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Abstract

Prior research suggests that adolescent girls may react more negatively to online sexual content than boys. This study explored the qualitative experiences of adolescent girls who encountered bothersome or disturbing sexual content online. Fourteen girls (aged 15-17) were interviewed online about the context in which they saw bothersome sexual material and the reasons for their negative reactions. Results showed that participants felt bothered while using the internet at home and in public, while engaging in online exploration, information seeking, or chatting with new acquaintances. Participants were also bothered when the sexual content portrayed sex of an extreme nature, seemed inappropriate for their age, broke norms for establishing romantic relationships, or threatened their home life. The impact of these experiences is discussed, especially in light of the participants' statements that they did not tell their parents or guardians about their experiences with bothersome online content.

Keywords: adolescence, youth, internet, pornography, unwanted exposure, sexual solicitation

Bothersome Exposure to Online Sexual Content among Adolescent Girls

With access to the internet, adolescents can now encounter sexual content in new ways (Döring, 2009). In comparison to more traditional media, such as magazines and videos, the internet uniquely allows users to find sexual information quickly, anonymously, and through online communication with their peers (Daneback & Ross, 2011; Zhao, 2009). Yet adolescents may also encounter sexually explicit content that they have not purposefully sought out (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003).

A recent large-scale survey conducted in 25 European countries found that a significant proportion of individuals (aged 9-16) had felt bothered by online sexual content. The sexual content had made them feel either uncomfortable or upset (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Livingstone and her colleagues (2011) used the term “bothersome” to conceptualize the perceived harm that this online risk-taking may bring. They found that the extent of the children’s exposure to online sexual content may not correspond with the extent of their bothersome exposure. For example, Czech girls were found less likely to be exposed to sexual content online than boys. Yet they were more likely to report such exposure as bothersome (Livingstone et al., 2011). We are therefore interested in exploring in depth what kind of content adolescent girls consider to be bothersome. In addition, we will examine in greater detail why they perceive such online sexual content to be bothersome.

Previous studies on adolescents’ exposure to online sexual content indicate that developmental readiness may contribute to how young people experience sexual material. For example, the EU Kids Online II survey stated that younger internet users were more likely than older users to be bothered by both sexual material and sexual messages. However, younger users

encountered online sexual content less frequently than older adolescent users (Livingstone et al., 2011). This difference may therefore be related to young people's psychosocial development, wherein some adolescents may encounter sexual content that they are not prepared for mentally. As Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2007) argued, insufficient developmental readiness may elicit negative reactions when exposure to online sexual content has been sought due to adolescent curiosity. The user may be curious but lack the cognitive capacity to properly comprehend the unfamiliar materials they have seen and the negative feelings that can follow such unexpected exposure (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000).

When adolescents are inadvertently exposed to new sexual content online, they may also lack the intrapsychic or cultural scripts necessary to fit their experiences into a broader understanding of their situation, and consequently, an understanding of how they are expected to behave. Gagnon and Simon (2005) argue that sexual scripts can provide a personal understanding of acceptable behaviour in certain situations. In other words, scripts are metaphorical how-to manuals, cultural norms of acceptable or 'normal' behaviour, shaped by what we learn and experience, both individually and culturally. Such scripts may help a young person fit a first date into context and provide them with a set of behaviours that would seem socially acceptable in that experience. However, if an adolescent had never learnt about a certain type of violent pornography, for instance, they may lack the sexual script to socially contextualize such content and know how to behave. They may end up feeling unprepared, scared, or disturbed.

We also considered how Livingstone's (2007) concept of bedroom culture might help theorize these experiences. Livingstone argues that increasing dangers in the contemporary adolescents' world have influenced them to spend less of their leisure time out in the public

streets. Instead, young people have now grown up in the perceived safety of their bedrooms, which can grant them unique virtual access to the outside world through media and technology. However, this sense of security in one's bedroom may result in a young person feeling especially frightened or disturbed when that veil of safety is lifted. We therefore aim to explore how these feelings of safety may be penetrated by exposure to sexual content.

In summary, the above-mentioned studies discuss possible reasons why exposure to sexual content online may result in negative experiences among adolescents. However, these theoretical perspectives do not reflect the experiences of girls who are more likely to be bothered than boys by online sexual content (Livingstone et al., 2011). Therefore, we aimed to shed light on the qualitative experiences of adolescent girls who encounter bothersome sexual content. We focused on exploring the context surrounding such an encounter and on addressing what sexual content was considered bothersome. The results of this study could be useful for parents, guardians, and educators who may be concerned with the negative impact of sexual content on female adolescents' psychosocial development, which includes the potential for adopting less progressive attitudes about sex, like that sex is primarily physical and casual rather than affectionate (see Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010).

Method

Context and Participants

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University, in the Czech Republic. Data was collected from March 2011 to May 2011. Two recruitment methods were used. The first aimed to recruit participants through

three popular social networking websites while the second focused on recruiting students in school.

Online participants were recruited on three Czech social networking websites largely used by young people: www.xchat.cz, www.lide.cz, and www.libimseti.cz, all of which allow young people to chat, date online, and meet new people. These websites have no connection to pornographic content and their users' profiles are publically viewable. A search engine was used in order to preselect potential participants. Eligibility was determined based on two initial criteria: 1) participants had to be active users of the social networking websites from which they were recruited, meaning that they had visited their profiles within a week of sampling, and 2) participants had to be between the ages of 11 – 18. Searching led to the pre-selection of 18,950 active internet-users, all of whom were sent an official invitation message on their profiles. This message included basic information about the study – its purpose, requirements, their rights, information about the researchers and their contact details. It also specified that participants needed to have had previous experience with exposure to online sexual materials and/or sexual messages that they perceived to be bothersome.

In-person recruitment also occurred at a state school that housed students between the ages of 12 – 19. Upon approval from the school director, a written letter of invitation was distributed to these students. The letter included the same information as the online message. Using these two methods, participants (14 adolescent girls, Mage=16.3 years, age range: 15-18 years) were invited to participate in an online interview. One participant was recruited through the school and the remainder was recruited online.

All participants had experienced exposure to online sexual content that they viewed negatively. However, the age at which participants had first experienced this exposure ranged

from 11 to 17 years old. The sample was also diverse in regards to where the exposure to bothersome sexual content had occurred; some had been exposed to the content on their computer ($n = 6$), a small number had been exposed to it on their mobile phone ($n = 2$), and some had been exposed through usage of both ($n = 6$). Participants also reported exposure to sexually explicit materials occurring at a rate between once a month and daily.

Additionally, as participants were recruited from Czech websites and a Czech school, it is valuable to note important cultural rules that may affect the experiences of the adolescents in this study. For instance in the Czech Republic, sexual intercourse is illegal for adolescents under the age of 15 and accessing sexually explicit materials is allowed at the age of 18.

Design Procedures and Instrumentation

Once the participants accepted the study's invitation, participants were asked to take part in an online interview via instant messenger (ICQ). Conducting the interview online allowed participants to feel relative anonymity while disclosing sensitive information. Interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours on average. However, in two cases the interviews exceeded two hours (excluding breaks). This extended length allowed the researcher and participants to take their time typing, which can be more time-consuming than simply talking. Participants were also instructed that they could interrupt their interview at any time, allowing them to go to the bathroom or complete a short errand (e.g. eat dinner, walk the dog). At the beginning of each interview, participants were also informed that they could end the interview at any time and that any information they provided would only be used for research purposes.

Each interview began with informed consent, in which anonymity was assured, and then consisted of questions about the types of exposure (e.g., picture, video, ad banner) the participant

had faced, its content, and where and how often each person had come across sexually bothersome content online. Participants were asked about the feelings evoked by the exposure and how long these had lasted. Throughout the interview, the researcher asked questions concerning the reasons any negative feelings occurred. At the end of the interview, participants were given the chance to add anything that may not have been previously covered.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted using the Grounded Theory Method (Strauss & Corbin, 1999; Charmaz, 2008), which employs an inductive approach that aims to establish a theoretical description of the observed reality from empirical data. We followed Charmaz's coding process, which is based on two main steps: initial line-by-line coding and focused coding. In the first phase, an interview is categorized based on characteristics of the observed phenomena. The focused coding allows for the separation, sorting, and synthesizing of large amounts of data. Each interview was analyzed before the next was conducted, resulting in greater specification and modification of the questions asked. The software ATLAS.ti 6.0 was used in the first stage of data analysis to organize data. Participants' answers were analyzed line-by-line resulting in the reduction of the text into codes. For example, the following sentence, "*Once I looked for a term "sheath" online and it was really unpleasant when while searching online at school some disgusting videos emerged instead of the sought term.*" was collapsed into codes such as: unwanted exposure to pictures/videos and inappropriate context.

Subsequently, focused coding was done to synthesize and explain the data obtained (Charmaz, 2008). In this step the most significant or repetitive codes were chosen, enabling the data to be condensed. For example, the category *breaking norms/rules* included explicit requests

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for sexual behaviour forbidden by law, requests for paid sex, a lack of respect for the rules of a given online environment, and online contact or friendship immediately reduced to sex online. These categories were finally put into the context of pre-existing literature to allow for analysis. For instance, the category *breaking norms/rules* was considered in relation to sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 2005) and the concept that most sexual activities occur within romantic relationships rather than in the absence of a close relationship (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999).

Results

As shown in Figure 1, participants encountered sexual content in private (e.g., at home) and in public (e.g., at school). Activities such as information seeking and browsing the internet were primarily connected with public exposure. Exposure within the private domains occurred mainly during online interactions (e.g. chatting with unknown people) but occasionally while information seeking or browsing the internet. The adolescents were bothered by online sexual content when it was considered unusually extreme, broke accepted norms, and/or felt threatening.

--Figure 1----

Where Bothering Sexual Content was Encountered

The participants reported that they encountered bothersome sexual content both in public and in private domains. However, the analysis showed that exposure to content that was considered bothersome often occurred when using the internet at home when they were alone. Only in two of the cases had the participants encountered sexual content in public.

I only use my computer at home, sometimes my friend's one or at school, but this [exposure] happens only at home, in my bedroom. (P13, 18 years)

Once I looked for the term "sheath" [Czech word also meaning vagina] online and it was really unpleasant when while searching online at school some disgusting videos emerged instead of the sought term. (P14, 18 years)

These participants also explained in more detail where they had experienced bothersome sexual content online. Exposure to sexual content could take place in the participant's bedroom, or less commonly, in public which was primarily unwanted.

The latter participant's (P14) excerpt also illustrates her engagement in one of the two *online* activities that had gotten participants in this study to experience bothersome sexual content: information-seeking/browsing and online interaction. During information seeking and browsing the web, the exposure could occur when using search terms that had a double meaning or was colloquially associated with, for example, human genitalia (e.g., "sheath" which is the same word as "vagina" in the Czech language). Five participants described that they felt uncomfortable when they were looking for nonsexual content and sexual content unexpectedly appeared based on their search terms.

When looking for make-up, I saw lots of advertisements on sexual toys and erotic webpages and this is something that bothers me. Everybody knows that these websites exist. If anyone is interested in them, then he can go there. But they don't have to put them everywhere. (P7, 16 years)

When browsing the internet, this participant was exposed to a greater range of sexual content over time, such as videos picturing naked females, male bodies, couples having sex, or sexual toys. Though there was no interest in visiting websites with sexual content, these sites frequently appeared when browsing the web. Thus, the lack of intention to watch sexual content online did not shield this participant from exposure. Similar stories were reported by other participants in our study.

Exposure did not always occur through browsing/information seeking; the second online activity that was associated with exposure to bothersome sexual content was interacting online (i.e., chatting) on a computer or mobile phone with unknown people. While communicating with unknown people on the internet, the participant could then be linked to sexual pictures or shown a web camera with sexual content. If the participant was communicating with an internet acquaintance through her mobile phone, she could then be sent a picture message (mms) that displayed male genitalia. As two girls described:

I was sent a link through a chat. It dealt with pictures with male genitalia and a request for paid sexual intercourse. (P5, 16 years)

I got several mms...with male genitalia, mostly erect penises. (P10, 17 years)

In this study's sample, receiving sexually explicit content such as erect penises while exchanging messages with unknown people was common context for being exposed to bothersome sexual content. Notably, the majority of the participants in this study (i.e. 10 girls) were sent sexually explicit pictures as opposed to being solicited to send their own pictures. Only two girls in our sample described being asked to send sexual images of themselves.

What Content was Considered Bothersome

Participants expressed that they encountered bothersome sexual content at home or in public. But what content felt bothersome to them? The analysis showed that participants felt uncomfortable or disturbed when the online sexual content fit at least one of three categories: (1) unusually disturbing sexual content, (2) content that breaks norms or rules, and (3) content that felt threatening.

Bothersome: Unusually disturbing sexual content. Some participants found the online sexual content upsetting if it portrayed something that the participants considered unusual or extreme.

I don't know. When it deals with a normal sexual act or nudity, this may be normal even though I am surprised. But when it is violence in sex or something hard like hard sex, this is really very bothersome. (P13, 18 years)

This participant made a distinction between sexual content that she regarded as more commonplace and bothersome sexual content that appeared to be something else but normal.

Bothersome: Content that breaks norms or rules. The online content was also perceived as bothersome when it broke norms or rules, like age-specific rules or rules for relationships. For example, five participants described sexual content as bothersome when they felt that it was not appropriate for their age.

Interviewer: They send you a link and a window pops up with a web camera?

Yes, but they sent it to me in chat rooms for people younger than 15 years old...(P1, 15 years)

Interviewer: So you did not like what you saw on the screen?

Exactly, I am not interested in anything sexual x). (P1, 15 years)

This participant found it upsetting that she had encountered a link and subsequent video in an online environment that she felt was associated with people too young to view sexual material. In fact, as stated, she had not been interested in anything sexual online. An additional example follows:

It was ok when they wrote that I was pretty, but when somebody wrote how he wanted to fuck me, that was no longer pleasant ...they should leave me alone when I am only 13 [her age at the time]. (P4, 16 years)

This participant became irritated when she received suggestions to have intercourse when she was legally underage. She was surprised that it was even possible to receive such messages as she thought it should be widely known that in the Czech Republic sexual intercourse is illegal under the age of 15.

The lack of respect shown for the adolescents' age (and thereby, appropriate level of sexual interest) was a common reason for the participants' negative reactions. Through deception, such as pretending to be a younger person or having non-sexual interests, adolescents became exposed to sexual content without their consent. One participant said:

They send you a link and tell you that they spend more time there [on the site they linked to] than from where they are writing you [the site where they are currently

chatting]. But from the web address [the link] you cannot recognize that it is a pornographic page...I felt distaste as somebody was forcing me to do something.

(P1, 15 years)

Due to such deception, where others send links to pornographic web sites, the participant seemed to be unable to protect herself against unwanted sexual exposure, but felt forced to click the links sent to her.

Some participants described the sexual content as bothersome when exposure occurred within the context of making contacts online or establishing romantic relationships (see [the extract from participant P4](#) above). Even when a relationship is being developed, if some sexual content is sent before the participant considers it as appropriate, the content may be perceived as bothersome. One participant describes how a relationship with another person developed online:

From ICQ, first he wrote how he liked me. In that time I had nothing else to do so we exchanged 2-3 messages. He asked me for my ICQ number and I wrote it there. It was ok, a normal guy. And in the evening I received the first text message from an anonymous number, he told me he had found it on my profile. Then he asked me if I wanted to come and visit him, and this was the start....

(P10, 17 years)

However, when sexual content was sent very early in the conversation, this could violate the participant's perception of appropriate relationship development.

Yes, I talked to some nice guy online, later we exchanged text messages and he immediately sent me some erotic mms, with his genitalia, shock. (P14, 18 years)

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This relationship was quickly co-opted for sexual purposes. The participant, who expected a nonsexual relationship as that point, felt deceived when the nonsexual conversation became sexual. Similarly, another adolescent described being sent sexual content as offensive because she felt like the content was introduced too early in the relationship formation and outside of the context of a relationship. She felt like a "light skirt," like she was being propositioned for sex, something "bad."

The most disturbing was that I felt like a light skirt that guys want only to sleep with ... I felt offended. It made me feel bad. (P11, 15 years)

Furthermore, these negative feelings could be exacerbated by age differences between the participants and their online pursuers when this age gap became apparent.

It happened to me more than 10 times and plus such awful 50 year old guys. (P12, 17 years)

Within the context of online chatting, both an age difference and relationship rules may therefore contribute to adolescent females feeling uncomfortable. If sexual content is sent too early, outside of the context of a more established relationship, and the person online appears to be much older than the adolescent, the participant may feel especially bothered.

Bothersome: Threatening content. Participants in this sample were especially bothered by threats. Being forced through intimidation to send naked pictures of themselves or to meet online strangers face-to-face resulted in participants feeling especially uncomfortable.

The worst is when they start to threaten me that they know where I live, they know my family...sometimes they threaten me because they want my pictures or want me to do something for them... (P10, 16 years)

As this participant explains, an online threat related to sexual content can feel very disturbing. She and another participant were each told to provide sexual material in order to keep their offline lives safe. Indeed, two participants in this sample confirmed that offline strangers did attempt to infiltrate their offline lives.

Threats via cell phone were also considered to be more personal than those made on a computer.

On the internet everybody can write to you...but on a mobile it is like they intrude into my privacy, it is bothersome. (P8, 16 years)

Participants felt that the perpetrator could get closer to them, interrupting their daily life to the point that one could not easily avoid the unwanted contact. And unsettling feelings sometimes grew into a deeper fear that the perpetrator could physically harm the participant:

After a couple of days I was totally ruined, I worried whether he would suddenly appear in the street and do something to me. (P2, 15 years)

Even though these types of threats were especially frightening, it is worth noting that adolescents in our sample were often hesitant to communicate their online activities to their parents. A few participants (2 girls) were scared of having their access to the internet blocked or of receiving increased parental monitoring of their usage of the internet or mobile phone. One of them stated:

Interviewer: Have you thought about telling your parents or some adult about it?

No, because I was worried they would block my profile. (P9, 16 years)

As this excerpt indicates, participants valued their ability to go online, even when they could encounter bothersome sexual content. Even being threatened online did not result in the participants telling anyone about their negative experiences.

Discussion

This study provides qualitative information about the experiences of adolescent girls online, where and how they may encounter bothersome sexual content, and what makes the content bothersome. In interpreting our results, we found that participants' experiences often fit into the context of bedroom culture (Livingstone, 2007). They were more often bothered by sexual content at home rather than in public. In the privacy of their own home, the participants may have felt particularly safe and protected from harm, and thus may have felt particularly violated when they encountered something new or unexpected. If the internet is associated with the home, it may become associated with feelings of relaxation, security, and safety. It may not seem unpredictable or potentially harmful. If viewed within a bedroom culture context, the threatening messages and calls received by some participants can be considered extended invasions of privacy, not just disturbing on the computer screen, but brought even further into the supposedly safe home.

We also found evidence that the adolescent girls felt bothered by material online when it did not fit their individual or cultural scripts of sexual behaviour. Gagnon and Simon's (2005) concept of the sexual script helped to explain why some participants might be okay with viewing some sexual material but not others; some content was considered 'normal' or acceptable sexual

behaviour, while other content was surprising, seemed violent, and therefore felt upsetting. For if a young person has encountered certain sexual content before, through conversations with friends or through sex education classes, she may be less likely to find the act unusual and bothersome. She has normalized sexual behaviour (adjusted sexual scripts) based on her previous conversations and experiences, so that she feels more comfortable when she has a frame of reference for specific content. In contrast, completely novel sexual material, or content that has been condemned by others, would garner a more negative reaction, for possessing no script or a script that identifies the material as bothersome might lead a young person to condemn it.

By addressing the qualitative experiences of adolescent girls who encounter bothersome sexual content, this study provides greater information about the specific context surrounding girls' unwanted sexual experiences online. Information from this sample may provide some insight into why girls are more likely to experience bothersome exposure than boys (Livingstone et al., 2011). For instance, prior research suggests that adolescent girls are more likely to be sexually solicited online than their male peers (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010). This study explains how that solicitation can happen, where, and with what type of content. The adolescent girls in this sample were exposed to sexual content while chatting. But sexual content was considered especially bothersome when it was unusual, did not follow norms of behaviour, or became threatening. Some of these reasons may be personal (sexual scripts can be personal or more culturally-based) and some more developmentally-specific (e.g., norms of behaviour) if exposure occurs beyond the adolescent's psychosexual development and her need to establish romantic relationships (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999).

The potential developmental impact to female adolescents from exposure to bothersome sexual content online remains generally unknown, though **the regular consumption of sexually**

explicit material can lead to more instrumental attitudes toward sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010).

However, as the participants in this study could differentiate between different levels of discomfort—threats being the most bothersome—it is not unreasonable to assume that the impact of bothersome sexual content varies depending on the situation. What is especially troubling, however, are the revelations that 1) participants did not always feel comfortable sharing their bothersome experiences with their parents and 2) that the online activities they were engaging in did not always appear risky before the unwanted exposure occurred. If adolescent girls can encounter such content through browsing on a school computer, and they are unwilling to seek help after being exposed, their usage of the internet may call for greater caution.

We therefore hope that the results of this study can be used to better prepare adolescents for future online activities. However, it may be near-impossible to shelter young people from all sexual content that is unwanted. Although filter software might help keep certain content off-limits, exposure may occur even in schools, where filtering is supposedly more common. Therefore, in order to aid young people as they use the internet and encounter sexual material, it may be valuable to increase communication about what they may experience online. These conversations could help establish new sexual scripts and better equip young people with the cognitive tools needed to handle unpredictable online experiences. Additionally, as exposure seems to occur largely at home, we recommend that parents or guardians in particular attempt to have these conversations with adolescents, even if they are challenging due to generational disproportionate use of the internet (Lupač & Sládek, 2008) and generational gap in communication about sexuality (Cohn, 2009). However, the young people in our study might have felt less distressed if they were encouraged by adults to share with them their experiences

online. In order to facilitate such conversations, it may be useful for parents and guardians to learn more about what and how their children may encounter sexual material on the internet.

It is additionally the authors' opinion, and that of other scholars (e.g. Greenfield, 2004), that adolescent school-based sex education could be strengthened to increase communication about adolescents' online sexual activities, especially as youth using the internet seem to be unintentionally sexually socialized (see also Ward, 2003). Further research can examine whether increased discussion and understanding may reduce the adolescents' feelings of vulnerability online and increase their feelings of empowerment.

Lastly, this study's findings should be considered with some limitations in mind. First, the study was conducted with participants in the Czech Republic and cultural differences may have impacted the findings. Our study was also limited by our methodology; as the interviews were conducted online, the participants' demographic backgrounds could not be validated through independent means. However, this study focused on a sensitive topic and some adolescents might have found it difficult to share their experiences in person where they could not be anonymous. This study focused on the experiences of adolescent girls who encountered bothersome sexual content online. Future research focusing on bothersome exposure to online sexual content may shed greater light on gender differences among adolescents.

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Figure 1. Overview of findings

Context of exposure to online sexual content	
Exposure in non-private space	Bothersome exposure Browsing the Internet: <i>Unusually disturbing sexual content</i>
Exposure in private space	Online interaction: <i>Breaking norms and rules</i> <i>age-specific rules or rules for relationships</i> <i>Threatening content</i>