
Participatory Design for Research on Technologically-Mediated Youth Sexuality: Ethical and Privacy Implications

Mel Stanfill

University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL 32816 USA
mel.stanfill@ucf.edu

Anastasia Salter

University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL 32816 USA
Anastasia.Salter@ucf.edu

Emily Johnson

University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL 32816 USA
Emily.Johnson@ucf.edu

Pamela Wisniewski

University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL 32816 USA
Pamela.Wisniewski@ucf.edu

Abstract

We plan to engage with adolescents as participatory designers of a digital game to help them make more informed decisions around technologically-mediated sexuality, involving youth directly in the design process at every step. This project raises questions about how, as researchers and designers, we can help youth make, hopefully, more informed decisions regarding their privacy. Involving youth in the project allows us to answer: What do youth desire to keep private and what do they want to have be public and open? From whom do youth desire privacy? Our participatory design method helps ensure that ethical concerns around collecting and analyzing user data, balancing privacy and disclosure, and trade-offs between privacy and beneficial outcomes are calibrated to the specific needs of our user population.

Author Keywords

Participatory design; youth; sexuality; digital games; privacy; ethics.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.1.2. User/Machine Systems – Human factors, Software psychology; H.5.m. Information interfaces

and presentation; K.8.0. Games; K.4.1 Computers and Society: Public Policy Issues

Introduction

Youth sexuality has long been both an ethically-contested issue and a vital area of inquiry. Often, approaches to youth sexuality have been prohibitionist and focused on prevention—of pregnancy, sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), or even sexual behavior itself—even as studies show that abstinence-based frameworks are not effective [11]. Similarly, interventions or educational projects tend to be imposed top down, based on adult beliefs about appropriate behavior [3,4]. Building on research examining youth’s own attitudes toward sexuality [9], rather than prohibition, our approach focuses on helping youth make informed, empowered choices about technologically-mediated sexuality [5], including involving youth in the definition of the problem and design of solutions, under the premise that such work is both more ethical and more effective.

Teens, Games, and Participatory Design

We will build a digital game that allows youth to learn about and engage in informed decision-making around technologically-mediated sexuality, involving youth in the design process at every step. Participatory design practices are well-established [8,10], including with children and teens, but only occasionally involve content that can be construed as risky to the participants themselves [2,15]. Projects such as Kidsteam (facilitated at the University of Maryland by Allison Druin) engage children as co-designers in educational and edutainment experiences primarily, but usually on traditional curriculum content subjects [7].

Teen-developed games on sexuality already exist within independent design communities: tools such as Twine, Construct 2, and Ren’Py are particularly popular because they require minimal programming literacy and enable one-person development teams to create interactive content [14]. Teen explorations of sexual identity through game design of this kind are usually very personal, although they might be distributed through social networks or communities with shared interests and practices, and are often centered on practices in fandom or transformative works (with an especially large community creating dating and sex simulations inspired by anime) [13].

Engaging and extending these existing development practices in the service of education is tempting, but challenging. Peer education, discussion, and discourse is one of the best tools we have for encouraging frank and diverse attitudes towards sexuality among teens [16], but existing games cannot be easily used to facilitate such discussions: They lack both intentional frameworks and the diversity that comes from multiple perspectives informing the design process

Ethics through Participatory Design

Our project to develop a game to facilitate healthy discussions of sexuality among teens brings in teenagers as participatory designers, both from participants already engaged in game design or other expressive practices and participants with a strong interest in the subject who may not have created anything of this kind before. While some teen game designers build strong identities and networks around their work, many publish under pseudonyms and hide their work from parents, mentors, and even peers. This freedom and selective anonymity is essential to the

confessional aspect of many of these games involving sexuality, particularly when that sexuality involves partners or practices that are marginalized.

Previous work in participatory design has identified a procedure [6] without mentioning the ethical implications of such study. Other participatory design researchers have discussed the ethics of participant-designed solutions with their participants but not published reflections on the ethics of the research project itself [1]. It seems to be assumed that participatory design is inherently ethical because the researchers value the knowledge of (presumably less educated) participants [12]. In our work to design an informative and ethical participatory research project to investigate taboo topics with young participants, we have laid out principles guiding our study to identify and adhere to ethical standards and protect the privacy of the youth in our study:

- **Transparency:** Being open to participants about our intent to better understand their social behavior
- **Autonomy:** Giving participants control over what is shared and how it is shared (anonymously or not)
- **Literacy:** Providing participants with comprehensive information about both technological and social aspects of the issue at hand.

This project raises important questions about how, as researchers and designers, we can make, and help youth to make, more informed decisions regarding privacy—given the abstinence focus of many adults, the impulse of youth is often to hide. This cuts them off from knowledge and resources. On the other hand, not having privacy from authority figures and peers around

sexual exploration is known to be detrimental. One of the key benefits of involving youth in the project is to be able to answer with better precision:

- What information do youth desire to keep private with respect to technologically-mediated sexuality and what might they want to have be more public and open?
- From whom do youth desire privacy with respect to technologically-mediated sexuality, particularly since there is often a disjuncture between desire for interpersonal and institutional privacy? [17]

In conclusion, we plan to engage teenagers as participatory designers for a digital game about informed decision-making around technologically-mediated sexuality. This approach away from treating privacy as a binary but instead considers the way it may function better as a spectrum or a case-by-case determination. Our participatory design process will ensure that ethical concerns around collecting and analyzing user data, balancing privacy and disclosure, and trade-offs between privacy and beneficial outcomes are calibrated to the specific needs of our population.

References

1. Zahra Ashktorab and Jessica Vitak. 2016. Designing Cyberbullying Mitigation and Prevention Solutions Through Participatory Design With Teenagers. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '16)*, 3895–3905. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858548>
2. Victoria Blake, Kerrie Buhagiar, Sylvia Kauer, Lena Sanci, Mariesa Nicholas, and Julie Grey. 2016. Using participatory design to engage young people in the

- development of a new online tool to increase help-seeking. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies* 1, 3: 68.
3. Samuel Kai Wah Chu, Alvin C.M. Kwan, Rebecca Reynolds, Robin R. Mellecker, Frankie Tam, Grace Lee, Athena Hong, and Ching Yin Leung. 2015. Promoting Sex Education Among Teenagers Through an Interactive Game: Reasons for Success and Implications. *Games for Health Journal* 4, 3: 168–174. <https://doi.org/10.1089/g4h.2014.0059>
 4. Kylene Guse, Deb Levine, Summer Martins, Andrea Lira, Jenna Gaarde, Whitney Westmorland, and Melissa Gilliam. 2012. Interventions Using New Digital Media to Improve Adolescent Sexual Health: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 51, 6: 535–543. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.03.014>
 5. Amy Adele Hasinoff. 2013. Sexting as media production: Rethinking social media and sexuality. *New Media & Society* 15, 4: 449–465. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812459171>
 6. Kensing, Finn, Simonsen, Jesper, and Bodker, Keld. 1998. MUST: A method for participatory design. *Human-computer interaction* 13, 2: 167–198.
 7. Kidsteam. Kidsteam: Children and Adults Working as Design Partners. Retrieved from <http://hcil.umd.edu/children-as-design-partners/>
 8. A. F. Newell, P. Gregor, M. Morgan, G. Pullin, and C. Macaulay. 2010. User-Sensitive Inclusive Design. *Universal Access in the Information Society* 10, 3: 235–243. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-010-0203-y>
 9. Jessica Ringrose, Laura Harvey, Rosalind Gill, and Sonia Livingstone. 2013. Teen girls, sexual double standards and “sexting”: Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory* 14, 3: 305–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113499853>
 10. Michael J. Salvo. 2001. Ethics of Engagement: User-Centered Design and Rhetorical Methodology. *Technical Communication Quarterly* 10, 3: 273–290. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1003_3
 11. Amy T. Schalet. 2011. Beyond Abstinence and Risk: A New Paradigm for Adolescent Sexual Health. *Women’s Health Issues* 21, 3: S5–S7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2011.01.007>
 12. Clay Spinuzzi. 2005. The Methodology of Participatory Design. *Technical Communication* 52, 2: 163–174.
 13. Taneska, Biljana Kochoska. 2009. Otaku—the living force of the social media network.
 14. Ana Valens. 2016. Anna Anthropy’s new book aims to teach game design to kids. *Kill Screen*. Retrieved December 16, 2016 from <https://killscreen.com/articles/anna-anthropys-new-book-will-teach-game-design-tomorrows-developers/>
 15. Annalu Waller, Victoria Franklin, Claudia Pagliari, and Stephen Greene. 2006. Participatory design of a text message scheduling system to support young people with diabetes. *Health Informatics Journal* 12, 4: 304–318. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1460458206070023>
 16. Lesley Wood and Farah Hendricks. 2016. A participatory action research approach to developing youth-friendly strategies for the prevention of teenage pregnancy. *Educational Action Research* 0, 0: 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2016.1169198>
 17. Alyson Leigh Young and Anabel Quan-Haase. 2013. Privacy Protection Strategies on Facebook. *Information, Communication & Society* 16, 4: 479–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.777757>