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Media: Lessons For Developing Sexual Health And
Wellness Literacy

Lani El-Guebaly and Shauna Butterwick

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EXPLORING YOUNG ADULTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUALIZED MEDIA: LESSONS FOR DEVELOPING SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS LITERACY

Lani El-Guebaly

University of British Columbia

Shauna Butterwick

University of British Columbia

Abstract

Sexual health and wellness is an important topic in providing health literacy programs for young adults. Given the growing prominence of sexualized media (including sexually explicit media such as erotica and pornography) and its consumption by young adults, it is important to understand the impact of such media on their sexual health and wellness. Interviews with 20 young adults about their consumption of sexualized media were conducted to better understand how this consumption impacted their intimate relationships and self-esteem. We explored relevant literature, including health literacy, harm reduction, and feminist approaches to media. Lani El-Guebaly's professional role and experiences as a sexual health specialist also informed this study. Following analysis of the data, recommendations for effective pedagogical approaches are outlined. Bringing an asset-based, sex-positive approach is crucial, as is creating safe and inclusive spaces that use clear and confident communication. Adult educators must be well informed about sexualized media and relevant research and be aware of their own biases. We call for future research that expands and includes all representations, inclusive of diverse populations, so that we may better represent and engage young people in a manner that is fun and interactive, yet equally sensitive and effective.

Résumé

La santé et le bien-être sexuels constituent un sujet important dans l'offre aux jeunes adultes des programmes portant sur les connaissances de santé. Compte tenu de l'importance croissante des médias sexualisés (y compris les médias sexuellement explicites tels que l'érotique et la pornographie) et leur consommation par les jeunes adultes, il est important de comprendre les effets de ces médias sur leur santé et leur bien-être sexuels. Nous avons mené des entrevues auprès de 20 jeunes adultes au sujet de leur consommation des médias sexualisés pour mieux comprendre comment

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cette consommation influence leurs relations intimes et leur opinion de soi-même. Nous avons exploré la documentation pertinente, y compris les connaissances de santé, la réduction des méfaits, et les approches féministes à l'égard des médias. Le rôle et l'expérience professionnels de Lani El-Guebaly en tant que spécialiste de santé sexuelle ont également contribué à la réalisation de cette étude. Après une analyse des données, nous avançons des recommandations à propos des approches pédagogiques efficaces. Il est crucial d'apporter une approche qui repose sur l'actif et qui soit positive envers la sexualité, ainsi que de créer des espaces sécuritaires et inclusifs qui mobilisent une communication claire et assurée. Les éducateurs d'adultes doivent prendre connaissance des médias sexualisés ainsi que des recherches pertinentes ; ils doivent aussi être conscients de leurs propres préjugés. Il est nécessaire que les recherches futures se développent pour inclure toutes les représentations, y compris les diverses populations, afin de mieux représenter et engager les jeunes d'une manière qui soit amusante et interactive tout en étant sensible et efficace.

Introduction

"Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?"
—Freddie Mercury, "Bohemian Rhapsody"

A topic of concern to many public health professionals is the effect of sexualized media consumption, including its tendency to misinform and create dependence. From our perspective, sexualized media can include print, picture, or film media that uses and/or exploits the use of imagery in a way that can be construed, to varying degrees, as having sexualized elements. While addressing the problematic misinformation and misrepresentations that media can perpetuate, there is great need to both de-stigmatize the consumption of sexualized media and to contribute to deeper understandings of the unanticipated and/or undesirable effects of overexposure (be it pornography, erotic movies, gaming, sexualized advertisements, etc.) that can arise as a result of active searches, innocent stumbling, or the vast spectrum in between.

Sexual health promotion has been a passion of Lani El-Guebaly's for nearly a decade. There is something electric about walking into a room and broaching a subject that is typically saturated with embarrassment, anxiety, shame, and uncertainty and seeing the energy in the room transform. For perhaps the first time, you are offering a new idea: that interest in, and knowledge of, sexual health—and its unapologetic exploration—is not only perfectly natural and legitimate, but as important as all of the other aspects of our lives that are crucial to keeping us happy and well. Equipping young adults with the knowledge and tools they will need to make informed decisions that are the healthiest for themselves, and their intimate relationships, is paramount to the development of sexual health media literacy that contributes to a sexually—and emotionally, and socially, and psychologically—savvy and safe generation. The complexities around comprehensive sexual health promotion are often trivialized and not fully understood; this area of health education is also an important aspect of adult education that requires more attention. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of sexualized media and its impact on young adults in order to contribute to building vital sexualized media literacy programs informed by critical thinking.

Background

This study was motivated by El-Guebaly's professional work as a sexual health specialist and her desire to better understand the unhealthy impacts of the consumption of sexualized media, particularly sexually explicit media, on young adults. This understanding was a result of her professional responsibilities, which included collaboratively creating curricula for various sexual wellness topics (including sexualized media literacy), facilitating workshops and observing comments from participants, managing an anonymous sexual health question-and-answer inbox and noting themes, and having various informal conversations on the topic. El-Guebaly (2014) was particularly concerned with the potential of sexually explicit media to contribute to sexual desensitization in real-life partnerships (compromising pleasure and performance satisfaction), increased rates of sexualized violence (due to the often erroneous assumption that certain acts seen on screen are enjoyable and/or consensual for real-life partners—hence a communication breakdown resulting in boundary violations), and increased body image issues (due to on-screen and real-life exemplifications not matching up). Sexualized media is also problematic in light of the misinformation about safer sex practices that can contribute to the transmission of infection.

Thus, the goals for this study were to (1) shed light on how consumption of sexually explicit media may have influenced sexual relationships, sexual satisfaction, body image, self-esteem, or a mix therein of a group of self-identified straight, cisgender young adults, and (2) share the results to support public health professionals and adult educators, working in diverse contexts, engage in critical conversations with young adults about sexualized media and their effect on sexual health and wellness. Our hope is that this study will contribute to the fields of public health and adult education by assisting both young adults and adult educators who are seeking ways to (1) deconstruct sexualized media for the sake of optimizing emotional and sexual health, and (2) obtain educational tools to help increase emotional and sexual well-being. Given the varying attitudes and perceptions related to sexualized media, it is important to clarify that we are not promoting an anti-sexualized media agenda. Sexualized media is, after all, largely entrenched in our popular culture, and it is important to acknowledge that we are all human beings with natural, healthy curiosities and desires that are satisfied in a variety of different ways. We believe that moderation is the best approach; that is, a level of consumption that still allows a person ample room for excitement by real-life stimuli and falls within a lifestyle that still allows for a variety of other real-life interests and hobbies that bring joy and satisfaction. This stands in contrast to levels of consumption that breed “impaired control of one's behavior,” increased hunger or cravings to achieve satisfaction, and “diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behavior and interpersonal relationships” (Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine, n.d.).

Framing the Study

This study is informed by public health discussions and the central role adult education plays in health education (English, 2012) as well as research on health and media literacy, particularly feminist media studies. While health literacy has been the focus of much research and practice, there has been little attention to the importance of media literacy as a crucial aspect of health literacy.

Health Literacy

Health literacy refers to “the wide range of skills and competencies that people develop and seek out, comprehend, evaluate and use health information and concepts to make informed choices, reduce health risks and increase quality of life” (Zarcadoolas, Pleasant, & Greer, 2005, p. 3). It is an important area of public health (as well as adult education) that, in the last decade or so, has been receiving much more attention, particularly in relation to the social determinants of health (e.g., Kickbusch, 2001). For example, health literacy has been identified as a key component of international and national initiatives, including adult basic education programs, especially those oriented to poorer communities with lower levels of education (Soricone, Rudd, Santos, & Capistrant, 2007, p. 2) and family literacy programs (Mooney & Prins, 2013). While many applaud the movement to promote health literacy, the individualistic and narrow approaches oriented to helping individuals read and understand health information to become more compliant have been challenged. In an empowerment approach, health literacy is regarded as a dynamic social practice and health literacy an asset that helps individuals navigate and take more control of their health (Nutbeam, 2009; Pleasant & Kuruvilla, 2008). This latter view aligns with Freire’s (1970) critical orientation to literacy and his emphasis on reading the word to read the world.

Another key notion that has informed public health initiatives (including health literacy) in British Columbia and other parts of Canada is harm reduction (Logan & Marlatt, 2010; Vancouver Coastal Health, n.d.). It refers to an approach that meets people where they are with their choices, without judgment or agenda, beyond helping to minimize risks such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV infections (Inciardi, 2000; Tucker, Donovan, & Marlatt, 2001). Within the harm reduction movement, gender, sexism, and the oppression of women are important considerations in any strategy. “In order to increase effectiveness of these strategies, it is pertinent to introduce a gender lens to harm reduction initiatives” (British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health, 2010, p. 2). A concern for gender dimensions of public health provision is also highlighted in the *Report on the state of public health in Canada: Influencing health—the importance of sex and gender* (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012) which states that “a sex- and gender-based approach is part of systematically planned interventions that are consistent with population health approaches” (para 18). Bringing a gender and anti-oppressive lens to bear on the development of critical health literacy was an important consideration in this study of young adults’ consumption of sexualized media.

Media Literacy

Given the extent of information about health, and in this case sexual practices, available through media, media literacy needs to become a part of health literacy initiatives. Furthermore, Tisdell (2008) pointed to the potential role of media in educating about matters of equity, diversity, and social consciousness. Equally important, as outlined by Canadian media studies experts Pungente and O’Malley (1999), is the role of the media in shaping values and attitudes. Thus, critical media education can contribute to creating critical viewers who can unearth the ideologies and values being promoted.

Feminist approaches to critical media studies refine this orientation. As van Zoonen (1994, p. 2) has pointed out, there is no “straightforward, univocal and identifiable feminist voice”; rather, there is “enormous heterogeneity of feminist media theory.”

Within this diversity of feminist media studies, however, cultural studies—“a concern with manifestations of popular culture and issues of representations and collective identities”—has become more dominant (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 6). One of the recurring areas of inquiry is the role of sexualized media in female objectification and associated gendered power imbalances. An orientation to objectification highlights those elements of “a sociocultural context that sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman’s worth with her body’s appearance and sexual functions” (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011, p. 6). Sexual objectification has negative influences on women’s mental health and occurs both overtly and covertly; women often assume the process of self-objectification and become focused on their appearance rather than their competence.

Feminist movements have a long history of bringing critical and sex-positive conversations to the discussion of the impacts of sexualized media. For example, the Women’s Media Centre (WMC; see www.womensmediacenter.com) has been working to bring about equal representation of all genders within all forms of media, given that media plays a crucial role in the culture of any society. WMC is particularly concerned with how girls and women are portrayed as sexual objects.

Sexualized Media Studies

For the purposes of this research, sexualized media, a debated term, includes print, picture, or film media that use and/or exploit the use of imagery in a way that can be construed, to varying degrees, as having sexualized elements. Within many researchers’ definitions, sexualized media encompasses pornography, which can be defined as “the explicit depiction or exhibition of sexual activity in literature, films or photography that is intended to stimulate erotic, rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings” (Media Smarts, 2013, p. 1). Regardless of the particular concept one ascribes to, it is hard to refute that sexualized media is an omnipresent part of Western culture and sexualized media is also becoming an increasingly significant feature of young people’s social fabric as indicated in one trans-American study that found 96% of adolescents had Internet access and over half were exposed to pornography (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009 p. 160). While sexualized media is becoming commonplace in the social fabric of young people, there are also notable gender differences: “When it comes to seeking out online pornography not only are [young men] more likely to look for online pornography but those [young men] who do consume quite a lot of it” (Steeves, 2014, p. 21).

There is still considerable debate about the impacts of the Internet and the sexualized content it so readily makes available. Online sexualized media affects adults of all ages; however, perhaps since the Internet is still a relatively new medium, adolescents who have grown up with this media source have typically been the subjects of study; few studies have explored the impacts of sexualized media on adolescents who have moved into adulthood.

Research to date points to how sexualized media consumption can influence attitudes, sometimes significantly, including how behaviours within partnerships, in addition to individual attitudes, have been impacted. “Prolonged exposure can lead to...sexual callousness, including more negative attitudes towards sexual partners [and] pornographic influence may not be restricted to attitudes; sexual behavior can also be affected” (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009 p. 156). While there is limited evidence to support that the impacts of sexualized media move from attitudes into behaviour, Braun-Courville and

Rojas argue that young adults who frequent sexualized media sources "are more likely to engage in high-risk sexual activities [and] more likely to possess sexually permissive attitudes [which] vary by the degree of exposure" (p. 160). Carroll et al. (2008) also found correlations between sexualized media consumption and riskier sexual behaviours.

Studies are beginning to examine sexualized media's impacts upon relationship dynamics. For example, Brown and L'Engle (2009) found a positive correlation between sexualized media and less progressive attitudes to gender roles. Studies are also showing a link between the frequency of consumption and the propensity toward more sexually aggressive behaviour. For example, Hald, Malamuth, and Yuen (2010) carried out a meta-analysis and concluded that there was "a significant overall relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes supporting violence against women" (p. 18). Ybarra, Mitchell, Hamburger, Diener-West, and Leaf (2011), in a study with youth aged 10 to 15, also found that "intentional exposure to violent X-rated material over time predicted an almost 6-fold increase in the odds of self-reported sexually aggressive behavior" (p. 1). Similarly, researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (Culzac, 2015) recently interviewed 130 teenagers aged 16 to 18 about their sexual behaviour and uncovered a potential "climate of coercion" (p. 1), particularly as it relates to a "seem[ingly] unmentionable" (p. 1) act of anal intercourse among "heterosexual" partners. They found it "appeared to be painful, risky and coercive, particularly for women," while males spoke of "being expected to persuade or coerce reluctant partners"; they further found that some young people "normalized coercive, painful and unsafe anal sex" (p. 1). Of utmost interest was how young people "rarely spoke in terms of mutual exploration of sexual pleasure," and the primary reason young people cited for their interest and engagement in the act was that boys "wanted to copy what they saw in pornography" (p. 1).

While adverse effects have been highlighted, it is important that we also acknowledge the benefits of certain sexual media, particularly sexualized media that illustrates diversity and includes bodies of all shapes, sizes, ages, and colours in sex-positive ways, highlighting safer sex tools and practices, proper consent communications, mutual pleasure, and respectful treatment and/or portrayals. Sexualized media has become a primary educational source because of its "accessibility, affordability, and anonymity" (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009, p. 161). Whereas years ago young people were unable to find access to information, they can now easily do so and perhaps gain the knowledge and confidence necessary to advocate for their own sexual health. While there is a plethora of credible, informative, and positive sources of sexual media, there is also an overwhelmingly disproportionate (and often deceptive to the uncritical eye) amount of flawed, false, or fabricated media and "information." Thus, while there is certainly great potential for quality information, such as about reproductive anatomy, pregnancy prevention, and sexually transmitted infection risk assessment and subsequent reduction, this pursuit of knowledge may inadvertently lead to "sexually explicit materials with [unsettling] pornography, violence against partners, or women as sexual objects" (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009, p. 157).

Given the unpredictability of computer pop-ups and the ambiguity of certain websites, other materials are often encountered in the search for genuine sexual health and wellness information. Braun-Courville and Rojas (2008) found that among Internet users aged 10 to 17 who were exposed to pornographic content, "66% of [it] was described as unwanted exposure" (p. 159). Smith's (2012) study, which included interviews with 51 youth regarding

their use of the Internet to learn about sex, found that these participants encountered both progressive as well as unrealistic content.

Mattebo, Larsson, Tyden, Olsson, and Haggstrom-Nordin (2012) produced some interestingly paradoxical findings. While respondents indicated that the widespread access to pornography was “inducing fear and anxiety” (p. 40) and discriminatory portrayals of body ideals, sexuality, and relationships, subjects also indicated that sexualized media’s prevalence “contributed to their confidence in having a knowledge base; they also regarded pornographic sexualized media as ‘a source of inspiration’” (p. 40). Given that “pleasure can at times undermine one’s ability to be critical...continually asking and reinforcing the importance of analysis is crucial for the development of critical media literacy” (Tisdell, 2008, p. 63).

Research to date indicates that the impact of sexualized media consumption is complex and requires further study. It is important to recognize the benefits of increased information available to inquisitive young people and that as health educators we stay mindful of the vulnerabilities that come with using the Internet for sexual health information and learning. We need to equip our young people to navigate the ubiquitous world of media with a cautious and critical eye. The study methodology is summarized, in the next section, followed by the findings.

Research Questions and Methodology

Three primary questions informed the study: How may the consumption of sexualized media (1) impact real-life intimate relationships? (related to communication, happiness); (2) impact real-life sexual response? (related to arousal, satisfaction); and (3) impact one’s self-concept? (related to body image, self-esteem).

A purposive sampling approach, “a non-probability form of sampling...to sample cases/participants in a strategic way” (Bryman, 2012, p. 418) was used. The selection criteria included young adults between the ages of 19 and 29 who self-identified as straight and cisgender who were willing to acknowledge their own or their partner’s intentional consumption of sexualized media. Since this was a small-scale study, we felt it beneficial to limit the criteria in this way to contribute to a deeper exploration of this group. It is important to note that the impact of sexualized media concerns people of all identities and orientations. Future interest and investment into this public health issue will undoubtedly expand and include the attention that is due to all representations, inclusive of diverse populations.

Working in public health for the past decade enabled El-Guebaly to approach this study from a genuine health perspective, one that does not shame or judge, as well as form connections with a myriad of progressive, open-minded individuals who were well-practised at speaking about sexual health. We used this network to find participants for the study. After first conducting some trial questioning sessions with some of El-Guebaly’s peers, as suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2014), we decided that informal, semi-structured interviews that offered encouragement and documentation of participant-led personal testimonies and narratives were appropriate. Given the sensitive nature of the content, it was of utmost importance to offer participants the respect and control to choose their own pace and tell their own stories, uninterrupted and, largely, undirected.

In the spring of 2014, recruitment flyers were posted within consenting coffee shops and office buildings. Twenty participants responded, including 12 self-identified straight, cisgender men and 8 self-identified straight, cisgender women. Most participants were of European ancestry, though some were from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds representative of the populations within the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Their educational levels and occupations varied, and all lived in Vancouver (see Table 1). Once consent was obtained, all of the interviews were conducted within Vancouver.

Interviews were as short as 10 minutes and as long as 60 minutes, and each explored the following areas: frequency of exposure, intended or unintended; beliefs about possible impacts on personal life, self-concept, self-esteem, and intimate relationships; and more general views about the potential impacts of sexualized media.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation
John	22	Graphic designer
Mike	21	Student, engineering
Dan	24	Teacher
Tom	28	Resident, pharmacy
Paul	20	Student, music
Matt	26	Engineer
Nick	22	Photographer
Will	24	Sales
Dave	19	Student, commerce
Rob	22	Postal worker
Mark	27	HVAC technician
Eric	21	Student, human kinetics
Jane	24	Geologist
Sara	24	Student, commerce
Amy	23	Pilates instructor
Lisa	25	Engineer
Jen	29	Physiotherapist
Kim	22	Esthetician
Jess	23	Sonographer
Ann	22	Student, social work

The first step in analysis involved listening to each tape and making some initial notes about the general tone and content. In the second step, those sections of the interviews

that related to the above questions were transcribed. In the third step, those sections were revisited for subthemes, with attention paid to similarities and differences, patterns and nuances, and matters of gender. Each participant was sent a synthesis of the data used in this paper.

Findings

The conversations with these young adults went very smoothly; El-Guebaly was able to foster a genuine degree of trust and rapport with her research participants that elicited candid testimony and honesty.

Consumption Practices

After being asked about their sexualized media viewing habits, 12 men described how they indeed consumed sexualized media to some degree. Nine indicated that they felt they sometimes watched more sexualized media than they should, believing it did impede on their real-life relationships to some degree:

I think what I [consume] plays a part in my desire [for intimacy] with my girlfriend...in some ways, I suppose, it feels like my interest in being with her has less to do with her and more to do with whether something I watched online got me excited or not, which sometimes feels perfectly fine but sometimes feels messed up. (John)

This participant, along with some others, was forthcoming in acknowledging that his consumption had impacted his relationship. His motivation for intimacy had become more oriented to trying something he had observed online. He was also aware of the adverse consequences of the split or dissociation between his relationship with his girlfriend and his interest in trying something new. This finding echoes previous studies in the literature that indicated the impact of consumption (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Mattebo et al., 2012); however, our study found that participants had more awareness of the impacts.

When the women were asked about their consumption practices, five participants indicated that they had consumed sexualized media to some degree, and one indicated she felt she sometimes watched more sexualized media than she should. Seven women described how they believed their partner consumed sexualized media on a regular basis, and one said she was not sure. A 23-year-old woman's response illustrated sensitivity to gender matters in women's consumption practices. She made the case for how consuming pornography that is respectful and caring can contribute in a healthy way to women's sexuality, but she also noted that this kind of sexualized media is not the norm:

It's important to me that it's acknowledged that many women like to seek out pornographic material too. To deny this fact is to deny us our sexuality. I think we are just, super generally speaking, pickier about the kind of stuff that turns us on. For me, there needs to be a certain level of care and respect present within what I watch or read in order for me to get into it. It doesn't have to be lovey-dovey or anything but content that is without imagination and is just about penetration—or worse, is depressingly aggressive or degrading to one of the partners—just doesn't do it for me [and] unfortunately, that's most of what is out there! (Jess)

As this quote suggests, some participants in this study were more discerning in their consumption of sexualized media than perhaps other studies have indicated. Jess drew attention to her need to find sexualized media that is respectful, and equally pleasurable, for all parties involved.

Impact on Sexual Performance

After being asked if sexualized media affected their physical performance in any way, seven men indicated that they sometimes had a difficult time achieving sexual completion within partnerships without recalling online imagery for support. Eight men indicated they could often achieve arousal through online media more quickly than in real-life experiences. Three participants noted some frustration regarding their "body betraying them" despite thinking and feeling that they were sufficiently aroused by their partner. A response from a 22-year-old man illustrated awareness of how unintentionally the imagery of sexualized media had interfered with his intimate relationship with his partner:

I'm usually okay [during intercourse] until I'm about to [finish] and then, as much as I love [my partner] I just find myself thinking about [name of actress and asset] right at the end, without even really realizing I'm doing it, until it's too late. I know everyone fantasizes about other people and that it's normal—but when it's in the moment like...THAT, then that's when I do feel a bit guilty about it because it's almost like I have no control [and] like I need [to recall what I watched earlier] in order to actually [reach orgasm]. Sometimes I just want to be with [my partner] and, like, be present, when I want to be instead of having to sort of check out in order to [finish]. (Nick)

Six men indicated inconsistent arousal and subsequent performance in real-life experiences compared to solitary online arousal and sexual completion that was more of a "sure thing." Three of these men indicated a frequency of inconsistent arousal that was enough to lead to some mild depression and/or feelings of inadequacy. One 26-year-old was aware that his consumption of sexualized media had significantly impacted his performance and his intimate relationship, but he was taking steps to try to intervene.

I do actually think I watch too much [name of pornographic site]. I didn't use to think so, 'cause I know everyone watches, but now I do because I realized that I need it in order to not be entirely useless in bed. I usually watch it just before my [partner] comes over to get me [in the mood]. I worry that if it was just her that I was relying on that I wouldn't maybe be able to [perform and satisfy her] in the way I know how to do on my own. I guess that's kinda sad saying it out loud like that. Anyway, I've actually made an effort to watch less porn because it's been freaking me out lately [and] I actually even have it written down beside my workout goals just so I can remind myself, so I don't get too hooked. (Matt)

As for what the women said, three participants indicated they were sometimes encouraged to watch sexualized media with their partners. Of these participants, one indicated that she enjoyed incorporating pornography into the routine and sharing this with her partner, while two women indicated that the content did not appeal to them nor

did it contribute positively to their sexual fulfillment. As one 24-year-old commented, her own imagination can contribute to her enjoyment as much as, or perhaps even more than, sexualized media:

I wouldn't say [sexualized media] does nothing for me, some of it can be exciting, sure, especially at first, when it's anticipation, but—honestly—I get bored of the repetitive, unoriginal actions rather quickly and would much rather (and often do) just close my eyes and allow my imagination—and the memories and thoughts from within it—get me excitable, [as] this usually works way better. (Jane)

In this study, this group of young adults expressed a range of engagements with sexualized media and a range of responses spanning feelings of enjoyment to being bored. What this also suggests is that viewing sexualized media can be limiting and brings into focus the role of the imagination and other more self-determined ways to bring pleasure.

Impact on Relationships and Self-Esteem

Broaching the topic of how sexualized media may have affected one's self-concept and/or one's relationship often led to the participants being even more reflective. Five young men expressed some frustration that their partners were not always open to exploring the vast sexual repertoire they had found online. In contrast to this, seven indicated they had not attempted to merge the two worlds and/or had opted not to broach the subject of reproducing what they found and enjoyed online with their partner. They described fear of rejection or judgment as the motivation for keeping this to themselves. One 24-year-old spoke about his fear and how he gets more from his consumption compared to his relationship:

I don't want [my partner] knowing what I'm into online. I wouldn't want her to [know] because I think she'd probably think of me differently [plus] that's just fantasy stuff anyway, even though I guess I wish she was into it because [while] I'm ashamed to admit it, it's way more exciting than just the regular stuff we do—our routine. It's great and she's great, it's just not the same feeling. (Dan)

Six women mentioned feelings of being subjected to the expectations that sexualized media created, to some degree. Their comments suggest a sense of objectification and feeling as though they had been “experimented upon,” expected to enjoy certain “tricks,” and pressured to “perform a certain way.” Interestingly, only two believed their partners were able to compartmentalize and disassociate their pornographic interest from their real-life partnerships. A 22-year-old commented on how she felt sexualized media had negatively influenced a past relationship and led to forms of objectification:

I know that porn affected my last relationship because I swear I just knew that some of the stuff he came up with was just him doing what he saw other guys do [within pornography] and it wasn't even that great for me [and] that's the strangest part: I seriously think he cared more about doing things that way he thought “looked” right rather than doing things the way he thought would feel good, like, feel good for me. For us. Honestly, there may as well have been a camera in our room, too! Like, in how many languages can one convey “No thanks! Next!?” (Kim)

As far as how sexualized media may affect self-esteem, 10 men confessed to varying feelings of inadequacy due to their natural inclination to compare their size and performance to what they witnessed on-screen. Only two men said it did not lead to any discernable feelings of inadequacy for them. Below is an insightful reflection expressed over the span of several minutes by, ironically, the youngest male participant (19 years old):

I'd be hard pressed—pardon the pun!—to find any guy who said that he didn't wish he looked more like what we see on [pornographic site]. Of course we wish we [were larger] and could last forever. I seriously think some young guys think that's what's normal, that that's the bar, and they probably feel really [badly] for it. That's when it's no fun; when what is supposed to be fun and a way to zone out and feel good turns into making you feel bad about yourself, like what you have to offer is not going to be enough. (Dave)

This interview question—and the response above—points to how crucial the practice of critical thinking and reflection is for our health and well-being. It also speaks to how important it is to have conversations about these topics; we discuss this further in the next section.

When asked about how sexualized media may or may not have affected their self-concept and/or self-esteem, seven women mentioned that their body image was indeed negatively impacted by “unattainable,” “bogus,” “backwards,” or “too perfect” sexualized media representations. One 24-year-old expressed critique of the distorted images of women's bodies that dominate sexualized media and expressed despair about how she was negatively impacted by these images. What is interesting is how she turned her critique inward, expressing harsh judgment for her inability to resist the tendency to self-judge, which is consistent with the findings of previously discussed literature (Mattebo et al., 2012; Szymanski et al., 2011):

I want to say that it doesn't affect me. I'm educated and know the [sexualized media site] selections are cast accordingly and the distortions that take place but, still, it skews my perceptions of my own body; even my performance sometimes. Which is crazy, because you are doing what is supposed to be this highly pleasurable thing and yet you find yourself in your head worried about how you look or how you sound; if it's at all like the girls in the videos, like maybe what the guys expect. I hate admitting that [and] it worries me because I think of all the girls, and guys for that matter, who aren't as aware of the difference between what's real and fake, and how if it could still impact ME then, ya, it's actually rather disturbing, isn't it? (Sara)

Another woman was quite resolute about how it did not affect her because she knew it was “not reality” and that any source of negative, or positive for that matter, body image influences came “more from real-life depictions of beauty, such as from friends and siblings” (Amy).

Discussion on Findings: Gender Matters

This study adds to the existing literature and research, confirming, as other studies have, the gender differences in relation to consumption and the impact on intimate relationships and self-esteem. The study extends this finding in that the responses from both men and women illustrated some degree of critical awareness of the unhealthy impacts of the consumption of sexualized media. While the young men spoke about performance issues, the young women spoke more about pleasure. The young men's performance orientation raises questions about dominant approaches to sexualized media and notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This link and the differences with respect to consumption and impact are worthy of further exploration in future studies. Some of the women spoke about feeling some pressure from their partners to participate in viewing pornographic material. They also made it clear that respectful and caring images in sexualized media can contribute to a woman's healthy sexuality; and observed that this is rarely found in most pornography. As noted earlier, the participants for this study were straight, cisgender-identified young adults, and much more research needs to be done with more diverse communities for improved representation.

As a result of this study, El-Guebaly feels increased confidence that her research into the impacts of sexualized media, which she had been privately forecasting, is indeed valid. The privilege of interviewing 20 people who spoke so candidly about a subject so often laced with shame and embarrassment was encouraging, as it is precisely through more dialogue that we can begin to illuminate these gendered dimensions and break down social pressures to stay silent about issues that very much affect our relationship dynamics and health.

Toward a Sexualized Media Literacy Program

In light of the findings of this study, and that of other research that has explored the impact of consumption, we recommend that the following be considered in the design and delivery of sexualized media literacy programs.

First, the findings of this study indicate that these young adults were actively involved in the consumption of sexualized media and had some awareness of the impacts on their relationships, sense of self, and body images. A common adult education principle is meeting people where they are at and bringing an asset-based approach (English, 2012). In that regard, programs should not assume that participants are unaware or lack experience; this study shows that some young adults are already doing their own degree of critical analysis. Exploring participants' current understanding and level of analysis about the impact of consumption is a good way to start. Participants could be invited to engage in self-reflection and awareness exercises, perhaps even answering some of the questions that were asked of participants in this study. They could also be asked to explore how sexualized media could meet its objectives while better illustrating respectful relationships/liasons that showcase equitable treatment and pleasure for all parties. An asset-based orientation is also relevant to bringing a sex-positive orientation.

Second, and closely related to the first point, the findings of this study illustrate the importance of bringing a gendered sensitivity to the conversation. This involves facilitating discussions about how dominant approaches can reinforce both hegemonic masculinity and the objectification of, largely, women. These discussions could additionally support participants' abilities to critically deconstruct sexualized media depictions and subsequently

encourage them to engage with sexualized media more discerningly. Pinkleton (2012) found that young people who received comprehensive sexualized media literacy training declared and demonstrated an enhanced understanding of how the media can manipulate perceptions of sex and were more likely to assert that sexual depictions found in the media were false and sensationalized.

Third, to engage in a gender analysis (while staying mindful of the gender spectrum) and have candid conversations about consumption, it is crucial to create a safe forum where young people, of all genders and orientations, can begin to learn how to talk about the pressures and stressors that the pervasiveness of sexualized media may evoke, in addition to issues related to sexual wellness and emotional well-being. Creating a safe space begins with ensuring that all voices and contributions are honoured and validated. Group guidelines should be established about confidentiality and the use of oppressive language. Educators can explore with participants how such language and ideas enter our shared discourse, how this language can have significant impact, and how any expressions will be adequately debriefed. It is also important to recognize the paradoxical relationship between safety and risk. Safety is important insofar as it enables some risk taking in discussing sexualized media.

Fourthly, closely associated with the need to create safe spaces, programs should create conditions to support clear and confident communication and authentic discussions that enable participants to practise such engagements in their current and future romantic and/or sexual partnerships. When designing and implementing sexualized media literacy, we, as adult educators, must also be aware of our dispositions around sexuality and any discomforts/biases that could compromise confidence and clarity when engaging young adults in a sex-positive way. Comprehensive facilitation training that exposes adult educators to the research and helps them reflect on their own knowledge and biases is key to creating the open, candid conversations that can successfully build capacity and contribute positively to sexual health and well-being.

Fifth, while it is crucial to any program to address the potentially adverse effects of the consumption of sexualized media, it is equally important to appreciate and explore how sexualized media can also contribute positively to sexual health and wellness. Not only does consumption help satisfy natural curiosities and desires, but there is a plethora of sex-positive online learning tools that can provide access to information that can help develop individuals' sexual understanding and agency. We must "consider the complex ways in which young people engage with media and the potential for an increasingly visible sexual culture that might help young people to develop a broad range of sexual competencies and to navigate and function in an increasingly complex and diverse media...world" (Bale, 2011, p. 311).

Conclusions

In this study, interviews with 20 self-identified straight, cisgender young adults were conducted to explore their consumption of sexualized media and how that consumption may have impacted their intimate relationships and self-esteem. Informed by health literacy and feminist media studies, as well as by El-Guebaly's professional role and experiences as a sexual health specialist, several key findings emerged. They confirmed previous studies

and brought attention to how young adults already have some critical awareness; the study deepened knowledge about gender differences in consumption practices and impact.

Implications of the findings for program development and delivery include: (1) building on the existing knowledge of participants, (2) bringing a gender analysis, (3) creating conditions for safety, (4) supporting clear and confident communication assisted by facilitation training, and (5) making room for the acknowledgement and discussion of positive impacts. All of these dimensions can help to reduce the potentially adverse impacts of the consumption of sexualized media—particularly the cultivation and proliferation of certain attitudes that may condone and/or perpetuate sexualized violence. The overall objective of critical media literacy is to make “people aware of how media is produced and advertised, and teach them critical thinking skills, with the hope that they will be less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors promoted by the media” (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009, p. 161).

With respect to future research, this was a small-scale study in a specific geographic location with a particular straight, cisgender-identifying age group, so more research with diverse groups is needed to deepen our understanding of how certain types of sexualized media may have different effects on different people, why this is the case, and what we can learn from this to develop effective pedagogy. In conclusion, we call for a thoughtful approach to critical media literacy that will help mitigate potentially adverse impacts on self-esteem, unrealistic body image, and desensitization leading to insufficient arousal and sexual satisfaction, and the real-life reproduction of performance-based behaviours that could perpetuate objectification and sexualized violence among the very young people for whom we care deeply.

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