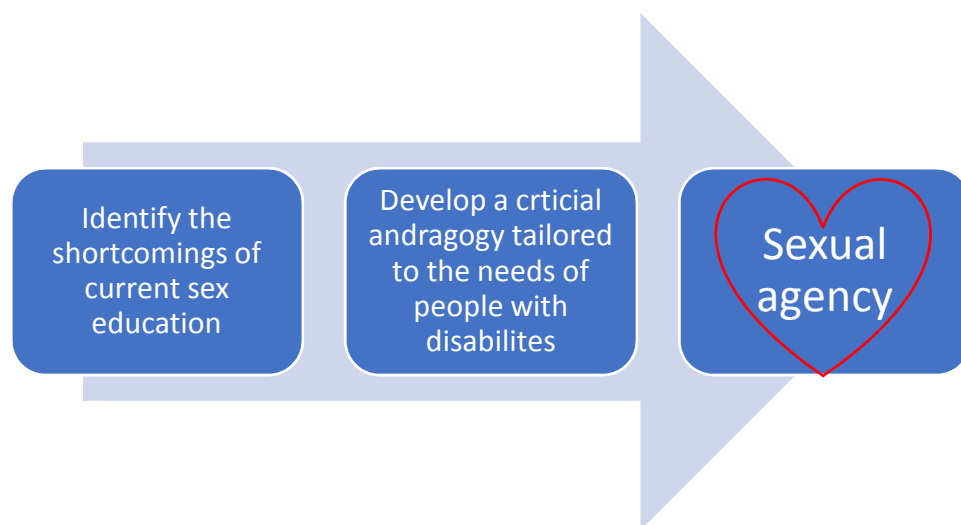
<sup>1</sup> When referring to neurodiverse populations, the authors use the term "intellectual disability," but since I am applying the model to autistic populations, I will be using language specific to ASD.

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

In a study examining the longitudinal stability of IQ across development, data showed that the best way to understand intellectual functioning in autistic populations is through the trajectory of multiple IQ scores over time than one IQ score at one point in time (Prigge et al., 2022). When compared to neurotypical controls, ASD samples showed lower levels of intelligence in childhood, but increased at a greater rate with age suggesting IQ estimates can be dynamic from childhood into early adulthood. Furthermore, IQ tests measure intellectual potential not practical reasoning. Using these measures to undermine someone's sexual agency even though they demonstrate practical reasoning skills, like using public transportation, budgeting/shopping, or working in customer service, is arbitrary and discriminatory (Ferrante & Oak, 2020).

As shown in Figure 1, Ferrante & Oak's sexual agency model starts with identifying the shortcomings of current sex education programs. For example, current curriculums emphasize risk aversion, focusing specifically on the dangers of unprotected sex or unwanted pregnancies for exclusively cisgender heterosexual people and completely fail to discuss the relational aspects of sexuality like ethics, pleasure, or desire.

**Figure 1**



## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

The model recommends more inclusive education programs for queer and disabled adults that also create awareness of the oppressive systems and barriers to learning they face. In traditional sex education pedagogy, the student is heavily reliant on the teacher for information. However, Ferrante & Oak specify why an andragogy, the method or practice of teaching adult learners, is optimal for sex education as it allows for self-reflection. Adult learners can draw upon their life experiences and should be viewed as capable. Real life situations that negotiate consent or discuss ethical sexual behaviors require problem solving through abstract thinking and that might be challenging for someone with an intellectual disability.

By incorporating “rapport a soi,” a technique that involves imagining how someone would like to be treated in sexual encounters in order to empathize with their partners’ feelings/emotions, students can understand the importance of maintaining ethical boundaries as they navigate sexual relationships. Understanding that sexual relationships require empathy and reciprocity is an important core principle for any population learning about sex. In an andragogy, people are encouraged to do what makes them feel comfortable and to develop positive language and new frames of reference for their sexuality. While being aware of the basic mechanics of sex is helpful, knowing how to discuss individual ideas of intimacy, express pleasures/desires, or manage sexual performance anxieties are concepts that stress the importance of self-determination and autonomy (Ferrante & Oak, 2020).

Individuals have a right to be included in social networks or private spaces so they can access the “ignored curriculum” and have the opportunity for sexual experimentation. For neurodivergent populations, adapting sex education lessons in these ways encourages a deeper understanding of the material through personal application. Ferrante & Oak’s model is based in reality, holding steadfast the belief that sexuality is inherent for all neurotypes, and that by

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

identifying the shortcomings of current education programs, lessons can be tailored to the needs of the learners who are normally excluded. With appropriate preparation and a foundational knowledge of sexual health, anyone can have safe, pleasurable relationships with control over their own sexual agency.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a queer woman from the south, I grew up in a close-minded, religious community that pedaled abstinence only in the school's lackluster, majority heterosexual sex education. I was completely ignorant and misinformed when I became sexually active. The purpose of sex education should be to prepare students for real life sexual relationships, but the only thing I had learned in school was sex can result in pregnancy and I should wait to have sex until I'm married. As I've grown up, I realized that some of the hardships I faced throughout my sexual development could have easily been avoided with simple conversations.

My first job in college was at a non-profit that focused on helping autistic adults build job and life skills to encourage and foster independence. I really enjoyed my time working there because each day came with a new challenge and the adults I worked with made life feel fun. During my time there I witnessed this group of people, who are consistently desexualized, flirting with each other, confessing their crushes, and talking about romantic relationships. These experiences showed me that people, no matter their neurotype or sexuality, want to have sex and are probably going to have sex.

There is a dire need for inclusive sex education, that I am acutely aware of, and this niche field of research motivates me to find the best ways to adequately prepares students for sexual relationships. It is my personal belief that understanding the relationship between autism,

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

sexuality, and the internet will improve accessibility of sex education and hopefully this study is a step in the right direction.

### **Current Study**

#### *Research Question:*

How is internet use related to participants' neurotype and sexuality?

To ask this question, complex variables like neurotype, sexuality, and internet use, need to be operationalized. Neurotype is a classification based on how someone's brain works. For example, a participant is either neurotypical (the brain functions similarly to their peers) or neurodivergent (the brain learns and behaves in ways that differ from "typical"). This study is interested in neurodivergent people, specifically those who are autistic.

Sexuality has a multifaceted definition in literature that is typically expressed through a combination of sexual attraction, behavior, and self-identification (Wolff et al., 2017). However, when previous research operated under the misassumption that sexuality is binary and someone's sexual attraction, behavior, and identity are always the same, the scope of findings cannot be applied to those who exist outside of rigid boundaries of academia's boundaries. These are the people who need their voices amplified. For these reasons, sexuality will be represented by how participants self-identify and rate their sexual attraction, respectively, to demonstrate the independence of each aspect of sexuality. Oftentimes researchers rely on behaviors to define sexuality in autistic adults. But in this population, for people who have not had sexual experiences or are not publicly out as queer, their behaviors would not capture their identity. Therefore, ratings of sexual behaviors were not used in this paper's definition of sexuality to avoid misclassification.



## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

Because this study utilizes data from a larger sexuality and relationship survey that did not focus on internet use in their research, I have categorized the data about internet use based on three common ideas- viewing existing online content, using the internet as a medium to engage in sexual behaviors, and moving sexual behaviors offline.

The goal of this research is to evaluate how people, autistic and neurotypical, are using the internet to explore or engage with their sexuality. By focusing specifically on participants' sexuality and neurotype, I hope to find differences in how heterosexual neurotypical people and queer autistic people use the internet.

*Hypothesis:* Overall, compared to neurotypical heterosexual participants, autistic queer participants will use the internet **more** to view existing online content and to engage in online sexual behaviors and **less** to move the sexual behaviors offline. A full list of detailed hypotheses is included in Table 1.

### **Method**

#### *Participants:*

The data used for this study was originally collected for a larger study conducted by Crehan, Rocha, & Dufresne (2021) investigating sex education and relationship experiences of autistic and neurotypical adults. A total of 132 participants were included in the sample: 44 autistic adults, and 88 neurotypical adults. To be eligible to participate, participants were at least 18 years old, able to independently complete an online survey related to matters of sexuality, behaviors associated with autism, and internet use, and lived in the United States.

#### *Procedure:*

Participants were recruited online through social media, by flyers shared with autism advocacy groups, and through the Autism Community Advisory Board. After reading a consent

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

statement, completing the survey took approximately 30-60 minutes. All survey responses were anonymously collected. Upon completion of the survey, participants were compensated with a \$20 Amazon gift card for their time.

### *Materials/Measures:*

#### ***Neurotype***

The Autism Quotient-10 (AQ-10) is a brief self-report questionnaire that screens for ASD in adults (Booth et al., 2013). The questionnaire consists of 10 items that measure key traits of ASD, such as social interaction, communication, attention, and imagination. The value for Chronbach's alpha is 0.517. This might appear to be inconsistent, but because the AQ-10 only has 10 items, this scale can be considered to have acceptable internal consistency. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale from definitely agree to definitely disagree. An example item would be, "I find it difficult to work out people's intentions." A total score of 6 or above is indicative of an ASD diagnosis. The AQ-10 has been extensively evaluated and found to be valid and reliable in populations with and without a clinical diagnosis of autism (Booth et al., 2013; Wheelwright et al., 2010). In a study focused on autistic adults, researchers included AQ scores of participants with and without professional diagnoses stating that autistic adults may receive inconclusive results or not receive an evaluation at all because diagnoses can be inaccessible and mostly focused on children (Byers & Nichols, 2014).

ASD1NT0 is a categorical measure of autism. Participants answered the yes/no question, "Do you have autism?" Those with autism were coded as 1 and those that were neurotypical were coded as 0. Due to the barriers for formal diagnosis and accounting for the broad spectrum that autism exists on, using self-diagnosis or self-identification will hopefully include the people

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

who believe they have autism and have not received a formal diagnosis or who score just outside the threshold of the AQ-10's 6 or above requirement.

### *Sexuality*

The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) is a questionnaire consisting of seven variables related to sexuality (attraction, behavior, fantasy, social and emotional preference, self-identification, and lifestyle). For the purposes of this research study, we will only be focusing on two of those variables- ideal sexual attraction and ideal self-identification. These questions are answered based on three different time periods (past, present, and ideal). The participant answers for the past (age 16 through 1 year ago), present (during the past year), and ideal (what you would choose now if it were a matter of choice). Sexual attraction options include none or no one, other sex only, other sex mostly, other sex somewhat more, both sexes equally, same sex somewhat more, same sex mostly, and same sex only. Self-identification options include none or no one, heterosexual only, heterosexual mostly, heterosexual somewhat more, heterosexual/gay/lesbian equally, gay/lesbian somewhat more, gay/lesbian mostly, and gay/lesbian only. When used on a large group of participants, the KSOG has been found to have high reliability and validity (Klein et al., 1985).

Sexual attraction and self-identification will be used to operationalize sexuality because of the implications of excluding people with autism from conversations regarding sex and sexuality. Dating is a hard game but trying to play without being taught the rules is an entirely different challenge. Since participants with ASD might not have had/felt prepared to have sexual experiences, relying on sexual behavior would not be an accurate way to define sexuality. Therefore, sexual attraction and self-identification seem the most appropriate. Based on those

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

scores' participants' sexuality will be categorized as queer or heterosexual. Queer identities include ratings 2,3,4,5,6,7, and 0, to be inclusive of ace/asexual identifying participants.

Heterosexual identity is rated 1. I chose to define queerness with all answers except "other sex only" or "heterosexual only" because advocating for inclusion means not excluding people who are only comfortable saying they are heterosexual mostly. Not all sexualities need to be defined or defended, but because sexuality can be fluid, I feel it is vital to include any minority identities to advocate for inclusivity of queerness and neurodiversity.

### *Internet Use*

The Teen Transition Inventory (TTI) is a measure of psychosexual functioning through parent and self-reports of adolescents with ASD. The original measure was developed using samples of autistic and non-autistic Dutch adolescents, but for the purposes of this study the measure was used on an adult sample. To evaluate internet use and online sexual activity, the current study focuses specifically on the self-report subscale You and the Internet. The questionnaire consists of seven items rated on a 3-point scale (not true at all, somewhat or sometimes true, and very or often true). The value for Chronbach's alpha is 0.857 which suggests strong internal consistency. An example item would be, "I visit websites that give information about sex." The TTI scale was developed for autistic adolescents and has not been analyzed using adult samples (Dekker et al., 2017). Therefore, information regarding reliability and validity is not available.

Items were grouped together based on similarity to operationalize internet use for sexuality purposes. Items 5 "I visit websites that give information about sex" and 6 "I visit websites with sexual imagery or videos (porn)" are grouped together based on viewing existing content on the internet. Items 7 "I have set a date with someone I met on the internet" and 8 "I

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

have had sex with someone I met on the internet” are grouped together because they are behaviors that transition from the internet into real life. Items 9 “I have shown myself naked via the webcam,” 10 “Another person has shown themselves naked via the webcam to me,” and 11 “I have had sex with someone via the internet (cybersex)” are grouped together because these sexual behaviors use the internet as a medium for connection.

### *Analytic Plan*

Twelve sequential linear regressions were run to evaluate the relationship between internet use behaviors, neurotype, and sexuality. Neurotype was used as a categorical predictor (autistic or neurotypical) and a continuous predictor (AQ-10 score). Sexuality was used as a categorical predictor (queer or heterosexual) from two different values, ideal self-identification, and ideal attraction. Using the four combinations of predictors (autistic or neurotypical and ideal self-identification, autistic or neurotypical and ideal attraction, AQ-10 score and ideal self-identification, AQ-10 score and ideal attraction) and each of the three internet use groups (viewing existing content on the internet, sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection, and behaviors that transition from the internet to real life) as predicted outcomes, 12 total regressions were ran.

**Table 1: Hypotheses**

	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Hypothesis</b>
1	Autism (categorical) Sexuality (self-identification)	Internet Use (Viewing Existing Content)	Autistic people will have higher scores on the internet use questions about viewing existing content on the internet and self-identify as queer.
2	Autism (categorical) Sexuality (attraction)	Internet Use (Viewing Existing Content)	Autistic people will have higher scores on the internet use questions about viewing existing content on the internet and classify themselves as experiencing queer attraction.
3	AQ-10 Score (continuous)	Internet Use (Viewing Existing Content)	Participants with an AQ-10 score of 6 or higher will have higher scores

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

	Sexuality (self-identification)		on the internet use questions about viewing existing content on the internet and self-identify as queer.
4	AQ-10 Score (continuous) Sexuality (attraction)	Internet Use (Viewing Existing Content)	Participants with an AQ-10 score of 6 or higher will have higher scores on the internet use questions about viewing existing content on the internet and classify themselves as experiencing queer attraction.
5	Autism (categorical) Sexuality (self-identification)	Internet Use (Sexual Behaviors with the internet as medium for connection)	Autistic people will have higher scores on the internet use questions about sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection and self-identify as queer.
6	Autism (categorical) Sexuality (attraction)	Internet Use (Sexual Behaviors with the internet as medium for connection)	Autistic people will have higher scores on the internet use questions about sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection and classify themselves as experiencing queer attraction.
7	AQ-10 Score (continuous) Sexuality (self-identification)	Internet Use (Sexual Behaviors with the internet as medium for connection)	Participants with an AQ-10 score of 6 or higher will have higher scores on the internet use questions about sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection and self-identify as queer.
8	AQ-10 Score (continuous) Sexuality (attraction)	Internet Use (Sexual Behaviors with the internet as medium for connection)	Participants with an AQ-10 score of 6 or higher will have higher scores on the internet use questions about sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection and classify themselves as experiencing queer attraction.
9	Autism (categorical) Sexuality (self-identification)	Internet Use (Behaviors that transition from the internet to real life)	Autistic people will have lower scores on the internet use questions about behaviors that transition from the internet to real life and self-identify as queer.
10	Autism (categorical) Sexuality (attraction)	Internet Use (Behaviors that transition from the internet to real life)	Autistic people will have lower scores on the internet use questions about behaviors that transition from the internet to real life and classify themselves as experiencing queer attraction.
11	AQ-10 Score (continuous) Sexuality (self-identification)	Internet Use (Behaviors that transition from the internet to real life)	Participants with an AQ-10 score of 6 or higher will have higher scores on the internet use questions about behaviors that transition from the

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

			internet to real life and self-identify as queer.
12	AQ-10 Score (continuous) Sexuality (attraction)	Internet Use (Behaviors that transition from the internet to real life)	Participants with an AQ-10 score of 6 or higher will have higher scores on the internet use questions about behaviors that transition from the internet to real life and classify themselves as experiencing queer attraction.

**Results***Data Evaluation and Preliminary Analyses*

Table 2 and 3 provide descriptive statistics for the predictor and outcome variables.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	
<i>Neurotype</i>	Autistic	44	33.33%	
	Neurotypical	88	66.67%	
		<b>132</b>		
		<i>M (SD)</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
<i>Sexuality</i>	Ideal Self-Identification	0.70 (0.46)	-0.85	-1.29
	Ideal Attraction	0.75 (0.44)	-1.14	-0.70
<i>Internet Use Behavior</i>	Viewing Existing Content	2.12 (0.53)	-0.04	-0.34
	Sexual Behaviors via Internet	1.76 (0.66)	0.25	-1.18
	Moving Offline into Real Life	1.96 (0.70)	-0.05	-1.15

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Participants by Group

		ASD (n = 44)		NT (n = 88)	
		M	SD	M	SD
<i>Age</i>		26.82	6.804	25.11	4.947
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Woman	20	46%	45	51%

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

	Man	19	43%	22	25%
	Non-Binary	1	2%	3	3%
	Chose not to identify	4	9%	18	21%
<i>Race</i>	Hispanic or Latino	7	16%	0	0%
	Asian	1	2%	5	6%
	White	20	46%	64	73%
	Black	8	18%	2	2%
	Multiracial	4	9%	2	2%
	Chose not to identify	4	9%	15	17%

---

Each of the internet use categories, viewing existing content online, sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection, and moving offline into real life, were relatively normally distributed. The normality is demonstrated by the skewness  $< | 1 |$  and kurtosis values  $< | 3 |$ . Scatter plots were created to test the linearity of the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables, and the small to medium effect sizes among the continuous predictor variables, so multicollinearity is not a concern.

*Sequential Regression**Viewing existing online content*

I estimated sequential regression models to assess if neurotype, being classified as autistic or neurotypical, and sexuality, defined here as self-identification or sexual attraction classified as queer or heterosexual, predicted someone's internet use scores for viewing existing content on the internet.

**Categorical autism** and **self-identification** sexuality jointly predicted 4.3% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2,128) = 2.86, p = .061$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.469 for neurotypical people with heterosexual identities. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.015, p = .554$ ). Holding autism



## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .488, p < .001$ ). Sexuality drives the relationship for viewing existing content on the internet. Regardless of neurotype, because autism was not a significant predictor, queer identifying people were more likely to **view existing content on the internet**.

Using **categorical autism** with **attraction** sexuality, these variables jointly predicted 4.8% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2, 127) = 3.17, p = .045$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.92 for neurotypical people who do not experience queer attraction. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .081, p = .410$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .242, p = .025$ ). As seen above, sexuality drove this relationship, and that pattern continued for most results. For this model, people with queer attraction were more likely to **view existing content on the internet** and that once again neurotype was not a significant predictor.

Next, I used a continuous measure of autism in the form of AQ-10 scores, or number of autistic traits. **AQ-10 scores** and **self-identification** sexuality jointly predicted 3.2% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2, 125) = 2.097, p = .127$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 2.028 for neurotypical people with heterosexual identities. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.01, p = .627$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .211, p = .043$ ). AQ-10 scores were not a significant predictor which means people with queer identities were more likely to **view existing content on the internet** despite the number of autistic traits they did/did not have.

**AQ-10 scores** and **attraction** sexuality jointly predicted 3.3% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2, 124) = 2.104, p = .126$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.993 for neurotypical people who do not experience queer attraction. Holding sexuality constant, autism

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.006, p = .765$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use ( $B = .225, p = .042$ ). Similarly for this internet use behavior, people with queer attraction were more likely to **view existing content on the internet** despite the number of autistic traits they did/did not have.

*Sexual behaviors with the internet as a medium for connection*

These regression models use the same method of analysis as above with autism and sexuality as predictors, but now the internet use outcome is sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium of connection. These two variables, **categorical autism** and **self-identification** sexuality jointly predicted 12.4% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2,128) = 9.09, p < .001$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.395 for neurotypical people with heterosexual identities. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .089, p = .445$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet scores ( $B = .483, p < .001$ ). Sexuality drove the relationship for this internet use behavior meaning that no matter neurotype, because autism was not a significant predictor, queer identifying people were more likely to engage in **sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection**.

Using **categorical autism** and **attraction** sexuality, these two variables jointly predicted 12.4% of the variation in internet scores  $F(2,127) = 7.47, p < .001$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.385 for neurotypical people who do not experience queer attraction. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .119, p = .313$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .457, p < .001$ ). For this model, that means that people with queer attraction were more likely to engage

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

in **sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection**, and that once again neurotype was not a significant predictor.

Next, I used a continuous measure of autism in the form of AQ-10 scores, or number of autistic traits. **AQ-10 scores** and **self-identification** sexuality jointly predicted 12.5% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2,125) = 8.90, p < .001$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.505 for neurotypical people with heterosexual identities. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.022, p = .363$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .517, p < .001$ ). AQ-10 scores were not a significant predictor which means people with queer identities were more likely to engage in **sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection**, despite the number of autistic traits they did/did not have.

Finally, **AQ-10 scores** and **attraction** sexuality jointly predicted 9.9% of the variation on internet use scores  $F(2,124) = 6.80, p = .002$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.469 for neurotypical people who do not experience queer attraction. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.015, p = .554$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .488, p < .001$ ). Similarly for this internet use behavior, people with queer attraction were more likely to **engage in sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection**, regardless of the autistic traits they did/did not have.

*Behaviors that transition from the internet to real life*

Once again, these regression models used the same method of analysis as above with autism and sexuality as predictors, but the internet use outcome was sexual behaviors that transition from the internet to real life. **Categorical autism** and **self-identification** sexuality

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

jointly predicted 9.8% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2,128) = 6.96, p = .001$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.695 for neurotypical people with heterosexual identities. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.084, p = .502$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores  $B = .477, p < .001$ . Sexuality drove the relationship for this internet use behavior meaning that no matter neurotype, because autism was not a significant predictor, queer identifying people were more likely to make the **transition from the internet to real life** to engage in sexual behaviors.

Using **categorical autism** and **attraction** sexuality, these two variables jointly predicted 7.9% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2,127) = 5.50; p = .005$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.649 for neurotypical people who do not experience queer attraction. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.052, p = .682$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .452, p = .001$ ). For this model, that means that people with queer attraction were more likely to make the **transition from the internet to real life** to engage in sexual behaviors and that once again neurotype was not a significant predictor.

Next, I used a continuous measure of autism in the form of AQ-10 scores, or number of autistic traits. **AQ-10 scores** and **self-identification** sexuality jointly predicted 13% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2,125) = 9.312, p < .001$ . The model predicted an internet use score of 1.835 for neurotypical people with heterosexual identities. Holding sexuality constant, autism did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.052, p = .044$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .529, p < .001$ ). This pattern of results differed from the other models. Instead of sexuality being the driving force of the relationship,

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

here, both predictor variables were significant. The results show that knowing someone's sexuality can be helpful for predicting these internet use behaviors, but there is something significant about queer identities/attraction in autistic people making the **transition from the internet to real life** to engage in sexual behaviors

Finally, **AQ-10 scores** and **attraction** sexuality jointly predicted 10.5% of the variation in internet use scores  $F(2,124) = 7.242, p < .001$ . The model predicted a 1.795 internet use score for neurotypical people who do not experience queer attraction. Holding sexuality constant, autism did not significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = -.044, p = .091$ ). Holding autism constant, sexuality did significantly predict internet use scores ( $B = .503, p < .001$ ). Resuming the previous pattern of results, for this internet use behavior, people with queer attraction were more likely to make the **transition from the internet to real life** to engage in sexual behaviors despite the number of autistic traits they did/did not have.

### *Post Analysis Screening*

I conducted a post-analysis screening on each regression model to check assumptions about normality, homoscedasticity, and collinearity. Histograms of the standardized residuals for autism indicated that they were approximately normally distributed. Based on standardized residuals of the sexuality variables, it is possible that the regression models are underpredicting heterosexual attraction and identities and overpredicting queer attraction and identities. The categorical sexuality variables have two values, heterosexual and queer. While the consistency across values may slightly affect homoscedasticity, there was variance and participants were represented in each heterosexual and queer category. The possible overprediction of people with queer attraction or queer identities does not pose an obvious threat to the data analyses because queer was being used as an umbrella term for a plethora of identities and is not considered one

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

individual category like heterosexual. Cross tabulation indicated that autism and sexuality predictors were not problematically correlated, and inspection of influential case statistics showed no concerning SD Beta and SD Fit values greater than the absolute value of 2.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this work was to explore how queer and autistic adults use the internet relative to their heterosexual and neurotypical peers. The online sexual behaviors were classified by the intensity and amount of socialization required. My hypotheses were based on literature that suggested autistic people go online in search of romantic connections when overwhelmed with the difficulties of face-to-face dating. However, the pattern of results show that autism was not a significant predictor for the internet use categories and that sexuality was the driving force for most of the models.

Literature exploring online sexual behaviors find that the internet is commonly used by queer individuals to fill their gaps in knowledge from the majority heteronormative lessons, which could explain why sexuality was the significant predictor for viewing existing online content (Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Teti et al., 2019). Sexual behaviors with the internet as the means of connection and sexual behaviors that move offline could be justified as not being significantly predicted by autism because of the relationship between the differences in someone's offline environment and how they sexually engage online. The absence of privacy to explore sexuality online perpetuates the delay of understanding of one's own identity and the lack of offline sexual relationships (Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2012).

#### *Viewing existing online content*

Similar patterns of results can be seen across all regression models for viewing existing online content (e.g., self-identification and sexual attraction sexuality variables were significant

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

predictors, and categorical autism and AQ-10 scores were not). Even though overall findings for each regression were the same, AQ-10 scores accounted for a larger percentage of variance in the model than categorical autism, which supports previous findings that characteristics of autism are continuously distributed (Constantino & Charman, 2016).

Past work has indicated that autistic adults were more likely to rely on nonsocial sources of information to learn about sex, like the internet, television, or pornography (Teti et al., 2019). Discovering that there were no significant differences between neurotypes on this internet use behavior was surprising. Studies have shown that social networks, like friends and family, are a key source of information about sexual health and relationships for people of all neurotypes, but societal attitudes and stereotypes of autistic people's sexuality can be an additional barrier to that foundational knowledge (Holmes et al., 2019). Because of the belief that autistic people's social networks would be reluctant to discuss sexuality topics, I assumed autistic people would be more likely to utilize the internet as a resource to fill their gaps in knowledge. However, this assumption was unfounded because the results show autism was not a significant predictor of viewing existing online content. A possible explanation is most studies that use autistic populations do not consider sexuality when investigating differences in internet use. Therefore, attributing deviations in online behaviors to neurotype could be misconstrued (Löfgren-Mårtenson et al., 2015; Roth & Gillis, 2015). Given the established finding that there is a higher rate of queer identities amongst autistic folks, differences in internet use could have been driven by sexuality rather than neurotype, so future studies should consider the differences between both variables.

Both measures of sexuality, self-identification, and sexual attraction, were significant predictors of viewing existing online content. The literature varies on describing participants'

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

reasons for seeking information about sexuality online, but cluster around main topics of embarrassment, knowledge, and curiosity (Daneback, Månsson, Ross, et al., 2012). The significance of sexuality predicting this internet use behavior could be explained by the heteronormative, unrealistic material of current sex education curriculums. For queer teens receiving lectures on the importance of abstinence and preventing unwanted pregnancies, viewing existing content on the internet is practically inevitable (Lykens et al., 2019).

Growing up alongside the advancement of technology means understanding the internet, while useful, is a bottomless pit of information and content. When teens are not introduced to identity-relevant information about sex and sexuality, they will attempt to fill the gaps in knowledge themselves. Queer teens and young adults reported positive feelings about internet use for sexuality citing the benefit of being able to meet other like-minded people. For example, someone living in a rural area without access to queer communities, and potentially dealing with nonacceptance, will go online in search of the resources their immediate environment cannot provide (Lykens et al., 2019).

Because there is no nationwide consideration for queer-inclusive sex education, queer adolescents are only exposed to heteronormativity leading them to the internet which can result in misinformation or skewed representations of healthy sexual relationships (Cavanaugh & Peters, 2019). Adopting any harmful stereotypes or sexual practices when trying to navigate dating only furthers marginalization, violence, and psychological stress for a population already at a greater risk of experiencing these issues (Cavanaugh & Peters, 2019; Teti et al., 2019). The significance of sexuality predicting this internet use behavior points to methodological considerations for future education because queer participants were more likely to view existing content online and look for information.



## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

### *Sexual behaviors with the internet as a medium for connection*

All regression models were significant when predicting scores for sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection and sexuality was driving the relationship. However, based on post-screening analyses of standardized residuals, it is possible the model is underpredicting heterosexual identities and attraction and overpredicting queer identities and attraction. Queer was used as an umbrella term to encapsulate all non-majority sexualities. The use of subcategories for specific sexualities could have increased the variance of identity and attraction. Despite potential overprediction of queerness, previous research justified the use of “queer” in literature stating that the encouragement of inclusive sexual health education has little to no drawbacks and benefits all parties involved (Cavanaugh & Peters, 2019).

Neurotype was not a significant predictor of this internet use behavior, so there was no detectable difference between how autistic and neurotypical people sexually engage online. These results conflict with other research that has suggested autistic people use online-dating methods at a greater rate because of the relief it provides to socialization stresses (Daneback et al., 2007; Daneback, Månsson, Ross, et al., 2012). The internet can be a place with positive social opportunities, but with any type of interpersonal communication there are inexplicit social norms that are expected to be followed. For someone with autism who is unaware of these rules, consistent with the Ferrante and Oak model, I would recommend targeted lessons related to socializing in an online world encourages connection and safe sexual exploration.

When examining online dating profiles of autistic men, research suggested norm-violating behaviors were more positively perceived by the respondent when they had previous knowledge the protagonist was autistic (Gavin et al., 2019). If this rationale extends to online dating, then disclosure of one’s autism diagnosis could offset negative reactions to any possible

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

social norm violations. However, online dating behaviors of autistic people must be investigated further before suggestions can be made to maximize a dating profile's effectiveness.

Ferrante and Oak (2020) state the reality that autistic people are sexually active regardless of cognitive abilities or extreme lack of resources. With that caveat, there is researcher responsibility to intervene and provide neurodivergent populations with the tools they need to foster healthy sexual relationships. I believe more research is needed into the role the internet plays in autistic people's lives but evaluating how they sexually engage online will only further our understanding and improve the way sex education is taught.

### *Behaviors that transition from the internet to real life*

When initially thinking about this type of internet use, I assumed autistic adults would be less participatory based on the required social demands of making the transition from online interactions to in-person meetings. Most of the results suggested that neurotype was not a significant predictor for making the transition from the internet to real life, which is unexpected and seemingly inconsistent with literature. Previous studies have found that autistic adults are as successful (or more successful) than the general population with online dating. Of the total sample, 64% of autistic adults indicated they find aspects of online dating easy, like having control over self-presentation, absence of nonverbal communicate cues, and more time to process information (Roth & Gillis, 2015).

Research has shown that access to the internet can increase the opportunities someone has to connect with sexual partners. But what happens when internet use access is hindered by threats to privacy? For an autistic person living at home under a guardian could mean that they do not have personal access to devices that no one else does. The offline setting can greatly influence how the internet is used for sexuality purposes. Results indicated that individuals who

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

had access to a computer no one else had access to were more likely to have connected with someone on the internet that they later met offline and had sex with (Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2012).

If a person's only internet access is through a family computer, viewing existing sexuality content online seems like a less intimidating task than trying to engage in cybersex with an online partner. The double edge sword of guardian and caregiver logic is seen with the combination of concern over lack of social connections/loneliness and fears of emotional/physical safety or appropriateness of sexual feelings and actions (Teti et al., 2019). Whether a caregiver being a barrier to sexual exploration or personal acceptance is intentional or not, autistic adults are motivated to find romantic connections online and date offline. This encourages the development of targeted programming within knowledge-based sex education that explain tools/techniques to use when safely exploring online connections and planning meet ups. However, further research is needed to determine the most effective ways to teach neurodivergent populations about sexuality.

The most interesting finding within this type of internet use came from the model using AQ-10 scores and self-identification sexuality to predict sexual behaviors that transition from the internet to real life. Results suggest that neurotype and sexuality were both significant predictors for this kind of internet use, so as the number of autistic traits a person has increases, their chances of transitioning sexual behaviors offline decreases. Autistic traits were a significant predictor for this behavior, unlike in the other models. To explore why this is, it would be interesting to study the factors that affect autistic people's ability to meet online partners in-person. Asking about transportation, scheduling, parental/guardian approval, verbal ability, etc.

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

could be a way to capture what specifically hinders the offline transition for people with higher AQ-10 scores.

In summary, the overall results indicate sexuality was a significant predictor for internet use behaviors, and neurotype was not. Yet, each domain of internet use had different patterns of findings. This suggests the demand of socialization for online behaviors might have been a factor in how people engage. Future research should take careful consideration of the nuances between behaviors because internet use has become entirely woven into sexual exploration. The motivations for viewing existing content could be different than the motivations for engaging in sexual behaviors that use the internet as a medium for connection. It is important to define, in depth, what an online behavior involves, because technology is adapting in such an accelerated way that “internet use” is now entirely too broad and vague an idea. A more rigorous distinction between and measure of online sexual behaviors is necessary to improve the generalizability and external validity of the results.

### *Limitations*

This data set was pulled from a larger sexuality questionnaire study. Because the survey was lengthy, and the KSOG measure appeared towards the end, it is possible participants suffered from fatigue and did not accurately answer the challenging questions related to self-identification and attraction. However, even if all participants did accurately answer the questions the KSOG has received a lot of criticism.

The KSOG measure was developed in response to the Kinsey Scale. The Kinsey Scale, a 7-point scale with higher numbers representing increased same-sex attraction, relies on binary heterosexual and homosexual language. Alfred Kinsey acknowledged that his scale could not

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

fully encapsulate every person's sexuality, that some people are between categories, but posited that all sexualities lie on a scale where the "two extremes" are heterosexual and homosexual. To address the missing components from early measurements of sexual orientation, the KSOG is based on three principles: aspects of sexual orientation can change with time, sexual orientation is multidimensional, and that there is a distinction between orientation and identification.

These principles can be seen in the measure itself. Each dimension of sexual orientation is answered for three aspects of life: past, present, ideal, and there are many aspects in the KSOG including attraction, behavior, fantasy, emotional preference, etc. Having different aspects, and self-identification on its own, showcases the belief that orientation is about sociocultural preferences and identification is a self-label. The creators of the KSOG understood the complexities that come with computing core components of sexuality, like identity, attraction, and behavior. While additional questions would theoretically give a more extensive look at someone's sexuality, the seemingly unnecessary addition of aspects like sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, and heterosexual/gay lifestyle have been critiqued for their usefulness and lack of empirical basing (Wolff et al., 2017). Researchers have also stated that measures of sexuality can respect the theoretical grounds of fluidity and still have a shortened conceptualization, like having a single question for each relevant aspect of sexual orientation (Cramer et al., 2015).

Not only are there fundamental racial and gender biases as diagnostic criteria are solely based on White boys, but there also continue to be socioeconomic barriers to evaluation. Racial disparities in healthcare mean that without the help of a medical professional families rely purely on educational records, which statistically for Black and Hispanic children lack the depth and specificity needed for confirming an Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis (Imm et al., 2019).

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

Additionally, because most evaluation processes focus on children, autistic adults can receive inconclusive results or misdiagnoses (Byers & Nichols, 2014). For this research I used autism as a categorical predictor and asking a yes/no question might have unintentionally excluded participants who are autistic but have not received a formal diagnosis. The idea of a yes/no question was to include people who self-identify or self-diagnose with autism, but a continuous measure, like the AQ-10, helps capture more undiagnosed neurodivergent people and even recognizes those on the cusp. Even though a recent study has questioned the AQ-10's reliability when used in non-clinical samples (Taylor et al., 2020), research has reiterated characteristics of autism are continuously distributed in the general population, so until a more psychometrically robust measure can be developed the pros of using this measure outweigh the cons (Constantino & Charman, 2016).

Regarding the internet use questionnaire, I categorized the items myself based on the level of socialization required. I was limited by the specificity of the internet use data because from the 11 total questions, 4 were thrown out due to their irrelevance to sexuality. The internet, and the ways people are engaging online, is evolving in unpredictable ways. In a study of 1,500 youth participants, results showed that young people are using online spaces at an increasing rate to explore sexual relationships, especially in areas where peer connections might be limited (Lykens et al., 2019). Not only are people engaging on the internet, but 70% of youth reported that they have used an online space or dating site to meet up with someone in person. Current research is calling for the inclusion of social media as potential sources of hookup culture and dating (Daneback et al., 2007; Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2012)

Researcher familiarity in this field is challenging because of the rapidly changing landscape of the topics involved. There is a notable lull between the reality of what platforms people use to

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

sexually engage online vs. what researchers are studying. Additionally, society's understanding of queer identities and disabilities is constantly evolving, so the importance of questionnaires differentiating and specifying internet behaviors to truly understand the ways people engage online cannot be stressed enough. To increase the sexual autonomy of autistic people in the modern dating world, they should understand how to use the internet strategically and safely. Therefore, researchers should stay up to date with current internet behaviors by utilizing measures that explore the multitude of ways the internet can be used.

### *Implications and Future Directions*

The data support the idea that the internet plays an active role in sexual exploration. Even though dating services have explicit rules prohibiting minors from using their platforms, a survey of youth revealed 34% of respondents had some type of experience using an online dating site/app. Of the group who had previously used dating sites, nearly 80% of youth under 18 met up with someone in person (Lykens et al., 2019). The pull of the internet is not limited to adults and in the future educators should incorporate lessons related to connecting with others on the internet, finding accurate information, or staying safe while engaging in online/offline sexual behaviors when developing inclusive teaching materials.

The statistical power that comes from a larger sample allows for the use of more demographics, which can provide the researchers with a clearer picture of who the participants are and how their internet use varies. Because there were not a large enough number of participants in the current study, it would not have been helpful to examine variables like religion, race, politics, or geographic location. Nevertheless, concerns over sexuality arise at a critical time in development and factors including sexual norms or cultural attitude have been shown to influence sexual behaviors and attraction (May et al., 2017).

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

For example, a closeted queer teen living in a Southern Baptist family probably views their sexuality differently than an out queer teen with a single mother in a big city. These hypothetical teens most likely differ on the ways they self-identify or rate their sexual attraction on a questionnaire, too. Larger sample sizes with demographic characteristics like religion or geographic location might capture these variables, in addition to sexuality, significantly predicting internet use behaviors, but until future research is conducted this suggestion is based on speculation.

To expand the scope of literature, future sexuality research in autistic populations should recruit participants from across the autism spectrum. This would mean including non-verbal populations and people who are otherwise seen as “less independent”. In a study of parental romantic expectations, results suggested that parents of children with below average IQ who are nonverbal or intellectually disabled have lower expectations about their children falling in love, getting married, or having a sexual relationships than parents of children without speech delays and average-to-above-average IQ (Holmes et al., 2016). When parents have low expectations for their child’s sexual well-being, they are less engaged in parent-child sexuality communication surrounding topics of future social/sexual behaviors like making the decision whether to have sex, how well birth-control can prevent pregnancy, or how to ask someone on a date (Holmes et al., 2016). The relationship between a child’s intellectual capabilities and the number of sexuality related topics discussed by the parents might be mediated by the parents’ romantic expectations. Further research is needed to explore how parents discuss sexuality with their autistic children, but offering parent specific training or having concurrent parent lessons with existing adolescent programs could be a way to encourage these conversations within families



## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

When investigating the effectiveness of collecting behavioral, eye-tracking, and electrophysiological (EEG) data from minimally verbal populations, researchers found that breaking tasks down into smaller steps, guiding participants through modeling behavior and rewarding responses, and addressing challenging behaviors with ABA principles to be the most successful methods (Tager-Flusberg et al., 2017). Applying these general approaches to other, more complicated types of data collection could be key in expanding the scope of research to be able to include autistic people from anywhere on the spectrum. As society's understanding of autism evolves, methods of communication and techniques for defusing challenging or aggressive behaviors will improve, encouraging research to be representative of the full autism spectrum. In the meantime, including appropriate sex education lessons in autistic students' IEPs (individualized education programs) could ensure the direct dissemination of information and offer the opportunities for personal reflection that the Ferrante and Oak model encourages for deeper understanding.

Some research has found that there is a higher percentage of autistic people who identify with a type of queer sexuality (May et al., 2017; Weir et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there can be differences between one's self-identification, their own description of their sexuality, and their attraction level. For example, a woman who identifies as heterosexual can find men and women attractive. This person may experience queer attraction but does not identify with it or act on it. Therefore, self-identification is not automatically consistent with attraction. Additionally, any number of reasons can prevent a person from publicly identifying as queer, like dangers of unacceptance, personal repression, or societal cis/heteronormativity. While researchers cannot say there is a link between being autistic and being queer, there is data to suggest a relationship between being autistic and identifying as queer (May et al., 2017; Weir et al., 2021).

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

However, as stated previously, the scientific literature varies on the way sexual orientation is operationalized. Some studies use self-reports of identification while others rely on self-reported sexual behaviors or attraction. The Department of Health and Human Services states that sexual orientation is typically defined by three components- sexual identity, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior (Wolff et al., 2017). Having participants answer multiple questions about different aspects of their sexuality helps researchers demonstrate each response can vary and that no one person's sexuality can be defined by an arbitrary scale at a singular point in time. I hope using "queer" as an all-encompassing LGBTQ+ identity illustrates researchers should no longer be limited in how they operationalize sexuality or by the pre-conceived notions that sexuality is either stagnant or binary.

In a study of gender identity and neurodevelopmental traits, compared to cisgender participants, transgender and gender diverse participants reported higher rates of autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions (Mulcahy et al., 2022). While gender and sexuality are two separate constructs, they are closely related. Data show there are a large percentage of transgender disabled and neurodivergent people with unmet needs that lead to poor health outcomes and these multilayered, oppressed identities put them at an increased risk of violence, discrimination, and exclusion.

Ferrante and Oak (2020) repeat the criticism that presumed heterosexuality and gendered assumptions are a major issue with contemporary global sex education. When advocating for queer inclusivity in sex education, this, without question, includes gender affirming lessons for trans students. My paper discusses the importance of intersectionality when measuring concepts like autism and sexuality but fails to address the influence gender might have. The intricacies required of using multiple variables was beyond the capabilities of a master's thesis, but future

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

research should consider how gender relates to sexuality and autism, and if the combination of these variables alter the significance of predicting internet use (Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2012).

Ferrante and Oak (2022) are grounded on the belief that emphasizing with the feelings and emotions of a partner are key to healthy sexual relationships and sexual agency. Much like dancing, sex requires synchronization, enthusiastic participation, and flexibility (sometimes literally, but mostly figuratively). Learning the horizontal dance of sex can feel intimidating, but as the saying goes, it always takes two to tango.

### References

- Abel, G., & Ludeke, M. (2020). Brothels as Sites of Third-Party Exploitation? Decriminalisation and Sex Workers' Employment Rights. *Social Sciences, 10*(1), 3.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010003>

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

Booth, T., Murray, A. L., McKenzie, K., Kuenssberg, R., O'Donnell, M., & Burnett, H. (2013).

Brief Report: An Evaluation of the AQ-10 as a Brief Screening Instrument for ASD in Adults. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43(12), 2997–3000.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1844-5>

Byers, E. S., & Nichols, S. (2014). Sexual Satisfaction of High-Functioning Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Sexuality and Disability*, 32(3), 365–382.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-014-9351-y>

Byers, E. S., Nichols, S., & Voyer, S. D. (2013). Challenging Stereotypes: Sexual Functioning of Single Adults with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43(11), 2617–2627. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1813-z>

Byers, E. S., Nichols, S., Voyer, S. D., & Reilly, G. (2013). Sexual well-being of a community sample of high-functioning adults on the autism spectrum who have been in a romantic relationship. *Autism*, 17(4), 418–433. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361311431950>

Cain, L. K., & Velasco, J. C. (2021). Stranded at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and autism: Gray's story. *Disability & Society*, 36(3), 358–375.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1755233>

Cavanaugh, K. M., & Peters, H. C. (2019). Queer Adolescents Dating and Sexuality:

Implications for Counselors, Counselor Educators, and Supervisors. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*, 5(1), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23727810.2018.1556986>

Constantino, J. N., & Charman, T. (2016). Diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder: Reconciling the syndrome, its diverse origins, and variation in expression. *The Lancet Neurology*, 15(3), 279–291. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422\(15\)00151-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422(15)00151-9)

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

- Cramer, R. J., Chevalier, C., Gemberling, T. M., Stroud, C. H., & Graham, J. (2015). A confirmatory factor analytic evaluation of the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2(2), 123–129.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000102>
- Crehan, E. T., Rocha, J., & Dufresne, S. (2021). Brief Report: Sources of Sexuality and Relationship Education for Autistic and Neurotypical Adults in the U.S. and a Call to Action. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-04992-z>
- Daneback, K., Mansson, S.-A., & Ross, M. W. (2011). Online Sex Shops: Purchasing Sexual Merchandise on the Internet. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 23(2), 102–110.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2011.565112>
- Daneback, K., Månsson, S.-A., & Ross, M. W. (2012). Technological Advancements and Internet Sexuality: Does Private Access to the Internet Influence Online Sexual Behavior? *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(8), 386–390.  
<https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0188>
- Daneback, K., Månsson, S.-A., Ross, M. W., & Markham, C. M. (2012). The Internet as a source of information about sexuality. *Sex Education*, 12(5), 583–598.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2011.627739>
- Daneback, K., Månsson, S.-A., & Ross, Michaelw. (2007). Using the Internet to Find Offline Sex Partners. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10(1), 100–107.  
<https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2006.9986>
- Dekker, L. P., van der Vegt, E. J. M., van der Ende, J., Tick, N., Louwerse, A., Maras, A., Verhulst, F. C., & Greaves-Lord, K. (2017). Psychosexual Functioning of Cognitively-

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

- able Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder Compared to Typically Developing Peers: The Development and Testing of the Teen Transition Inventory- a Self- and Parent Report Questionnaire on Psychosexual Functioning. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(6), 1716–1738. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3071-y>
- Dewinter, J., Graaf, H. D., & Begeer, S. (2017). Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Romantic Relationships in Adolescents and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(9), 2927–2935. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3199-9>
- Ending Guardianship: How State Governments Take Away Our Right to Make Choices and How We Can Stop It - Autistic Self Advocacy Network. (2020, June 25). <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>  
<https://autisticadvocacy.org/actioncenter/issues/choices/guardianship/>
- Ferrante, C. A., & Oak, E. (2020). ‘No sex please!’ We have been labelled intellectually disabled. *Sex Education*, 20(4), 383–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2020.1719479>
- Fisher, M. H., Moskowitz, A. L., & Hodapp, R. M. (2013). Differences in social vulnerability among individuals with autism spectrum disorder, Williams syndrome, and Down syndrome. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 7(8), 931–937. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2013.04.009>
- Gavin, J., Rees-Evans, D., & Brosnan, M. (2019). Shy Geek, Likes Music, Technology, and Gaming: An Examination of Autistic Males’ Online Dating Profiles. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 22(5), 344–348. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2018.0607>

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

- Gurriell, M. (2021). Born into Porn But Rescued by Thorn: The Demand for Tech Companies to Scan and Search For Child Sexual Abuse Images. *Family Court Review*, 59(4), 840–854. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12613>
- Hall, J. P., Batza, K., Streed, C. G., Boyd, B. A., & Kurth, N. K. (2020). Health Disparities Among Sexual and Gender Minorities with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 50(8), 3071–3077. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04399-2>
- Hartmann, K., Urbano, M. R., Raffaele, C. T., Qualls, L. R., Williams, T. V., Warren, C., Kreiser, N. L., Elkins, D. E., & Deutsch, S. I. (2019). Sexuality in the Autism Spectrum Study (SASS): Reports from Young Adults and Parents. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49(9), 3638–3655. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04077-y>
- Hillier, A., Gallop, N., Mendes, E., Tellez, D., Buckingham, A., Nizami, A., & OToole, D. (2020). LGBTQ + and autism spectrum disorder: Experiences and challenges. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 21(1), 98–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1594484>
- Holmes, L. G., Himle, M. B., & Strassberg, D. S. (2016). Parental romantic expectations and parent–child sexuality communication in autism spectrum disorders. *Autism*, 20(6), 687–699. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315602371>
- Holmes, L. G., Strassberg, D. S., & Himle, M. B. (2019). Family Sexuality Communication for Adolescent Girls on the Autism Spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49(6), 2403–2416. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-03904-6>

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

- Imm, P., White, T., & Durkin, M. S. (2019). Assessment of racial and ethnic bias in autism spectrum disorder prevalence estimates from a US surveillance system. *Autism, 23*(8), 1927–1935. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319827510>
- Kim, J., LaRose, R., & Peng, W. (2009). Loneliness as the Cause and the Effect of Problematic Internet Use: The Relationship between Internet Use and Psychological Well-Being. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 12*(4), 451–455. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2008.0327>
- Klein, F., Sepekoff, B., & Wolf, T. J. (1985). Sexual Orientation: A Multi-Variable Dynamic Process. *Journal of Homosexuality, 11*(1–2), 35–49. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v11n01\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v11n01_04)
- Kovacs, K., & Conway, A. R. A. (2019). A unified cognitive/differential approach to human intelligence: Implications for IQ Testing. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 8*(3), 255–272. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2019.05.003>
- Löfgren-Mårtenson, L., Sorbring, E., & Molin, M. (2015). “T@ngled Up in Blue”: Views of Parents and Professionals on Internet Use for Sexual Purposes Among Young People with Intellectual Disabilities. *Sexuality and Disability, 33*(4), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-015-9415-7>
- Lykens, J., Pilloton, M., Silva, C., Schlamm, E., Wilburn, K., & Pence, E. (2019). Google for Sexual Relationships: Mixed-Methods Study on Digital Flirting and Online Dating Among Adolescent Youth and Young Adults. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance, 5*(2), e10695. <https://doi.org/10.2196/10695>
- Ma, H. K., Chu, M. K. Y., & Chan, W. W. Y. (2011). Construction of a Teaching Package on Promoting Prosocial Internet Use and Preventing Antisocial Internet Use. *The Scientific World JOURNAL, 11*, 2136–2146. <https://doi.org/10.1100/2011/672898>



## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

- May, T., Pang, K. C., & Williams, K. (2017). Brief Report: Sexual Attraction and Relationships in Adolescents with Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(6), 1910–1916. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3092-6>
- McCabe, K. A. (2019). Child Abuse and Technology. In F. P. Bernat & K. Frailing (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Women and Crime* (pp. 1–3). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118929803.ewac0551>
- Mckinlay, T., & Lavis, T. (2020). Why did she send it in the first place? Victim blame in the context of ‘revenge porn.’ *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 27(3), 386–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2020.1734977>
- Mogavero, M. C., & Hsu, K.-H. (2020). Dating and Courtship Behaviors Among Those with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Sexuality and Disability*, 38(2), 355–364. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-019-09565-8>
- Mulcahy, A., Streed, C. G., Wallisch, A. M., Batza, K., Kurth, N., Hall, J. P., & McMaughan, D. J. (2022). Gender Identity, Disability, and Unmet Healthcare Needs among Disabled People Living in the Community in the United States. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(5), 2588. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19052588>
- Oswalt, S., & Lederer, A. (2017). Beyond Depression and Suicide: The Mental Health of Transgender College Students. *Social Sciences*, 6(1), 20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6010020>
- Overbeek, G., van de Bongardt, D., & Baams, L. (2018). Buffer or Brake? The Role of Sexuality-Specific Parenting in Adolescents’ Sexualized Media Consumption and Sexual

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

Development. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(7), 1427–1439.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0828-3>

Pearlman-Avni, S., Cohen, N., & Eldan, A. (2017). Sexual Well-Being and Quality of Life Among High-Functioning Adults with Autism. *Sexuality and Disability*, 35(3), 279–293.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-017-9490-z>

Peña-Guzmán, D. M., & Reynolds, J. M. (2019). The Harm of Ableism: Medical Error and Epistemic Injustice. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 29(3), 205–242.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2019.0023>

Prigge, M. B. D., Bigler, E. D., Lange, N., Morgan, J., Froehlich, A., Freeman, A., Kellett, K., Kane, K. L., King, C. K., Taylor, J., Dean, D. C., King, J. B., Anderson, J. S., Zielinski, B. A., Alexander, A. L., & Lainhart, J. E. (2022). Longitudinal Stability of Intellectual Functioning in Autism Spectrum Disorder: From Age 3 Through Mid-adulthood. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 52(10), 4490–4504.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05227-x>

Reiner, I., Tibubos, A. N., Hardt, J., Müller, K., Wölfling, K., & Beutel, M. E. (2017). Peer attachment, specific patterns of internet use and problematic internet use in male and female adolescents. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 26(10), 1257–1268.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-017-0984-0>

Roth, M. E., & Gillis, J. M. (2015). “Convenience with the Click of a Mouse”: A Survey of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder on Online Dating. *Sexuality and Disability*, 33(1), 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-014-9392-2>

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

- Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions*. (n.d.). Human Rights Campaign. Retrieved May 29, 2022, from <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>
- Stark, R., Kruse, O., Snagowski, J., Brand, M., Walter, B., Klucken, T., & Wehrum-Osinsky, S. (2017). Predictors for (Problematic) Use of Internet Sexually Explicit Material: Role of Trait Sexual Motivation and Implicit Approach Tendencies Towards Sexually Explicit Material. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, *24*(3), 180–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720162.2017.1329042>
- Stokes, M., Newton, N., & Kaur, A. (2007). Stalking, and Social and Romantic Functioning Among Adolescents and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *37*(10), 1969–1986. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-006-0344-2>
- Tager-Flusberg, H., Plesa Skwerer, D., Joseph, R. M., Brukilacchio, B., Decker, J., Eggleston, B., Meyer, S., & Yoder, A. (2017). Conducting research with minimally verbal participants with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, *21*(7), 852–861. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316654605>
- Taylor, E. C., Livingston, L. A., Clutterbuck, R. A., & Shah, P. (2020). Psychometric concerns with the 10-item Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ10) as a measure of trait autism in the general population. *Experimental Results*, *1*, e3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/exp.2019.3>
- Teti, M., Cheak-Zamora, N., Bauerband, L. A., & Maurer-Batjer, A. (2019). A Qualitative Comparison of Caregiver and Youth with Autism Perceptions of Sexuality and Relationship Experiences. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, *40*(1), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000000620>

## INTERNET USE AND SEXUALITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS

Weir, E., Allison, C., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2021). The sexual health, orientation, and activity of autistic adolescents and adults. *Autism Research, 14*(11), 2342–2354.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2604>

Wheelwright, S., Auyeung, B., Allison, C., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2010). *Revealing the broader, medium and narrow autism phenotype among parents using the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ)*. 9.

Wolff, M., Wells, B., Ventura-DiPersia, C., Renson, A., & Grov, C. (2017). Measuring Sexual Orientation: A Review and Critique of U.S. Data Collection Efforts and Implications for Health Policy. *The Journal of Sex Research, 54*(4–5), 507–531.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1255872>