



Original article

The Use of Sexually Explicit Material and Its Relationship to Adolescent Sexual Activity

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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: There is growing concern that sexually explicit material (SEM) may influence young people's sexual activity. The present study aimed to assess the longitudinal association between frequency of SEM use and adolescent sexual debut.

Method: The present study used two independent panel samples of Croatian adolescents (with four and five data collection waves, respectively). We employed discrete-time event history approach and propensity matching score analysis to explore the target association.

Results: A consistent lack of significant association between SEM use and sexual debut was observed among male adolescents. Among female adolescents, the findings were inconclusive. We also found some evidence for the role of timing of first exposure to SEM.

Conclusions: Our findings are relevant for educational and adolescent health specialists, as well as concerned parents. Considering that this study focused on middle adolescence, future research should address a potential link between SEM use and early sexual debut.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTIONS

A robust analytical approach and replication component were used to longitudinally explore the role of sexually explicit material (SEM) in adolescent sexual initiation. The finding that SEM use did not hasten sexual debut among male Croatian adolescents is relevant for educators, adolescent health specialists, and concerned parents.

Recently, Utah legislation declared pornography “a public health crisis” and large corporations such as McDonalds and Starbucks have banned pornographic websites from their Internet networks [1,2]. These actions are, in part, a response to the increase in exposure and use of sexually explicit material (SEM),¹ especially among adolescents, due to unrestricted access on personal technologies [3]. In a sample of nearly 1,000 U.S. adolescents,

66% of males and 39% of females reported previous SEM exposure [4], while a Swedish study of high-school students found that almost all men (98%; n = 703) and over two thirds of women were familiar with SEM [5]. This is causing concern regarding the development of risk behaviors associated with it, especially the impact SEM may have on hastening sexual debut, defined as the experience of first sexual intercourse [6,7]. Although penile-vaginal sex is not among the first sexual acts commonly experienced in adolescence, it accounts for the highest vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections—compared to other sexual acts—with a substantial prevalence among adolescents. Recently, the Global Burden of Disease Study showed that unsafe sex is the second highest risk contributor to mortality among 15- to 19-year-old men and women globally [8]. Considering that

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¹ In this paper we use the phrase sexually explicit material as synonym for pornography, defined as uncensored depiction of sexual acts intended to provoke sexual arousal.

failure to use a condom at first sexual intercourse is not uncommon [9,10], the focus on the association between SEM and sexual debut is warranted.

Conceptually, the association between SEM use and sexual initiation can be explained using the social learning framework—as specified by the cultivation model [11] and the 3_{AM} model [12]. Both models propose that sexual behavior is socially scripted through social norms, peer pressure, or media portrayals. Specifically, popular media may influence sexual behavior by depicting certain activities as common, risk-free, and pleasurable. According to this conceptual framework, adolescents characterized by a higher frequency of SEM use would be more likely to seek out experiences that are depicted in SEM, including sexual intercourse [13].

The available research has focused on the effects of sexualized media, rather than SEM, on sexual debut. Two studies that assessed the impact of viewing mass media (e.g., television, movies, music) in a sample of U.S. adolescents found that individuals who consumed more mass media were more likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse before the age of 15. This link was only supported among white adolescents [14,15]. Two additional studies among adolescents found that increased exposure to sexualized media predicted earlier sexual debut throughout a 6-year period [16] and 12 months from the initial wave [17]. However, findings that have been re-examined using propensity-matching analyses demonstrated mixed results. A study by Steinberg and Monahan [18] investigated findings from Brown et al. [14] and failed to find a statistically significant relation between sexualized media use and adolescents' sexual initiation. In contrast, Collins and her colleagues were able to confirm their earlier findings [17] using a comparable analytical approach [19].

As already noted, there is limited research that has prospectively investigated the relationship between SEM use and sexual debut. Interestingly, in a study with adolescents and young adults aged 15–24, more than half of participants believed that viewing online SEM would increase the likelihood of individuals to engage in sexual intercourse at an earlier age [20]. Using a two-wave design, Brown and L'Engle [4] found that increased SEM exposure at baseline predicted a higher likelihood of reporting sexual intercourse 2 years later for both genders. Another two-wave study carried out among 639 Belgian adolescents demonstrated that SEM use at baseline was significantly associated with sexual debut 6 months later [21]. Notably, the relationship was moderated by pubertal timing, so that individuals in late pubertal status, compared to “early bloomers,” were less likely to initiate sex regardless of their SEM use.

Only two studies used true longitudinal assessment with three or more data collection points [22]. In a large-scale seven-wave Taiwanese study, SEM was found to predict sexual debut in both male and female adolescents [23], but the validity and interpretability of the findings are limited by the crude indicator of SEM use (*Have you ever visited pornographic websites?*) employed in the study and the fact that SEM was not defined for participants. The other study, carried out among 1,132 Dutch adolescents, reported a significant bidirectional association between SEM use and sexual behaviors only among male adolescents, and only in the first 6 months under observation (i.e., between the first two of four waves of data collection in total) [24]. The authors' decision to group different sexual behaviors (from French kissing to vaginal intercourse) into a composite indicator precludes a clear conclusion about sexual initiation specifically.

None of the reviewed studies explored the possible influence of the timing of first exposure to SEM, which has been associated with sexual risk taking in a national probability-based sample of emerging Croatian adults [25]. Considering that an early exposure to or actively searching for SEM may indicate several phenomena relevant for the target association—such as an early interest in sex, proclivity to sensation seeking, or a risk of SEM use habituation—this construct is important to assess.

Study aims

Given the lack of methodologically robust and precise assessment of the relation between SEM use and adolescent sexual initiation, the present study intended to provide a more comprehensive exploration of the association by using a four-wave longitudinal design and, unlike the previous studies, controlling for age at first exposure to SEM. The question of whether adolescents' SEM use hastens sexual initiation is relevant not only for sexuality educators and media scholars but also for professionals working in the field of adolescent reproductive and sexual health, as well as concerned parents.

It is hypothesized that the frequency of SEM use would predict the timing of sexual initiation among both genders. Although male and female adolescents have reported markedly different frequencies of SEM use, with men using SEM at higher rates [26], previous research has found a significant association between SEM use and sexual debut in both genders [4]. One reason for this may be the increase in sexual permissiveness and heightened interest in sex due to socializing (i.e., scripting) effects of SEM use in adolescents [27]. A spurious association, with adolescents characterized by a higher-than-average interest in sex seeking out both SEM and sexual experience, is also plausible.

Method

Participants

The panel sample (*Mage* at baseline = 15.8, *SD* = .50) was recruited from 14 larger secondary schools in Rijeka, the third largest city in Croatia.² A mid-adolescence cohort was selected for this study based on an informed expectation that most of participants would have no experience of sexual intercourse at baseline, but about two thirds would have reported it by the end of the (still ongoing) 3-year study. The initial survey (T0, *n* = 1,307) took place in December 2015 and was repeated in April 2016 (T1 *n* = 1,311), October 2016 (T2, *n* = 1,252), and finally in April 2017 (T3, *n* = 1,117)—16 months after the initial round of data collection. Responses from 791 students were successfully linked across all data collection waves.³ Of the rest, 391 had participated in at least two consecutive waves. Following this study's analytical logic, all students who participated at the baseline and at least two consecutive waves were included in the final sample. Only participants who reported no sexual intercourse at baseline were

² The recruitment in Rijeka included 14 out of 22 high schools. Seven smaller schools with less than 50 second-grade students were omitted (due to financial reasons) and one school was left out because of a recent burglary and arson. The selected 14 schools included 63% of the city's second-grade student population.

³ Data cleaning resulted in a small number of questionnaires being excluded for gross inconsistencies, illogical responses, and/or jokes (T0 = 16, T1 = 28, T2 = 19, T3 = 25).

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