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A longitudinal exploration of the relationship between pornography use and sexual permissiveness in female and male adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: There are concerns that pornography use increases adolescents' sexual permissiveness, leading to sexual risk-taking. In contrast to most longitudinal explorations of the relationship between adolescent pornography use and sexual permissiveness, which were carried out in highly liberal and permissive societies, we aimed to re-assess the target relationship in a more traditional, highly religious society.

Methods: Informed by the social learning and selective exposure theoretical underpinnings, we used two independent panels of Croatian female and male adolescents (on average 16 years old) to assess the association over 18 and 24 months. Online surveying was used in the Zagreb (n = 372) and classroom-based surveying in the Rijeka panels (n = 753).

Results: Participants reported relatively low levels of permissiveness, but substantial pornography use—particularly adolescent men. Contrary to earlier studies, we observed no significant paths leading from pornography use to sexual permissiveness. The paths leading from sexual permissiveness to pornography use were significant only among female participants in the Zagreb sample and male participants in the Rijeka sample. However, significant and positive covariances between the two constructs suggested the role of unobserved variables.

Conclusions: In line with the selective exposure hypothesis and the integrative models, this study's findings challenge the notion that pornography use increases sexual permissiveness among adolescents. Although this is reassuring, comprehensive sexuality education and media literacy programs remain important tasks for educational policy in the Information age.

1. Introduction

Culture as a set of guidelines, values, belief systems, knowledge and practices influences individual and group behavior, also in the area of sexuality. All cultures have rules and strategies designed to regulate sexuality by determining which behaviors are acceptable and desirable, and which are not (Agocha Asencio, & Decena, 2014). Sexual permissiveness is assumed to be a single underlying dimension measuring tolerant or liberal sexual attitudes and usually considering attitudes toward premarital sex, teenage sex, extramarital sex, and homosexual sex (Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998). As shown in a cross-national study on attitudes toward nonmarital sex conducted in 24 countries by Widmer et al. (1998), cultural norms that regulate sexuality differ between national and cultural groups. The issue of permissive sexual attitudes has received considerable critical attention being seen as a

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potential risk factor for sexual health. Sexual permissiveness is assumed to be linked with sexual risk behavior as for example having sex with multiple partners is a risk factor for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as multiple contacts increase opportunity for transmission (Slaymaker, 2004). Previous research found associations between sexual permissiveness and multiple sexual partners (Ashenhurst, Wilhite, Harden, & Fromme, 2017; Kan, Cheng, Landale, & McHale, 2010), early sexual debut (Warner, 2018; L'Engle & Jackson, 2008), lower sexual satisfaction (Seehuus & Rellini, 2013), and unwanted sexual experiences (Dempster, Rogers, Pope, Snow, & Stoltz, 2015).

In the age of the Internet, freely available online pornography has become one of the central issues for those responsible for the psychosocial and sexual development of adolescents (Davis, 2012; Dombrowski, Gischlar, & Durst, 2007). A primary concern of parents, teachers and other educators is the impact of the consumption of sexually explicit materials (SEM) on sexual behavior and sexual and reproductive health of young people by influencing their attitudes and beliefs about sexuality. This concern is largely based on the fear that contact with the pornographic depiction of sexuality, which focuses permissive, unprotected sex without emotional engagement and with multiple partners, may lead to internalization of sexually permissive attitudes and result in elevated sexual risk-taking. This idea of social learning is based on the social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which assumes that one's own experience is not a necessity for the learning process. By observing other people—especially the relevant others—one can learn the consequences of an action. The observer develops a positive expectation of success if the model behavior is rewarded, which in turn makes the behavior more likely to be executed. If the observed behavior leads to negative consequences, the opposite is true.

In the context of the media impact, Bandura (2001) pointed out that media are on the one hand a social benchmark and on the other hand a source of social role models. According to this theory, adolescents learn (sexually permissive) attitudes, roles and behaviors that are pervasive in pornography through their own or observed positive outcomes, such as sexual arousal and pleasure. This paradigm is characterized by a media-centered perspective that assumes that stimuli, which are spread via Internet, reach the recipients in a uniform way and achieve identical reactions (Gerbner, 1998; Potter, 2014). An alternative point of view, a more recipient-centered one, assumes that people differ in the perception and processing of media content depending on their individual personal background. The selective exposure hypothesis postulates that media users select contents according to their beliefs, preferences, needs, and expectations (Zillman & Bryant, 1985). The use of media is, therefore, a process of consideration and decision making, the one determined by personal characteristics, expectations, and evaluations. According to this model, adolescents selectively use pornographic material that matches their attitudes, beliefs, and desires. However, this approach is limited to the selection of media content and tends to neglect the diverse aspects of the cognitive and emotional processing of the experienced content.

A critical examination of the existing models has resulted in an integrative approach that takes into account the mutual influence of media impact and media use. Several integrative models have been developed: the Media Practice Model (Steele & Brown, 1995; Brown, 2000, 2002), the Differential Susceptibility Model (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) and the Reinforcing Spirals Model (Slater, 2007). For example, the Reinforcing Spirals model assumes a dynamic, reciprocal relation between the user's choices of particular media content and the effect of this content on the user (Slater, 2007, 2015). The selection and use of media content are affected by individual differences and may influence outcomes like attitudes and related behaviors that in turn may impact media content to which people attend. Based on this model, adolescents' pornography use is shaped by their social context and individual characteristics (like permissive attitudes) and the consumption of pornographic material may impact them and change the future use. However, the spirals typically reinforce and maintain attitudes rather than driving them to an extreme. The users tend to defend their attitudes from challenges by selecting media content confirming their preexisting attitudes.

Data from a number of cross-sectional studies suggest an association between pornography use and sexual permissiveness (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Lo, Neilan, Sun, & Chiang, 1999; Lo & Wei, 2005; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2008; To, Ngai, & Iu Kan, 2012). However, much uncertainty still exists about long-term effects of pornography use on adolescents' sexual permissiveness. To date, relatively few studies have investigated the association longitudinally. A longitudinal study by Peter and Valkenburg (2010) reported that, over time, the use of online pornography predicted sexual permissiveness in adolescents aged 13 to 20 but not vice versa. A more recent report also observed a significant longitudinal association between adolescent SEM use and permissive sexual attitudes (Baams et al., 2015). Similar findings were reported in a U.S. longitudinal study with young adults (95% of the sample was between the ages of 18–25; Leonhardt & Willoughby, 2018). Finally, a longitudinal study by Doornwaard, Bickham, Rich, ter Bogt, and van den Eijnden (2015) found the relationship in Dutch adolescents (mean age in the sample was 14 years) gender-specific—reaching significance among adolescent men but not women. The lack of significant relationship between sexually explicit material use and sexual permissiveness among adolescent women and a significant association among adolescent men were also reported in an older study by Brown and L'Engle (2009) that sampled adolescents who were, on average, 13.6 years of age at baseline. Generally, previous pornography research observed substantial gender differences in pornography use, with men coming into contact with pornography earlier and using it more often than women (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). This indicates that pornography use has a different attraction and meaning for men compared to women, which may also play a role in the association between the use of pornographic material and sexual permissiveness.

1.1. The current study

Considering that all five longitudinal studies were conducted among samples from Western societies, with three of the five assessments sampling adolescents from a highly liberal and sexually permissive culture, the Netherlands (the other two studies were carried out in the United States), we aimed to re-assess the target relationship in a more traditional and highly religious Southeast European society, in which societal levels of sexual permissiveness seem to be relatively low (cf. Štulhofer and Rimac, 2009). Croatia experienced a substantial increase in religiosity during the 1991–1995 war and the post-communist transition that followed the

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