Antecedents of adolescents' exposure to different types of sexually explicit Internet material: A longitudinal study

Laura Vandenbosch *

The Amsterdam School of Communication Research, ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Communication scholars have repeatedly highlighted the importance of studying the type of content that media users are exposed to. However, although adolescents use sexually explicit Internet material (SEIM) frequently, we know little about which specific types of SEIM they are exposed to. Moreover, knowledge is lacking about the antecedents of exposure to different types of SEIM and whether these antecedents differ between boys and girls. The present two-wave panel survey among 1557 Dutch adolescents addressed these lacunae by studying exposure to affection-themed, dominance-themed and violence-themed SEIM. Younger adolescents were more often exposed to affection-themed SEIM, while older adolescents and adolescents with higher levels of academic achievement were more frequently exposed to dominance-themed SEIM. Hyper masculine boys and hyper feminine girls were more frequently exposed to violence-themed SEIM.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has made sexually explicit material widely available. Sexually explicit Internet material (SEIM) can be described as "professionally produced or user generated pictures or videos (clips) on or from the Internet that are intended to arouse the viewer. These videos and pictures depict sexual activities, such as masturbation as well as oral, anal, and vaginal penetration, in an unconcealed way, often with a close-up on genitals" (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011, pp. 1015–1016). While SEIM is officially targeted at an adult audience, SEIM is also used by many adolescents. Studies from the US (e.g., Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007), Europe (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2011) and Asia (e.g., To, Ngai, & Iu Kan, 2012), for instance, have consistently demonstrated that on average 40–60% of adolescents visit sexually explicit websites.

Although it is thus well-documented that a substantial proportion of adolescents are exposed to SEIM, we know nearly nothing about which specific types of SEIM and thus which sexual scripts adolescents encounter when watching SEIM. Recent reviews have highlighted this lack of knowledge as one of the central lacunae in research on adolescents' use of SEIM (Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012; Wright, 2014). Moreover, there is some discussion

in the field about the extent to which specific types of SEIM may affect adolescents. For example, it has been suggested that adolescents' exposure to more violent SEIM may contribute to sexual aggression (e.g., Bonino, Ciairano, Rabaglietti, & Cattelino, 2006; Ybarra, Mitchell, Hamburger, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2011). Similarly, the relatively frequent occurence of male dominance in SEIM has been related to gender-stereotypical sex roles (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2007, 2009). Others, in contrast, have argued that the Internet has increased the accessibility of all types of SEIM (Attwood, 2007), notably material that presents sexual activity in a more intimate, affectionate context (Ogas & Gaddam, 2011). As there has been limited systematic effort in investigating which types of SEIM adolescent users are exposed to, the first goal of the current study was to explore how often adolescent users access violence-themed, dominance-themed, and affection-themed SEIM.

Moreover, knowledge is lacking about the antecedents of exposure to different types of SEIM. Although an emerging body of research has dealt with the antecedents of exposure to SEIM in general (e.g., Beyens, Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2014; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2008b, 2009, 2011), no study has yet addressed the antecedents that shape exposure to different types of SEIM in adolescents. However, research on the use of sexual media content has shown demographic variables, sociocultural factors, and personality characteristics play an important role in which types of sexual media content adolescents are exposed to (e.g., Beyens et al., 2014; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2011; Steele, 1999).

* Tel.: +31 (0)20 525 3680.
E-mail address: L.P.Vandenbosch@uva.nl

Hence, the second goal of the current study was to examine the extent to which exposure to violence-themed, dominance-themed, and affection-themed SEIM depends on demographic variables (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2006), sociocultural factors (e.g., Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004) and personality factors (e.g., Beyens et al., 2014).

Finally, research points to gender differences in the antecedents of adolescents' SEIM exposure (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). More generally, the gender socialization literature has shown that boys and girls are socialized toward different sexual identities (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994), which may affect how their users' profile relates to exposure to sexual media content (Steele, 1999; Steele & Brown, 1995). Therefore, the third goal of this study was to explore whether gender moderates the influence of various antecedents on exposure to different types of SEIM.

1.1. Types of sexually explicit Internet material

The literature on pornography has typically focused on three major themes in pornography: Affection, dominance and violence (e.g., Arakawa, Flanders, & Hatfield, 2012; Crooks & Baur, 2002; Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Ogas & Gaddam, 2011). Affection-themed SEIM can be described as SEIM that depicts sexual activities and the related scenarios within an intimate context in which the sexual partners show affection toward each other. In this type of SEIM, the sexual activity is considered a physical expression of partners' feelings for each other (Laan, Everaerd, Van Bellen, & Hanewald, 1994; Ogas & Gaddam, 2011). In the literature, affection-themed SEIM has been characterized by its non-degrading and non-violent nature and its focus on affectionate sexual acts (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010; Check & Guloien, 1989; Crooks & Baur, 2002; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981). Studies have found that affectionate sexual acts, such as kissing during sexual activities (Gorman, Monk-Turner, & Fish, 2010; Vannier, Currie, & O'Sullivan, 2014), occurred in respectively 40–50% of sexually explicit material (SEM). Scholars have emphasized that affection-themed SEM can especially be found on pornographic websites targeting a female audience (Ogas & Gaddam, 2011). Arguably, this type of SEIM is appealing for female Internet users as they enjoy watching the material more strongly when it has an affectionate storyline (Laan et al., 1994; Ogas & Gaddam, 2011).

Dominance-themed SEIM refers to SEIM that features a dominant sexual character, either male or female. More specifically, Cowan and Dunn (1994) have argued that this type of material portrays a sexual partner who imposes his/her sexual wishes to one (or more) sexual partner(s), often with disregard of the feelings of the other sexual partner(s). Research has consistently shown that dominance is a popular theme in SEIM as up to 50% of the analyzed SEIM contained depictions of power (Barron & Kimmel, 2000; Klaassen & Peter, 2015). For instance, a study of Gorman et al. (2010) showed that dominance was the main theme in 33% of the analyzed sexually explicit Internet videos, while it occurred as a secondary theme in 11% of the material. Earlier literature typically has identified men as dominant characters in SEM (e.g., Cowan & Dunn, 1994). However, recent content analyses of SEIM have found that women are also portrayed in dominant sexual roles, albeit still significantly less often than men (Arakawa et al., 2012; Barron & Kimmel, 2000; Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Vannier, Currie, & O'Sullivan, 2014).

Internet material showing sexual activities that occur in a context of physical aggression against one or more sexual partners can be described as violence-themed SEIM (Barron & Kimmel, 2000; McKee, 2005; Palys, 1986; Yang & Linz, 1990). Violence portrayed in SEIM may include depictions of physical pain and the harm (e.g., crying) of the person who is forced into the sexual interaction

(McKee, 2005). Two studies on SEIM have shown that four out of ten scenes depicted sexual violence, such as slapping/spanking and confine/bondage (Barron & Kimmel, 2000; Klaassen & Peter, 2015). Spanking, in particular, occurs relatively often: In one study, popular sexually explicit Internet videos were found to feature spanking in 27% of the videos (Vannier, Currie, & O'Sullivan, 2014). Similarly, another recent study demonstrated that women were being spanked in 27% of the scenes of sexually explicit Internet videos (Klaassen & Peter, 2015. See, however, also their discussion of whether spanking constitutes sexual violence and whether the definition of spanking as sexual violence may lead to an overestimation of sexual violence in pornography). In addition, research on both offline and online SEM has reported that the violent acts are often performed by men and involve female victims (e.g., Bridges et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Yang & Linz, 1990).

Although previous quantitative research has not yet examined the types of SEIM that adolescents consume, the results from the aforementioned content analyses suggest that there is a chance that adolescents distinguish between affection-themed SEIM, dominance-themed SEIM and violence-themed SEIM. Qualitative research also suggests that adolescents may be exposed to all three types of SEIM (Häggstrom-Nordin, Sandberg, Hanson, & Tyden, 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Månsson & Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2007). However, as previous research does not allow us to specify which types of SEIM adolescents are predominantly exposed to, the following research question was posed:

RQ 1: To what extent do the themes of affection, dominance and violence occur in the SEIM that adolescents watch?

1.2. Antecedents of exposure to sexually explicit Internet material

Research has generally suggested that Internet users are not equally exposed to affection-themed, dominance-themed, and violence-themed SEIM (e.g., Cameron et al., 2005; Månsson & Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2007; Ogas & Gaddam, 2011). Previous research on SEIM has so far supported that demographic, socio-cultural and personality-related media antecedents predict adolescents' general exposure to SEIM (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2011; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013; Wolak et al., 2007). These antecedents may also be important when studying adolescents' exposure to specific types of SEIM.

In the literature on media exposure, it has been has argued that demographic, sociocultural and personality-related antecedents may influence the probability of being exposed to particular media content (e.g., LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Steele & Brown, 1995). These antecedents are expected to shape the level of congruence one experiences between one's own identity and the messages covered in the media content (Steele & Brown, 1995). Media content that is congruent with one's identity is more likely to be used as this material matches the user's motives to consume media.

1.2.1. Demographic antecedents

A first important demographic antecedent for exposure to affection-themed, dominance-themed and violence-themed SEIM is gender. Generally, boys have been shown to be rather attracted to power and dominance in human relationships, while girls are more interested in emotions and affection (Crooks & Baur, 2002; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994). More specifically, qualitative research on young adults and adolescents' experiences with SEIM has suggested that exposure to SEIM at least partly reflects preferences for power, dominance, and affection (Cameron et al., 2005; Månsson & Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2007). Girls rather preferred affection-themed SEIM, while (some) boys were more willing to