

Rethinking Pornography + Healthy Adolescent Sexual Wellbeing

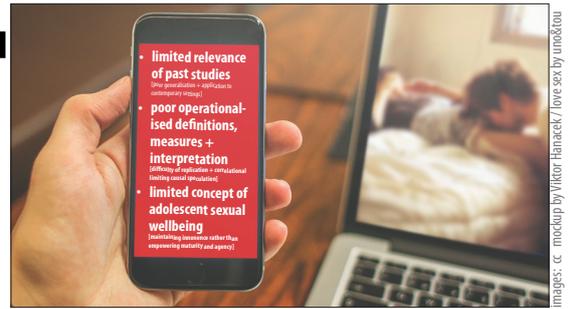
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Each generation of Australian adolescents is increasingly encountering more pornography, or Sexually Explicit Media (SEM) with usage mirroring behavioural patterns of adolescents and adults in other countries. Global research into adolescent use of SEM has tended to emphasise speculated negative effects, minimise any positive effects, as well as side-stepping design and methodological weaknesses that challenge the majority of the conclusions regarding negative impacts. SEM needs to be considered within the broader context of wider contemporary media reflecting or influencing societal attitudes towards sex, sexuality, body image, gender relations, violence or broader ideas of wellbeing. Additionally the narrow focus on the behavioural use of SEM often ignored a more holistic psychology of adolescent sexual wellbeing, beyond sexual innocence and virginity. Using a holistic positive approach to adolescent sexuality a more critical re-examination of the negative effects proposed by the literature, especially review studies, are explored. When motives and pre-existing characteristics of users of SEM are considered, strong positive effects are found for the sexually diverse, with some positive effects still for heterosexuals of both genders. Longitudinal research into the widespread voluntary consumption of SEM by Australian adolescents, showed adolescents approach SEM with critical media literacy; perceived it as a valued source of positive sexuality information to improve sexual relations, representing a more realistic diversity of sexual tastes, experience and orientations, with usage having positive effects on adolescent sexual wellbeing and sexual relationships into adulthood.

Australian adolescents are increasingly encountering more pornography, or Sexually Explicit Media (SEM) (McKee, 2010; Flood, 2007), with the vast majority being intentionally accessed easily through the internet, mirroring behavioural patterns of adolescents in other countries (Svedin, Åkerman, & Priebe, 2011). Global research into adolescent use of SEM has tended to emphasise contemporary internet pornography is more extreme in nature to pornography of generations past, the passive role of the adolescent to exposure, highlight speculated negative effects (developing unrealistic sexual attitudes and beliefs that could lead to higher anxiety and mood disorders; cultivating poor gender values; increased sexual, violent, delinquent, risk-taking, and sexual assault behaviours; increasing social isolation and vulnerability to child sexual abuse; and potential online sexual problems and addictions), minimise any positives effects, as well as side-stepping design and methodological weaknesses that challenge the majority of the conclusions regarding the negative impact of SEM on adolescents (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; McNair, 2014; Owens et al. 2012; Flood, 2009), often without any consideration of increasing acceptance and higher use by adults of SEM compared to adolescents (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). The narrow focus on the behavioural use of SEM often ignores a more holistic psychology of adolescent sexual wellbeing, beyond sexual innocence and virginity (Harden, 2014). This presentation seeks to re-examine the literature on the role of contemporary internet SEM impact, with a focus on review studies, on Australian adolescents, particularly highlighting the lack of relevance, poor operationalisation that makes replication of results difficult, and limited concept of adolescent sexual wellbeing.



Limited relevance of past studies	Poor operationalised definitions, measures + interpretation	Limited concept of adolescent sexual wellbeing
Historical context of offline porn illicit/deviant Societal changes about + to sex/sexuality/porn Discontinuous youth media consumption patterns Clinical/problematic populations studied Nature of content accessed not examined	Definitions inconsistent/vague Measures/stimulus materials ill-defined Correlation (not causation) approaches Individual differences provide better explanations Positive effects often discounted	Youth sexuality often viewed as problematic Voice of youth rarely considered or studied Youth media literacy + seeking agency ignored Diversity (race/sexuality/ability) discounted Longitudinal studies show minimal negative effects

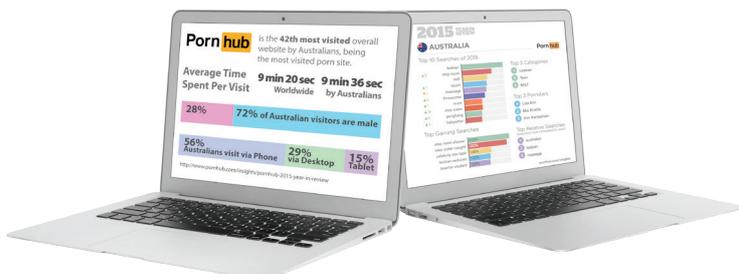


Figure 1 As most SEM viewed online are offered freely, SEM providers rely primarily on advertising and offer details of the content accessed by online adult SEM consumers to attract advertising clients. No specific studies have examined the content of adolescent online SEM use, with researchers instead just speculating that adolescents will be exposed to the worst aspects in order to offer how SEM use then leads to problematic sexual behaviours, gender attitudes and relationships. Hald et al. (2013) found no difference between genders of 4,600 Dutch 15-25 year olds in the consumption of specifically themed offline and online SEM, including materials depicting violent/forced sex, SM/bondage/fetishrelated sex, or "other" themed sex.

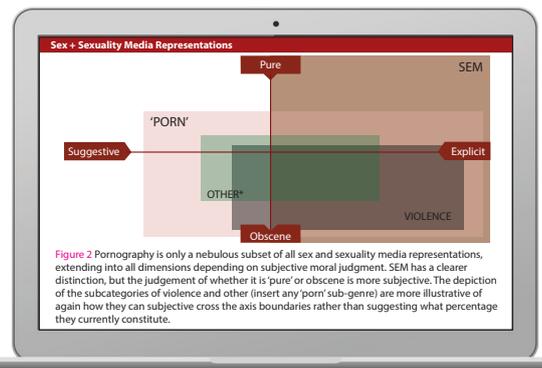


Figure 2 Pornography is only a nebulous subset of all sex and sexuality media representations, extending into all dimensions depending on subjective moral judgment. SEM has a clearer distinction, but the judgement of whether it is 'pure' or 'obscene' is more subjective. The depiction of the subcategories of violence and other (insert any 'porn' sub-genre) are more illustrative of again how they can subjective cross the axis boundaries rather than suggesting what percentage they currently constitute.

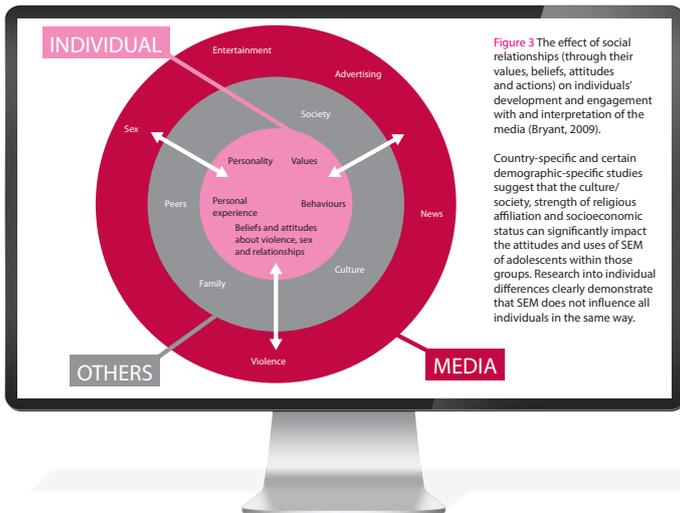


Figure 3 The effect of social relationships (through their values, beliefs, attitudes and actions) on individuals' development and engagement with and interpretation of the media (Bryant, 2009).

Country-specific and certain demographic-specific studies suggest that the culture/society, strength of religious affiliation and socioeconomic status can significantly impact the attitudes and uses of SEM of adolescents within those groups. Research into individual differences clearly demonstrate that SEM does not influence all individuals in the same way.

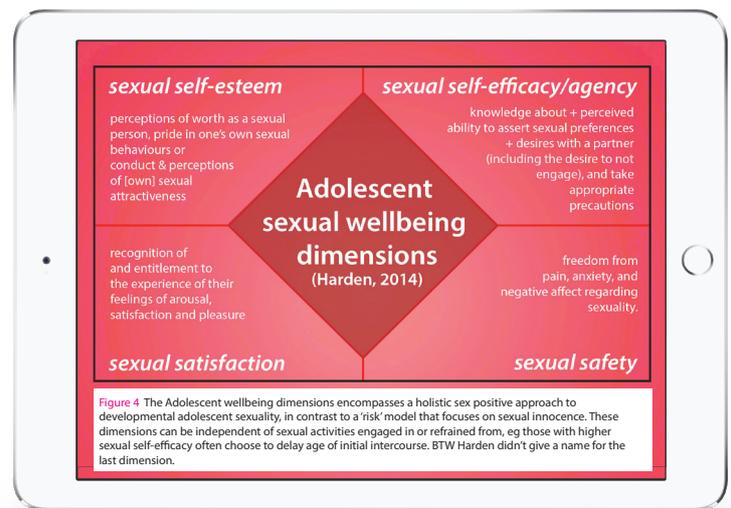


Figure 4 The Adolescent wellbeing dimensions encompasses a holistic sex positive approach to developmental adolescent sexuality, in contrast to a 'risk' model that focuses on sexual innocence. These dimensions can be independent of sexual activities engaged in or refrained from, eg those with higher sexual self-efficacy often choose to delay age of initial intercourse. BTW Harden didn't give a name for the last dimension.

Barker (2014) praises past efforts and encourages the **constant need for psychologists to bring nuanced understandings into often polarised debates about SEM**. Understanding the difference and relevance of historical studies versus contemporary studies; the importance of clear operationalised definitions, especially for replication of past results; considering any phenomena within the social and cultural contexts they exist in, and particularly looking for underlying factors rather than just convenient correlations to suggest causation has been neglected in such a morally charged field. Instead of a narrow behavioural focus, it is more helpful to see SEM use as contributing positively to adolescent sexual education, formation and wellbeing. Longitudinal research into the widespread voluntary consumption of SEM by Australian adolescents showed adolescents approach SEM with critical media literacy; perceive it as a valued source of positive sexuality information to improve sexual relations, representing a more realistic diversity of sexual tastes, experience and orientations; with usage having positive effects on adolescent sexual wellbeing and presumably their sexual relationships into adulthood.

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