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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exposure to online sexual materials in adolescence and desensitization to sexual content[☆]

Exposition au matériel sexuel en ligne à l'adolescence et désensibilisation au contenu sexuel

K. Daneback^{a,*}, A. Ševčíková^b, S. Ježek^b

^a University of Gothenburg, Göteborg, Sweden

^b Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

KEYWORDS

Internet;
Sexuality;
Pornography;
Adolescents;
Longitudinal design

Summary It is well known that adolescents use the Internet for sexual purposes, for example viewing sexually explicit materials, a practice which increases with age. Prior research has suggested a link between cognitive and behavioral effects on the one hand and viewing sexually explicit materials on the Internet on the other. The present study aimed to explore exposure to sexually explicit materials on the Internet and a possible desensitizing effect on the perception of online sexual content over time. The study design was longitudinal; data were collected in 3 waves at 6 months intervals starting in 2012. The sample included 1134 respondents (girls, 58.8%; mean age, 13.84 ± 1.94 years) from 55 schools. A multivariate growth model was used for analyzing data. The results showed that the respondents changed their perception of sexually explicit material on the Internet over time depending on age, frequency of exposure and whether exposure was intentional. They became desensitized in terms of being less bothered by the sexual content. The results may indicate a normalization of sexually explicit material on the Internet during adolescence.

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* Corresponding author. Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, P.O. Box 720, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden.
E-mail address: kristian.daneback@socwork.gu.se (K. Daneback).

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Introduction

Several studies have shown adolescents to use the Internet for online sexual activities. Among these, viewing sexually explicit content on the Internet is one that has received the most attention in the research community, sometimes due to public concern about the possible negative implications for children and adolescents (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2005).

Previous research found viewing sexually explicit material on the Internet to be primarily a solitary activity, more common in boys, to increase with age and to be more common in liberal societies (Peter and Valkenburg, 2006; Sevcikova and Daneback, 2014; Sevcikova et al., 2014; Vandenbosch and Peter, 2016; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2005). Drawing on EU-kids Online II data, comprising 11,712 adolescents across Europe, aged 11–16 years, it was shown that boys were more often intentionally exposed, while there was no gender difference for unintentional exposure. Furthermore, living in a more liberal culture was found to predict intentional exposure and less pronounced gender differences. Intentional and unintentional exposure to pornography was predicted by similar factors, such as sexual experience, older age, and higher scores on sensation-seeking scales (Sevcikova et al., 2014). However, later research found neither age nor sensation-seeking to be associated with exposure to sexual material on the Internet, perhaps pointing to a normalization of the activity (Vandenbosch and Peter, 2016).

The results of a qualitative study of adolescent girls suggested that exposure to sexual material on the Internet was perceived differently in terms of the material considered to be bothering, suggesting that perception was highly individual, related to socio-sexual development, and depending on the situation (Sevcikova et al., 2015).

Sevcikova and Daneback (2014) found that curiosity was a main reason for both boys and girls to view sexually explicit material on the Internet, but boys also reported arousal, a reason became increasingly frequent with age. They suggested that the purpose of viewing pornography may change over time, from cognitive to behavioral, alongside sexual development.

The cognitive and behavioral consequences of exposure to sexual content online are controversial. A longitudinal study of 1792 adolescents in the U.S. found that those who viewed more sexual content on television were more likely to have had sexual intercourse and other non-coital sexual activities one year later. This was the case regardless of age (Collins et al., 2004). A population-based 2-wave comparative panel study between 833 Dutch adults and 1445 adolescents found that male adults were the most frequent users of sexually explicit material on the Internet, for whom it was also associated with an increase in sexual risk behavior (Peter and Valkenburg, 2011a; Peter and Valkenburg, 2011b). However, in a Dutch longitudinal study comprising 1467 adolescents, viewing sexual content on the Internet was found to be a direct predictor of willingness to engage in casual sex (van Oosten et al., 2017).

In a 3-wave panel study of 1052 Dutch adolescents, there was a negative relationship between sexual satisfaction and viewing sexually explicit material on the Internet, especially in those with little or no sexual experience (Peter and Valkenburg, 2009). Furthermore, in a sample of 1879 Dutch

adolescents, more frequent exposure to sexually explicit material on the Internet was associated with increased body dissatisfaction for boys (Peter and Valkenburg, 2014). Another Dutch longitudinal study of 962 adolescents aged 13–20 years found that exposure to sexually explicit material on the Internet had a direct mediating effect on cognitive engagement in sex. The authors suggested that this may be due to questions raised by the content, but did not specify whether the cognitive engagement was positive or negative (Peter and Valkenburg, 2008).

On the basis of prior research, we know that many adolescents are exposed to sexual material on the Internet and that this may be related to age and sexual development. We also know that the purposes of viewing sexually explicit material on the Internet changes over time, and that adolescents' perceptions of what they have viewed and how it impacts them may change. In addition, there is some evidence that exposure to sexually explicit material has a number of cognitive and behavioral consequences. However, there is limited knowledge of how exposure to sexually explicit material on the Internet influences the perception of future exposure: in other words, whether there is a process of normalization, as suggested by some previous studies, or whether the perception of sexual material is rather related to age, gender or how frequently one is (intentionally or unintentionally) exposed. The present study therefore aimed to explore the frequency and intentional or unintentional nature of exposure to online sexual materials and its possible desensitizing effect on the perception of online sexual content over time, in a sample of Czech adolescents.

Methods

Sample and procedure

The study used data from a longitudinal research project analyzing the use of the Internet and online risks in Czech adolescents. The 3-wave data collection at 6-month intervals started in June 2012 and was completed in June 2013. Using cluster sampling, 164 primary and secondary schools in the Czech Republic were asked to participate in the survey, and 74 schools agreed. The longitudinal sample included 1134 participants (girls, 58.8%; mean age, 13.84 ± 1.94 years) from 55 schools, with a drop-out rate of 63%. Due to the racially homogenous structure of the Czech population, ethnicity was not analyzed.

After signing an informed consent form delivered by the head of the school, respondents filled out an online questionnaire administered in the school computer lab in the presence of a teacher. Respondents who chose not to participate in the study were allowed to use a PC for their own purposes during that time. Participants were notified that they could withdraw from the survey at any time and that their answers to sensitive questions would be used only for research purposes. Anonymity was guaranteed by self-generated codes linked to the completed questionnaires, ensuring that no name or contact details were used. Respondents were also given contact information for the principal investigator, to whom they could turn with any questions related to the study.

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