Youth Viewing Sexually Explicit Material Online: Addressing the Elephant on the Screen

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Abstract Existing research demonstrates adolescents are increasingly using the Internet to learn about sex. This includes viewing sexually explicit material. Minimal scholarly work addresses the role of sexually explicit material in the lives of adolescents in the USA. This article reports findings drawn from open-ended semi-structured interviews with 51 young adults about their use of the Internet to learn about sex. Specifically discussed are the motivations for viewing sexually explicit material and participants' responses to the material they viewed. Participants' motivations for viewing sexually explicit content included curiosity about sex, curiosity about sexually explicit material, with romantic partners, in groups, or for individual sexual pleasure. Participants viewing of sexually explicit material as adolescents ranged from a minimal number of times to frequent and consistent viewing. Participants' positive assessments of viewing sexually explicit material as adolescents included that some content portrayed a more realistic range of people and bodies than sexual content in mainstream media and that it was a safe means of exploring and learning about sexuality. Participants' negative assessments of viewing sexually explicit material as adolescents included encountering upsetting content and feeling that it portrayed unrealistic sexual behaviors and interactions. Many participants described incorporating ideas gleaned from sexually explicit material into their sexual experiences. Participants with skills and resources to critically view sexually explicit material were most likely to assess it positively. Based on these findings, initial suggestions could be derived for how online sexual information as well as sexually explicit material might be responsibly addressed in formal sexual education settings.

Introduction

The first decade of this century has been characterized by a significant increase in adolescents' use of the Internet (Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) 2010), a marked increase in the availability of sexual content online (Lehman 2006), as well as a general societal shift toward offering abstinence-only formal sexual education (Fields 2008). Thus, while the extent of sexual information in formal educational settings was being limited for adolescents, there was a concurrent rapid expansion in the amount of sexual information and content accessible to them online. As a result, many adolescents learned about sexuality while dealing with polarized cultural expectations. On one hand, adolescent sexual discussion has been restricted in formal sexual education and in religious and family settings. On the other hand, adolescents encounter an increasingly sexualized media environment, including the glut of sexual content online. These historical circumstances are unique.

This research was designed to explore the experiences of adolescents as they learned about sexuality within this conflicting cultural climate. This article presents a portion of the results from a larger research project that investigated where and how adolescents that matured in the mid-2000s learned about sexuality.

Fifty-one young adults participated in semi-structured, open-ended interviews of their remembered experiences of learning about sex. The results described here concentrate on their experiences with sexually explicit content and the potential implications for sexual education.

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Many participants, especially those who did not have other available resources, described going online as adolescents to find sexual information, including sexually explicit content. Often the inspiration for seeking out sexual information online was incomplete information provided by other sources, such as formal sexual education, or through references to sexual topics in other media. One initial implication of these interviews is, thus, obvious and not surprising. Formal sexual education is not a satisfactory source of information for many adolescents in the USA, and they can and will seek out sexual information online.

In addition, this article provides detailed discussion of the interviewees' motivations for viewing sexually explicit material (SEM) online, the range of their experience in viewing such material, and their opinions of the content they encountered. Consideration of this information developed in the interview process can provide valuable insights into both the development of appropriate sexual education curricula, as well as providing strategies for parents and other adults to use when speaking with adolescents about sexuality. Among these insights, one stands out as of critical importance. Online sexual content should be addressed in sexual education programs.

Background

Before widespread access to the Internet, adolescents potentially had a limited range of sources for gaining information about sexuality. These included relatively extensive formal sexual education in public schools (Irvine 2004; Moran 2000) and may have also included discussions with a parent, trusted adult, or older sibling, books or magazines that included sexuality information (Gebhard 1977), or, more recently, videotapes or DVDs with SEM. However, for the last decade or so, the number of young people who have also been able to access sexual information and content on the Internet has significantly increased. While the Internet had been available for some year's prior, home access to high-speed Internet among adolescents in the USA was virtually nonexistent in 1999 and increased from 31 % in 2004 to 59 % in 2009 (KFF 2010). Contemporaneously, there was a significant increase in readily available SEM, facilitated by the advent of sexually explicit equivalents to YouTube (e.g., YouPorn) that are free and do not require age verification by use of credit card, as well as search engines such as Google. This is a historic shift in the availability of such material to adolescents.

In contrast, the extent of sexual information available to adolescents in public schools was significantly limited during this same period. The administration of George H. W. Bush supported by a Republican-controlled Congress and a reinvigorated effort by the Christian Right, accomplished widespread implementation of abstinence-only sexual education in public schools (Mauro and Joffe 2009; Fields 2008; Luker 2006). In order to receive federal funding, sexual education in public schools could only cover a limited range of topics. The topics permitted included emphasizing that abstinence is the only effective means of preventing pregnancy or contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), as well as promoting marriage between a man and a woman as the ideal and only acceptable relationship. More recently, under the Obama administration, there has been a move back toward a more comprehensive curriculum (Jayson 2009; Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) 2010).

Adolescents' Access to Sexual Information

Child and adolescent access to sexual information is a controversial issue and one that is used as a proxy for broader cultural debates about sexuality and normative behavior in general (Irvine 2004). Both sexual education and access to SEM derive from the underlying disagreements about youth access to sexual information.

Luker (2006) asserts that "sexual liberals" view access to sexual information as necessarily beneficial and empowering, asserting that it enables people to make informed and responsible choices. In contrast "sexual conservatives" view sexuality as something that people need only learn about through the "natural" experience of engaging in sexual activities after getting married. They argue that learning about sexuality creates new possibilities to participate in undesirable sexual activities or explore unacceptable aspects of sexuality. Thus, sexual information is viewed as corruptive, especially for young people. In terms of sexual education, for sexual conservatives, providing adolescents with sexual information encourages unacceptable sexual activity and behavior. For sexual liberals, providing adolescents with sexual information allows for more responsible decision making. These competing perspectives on sexuality have informed debates about sexual education for decades.

The Internet and Sexual Education

Since the widespread implementation of abstinence-only curricula, researchers have documented numerous problems that were correlated with this limited content. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2010), and an internal assessment conducted by the US Department of Health and Human Services, found that abstinence-only curricula did not result in positive outcomes for common measures of sexual health among adolescents in the USA (Trenholm et al. 2007). Those measures of sexual health included the rates of participation in sexual behaviors, age at first intercourse, rates of unprotected sex, knowledge of unprotected sex risks, the

consequences of STIs, and the perceived effectiveness of condoms and birth control pills. Furthermore, these effects are unequally distributed across lines of race, socioeconomic status, and sexuality such that disadvantaged populations are relatively more negatively impacted (Fields 2005, 2008; Garcia 2009; Irvine 2004). These analyses have made it apparent that new, more effective means of presenting sexual information to adolescents are needed.

While adolescents continue to rely primarily on friends for information about sexuality, the Internet increasingly plays a role in this area of their lives (Jones and Biddlecom 2011). This makes it an appealing source to utilize for providing sexual information to adolescents.

With increased support for comprehensive sexual education, researchers have begun to explore incorporating the Internet and other new media into sexual education curricula (Gilliam et al. 2011). As one example, Levine (2011) presented an overview of technologies and online resources that are currently used in sexual education and made suggestions how these might be more widely used.

Using the Internet to provide information related to other health and behavior issues, such as alcohol consumption, has proven to be effective, especially for topics where privacy or anonymity are desirable (Hanauer et al. 2004; Kypri et al. 2004). Web-based information and intervention may be effective in increasing accurate knowledge of sexually transmitted infections (Doherty and Low 2008); however, the effectiveness may be mediated by other factors such as moral values (Hilpert et al. 2012). This research indicates there is a significant potential for using the Internet to provide effective sexual information to young people, but that doing so should be done carefully. Inasmuch as the research described herein reports on adolescents' experiences with online sexual content, it should prove useful for more effectively determining how to incorporate online content into sexual education.

In this regard, it must be noted that early efforts to implement more comprehensive changes to sexual education have already sparked backlash among parents and community leaders. For example, proposed changes to the sexual education curriculum in New York City Public Schools were met with resistance from parents and community figures (Hibbard 2011). Opponents to the changes argued that the proposed curriculum, which included specific references to Columbia's Website devoted to adolescent sexual health information (www.goaskalice.columbia.com), would encourage bestiality and promote homosexuality.

For those interested in use of online content in sexual education, the research on moral panics related to adolescent sexuality (Herdt 2009) as well as adult discomfort with adolescent technology use (Osgerby 2004; Pascoe 2011) will also be helpful for understanding opposition to these changes.

As in the recent case with New York City Public Schools, the competing perspectives of "sexual conservatives" and "sexual liberals" regarding sexual information continue to inform our understanding of the debates over sexual education. As would be expected, sexual conservatives are critical of including online content arguing that this information will encourage sexual behavior and increased tolerance of "deviant" sexuality. In contrast, sexual liberals argue that including online sexual information will help adolescents to make informed and responsible decisions (Levine 2011). Considering this fundamental divide when developing sexual education curricula that includes online content and new media may help accomplish changes that are more effective and that move beyond simply rehashing long established debates. It is clear that simply substituting sexual information from the Internet for more traditional sources will not resolve or avoid these underlying disagreements. However, with the Internet and new media technologies, there are novel possibilities for developing a more broadly accepted curriculum. The perceptions of the interviewees presented in this research should prove useful in formulating such curricula.

Adolescents Viewing SEM Online

Beyond the issues described above related to the mere providing of sexual information to adolescents, there are multiple and more controversial issues surrounding adolescents having access to explicit sexual materials online.

In the USA, SEM has endured as a primary object of scrutiny into notions of corrupted sexuality (Dworkin 1987; MacKinnon 1990; Jensen 1995, 2007; Paul 2006; Simmons et al. 2008). SEM has also been repeatedly investigated as a causal variable for aggression in psychological research. Malamuth et al. (2000) completed a meta-analysis of research between aggression and viewing pornography, concluding there is evidence of a correlation between frequent viewing and sexually aggressive behavior. More recently, Hald et al. (2010) derived a similar conclusion, from a meta-analysis of nonexperimental studies, that there was "a significant overall relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes supporting violence against women" (p. 18). In both cases, the correlation was found to be particularly likely for men who score high on other indicators for sexual aggression and that individual differences were significant moderators of these correlations. Furthermore, the type of pornography viewed, violent or not, was also significant. Other researchers have not found these relationships or inconclusive results (Fukui and Westmore 1994). It is also worth noting that the research included in these meta-analyses was designed to investigate only negative impacts of viewing SEM. Furthermore, this research does not specifically address adolescents.

Several factors contribute to this omission. There are difficulties researching adolescent sexuality generally. These difficulties include suspicion of research motives and accusations of promoting youth sexual activity (Levine 2002). Also, there are problems researching SEM generally, including the often-negative and polarized reactions to the topic by both the general public and other academics (Epstein 2006; Lehman 2006; Wicke 2004). There are also legal issues related to studying SEM that may be of questionable legality (Jones and Mowlabocus 2009). These concerns are only intensified when conducting research with young people and SEM.

There is some literature relative to this issue in countries other than the USA. Among Dutch adolescents, studies have shown a correlation between gender, sexual orientation, as well as personality traits such as high-sensation seeking and viewing SEM online (Peter and Valkenburg 2006, 2009). Additional research on Dutch adolescents has shown that viewing SEM online is moderately correlated with beliefs that women are sex objects (Peter and Valkenburg 2007) and that the increased perceived realism of online SEM is correlated with more instrumental attitudes toward sex as well as a heightened belief that SEM is useful for sexual experiences (Peter and Valkenburg 2010). As a result of viewing SEM online, Danish adolescents described significantly more positive than negative effects across measures such as sex life, feelings about life in general, and perceptions of the opposite gender (Hald and Malamuth 2008). Among Croatian teenagers, no association was found between early exposure to SEM and high sexual compulsivity (Štulhofer et al. 2008).

Studies have shown that a significant percentage of adolescents in the USA encounter SEM on the Internet, some voluntarily and some unintentionally (Braun-Corville and Rojas 2009; Wolak et al. 2007). Carroll et al. (2008) found that in the USA, "pornography is a prominent feature of the current emerging adulthood culture" (p. 23). However, limited research has been completed in the USA concerning what effects, if any, there are on adolescents who view SEM online. Of the existing studies, several have highlighted that significant gaps exist in the literature on adolescents' viewing of SEM (see Carroll et al. 2008 for discussion) and have stated that more research is needed. A primary issue is that most research has been conducted with adults, college students, and clinical populations (Brown and L'Engle 2009), rather than with adolescents. Furthermore, many of these studies rely on data gathered in 2005 or prior (Wolak et al. 2007; Ybarra and Mitchell 2005), before significant expansion of high-speed home Internet access for adolescents (KFF 2010) and the availability of Websites such as YouPorn.

Among adolescents in the USA, consumption of mass media with sexual content has been found to influence the age and likelihood that adolescents will engage in sexual intercourse (Brown et al. 2006) and participation in other sexual behaviors (L'Engle et al. 2006). A meta-analysis of research on media consumption and adolescent sexual behaviors and attitudes also noted the lack of available research, especially research on media other than television (Escobar-Chaves et al. 2005). However, none of these studies include SEM, as part of the analysis. Acceptance and usage of SEM has been shown to influence adolescents' sexual beliefs and behaviors, sometimes in problematic ways, such as being correlated with less progressive gender role attitudes and sexual harassment (Brown and L'Engle 2009), as well as risky sexual behaviors (Carroll et al. 2008).

Considered in its entirety, the existing research indicates that media consumption generally, and viewing of SEM specifically, influences adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors. However, a consensus has not emerged as to the effects, and not enough research has been completed to address the impact of cultural differences. For example, there are clear and significant differences in how the USA and the Netherlands treat adolescents and sexuality (Schalet 2011). This limits the application of research conducted in other countries to adolescents in the USA. Lastly, almost all of the work on adolescents' viewing of SEM has been quantitative. Qualitative research is also important to consider in evaluating the relationship between social policy and individuals' experiences of sexuality (Frost and de Vries 2011).

The research presented here offers analysis of qualitative interview data with young adults who matured during the mid- to late 2000s, regarding their remembered motivations for viewing SEM online, and their descriptions of the SEM they viewed. Most participants in this research did encounter SEM content online as adolescents. Participants described a variety of reasons for viewing sexually explicit content and a wide range of experiences viewing it. Based on this and prior research, SEM is an important component of adolescent sexuality. Drawing upon my findings, I present issues to consider for possibly addressing SEM in formal sexual education programs.

Methods

Sample and Recruitment

For this research, semi-structured in-depth interviews ($n = 51$) were completed with young adults about where and how they learned about sexuality. The interviews were designed to elicit retrospective narratives concerning access to sexuality information and sexual development during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

Twelve men and 39 women participated in the research project as interviewees. Most participants were white

college students, from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, and self-identified as heterosexual.

At the time of the interviews, the average age of the participants was 21.0 for the women and 23.1 years of age for the men. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 years old with an overall average age of 22. Interviews were completed during 2010 and the first 3 months of 2011. Hence, given the age range of the sample and the timeframe when interviews were conducted, most data address adolescent experiences during the middle years from 2000 to 2010.

Forty-one of the participants self-identified as white, two as both white and Jewish, two as Hispanic, one as black, one as Asian, one as Native American, and three identified as multiracial. At the time of the project, 39 of the participants were enrolled at a university, eight had completed college degrees, two were enrolled in graduate programs, one had completed an advanced degree, and one had completed a high school equivalency program. As to their family's socioeconomic status during their youth, one participant identified his/her family as upper class, 21 as upper-middle class, 22 as middle class, two as lower-middle class, four as working class, and one as lower class.

The university's review board that oversees research on human subjects specified that only adults 18 years or older could be interviewed. Complying with that requirement, the author interviewed anyone over that age who was willing to discuss his or her history of learning about sexuality as an adolescent.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject, a number of factors, as discussed below, impinged upon obtaining participants. Accordingly, it must be recognized that this is a convenience sample and the demographics of the participants do not correspond to that of the USA. Hence, the results are neither representative of, nor generalizable to, a larger population.

Participants were recruited largely from undergraduate university classes. Recruitment was focused in classes that included sexuality and gender as central topics. The reasoning was that students in gender and sexuality courses would likely be more willing to participate in an interview on similar topics. However, students were not required to participate in the study or any other research project as part of their grade. Participants were also recruited from the author's personal networks of friends and acquaintances as well as through word of mouth from other participants. Individuals who had previously been students of the author in classes on sexuality or gender were also recruited to participate. This proved to be a productive option as several former students participated in interviews.

During recruitment, it was stressed to participants that judgment or evaluation of their sexual experiences was not a component of the research. This was in order to attempt to combat social desirability bias (Lofland et al. 2006) and encourage participation. Also, the interview schedule was crafted so that questions did not imply judgment or sex negativity. This was also true of researcher prompts and comments made during interviews.

Snowball sampling is useful precisely when the topic is controversial or potentially stigmatizing (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Having someone who had participated in the interview vouch for the interviewer's integrity, or describe the interview experience, is helpful for reassuring hesitant participants. Six participants were recruited through snowball sampling; other interviewees offered them information about the research project and they subsequently volunteered.

As the issue of sexuality is a particularly sensitive topic in US culture, these participants were likely more willing to discuss the topic than the general population. Accordingly, this sample of interviewees likely exhibits "volunteer bias"—an issue that has been of concern for sexuality research in the past (Weiderman 2001).

There was considerable difficulty getting men to participate in this research. This has previously been an issue for men researchers, specifically when recruiting research participants (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004, p. 112).

Only three of the 12 men that participated in this research were neither former students nor from informal social networks. Two of these three had been encouraged to participate by women who had themselves participated in a research interview. Only one man volunteered to participate of his own volition without some other social connection to either the researcher or another research participant. One possible reason for this male reluctance is that men are less comfortable or more distrustful about discussing their sexuality with a man researcher.

Given the broader range of women that participated in this research, the results obtained here are more indicative of women's experiences. However, based on the data produced from the men that did participate, and the results of other research showing that men are more likely to be frequent viewers of SEM online (Brown and L'Engle 2009), it is apparent that more research regarding their experiences should be conducted.

Data Analysis

For a variety of reasons, including maintenance of confidentiality and consistency of analysis, the author personally conducted and transcribed every interview. Interviews were audio recorded with the consent of participants. Interviews lasted between approximately 45 min and 2 h, with most being about an hour long.

Coding and analysis of the data proceeded in an iterative process, both during and after completing data collection

(Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 239). After an initial group of 12 interviews had been completed and transcribed, an initial analysis of the data was conducted. Printed interview transcriptions were reviewed line-by-line and initial coding and memoing (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Charmaz 2006) was completed by hand. A review of the memos led to the production of a comprehensive list of codes that was itself revised throughout subsequent iterations of data analysis.

Throughout the rest of the research process, completion of several additional interviews would be followed by their transcription and review, resulting in the production of additional memos and revised codes (Lofland et al. 2006). The memos noted topics in the data and also included brainstorms and ideas about relationships between codes and memos (Charmaz 2006). Similarities among memos were used to develop codes. Possible exceptions to codes in the data were also noted, particularly with regard to the final 12 interviews. A master list of codes was kept separately near the transcribed interview, and each transcription was annotated with these codes where relevant. Codes were consistently re-analyzed to assure accuracy and to make any needed refinement.

The next stage of analysis involved "focused coding" (Charmaz 2006, p. 57). Upon the completion of each new group of interviews, all of the existing interview transcriptions were re-read. This helped to insure familiarity with the data thus far obtained and facilitated comparison of memos and codes across groups of interviews. This involved "using the most significant and/or frequent codes to sift through large amounts of data" (Charmaz 2006, p. 57), specifically to evaluate and, if necessary, refine those codes. Also during focused coding, initial codes were grouped into larger analytical categories and themes.

Once the process of focused coding began, new (not annotated) versions of all interviews were printed. Then, a revised master list of themes and categories was created. The new unmarked paper copies of transcribed interviews were coded based on these new categories. Upon completion of focused coding, all the material with the same codes was put together (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p. 240). This material was then reviewed to recognize patterns or themes in the data.

Upon being identified, these initial themes were grouped into three overarching categories of sources of sexual information, namely: interpersonal sources, traditional media sources, and the Internet. Transcripts were then revisited to consider any larger patterns that had emerged relative to how participants discussed these different categories of sources and to compare the attribution of significance to the different categories of sources. Furthermore, during this revisit to the transcriptions, consideration was given to variations in discussion within the categories by gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class background.

This iterative process continued, including "initial coding" of each transcript for new interviews (Charmaz 2006, p. 47), until 39 interviews were complete. At that point, additional interviews were undertaken for purposes of accomplishing "data saturation" (Charmaz 2006, p. 520). The final 12 interviews were analyzed with established codes and themes in mind. Data that countered or challenged earlier ideas were noted and considered to see if such data could be designated as anomalies or whether existing codes should be revised.

After 51 interviews, it was determined that data saturation had been achieved for the themes and topics that emerged as most salient to the research questions. After all interviews were completed and transcribed, a final list of analytical categories was produced and used for data analysis. In this way, the data analysis progressed in an iterative process of refining, modifying, and reworking analytical categories (Charmaz 2006).

Results

Types of Sexual Content

Participants reported seeking out two types of sexual content online. The first of these was *sexual health information*. The topics sought primarily included information about sexual anatomy, STIs, and to a lesser extent contraception. This information was typically text based with images and video occasionally identified. Second, participants described seeking out SEM. This article reports the findings of this research regarding the experience of participants with SEM, especially as adolescents. Sexual health information is discussed only as it is related to participants encountering SEM.

Younger participants, and participants with earlier Internet access because of family or class background, were more likely to describe the Internet playing a significant role in their learning about sexuality. Participants who had limited sources of sexual information, including parents who would not discuss sexual topics and those with minimal formal sexual education, used the Internet as a resource.

Viewing SEM Online as Adolescents

Participants described a considerable range of experience with viewing SEM online. The majority ($n=37$) of participants reported having viewed SEM online as adolescents with at least some regularity (*Regular viewers*). A minority ($n=14$) described either actively and successfully avoiding SEM online or encountering it only a very few times

(*Minimal viewers*). These two groups responded to their online experience with SEM in noticeably different ways.

Among the regular viewing majority, two women and five men reported first viewing SEM on videotape or DVD and later accessing such content online. The greater percentage of men may be due to the older average age of men in the sample (23.1 versus 21 years old). The younger men participants all described initially accessing SEM online. These data are indicative of how rapidly accessibility of SEM online was shifting during the participants' adolescence.

Minimal viewers described viewing SEM for short durations, several minutes or less, and only a few occasions. There were both men (*n*=2) and women (*n*=12) among this group. Within these participants, there was a clear division between those that reported never *intentionally* seeking out SEM and those that did. Of these 14 participants, six did not intentionally seek it out. Participants that did not seek out SEM online encountered it either accidentally or as a result of a friend or peer unexpectedly exposing them to such content.

Minimal viewers reported that with some effort they were able to avoid encountering SEM online. These participants reported *having to* consciously avoid this content. Typically, this required steps, such as not following certain links, leaving a website, or closing a pop-up window. For example, Katie, a 22-year-old woman discussed researching pregnancy and STIs online. When asked if she encountered SEM during this process, she replied,

> Oh you would run into [SEM]. But it wasn't, I was like, that's not what I'm looking for, and exit out. Because I wanted to know the bad things. I didn't want to see people that are enjoying having sex before I knew what the consequences were.

Katie's comment is representative of others in that she recalled coming across SEM while looking for sexual health information and then having to avoid this content.

Regular viewers described watching SEM with some regularity during adolescence. The extent of SEM viewership during adolescence ranged from a few intermittent viewing instances, to consistent viewing, and up to almost daily viewing. Regular viewers who at times did not view SEM reported that they refrained because of changes in a relationship status or temporary lack of access, not because of personal motivations to stop viewing. Regular viewers were often critical of SEM but still viewed this content at least intermittently throughout adolescence.

Ten men (*n*=10) and 27 women (*n*=27) regularly viewed SEM online as adolescents. Men in this sample were more likely to report viewing SEM more often and over a longer period of time. These findings are consistent with past research (Laumann et al. 1994; Carroll et al. 2008; Brown and L'Engle 2009). The number of women in the regular viewing group is significant. However, it should be noted that a number of these women almost exclusively watched SEM with sexual partners or as part of a group.

Motivations for Not Viewing SEM Motivations of minimal viewers for *not* viewing SEM included adherence to religious precepts against SEM, a general dislike of the idea of SEM, a general lack of interest in SEM, and, in a very few cases, being unaware of the availability of SEM online. Among those participants who were aware of the availability of SEM online, it was not lack of access that prevented them from viewing it. With only one exception, all participants reported being able to circumvent limitations to accessing SEM that had been imposed by parents or schools, such as content filters or monitoring computer usage.

Eight of the 14 participants who minimally viewed SEM online deliberately sought it out, but subsequently refrained from further viewing. These participants described their motivation for this course of action as either being personal curiosity about SEM, curiosity about sex, or as resulting from interactions with friends and peers. Curiosity about SEM was most often in response to having heard the term "pornography" mentioned elsewhere. Participants had heard "pornography" or "porn" referenced in mainstream media, by friends, or by older siblings. For example, Oliver, a 22-year-old man, described his motivation when first searching for SEM online,

> I was trying to figure out what the big deal about pornography was. There was some news story about something related to porn. So I had an Internet connection. I went and looked it up. And I was like, "Oh. That's why [it's a big deal]."

Oliver's experience was similar to other minimal viewers who heard the term "pornography" elsewhere and then went online to find out about it. No participants mentioned turning to any sources other than the Internet, such as asking friends, parents, or siblings, in response to hearing about "pornography."

Some minimal viewers also described the SEM they viewed as distasteful or unappealing. Once their curiosity was satisfied they did not view SEM again. The experience and motivations of Dennis, a 20-year-old man, was typical of these participants:

> I ended up in seventh or eighth grade, I masturbated twice and I looked at porn a few times. … Me and my neighbor, we decided we were going to look at porn and we decided we were going to do it together, so we both felt less guilty. So three or four times we looked at porn on the Internet.

Dennis had since refrained from viewing SEM and from masturbation. He stated this was motivated by his religious

beliefs, as well as his concerns that women who appeared in SEM were exploited or abused. This was common among several minimal viewers.

Curiosity about sex generally was also a motivation for participants that sought out but minimally viewed SEM online. For example, Tess, a 21-year-old woman, described seeking out SEM online while in middle school. She was curious about what sex would be like when she felt she was old enough to participate. Tess described her experience as follows:

> It was back, I would say, in middle school. I was curious about what sex was and things like, that so I just got on the computer and kind of typed it in. And I remember stumbling across a porn site and just watching it … I didn't know whether to be terrified or intrigued or, it was just interesting to me. … It was just maybe a little phase or something where I was intrigued by it and then I think I started feeling bad or guilty for doing it. So I was like, well okay, now I know. That's enough.

Tess viewed such content one time alone and another time with a friend. After these experiences, she refrained from further viewing SEM.

The experience of Tess was typical of participants that minimally viewed SEM online, particularly those motivated by a curiosity about sexual activities. These participants refrained from continuing to view SEM because their curiosity was satisfied, they began to feel guilty about viewing SEM sometimes because of religious beliefs, or they found the content itself unappealing.

When participants were searching for sexual health information, they described either seeing that SEM was available or seeing it directly. This was particularly the case for participants who were unaware of specific websites for sexual health information. Typically, as participants used search engines for sexual health content, SEM would also appear in search results. While minimal viewers typically remained focused on sexual health information, other participants explored the available SEM that they found.

Motivations for Viewing SEM Regular viewers sought out SEM for four primary reasons: first, participants described wanting to see a video example of sexual behavior to learn about it; second, participants viewed SEM with a sexual partner; third, participants watched SEM individually for sexual arousal; and fourth, participants were part of a group that viewed SEM at social gatherings such as a party. These motivations often overlapped. There were also clear gender differences among regular viewers as to their motivations for viewing SEM.

First, as with minimal viewers, regular viewers of SEM online reported seeking out this content as a way to learn

about sex. This included referencing SEM for sexual ideas or as a way to explore new sexual activities without the risk of trying them personally. In comparison to minimal viewers, regular viewers were more likely to describe a specific desire to see examples of particular sexual behaviors, rather than just wanting to find out about "pornography." Regular viewers most often heard a sexual behavior mentioned elsewhere and sought out an example in response.

Participants described risking considerable social embarrassment if they were to ask others about sexual behaviors because their peer group stigmatized anyone who seemed to be ignorant about sex. Thus, online SEM offered participants the opportunity to learn more about these topics without risking embarrassment or loss of status. For example, Mallory described viewing SEM when she was about 12 years old:

> Me and [my friend Jill] and my sister used to look up YouPorn and videos of blowjobs because we didn't know what they really were. And Jill had a boyfriend so she wanted to learn how to do it, so she went off of the Internet. We looked up sex, gay sex, what is a boner, stuff like that.

This curiosity about sexual terms was typical of the descriptions of other participants who viewed SEM online in order to learn about sexual behaviors.

Second, participants viewed SEM during adolescence with a sexual or romantic partner and meant the experience to be arousing or as exploratory of mutual potential sexual behaviors. Only men were reported as being the sexual partner who initiated viewing SEM in this context. While none of the women were initiators of this behavior, many reported either indifference or a positive result from the mutual viewing experience. However, this typically did not compel these women to more frequently view SEM alone, or to initiate viewing SEM with subsequent sexual partners. Women were more likely to have viewed SEM only while in a relationship, while men were more likely to have viewed SEM only while not in a regular sexual relationship.

The third primary motivation for viewing SEM among regular viewers was individual sexual arousal. The university institutional review board specifically prohibited asking directly about using SEM as a masturbatory aid; however, some regular viewers, both men and women, reported doing so in response to other questions. Participants who described viewing SEM more frequently and regularly were more likely to indicate masturbation as a motivation. For example, when asked about her viewing of SEM, Juliette, a 19-year-old woman, answered:

> Once I felt like I kind of knew the basics [of anatomy] then I was just like this is fun anyway. You know it got

me turned on and stuff so. … I think when I first started looking it [SEM] up, it was for information, I started using the pictures even for pleasure and masturbating and stuff. And then I got into the videos for kind of the same informational purposes and then going from there again into pleasure …

Juliette's comment reflects the descriptions of other participants who indicated they *initially* viewed SEM as a source of information about sexuality. Furthermore, Juliette's experience, as well as others like her, is particularly important because seeking out sexual health information led to viewing SEM for other reasons.

The fourth motivation for regular viewers arose as a result of their being part of a social group that viewed SEM online. Women in this category had primarily viewed SEM in same gender groups. While men reported viewing SEM with one other male friend, or having particular SEM recommended by other male friends, none mentioned viewing it in groups of only men. Women who viewed SEM in mixed-gender social settings typically did so in later adolescence or early adulthood. This occurred at ages ranging from 14 to 20 years old. Participants who viewed SEM in mixed-gender groups typically reported its purpose as being for entertainment or as a source of humor. For example, Abby, a 20-year-old Hispanic woman, described watching SEM with friends in high school:

It became tradition, if my group of friends, after a party we would always go sleep at my friend Jimmy's house. Jimmy was my best friend's boyfriend and so it would just be a large group of friends. And he loved to watch porn. So we started watching porn when we were like 17, 16. Just for fun. We wouldn't take, I mean maybe some people would take it serious, but we would always make fun of it and be like, "That's crazy!"

Abby's perspective was common among regular viewers that viewed SEM in mixed-gender groups. In these instances, participants reported that the expectation was to be either blasé about the content or to find it humorous. The viewing of SEM in mixed-gender social settings was guided by a social script distinct from those situations where groups comprised only of women viewed SEM. Although SEM is often viewed for sexual arousal (Laumann et al. 1994, p. 135), and it is popularly assumed that arousal is the primary motivation for viewing it, participants viewed such content in mixed-gender groups for its novelty and humorous value. Participants were clear that in these circumstances SEM was not meant to be sexually arousing, rather the content was actively de-sexualized.

Women participants who viewed SEM in social settings with only other women did so on average at younger ages than those who viewed SEM in mixed-gender groups. Groups of only women typically started viewing SEM between the ages of 10 and 14, and the occasion was often a "sleepover." Sleepovers offered more time and privacy for viewing SEM online. When viewing in groups that were only women, curiosity about sexual behaviors was a motivation. This excitement of looking at forbidden content was also a motivation. These women were clear that it was particularly taboo for them, as girls, to view this content and so it was exciting to do so.

Responses to Viewing SEM as Adolescents

In the USA, it is often assumed that adolescents' viewing of SEM will have negative impacts. However, Danish adolescents were more likely to report positive than negative effects of viewing SEM (Hald and Malamuth 2008). Similarly, the respondents in this research expressed a variety of reactions, both positive and negative, to their having viewed SEM as adolescents. Positive assessments of SEM included that it portrayed a more realistic range of people and bodies than mainstream sexual content and that it provided a safe means of exploring and learning about sexuality. Negative assessments included encountering unappealing or upsetting content and feeling that SEM portrayed unrealistic sexual behaviors.

Positive Assessments of Viewing SEM Online Regular viewers of SEM, especially women, reported that *some* SEM provided a realistic and accurate representation of bodies and sexual activities. Sophie, a 22-year-old woman, discussed her preferences regarding SEM:

Amateur porn[ography] does a surprisingly good job of varying everything and so I never felt intimidated or bad about myself while watching it. I found that, in some ways looking at Seventeen magazine and stuff like that hurt me more because it was showing me the same girls over and over again. It was showing me the same way to look. … And all that was more: you are supposed to look this way and this is how, these are the only ways that men are going to desire you.

Sophie's comment was representative of others who felt that, in comparison to mass media, the amateur SEM that they viewed included a more diverse range of people in terms of ethnicity, appearance, and sexuality. Sophie also described not considering herself to be attractive at this time in her life. She found the diversity of people in amateur SEM reassuring that she could be thought of as desirable and that, when she was ready, she too would be able to participate in sexual behaviors with other people. For her this contrasted with the message she felt mainstream media

sources conveyed that only those who conformed to culturally dominant ideals of beauty could be sexual.

A number of women viewed SEM from a critical perspective and selectively chose content that suited their interests and motivations for viewing, including for increased perceived realism. In this regard, several women regular viewers specifically mentioned preferring "amateur pornography" because of its "realism." For example, Marion, a 20-year-old white woman, explained:

Some of [the SEM] I watched was normal. I mean I found amateur stuff too. And I actually prefer the amateur stuff because I feel like it is more realistic. … [People in amateur SEM] are putting on an act, but I think it's also even more of a realistic act than porn from the porn industry. They look more real, they act more real.

Both men and women described viewing online SEM positively because it afforded a safe way to learn about sexual topics. However, a clear gender difference arose in how they spoke about doing so. Men were more likely to describe noting new "techniques" or "tricks" they saw in SEM that they felt could be engaged in with a sexual partner while women were more likely to describe SEM as a source of ideas about sexual behaviors generally. For example, Michael, a 29-year-old white man, explained:

You know I think what really expanded my options as far as sex education goes are porn videos. I learned how to give a woman cunnilingus by watching lesbians do it. They were probably the single best teachers. Because women know what women like. I've also coached my girlfriend to give me a better blowjob by watching porn of a great girl giving great head. So, yes, it has progressed. You know you learn new things. You learn new tricks. You implement those tricks.

Michael's comments were indicative of how men referenced SEM as helpful for learning specific behaviors that they felt would improve their sexual abilities. In contrast, only one woman respondent ever mentioned garnering a "technique" or "trick" from SEM.

Women spoke of viewing SEM as a way to consider sexual behaviors more generally. For example, Emily, a 20-year-old woman, described viewing SEM as a safe way to explore sexual options,

"… I guess the way I look at porn now is like it's something you can watch and then be like, 'Oh that looks awesome or that looks really uncomfortable. It's something you can use as a learning tool."

Emily's comments are representative of other women who described viewing SEM as either inspiration for, or a chance to evaluate, sexual behaviors without engaging in them.

Both women and men who regularly viewed SEM online reported deliberately carrying something from SEM into their sexual interactions. Participants reported both successes and failures with the activities or positions they tried that were inspired by sexually explicit content. Given that much online SEM presents an illusion of fluidity and masks preparatory steps and other aspects of sexual experiences, this is hardly a surprise. Regardless, participants described having this option positively.

Negative Assessments of Viewing SEM Online With regard to negative assessments of viewing SEM, a few participants reported having seen SEM that they described as upsetting or distressing. Women were more likely to discuss having seen content they found upsetting. When asked about problematic or upsetting content, men typically discussed "shock videos" rather than material that was intended to sexually arouse the viewer.

Participants mentioned encountering two categories of upsetting SEM online. First, participants described SEM in which they perceived the woman or women depicted as not clearly enjoying the activity, including depiction of behaviors interpreted as nonconsensual (such as rape fantasy porn) to be problematic. Second, participants specifically reported "shock videos" as problematic. "Shock videos" were not discussed in ways that suggested they were meant to sexually arouse viewers; however, participants understood these as counting as sexual content. One particularly notorious online video depicting two nude women ostensibly consuming human vomit and feces was mentioned specifically by several participants.

Women expressed much more intense revulsion to shock videos than men. Men were typically dismissive of their own reactions to the content of shock videos as temporary and only superficially problematic.

Participants also negatively evaluated their having viewed SEM because they felt it was unrealistic in a number of ways. Because they saw SEM as unrealistic, they asserted that this imparted to viewers, particularly to young people, unrealistic expectations for sexual behaviors.

Women who identified as heterosexual often voiced criticism as to the unrealistic appearance of porn stars, the unlikelihood of the scenarios in SEM that led to sex, and the unrealistic sexual behavior of the women in SEM. For example, Rita, a 20-year-old woman, described her assessment of the SEM she had viewed,

"… the [SEM] that I've watched is kind of ridiculous. The female, how she acts and what she's doing, and half the time you don't even see the guys face. So I'd almost be like pissed if that is how it turned out just

because the woman is doing *everything* that the guy wants to do, and I'm definitely not like that at all."

Rita's comments are indicative of women who were critical of the sexual behaviors that were depicted in much of the SEM they encountered. Several women participants, although stating they personally did not experience this, went on to describe that they felt dismayed at the prospect that other women might expect sexual experiences to be similar to the content of SEM.

The eight women participants who identified as other than heterosexual were also critical of SEM in these ways but were more likely to state an overall and fundamental criticism of the content of SEM as unrealistic, without relevance to them, and primarily the purview of men. For example, Betsy, a 20-year-old woman who identified as lesbian, regularly viewed SEM and was specifically critical of SEM that depicted encounters involving two women:

> So I came across it but it did not register as gay to me. It registered as two straight girls doing gay people things for straight people. You know, so that's not, it never affected me in a legitimate pornographic way, this isn't real porn, this is for the show, this is just a circus.

Betsy described a fundamental disconnect between her sexual self-awareness and identification as a lesbian and the sexual interactions between two women in the SEM she viewed online, which she described as "entirely heterosexual." Other participants that identified as lesbians described a similarly profound disconnect between pornographic content and their own sexual interests.

Discussion

Overall, the men and women in this research spoke about viewing SEM online as a common aspect of adolescent life. Common motivations for seeking out online SEM to view included curiosity about sexual behaviors, curiosity about SEM itself, often piqued by references to such content in mainstream media, and incomplete information provided elsewhere, including from formal sexual education. Altogether this research suggests that, over the past decade, young people have begun, with some regularity, to use the Internet as a source of both *sexual health information* and for viewing SEM online. Furthermore, it indicates that some adolescents consult online SEM as a reference for understanding sexuality. This content is then influencing their understanding of sexuality and is being incorporated into their sexual interactions in various ways.

There is still intense and widespread concern in the USA about anyone under the age of 18 viewing SEM (Tarrant 2010). Assertions that SEM is necessarily a negative and

corrupting influence, especially for adolescents, are common in journalistic and academic accounts (Dines 2010; Jensen 2007; Paul 2006; to name a few). As a result, increased access to the Internet by adolescents has often been cast as a cause for alarm and regulation, with such views often being driven by concerns about child pornography and sexual predators. In contrast, this research indicates that the Internet can, indeed, be problematic for young people, but it can also be a helpful and beneficial resource for them.

A number of participants encountered SEM and other content online that they found to be upsetting. In addition, both men and women described the unrealistic portrayal of sexual interactions and bodies in SEM as problematic in that it often led to unrealistic expectations. Consistent with other research (Peter and Valkenburg 2010), participants' ability to critique the perceived realism of the SEM they viewed played an important role in how they assessed that content. Both men and women referred to SEM for information about sexual behaviors and interactions. The self-assessment of many participants was that this was a positive experience because it provided more information than they had otherwise and was thus reassuring. However, particularly given the results of other research that correlate viewing SEM with problematic sexual attitudes, the templates for sexual behaviors provided by SEM may have longer-term negative impacts that this research was not able to address.

A significant number of participants, both men and women, believed that men are responsible for women's sexual pleasure. Men described this expectation as producing a considerable amount of anxiety and stress. Interestingly, while men understand this to be their responsibility, many men saw few options for learning how to meet this expectation other than by viewing SEM. Therefore, these adolescent men referenced SEM for guidance in how to engage in sexual behaviors with women.

Men were less likely to discuss SEM critically in comparison to women. And, in the USA men are typically expected to initiate and direct sexual encounters (England et al. 2007; Zilbergeld 1992). While women felt SEM was a safe option for exploring sexual behaviors, this did not necessarily translate to their ability to voice their desires during sexual interactions. This raises the question as to the impact of online SEM viewing on all adolescents who have sexual experiences with young men. Furthermore, men also referenced SEM for how to guide women in sexual interactions. While there is a lack of current content analyses of SEM, given journalistic accounts of SEM that found much content heavily emphasizes the pleasure of men (Jensen 2007; Paul 2006) and portrays women primarily in servile roles, this topic in particular should be further researched.

The relatively small number of men in this sample limits the scope of these results. However, if sexual education

programs are to address online SEM, then it will be important to consider adolescent understanding of gender roles in sexual interactions, and especially masculinity norms, when providing adolescent boys with resources for critically viewing SEM.

For those participants who were excluded from other sources of sexual information, by deliberately selecting particular content, they were able to explore sexual behaviors safely and comfortably, find content that was reassuring in that it depicted a wide variety of bodies and people, pleasurably use SEM as a masturbatory aid, and incorporate viewing SEM positively with sexual partners. Many participants viewed sexually explicit content with a critical eye in terms of lack of realism, problematic representation of bodies, and other messages conveyed about sexuality. By the participants' self-assessment, this critical approach was helpful in contextualizing SEM and avoiding negative impacts.

The ability of some participants to assess critically the SEM they viewed online is important to consider when promoting the use of the Internet and new media for adolescents to learn about sexuality. Given the increasing use and importance of the Internet for adolescents learning about sexuality, sexual education should address various aspects of online sexual content, including SEM. For these participants, SEM was neither necessarily harmful nor beneficial, but those with the skills and resources available to approach the content critically were also those most likely to describe these experiences as either positive or not problematic.

The vast majority of participants in this research were from relatively privileged backgrounds in terms of socio-economic status and education. This likely influenced their ability to be critical consumers of information generally and SEM specifically. This was important in shaping their assessments of the SEM they viewed. More research with people from various backgrounds and demographic characteristics would be useful for understanding how young people respond and understand SEM online.

As participants reported learning about sexuality from SEM online, and incorporating what they learned into their lives, this research shows SEM online is influencing the sexual scripts of young people. According to the participants themselves, this influence is either inconsequential or mostly positive. However, participants often made this self-assessment within a context of having few or no other sources in which to compare what they were learning.

As adolescents, many participants in this research had little or no opportunity to freely discuss sexual topics with educators, parents, or even friends. The aspects of sexuality that were commonly presented to participants during adolescence were the dangers of sexual interaction via formal sexual education, the idealized romantic notions of relationships in mainstream films, and the physical mechanics of sexual interaction in SEM. As adolescents, these participants were left to figure out if and how these aspects of sexuality integrate, relate, and inform one another, without the opportunity to discuss these topics with adults.

Those participants with peers with whom they could discuss sexual topics described this as very helpful for navigating adolescent sexual experiences. Such was true even though, in retrospect, many were disappointed in how little they and their peers knew about sex. Participants with a parent, older sibling, or other trusted adult with whom to discuss sexual topics, generally reported a more positive experience of sexuality during adolescence. For others, negotiating sexuality as adolescents was trial by fire as they sorted out the information from competing and incomplete sources. Consequently, if sexual education programs are to be expanded to include more content, this research highlights a number of topics where more knowledge, and especially opportunity for discussion with a trusted adult, would prove to be very helpful for adolescents.

This research supports the assessment by other scholars that there is a paltry amount of research on adolescents and SEM online in the USA, particularly given the existing indications that SEM online plays a significant role in adolescent culture. Further research should be conducted in a number of related areas, including qualitative work that investigates the responses of viewing SEM by adolescents in other demographics, as well as content analyses of SEM that adolescents view. Given the importance of perceived realism in both this and other research (Peter and Valkenburg 2010), and the increased availability of amateur SEM online, further research into how adolescents evaluate and reference various types of SEM to learn about sexuality seems especially warranted.

Those participants who viewed SEM critically were able to guard themselves from potential negative impacts and even benefit from these experiences. Accordingly, it would seem appropriate to provide adolescents both with websites that provide accurate and honest sexual health information, as well as resources and skills for a critical assessment of SEM should they encounter it.

While some participants in this research effectively self-censored the SEM available on the Internet by avoiding content they found to be unappealing, many went to the Internet to find sexual health information and also encountered SEM. Hence, if sexual education programs begin to include where and how to access sexual health information online, then it should also include a discussion of SEM.

This discussion could begin with providing young people with the skills and the means to avoid SEM on the Internet, but it should also provide them with resources for understanding and critically evaluating sexual information, including SEM. An initial list of topics could include information about the production of SEM, discussion of the formulaic and constructedness of interactions in much

SEM, and how SEM is often different from real life inter-actions. In short, we should provide adolescents with the resources to be able to define and explore their own sexuality in a culture where sexually explicit content online is recognized as one of the options for learning about sexuality but is also seen as one that needs to be approached with caution and with a critical eye.

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