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## Adolescents' experience with sex on the web: results from online focus groups

Kenzie A. Cameron<sup>a,\*</sup>, Laura F. Salazar<sup>b</sup>, Jay M. Bernhardt<sup>b</sup>,  
Nan Burgess-Whitman<sup>c</sup>, Gina M. Wingood<sup>b</sup>, Ralph J. DiClemente<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Program in Communication & Medicine, Division of General Internal Medicine, Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, 676 North St. Clair St., Suite 200, Chicago, IL 60611, USA*

<sup>b</sup>*Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA*

<sup>c</sup>*Harris Interactive Inc., New York, USA*

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### Abstract

To discover adolescent Internet users' experiences with, exposure to, and perceptions of sexually oriented websites (SOW) and sexually explicit websites (SEW), four web-based focus groups ( $N = 40$ ) were conducted. Participants (ages 14–17) reported high levels of exposure to SEW and SOW, which was intentional for some and unsolicited for others. Female adolescents found SEW to be socially distasteful; some adolescent males avoided SEW while others were willing consumers. Participants believed exposure to SEW had no influence on them, and reported that their parents were unaware of what they view online. Future research should explore the effects of exposure to SEW and to SOW and mediating factors.

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### Introduction

Congress and experts on youth and media have indicated that research on the effects of sexualized media on children and adolescents is an important research priority (Hogan, 2000;

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\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 312 695 1479.

E-mail address: [k-cameron@northwestern.edu](mailto:k-cameron@northwestern.edu) (K.A. Cameron).

Zillman, 2000; Villani, 2001). Unfortunately, little research on this topic has been conducted to date (Thornburgh & Lin, 2002). Television remains the most consumed medium; however, Beard (2002) suggested that the Internet is the “most important” form of media especially for adolescents. Internet use has been rising rapidly; recent estimates suggest that 75% of adolescents aged 14–17 use the Internet (US Department of Commerce, 2002).

The Internet provides access to a multitude of topics and content from innumerable websites including sexually oriented websites (SOW) and sexually explicit websites (SEW). Various studies have explored the topic of Internet-based sexual content among adults; markedly fewer studies have examined adolescents’ use of the Internet for sexually related reasons. Thus, the current study was conducted to explore and describe qualitatively the specific experiences with and perceptions of SOW (i.e. sites containing content that is sexual in nature, such as kissing, relationships, or “sexy” images) and SEW (i.e. sites containing text and images considered to be sexually explicit) among adolescent Internet users. A better understanding of the extent and perceptions of exposure to sexual content on the Internet may inform prevention efforts to limit exposure and mitigate potential negative effects.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Participants who met study eligibility criteria (age 14–17, grade 9–11, were regular online users) were recruited from a proprietary panel of more than one million Internet users throughout the US who complete occasional online surveys for Harris Interactive, a major market research company. A total of 40 adolescents (18 males, 22 females) participated in one of the four focus groups. Sample size was limited to 40 participants as this study served as formative research for a larger study.

To recruit the sample, e-mail invitations were sent to potential participants. Parents and/or legal guardians of *interested* teens were then contacted by phone and mail to obtain verbal and written consent; written adolescent assent was also obtained. These procedures insured the participants were who they purported to be. The Institutional Review Board of Emory University approved the study prior to implementation.

### *Procedures*

Each focus group was stratified by age and gender: 14–15-year old males, 14–15-year old females, 16–17-year old males, and 16–17-year old females. Qualitative data were collected using web-based focus group discussions with adolescents. The web-based focus group interface is similar to an online chat-room: participants can post comments and respond to the comments of the moderator and other participants, but are identified only by their first name. In general, the web-based chat-room is an environment in which participants feel comfortable conversing and communicating with people they may or may not know. Typically, the identity of each discussant is anonymous. Thus, there is a greater likelihood of disclosure of personal or sensitive information than might be revealed in a face-to-face focus group (Walston & Lissitz, 2000). In our online focus

groups, participants used their first name only, and if they wished to present a view that was in opposition to the tenor of the group discussion or reveal something personal, then the participant was able to send a private message to the moderator, in which case only the moderator would view the message and respond.

In addition to real-time observation and note-taking of the chat, the content from the focus group discussions were captured in text verbatim within the web-based software. The moderator presented topics for group discussion based upon the key questions of the study: the degree to which adolescents are exposed to SOW and SEW, the manner in which they are exposed, the types of SOW and SEW to which they are exposed, their perceptions of these exposures, and their experiences regarding parental monitoring of their Internet usage. Participants were asked specifically about websites that “have stories, information, or pictures about dating and relationships (the kind of sites that may have some sexy stuff, but not nudity)” (SOW); health-related websites related to sex education, sexual health, STDs and birth control (SOW); and “‘X-rated’ websites, that is websites that have stories about people having sex, show nudity or people having sex, or sites that have mini movies or audio that describe people having sex” (SEW).

The focus groups lasted approximately 1.0–1.5 h. At the conclusion of each group, \$40 was mailed to each participant<sup>1</sup>.

## Results

Adolescents were exposed to SOW through several mechanisms: intentional exposure while searching for sexual health or relationship-related information, unintentional exposure when opening incoming personal e-mail with a benign subject line, and unintentional exposure when following misleading URLs. The SOW related to health issues (e.g. safer sex) was valued by most; girls were more likely to express interest in relationship-related SOW than were boys.

Exposure to SEW ranged from “never in their lifetime” to daily exposure. Adolescents indicated that most of the exposure was accidental or unintentional. Unsolicited e-mails including explicit content or links to SEW were the most common routes of exposure. Some adolescents indicated they received 10–20 such e-mails daily. A subgroup of boys described intentional exposure to SEW, citing curiosity and sexual arousal as reasons for visiting these websites. Most girls responded negatively to SEW. The younger girls cited SEW as being “dumb” or “gross,” whereas the older girls indicated disdain for pornographic participants. No girls reported intentionally viewing SEW. They expressed concern that pornography is demeaning to women and believed exposure to SEW did not have an effect on their personal views. Some boys believed SEW to be “sick,” and had no desire to be exposed, whereas others reported SEW gave them “something nice to look at.” The younger boys discussed the pleasure of viewing naked female bodies, whereas older males discussed their ideas of what constitutes “tasteful” SEW. Boys believed exposure to SEW had no effect on their views of women or their own relationships.

Regarding parental monitoring of web behaviour, indirect monitoring (e.g. checking history files) was easily thwarted by adolescents, and third party software (e.g. Net Nanny) was often

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<sup>1</sup>Participants in this proprietary panel are accustomed to receiving a comparable amount of money in exchange for their participation.

removed by parents due to inconvenience. Adolescents perceived that their parents did not monitor them because they “don’t care” or “they trust me.”

## Discussion

Not surprising is the apparent gender difference that emerged in our study related to SEW. A number of girls reported inadvertent exposure, yet none reported intentional viewing. In contrast, a portion of boys reported that they intentionally visit SEW. This difference is not surprising as men are the primary consumers of pornographic materials (Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987). Our research does not reveal what factors account for these differences in SEW perceptions among adolescent Internet users, however. Additional research should explore whether personal characteristics, developmental or pubertal stage, sexual or relationship experience, parental monitoring, Internet access logistics, or some combination of factors can account for gender differences.

Also, we anticipated that participants would express more curiosity about and intentional exposure to SEW than what was reported. Of the over 2 billion websites accessible to an Internet user, only 1.5% is believed to contain explicit sexual content, yet these pages record a significant amount of overall web traffic (Thornburgh & Lin, 2002). Further, sex is reported to be the most frequently searched topic on the Internet (Freeman-Longo & Blanchard, 1998). Several explanations could account for the apparent lack of reported intentional exposure such as the reliance on self-report methods where participants could have responded in ways to make themselves look better. Because we assessed the viewing of controversial content, response distortion may be more pronounced (Schaeffer, 2000). Also, the adolescents in our study were “regular” Internet users who belonged to a proprietary sample. They may be different from other adolescents in that they have more experience and have explored SEW sufficiently in the past—a “been there done that” attitude. Or, it may be plausible that the participants in this study may have been affected negatively in the past by extreme content in such a way that they no longer desire to explore sexually explicit content.

A notable finding was the perception of exposure to SEW on oneself. Results show that participants perceived no impact on themselves. This perception may be problematic because previous research has documented negative effects of exposure to sexually explicit content (e.g. Donnerstein, 1984; Zillman & Bryant, 1984; Malamuth & Ceniti, 1986; Zillman, 1989; Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lashambe, 1999). It may be that adolescents are developmentally unable to judge how this content affects them or that there are other individual characteristics (e.g. liberal attitudes, attitudes toward censorship) that may affect their perceptions. Future research should explore these issues.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the data from this research. Generalizability and self-selection bias may have been introduced as participants were compensated \$40. The veracity of responses may also be questioned. For example, as with any focus group, those participants who provide the initial statements and who are the most vocal can set the tone of the group discussion. Although there was general agreement among a majority of participants, we believe that this agreement was an accurate assessment of their beliefs and not a function of a “bandwagon” effect. Moreover, at the end of each focus group, participants were

asked to indicate how truthful their answers had been; all except two of the participants indicated that they had been honest in the answers they gave. Despite the fact that the data demonstrated convergence, it is possible that some important opinions and perspectives were missed.

The results of this study seemingly raise more issues than they resolve. Notwithstanding, these results should be viewed as a springboard for future research efforts. Future research should seek to replicate and expand upon these findings with larger representative samples and through the use of quantitative methodologies. As this study was considered to be formative research, it will be used to guide our future research. For example, we plan to overcome limitations of this and previous pornography and media-effects research by using a naturalistic group prospective design and assessing actual rather than self-reported exposure. We hope to reveal whether or not exposure to sexually explicit content has an impact on adolescents. We also challenge other researchers in the field to expand upon these efforts and continue this line of important research.

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