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Exploring the effect of sexually explicit material on the sexual beliefs, understanding and practices of young men: a qualitative survey.

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Key words: Sexual Explicit Material, Online Pornography, Adolescent males, qualitative research, theory,

Abstract

Purpose

Research suggests that exposure to Sexually Explicit Material (SEM) has negative effects on the beliefs, attitudes and actions of adolescents, especially on males. The objective of this study was to explore the effect of exposure to SEM on the sexual beliefs, understandings and behaviours of adolescent males in society today and begin to build theory around this gap in the UK literature.

Method

An opportunistic sample of participants of males aged between 18 – 25 were recruited within one workplace (a call centre, Bristol,UK). Of 40 invited, 11 responded to a qualitative survey. Data was collected (online and paper format) and analysed for themes.

Results and Conclusions

Findings suggest that the key themes around SEM, that influence the sexual beliefs, understandings and behaviours of adolescent males are:- increased levels of availability of SEM, including an escalation in extreme content (Everywhere You Look) are seen by young men in this study as having negative effects on the sexual attitudes and behaviours of adolescents (That's Not Good). Family or sex education may offer some 'protection' or a balance to the representations of sex (Buffers), young people see in SEM. Data suggests conflicting or confused views (Real versus Fantasy) around adolescents' expectations of a healthy sex life (Healthy Sex Life) and appropriate beliefs and behaviours (Knowing Right from Wrong). Pulling the themes into an account of a causal pathway helps build theory.

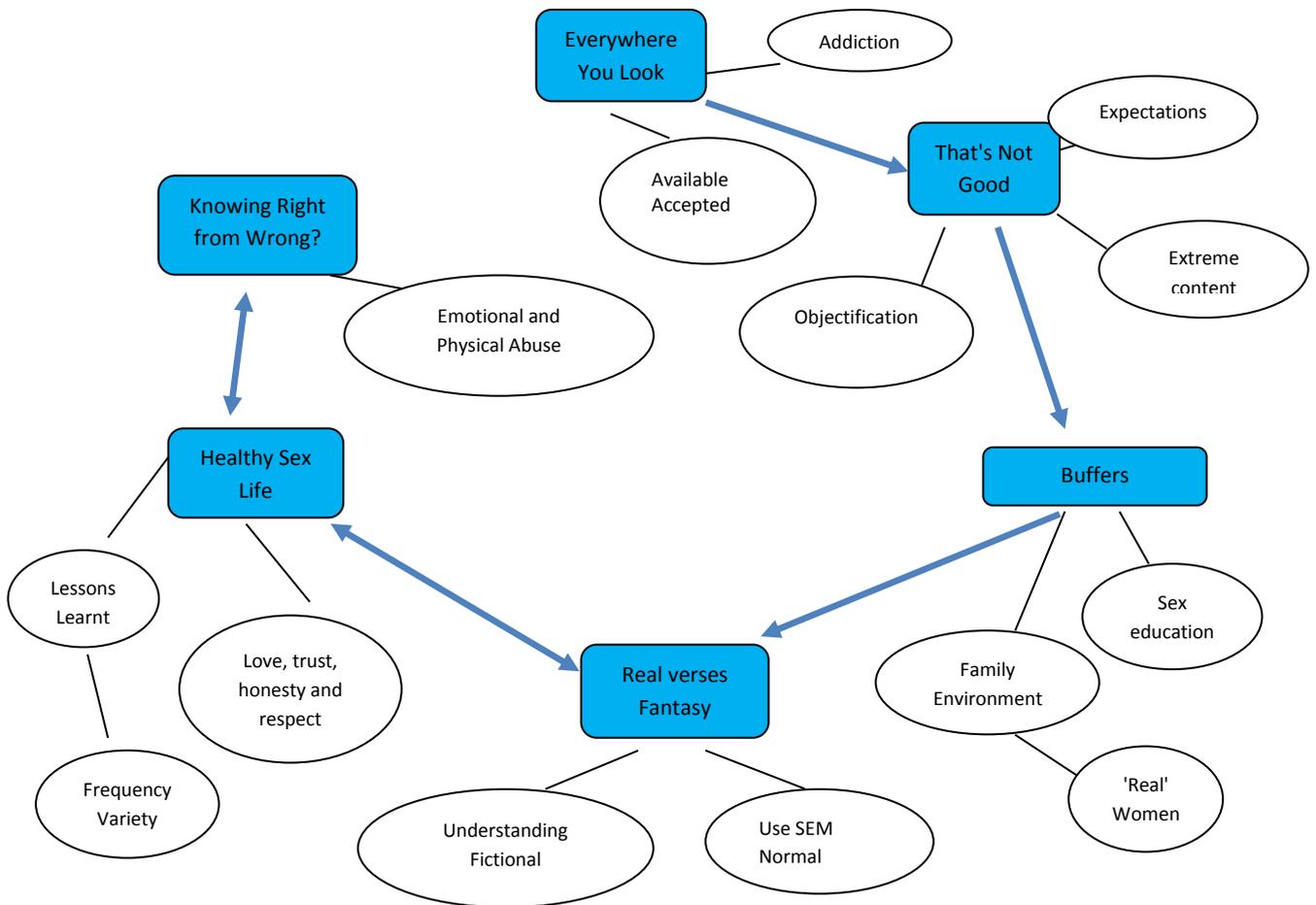
Keywords: Sexual explicit material, Adolescent males, Beliefs, Understanding, Behaviour, Qualitative research.

Implications and Contributions

- Wide availability of SEM reported with increasingly extreme content.
- Consumption may lead to confusion and SEM values based expectations of real sex.
- Variation in this affect may be due to existing vulnerability or experience of 'buffers'
- Sex education was seen as a missed opportunity to provide a healthier counter balance.

Graphical Abstract

Key Themes around young men's exposure to Sexually Explicit Material



Introduction

The increased availability of pornography (1) particularly through digital platforms (2,3,4) has resulted in what some term a 'pornified' world (5). Research is has begun an impact on the development of adolescents and youth culture in a number of unprecedented ways (6,7,5,8).

McNair, 2002(8) claims that the normalisation and mainstreaming of sexually explicit material (SEM) is not only shown by the role pornography plays in young people's lives, relationships and the ease at which they discuss it, but also in popular culture and contemporary art.

The indiscriminate nature of modern internet-enabled technology has increased exposure to SEM in all age groups (1) but especially in young people either accidentally or intentionally (9, 10) . Levels of participation in the creation and distribution of sexually explicit content of a personal nature through social media sites has also increased (11).

Research into levels of SEM consumption have suggested a range of potential negative effects include; encouragement of sexual violence (12) ;objectification of women (13); earlier sexual debut (14, 15, 16); risky sexual behaviour (17) and sexual harassment (16).

However, Luder et al. 2010 (18) using a large population of Swiss youth, (N=6054) found no link between SEM exposure and the majority of risky sexual behaviours. The pattern may however be one of greater negative effect in vulnerable populations as found by large scale (N=1501) work in the US, (19) found that the majority of males were found to have no links between frequent SEM exposure and a higher tendency towards sexual aggression.

However, among those with a predisposed level of risk towards sexual aggression who also

frequently sought out SEM, levels of sexual aggression in comparison to their peers were found to be four times greater or more. The interplay of exposure and effect require greater investigation and more importantly a theory building approach.

Theory development in this field is lacking (20). Cross sectional studies have suggested that adolescents do learn sexual behaviours from the observation of SEM (14 ,21) and that this may result in a distorted expectations of sexuality (22). Peter and Valkenburg, 2010 (23) found more frequent SEM exposure resulted in increased beliefs that it was similar to real-world sex (social realism) and a useful source of information about sex (utility).

The potential role of protective sex education around SEM is evidenced, (24) highlighted that the absence of education relating to the potential negative consequences of SEM may be related to an increased rate of high risk sexual behaviours.

A study conducted by Hald and Malamuth, 2008 (25) helped to identify avenues for sex education with regards to pornography, championing the incorporation of content that would increase media literacy and assist in the critical interpretation of pornographic material of young people.

However, in depth qualitative (7) work recognised that some young people recognised the unrealistic nature of SEM, again pointing to the complexity of adolescent experience and understanding. Such in depth work is sparse in the literature but needed to piece together a richer account of how SEM is experienced in order to begin to understand both theoretical casual pathways and explore potential means of intervention. Also noted is the lack of UK based research in the wider European dominated literature that may give voice to potential cultural variation in experience.

The aim of this research was therefore to understand the effects that exposure to SEM has on the sexual beliefs, understanding and practices of young men through their own accounts as a first step towards theory building.

Methods

Gaps in the literature around qualitative studies that could build theory and explore complexity, lead to the selection of qualitative data collection. Due to the nature of the topic, a survey tool was chosen to ensure participant anonymity and reduce social desirability.

Using an opportunistic, snowball sampling strategy, acquaintances were recruited by existing participants until data saturation was reached (26) . Males, aged between eighteen and twenty-five years were invited to participate in this study, and of the 40 invited, 11 participants completed the survey (See Appendix A).

The University of the West of England's Health and Life Sciences ethics board provided ethical approval for this study. Participants completed either hard copy (returned via anonymous envelope) or online version (returned via email) of a qualitative survey.

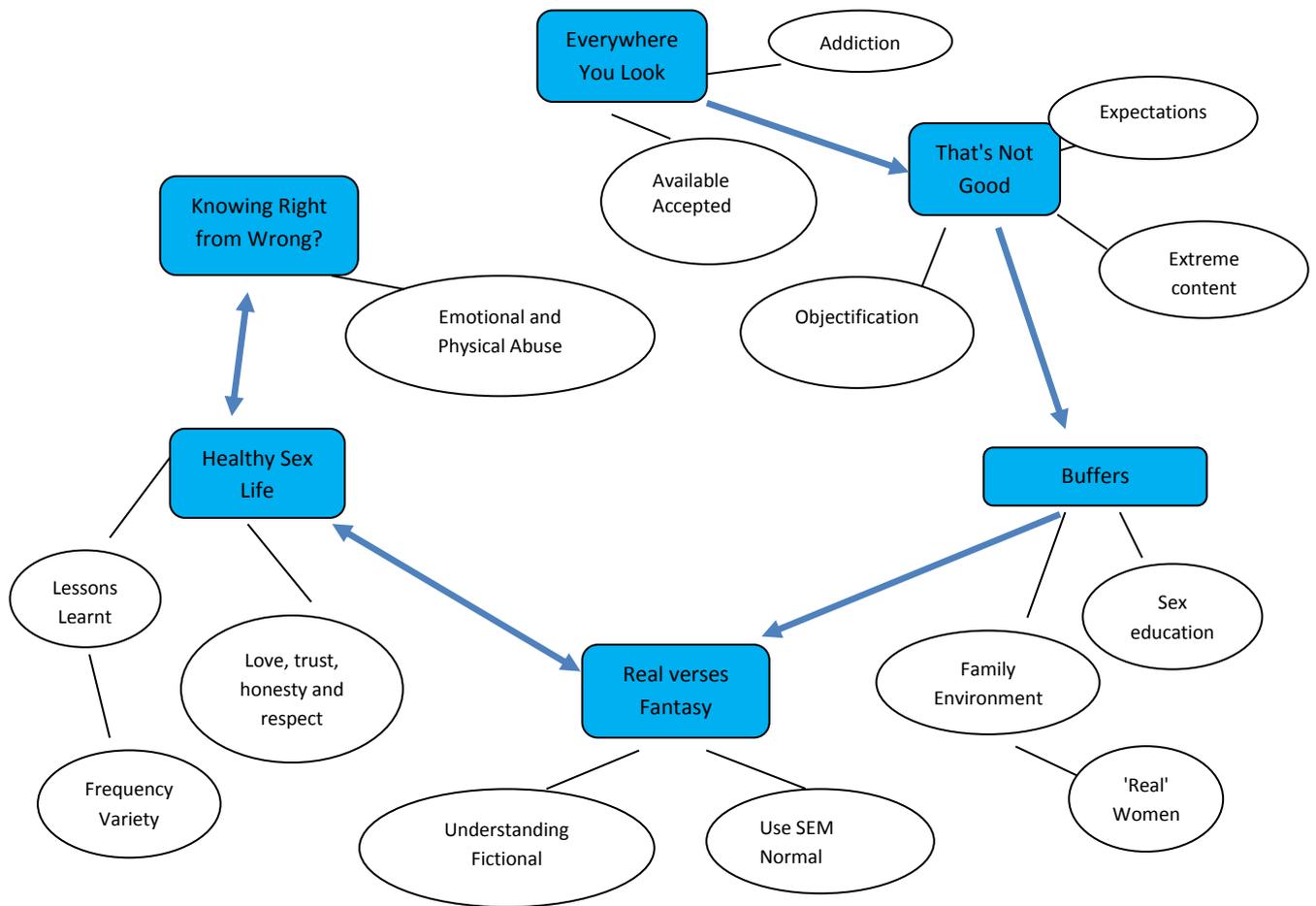
Data analysis was carried out through a six-phase approach to inductive thematic analysis (27), exploring the semantic value of the data through generating initial codes (see Appendix B) before searching for and identifying main themes. Rigour of interpretation was underpinned through development of personal statement by the researcher and supervisor confirmation of themes (28).

Results

Participants included 11 males between the ages of 18-25 years all working at the same Bristol based workplace. They have been given pseudonyms for anonymity.

The inductive thematic analysis applied to these qualitative surveys elicited six key themes that were present within the data. These themes are seen as essential in determining beliefs, understandings and actions of all participants. Themes have been labelled and are presented in a logical order "Everywhere You Look", "That's Not Good", "Buffers, sex education and family", "Real verses Fantasy", "Healthy Sex Life" and "Knowing Right from Wrong?". The themes are presented in this specific order to communicate the overarching story running throughout.

Diagram of key themes and sub themes



1. Everywhere You Look

This theme is defined by patterns of exposure to SEM reported by the participants and evidences the ease and range via which this content seems to be accessed with the internet as the most cited source.

“I have mainly seen hard-core porn that I access from free websites on the internet”-

Sid

“Page 3, lads mags (Zoo & Nuts)” - Tom

“Explicit music videos, TV girls where you call up” – Richard

“Instagram” – Mo

Participants seemed to demonstrate a measure of social acceptance for the viewing of SEM by adolescent males in the modern world, seeing the behaviour as part of a developmental process.

“I think that it is a part of growing up and on the whole it is considered as socially acceptable for young men to view this material.” - Ross

However, some seemed to recognise potential detrimental results, influencing sexual experimentation and addictive behaviours in adolescent males.

“I worry about the affect it has had on young people, because of porn I have experimented sexually trying to copy things I’ve seen and not all have been positive experiences (sex parties, group sex etc)”. - Gaz

“When I was not so careful, I found myself getting addicted to porn because of the ease in which I could get hold of it and the reward from chemicals in my brain”. - Alfie

A link between social media and actual physical sexual activity was also communicated, with concerns being raised in relation to the ability to trust in the sincerity of how people portray themselves online, this newer phenomenon is raised in next theme.

2. That's Not Good

Views and attitudes portrayed in SEM content seemed to be replicated in comments made by participants. Gender hierarchies and the objectification of females were

especially present throughout, with some awareness reported, that this might be a problem.

“I would also say it reinforces dangerous ideas of gender hierarchy. Women are usually depicted as submissive and easily influenced by men. Men are usually depicted as the ones in control and as the stronger gender. I believe this has affected susceptible individuals in our society, reinforcing the patriarchy within our society, making strong female attitudes less desirable.” – Bob

“Sex as a product that can be easily accessed and purchased. Changes the way they view girls and women, objectification, girls not as people” - Mo

In this group, the gender stereotypes shown in SEM also seemed to effect the way in which young males perceive themselves.

“It can make some men feel insecure about their sexual ability as they can't necessarily last as long as some male pornstars”. - Richard

“Porn has made me feel less adequate as a man – has a negative effect on my own perception of myself.” - Tom

In addition, participants talked about the ever increasing levels of extremity within SEM content online . SEM could therefore be seen as an influential force in the moulding of more extreme sexual preferences into the fabric of an adolescents consciousness.

“due to the ever increasing availability of porn, the videos are becoming more and more adventurous and shocking in order to keep up with the demand for it to still be deemed exciting. - Jay

“It has probably made me case hardened. It takes a lot to shock me now, Because of the amount I have seen it doesn’t affect me as much as it used to” - Tom

This increased need for a higher levels of stimulation may effect the level of expectations on an individual's sexual partner to participate, as well as on the individual themselves to conform with what may be regarded as a ‘the norm’.

3. Buffers

Balancing or alternative sexual models provided by e.g. family behaviour or sex education were reported in terms of having a positive contribution or a missed opportunity.

“My sex education at school was terrible. Pornography was not covered at all and it seemed like they were doing the bare minimum They glossed over any details that would actually give you a useful insight in to what being sexually active would actually be like “- Jay

“The human form was not taboo in my household when I was growing up, so I think this gave me an advantage that not all would have. My mother’s art work certainly gave me a very good idea of what a real women looks like”. - Bob

Family make act as a “buffer’ against the negative effects of SEM viewing and sex education a missed opportunity to provide a balancing source of healthy ‘norms’. The action of such a ‘buffer’ could be in helping adolescents distinguish between real and fantasy sexual behaviour.

4. Real verses Fantasy

Participants reported viewing the use of pornography as now being much less stigmatised, regarding it as a normal part of life that is discussed openly within relationships.

“It is now normalised. Less of a taboo. It can be talked about with partners”. - Tom

This normalisation was variously represented as a ‘trustworthy’ educational source of information, but some participants reported a the negative effect of SEM ‘norms’.

“I have learnt a lot from porn – moves – what is expected from me as a male”. - Tom

“I would say it gives young men a very dangerous idea of what sex is and what it provides”. - Bob

“It also affects body image and my view of how someone should look and how sex should look and be”. - Harry

“These explicit materials had a lot less of an impact on my perspective of the human form and I think this mainly due to the knowledge that it is depicting a fictional world, where the people depicted are almost characters of the real world”. - Bob

SEM consumed as the norm may be contributing to confusion around sexual expectations.

In this group, different levels of understanding or insight into whether it represented real sexual behaviour were reported.

5. Healthy Sex Life

Participants were asked about what a healthy sex life might be. Frequency and quality were common threads within the data set when describing a health sex life.

“Frequent and fulfilling with someone that has the same sexual interests as you” -

Jay

A variety of sexual experience was reported by participants as important in the avoidance of a boring sex life,

“Being adventurous in the bedroom and having sex regularly” – Richard

In contrast, other respondents raised aspects that took into account partners and relationships.

“Communication is key to sex and porn often teaches methods of causing pleasure that isn’t reflective of what a partner wants”. - Harry

“Being in a committed relationship or being honest about who you are when it comes to engaging in sexual activity. It shows that you have a healthy respect for the other sex”. - Ross

“When there is an emotional attachment – I forget meaningless sex”. - Tom

Communication, honesty, respect and a need for emotional attachments are all reported in describing a healthy sex life. The gap between these and sex depicted in SEM is clear, the degree to which young men in this group demonstrated insight into this varied.

6. Knowing Right from Wrong?

The data provided numerous examples of contradiction and derogatory views and opinions in relation women, gender stereotypes are clearly evidenced with varying degrees of insight.

“May have desensitised me to certain aspects of sex. I do not feel that has had any negative impact on me and it is not something that I have viewed or do view on a regular basis”. -Ross

“perhaps gender inequalities could arise from seeing women prostitute themselves in front of a camera”. - Alfie

“A man should take the time to make sure his women is satisfied before he blows his load if he is to have any chance of a good lasting sex life”. - Alfie

The manifestation of abusive behaviour stemming from the objectification of females was also displayed on a conscious level.

“When men drop their personal standards to the point where the female becomes a standing joke amongst friends, this is abuse in my opinion. (I’ve fucked some absolute rotters for a good story for my friends and this is unacceptable) - Gaz

Discussion

The results highlight some potentially important findings in relation to the effect SEM consumption has on the sexual beliefs, understanding and practices of young men, an under researched field. Within the limitations of a qualitative and therefore non generalizable sample, themes would benefit from large sample confirmation but still contribute to the beginnings of a theoretical account of how SEM can shape attitudes and behaviour.

Consumption and acceptance SEM was reported as growing, as confirmed in other research (2,3,4,16,10)., including more extreme content as adolescents reported becoming desensitised to SEM content, requiring evermore extreme exposure in order to feel stimulated or shocked.

Young men in this study, acknowledged negative effects on the sexual attitudes and behaviours of adolescents. Family or sex education may offer some 'protection' or a balance to SEM representations of sex. Data suggests conflicting or confused views around adolescents' expectations of a healthy sex life and appropriate beliefs and behaviours. The pattern of SEM values being internalised may be variable and the experience of 'buffers' could be a mediator of vulnerability to SEM as a source of information.

Increased availability may have increased the social acceptance of SEM as simply 'part of the modern age' (29, 5, 1). Data suggests a pathway of internalising SEM sexual norms leading to confusion and unrealistic expectation, but the perception of SEM as 'real' varied.

Variation previously found in the research seemed to revolve around some form of vulnerability (30). The data suggest the role of 'buffers' such as family role models or the potential of sex education may be areas for intervention. Data refers to the increasing use of 'active' or self-produced forms of SEM within social media (e.g Instagram) to create or consume pornographic images (31). How does this home grown approach play into the ideas of real and fantasy behaviour? Collins' et al, 2011 (20) useful research overview certainly notes that social media can result in increased requests of online sexual interaction being made or received by youths.

Young men in this study themselves raised the possibility that SEM exposure may lead to an addiction model of consumption with increasing need for more extreme content. Some report feeling the need to constantly push their boundaries for stimulation, with individuals no longer being shocked by some content, a pattern found in previous research (32, 33, 34, 35, 36) linking it to premature sexual experiences; objectification of females, unrealistic expectations and increased incidence of sexual harassment (16).

Understand the links better – theoretical pathways, vulnerability and buffers.

Further research should investigate mediators of susceptibility to SEM influence and this work, although based on one group of young men, begins to piece together the pathway of how increasing volume and extreme content of SEM may translate into enacted attitudes and behaviour.

Internet Safety

Work by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety's and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's guidelines (37) recommend that service providers for social networking and interactive services have measures in place to minimise risk, but also make safety advice available for young people, parents and caregivers. Schools themselves are increasingly addressing internet safety amongst children as young as primary school age.

Sex Education and family communication around sex

The findings may highlight the importance of addressing possible inadequacies in current sex education (24). Data in this study confirms the widely established relationship (20), to role modelling of appropriate behaviours, attitudes and opinions by primary caregivers but this requires more research.

The value of sex education is well documented throughout current literature (38, 39, 24) and participants reported their sex education as inadequate in general but not covering the issue of SEM. This seems a missed opportunity in prevention of some of the distorted perceptions and confusion young men may be vulnerable to from viewing SEM through provision guidance around what SEM means. Furthermore, the source of such information

would logically be more accessible through the same medium SEM is accessed, online (20).

More research around this field is needed.

Study Limitations

A survey based tool limits the potential to explore topics raised and findings are not generalizable with themes requiring larger sample confirmation. The interpretation of themes from the data can be influenced by the researchers own life experience, establishing reflexive practice, triangulation and using supervision to confirm interpretation are all methods that were used to improve qualitative rigour (28).

This work begins to address gaps in the literature around in-depth qualitative research in a UK setting and research that builds theory around SEM exposure and behaviour. Increasing availability and the recognition by young men themselves of the negative effects of SEM point to the need for intervention. Data around key buffers confirm potential avenues of intervention widely recognised in research around teenage pregnancy and STI prevention, i.e. sex education and family communication. Only through raising awareness of possible risks, and then by providing the tools necessary and implementing appropriate safety measures will it then be possible for young people to manage their experiences in life and protect themselves from any potential harm.

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