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Longitudinal associations between the use of sexually explicit material and adolescents' attitudes and behaviors: A narrative review of studies



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ABSTRACT

This review analyzed longitudinal studies examining the effects of sexually explicit material on adolescents' attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. The review also aimed to provide an analysis of the limitations of the existing studies, as well as recommendations for future research. To be included, publications had to employ repeated measurements, include a measure of sexually explicit material use and participants aged 18 years or under. A total of 20 papers from nine different research projects were reviewed. The results show that sexually explicit material is associated with sexual behavior, sexual norms and attitudes, gender attitudes, self-esteem, sexual satisfaction, uncertainty and preoccupation. In addition, the studies reported developmental effects on adolescents' behavioral, cognitive and emotional well-being. Because experimental studies among adolescents are not feasible, more methodologically rigorous longitudinal studies—followed by a meta-analysis—are needed to further our understanding of the effects of sexually explicit material in this population.

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1. Introduction

Technological advancements such as smartphones and tablet computers have enabled fast and easy access to internet-based sexually explicit material. Using the Triple-A concept (Accessibility, Affordability, Anonymity), [Cooper \(1998\)](#) pointed to the characteristics that distinguish internet-based sexually explicit material from earlier forms. He asserts that these three characteristics have facilitated the use of internet in the area of sexuality, including the use of sexually explicit material. The contemporary omnipresence of sexually explicit material has also been related to an increase in the diversity of its content. More than four million pornographic websites contain unprecedented quantity and diversity of sexually explicit material ([Ropelato, 2007](#)).

Given that a great majority of adolescents in Western countries have access to the internet, exposure to and use of sexually explicit material is no longer restricted to adults ([Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012](#)). Empirical evidence suggests that a substantial proportion of adolescents use sexually explicit material ([Peter & Valkenburg, 2006a, 2011c](#); [Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007](#)). According to a large probability-based study carried out in the US, 93% of male and 62% of female adolescents were exposed to sexually explicit material before the age of 18 ([Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008](#)).

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The findings that exposure to sexually explicit material precedes first sexual experiences (Brown & L'Engle, 2009) point to a potentially socializing role of sexually explicit material (Stulhofer, Busko, & Landripet, 2010; Wright, 2012). This led to a growing concern among policy makers and the general public regarding the use of internet-based sexually explicit material among young people and its presumed (negative) effects on adolescents' attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. In 2013, David Cameron's government enforced online traffic restrictions in the UK by making a variety of web sites, including pornographic sites, available by request only ("Online pornography to be blocked by default, PM announces," 2013; Petley, 2014). This legislation was preceded by the Office of the Children's Commissioner's report on the commercialization and sexualization of childhood (Horvath et al., 2013), which emphasized the harmful effects of sexualized media on children and parents' concerns related to the efficient protection of their children's well-being. In the report's conclusion, the authors stated that children and young people's exposure to pornography has been associated with risky sexual behavior and that pornography affects their sexual beliefs (e.g., having unrealistic expectations about sex or having greater acceptance of casual sex). In 2013, the European Parliament debated a proposal to ban pornography to protect children and adolescents from degrading and violent sexual imagery ("Will porn be banned in Europe? EU set to vote on internet crackdown," 2013). At the same time, a similar proposal was put forward by Iceland's government ("Iceland seeks internet pornography ban," 2013). Both proposals were later rejected (Whittaker, 2013).

Coinciding with rising public concerns is an increasing interest in the scientific study of sexually explicit material use among young people (Hald, Kuyper, Adam, & de Wit, 2013; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Luder et al., 2011; Mattebo, Tydén, Häggström-Nordin, Nilsson, & Larsson, 2013; Svedin, Åkerman, & Priebe, 2011; Ševčíková and Daneback, 2014; Weber, Quiring, & Daschmann, 2012). Focusing primarily on the possible negative effects of intentional or accidental exposure to sexually explicit material, social scientists have been exploring interpretations and the adoption of sexual attitudes and expectations among adolescents (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009), as well as the developmental co-occurrence of sexually explicit material use and sexual behaviors and their cognitive, emotional, health-related and social implications. For example, researchers have been assessing the impact of sexually explicit material on adolescents' sexually aggressive behavior (Alexy, Burgess, & Prentky, 2009; Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Malamuth & Huppert, 2005; Ybarra, Mitchell, Hamburger, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2011), risky sexual behavior (Brown, Keller, & Stern, 2008; Collins, Martino, & Shaw, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011b; Wingood et al., 2001), sexual uncertainty (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008b, 2010a; van Oosten, 2015) and attitudes toward women as sex objects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007, 2009a).

The literature on adolescents' use of internet-based sexually explicit material was recently summarized by Owens et al. (2012) and Peter and Valkenburg (2016). Both reviews included qualitative and quantitative studies. An overwhelming majority of the selected studies were cross-sectional, making causal inferences impossible. For example, the directionality of a significant association between sexually explicit material and recreational attitudes toward sex reported by Peter and Valkenburg (2006b) remains unknown and cannot be ascertained using a cross-sectional design. This is a serious limitation, particularly when considering the great demand for evidence-based policy making. However, experimental studies, which are considered to be the "golden standard" for exploring causal relationships (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002), would clearly be unethical in this context (Peter & Valkenburg, 2014). Furthermore, finding a control group with no exposure to sexually explicit material seems increasingly less possible.

In the absence of experimental studies, researchers interested in exploring causal links resort to a longitudinal research design (Shadish et al., 2002). In addition to their clear advantages (prospective character) over studies using a cross-sectional design, longitudinal studies enable insights into the developmental dynamics and time-related characteristics (Lynn, 2014). Taking logistic, methodological, financial and ethical (Caskey & Rosenthal, 2005) complexities of longitudinal research into consideration, the small number of longitudinal studies available on adolescents' use of sexually explicit material is not surprising.

Despite the abovementioned difficulties, longitudinal studies are needed for a better and more rigorous understanding of the possible effects of sexually explicit material on adolescents' sexual and reproductive health and well-being. The same is true for policy planning and decision making aimed at protecting young people from detrimental media influences.

1.1. Study aims

Currently, four reviews of internet-based sexually explicit material and its correlates are available (Döring, 2009; Owens et al., 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Short, Black, Smith, Wetterneck, & Wells, 2012) with two focusing on adolescents (Owens et al., 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Although these reviews included some of the available longitudinal studies, this is the first review exclusively focused on longitudinal panel studies of adolescent use of sexually explicit material, their methodological characteristics and key findings. This focus enables a more comprehensive insight into potential effects of sexually explicit material use among adolescents. It also contributes to the identification of gaps and shortcomings in the current understanding of this topic and provides recommendation for future research by analyzing conceptual and methodological limitations of the relevant studies.

2. Method

2.1. Search strategy

The following electronic databases were searched for relevant publications: Medline, PubMed, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect and Web of Science. The keywords for sexually explicit material exposure/use were "porn," "pornography," "online

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