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Dutch Adolescents' Motives, Perceptions, and Reflections Toward Sex-Related Internet Use: Results of a Web-Based Focus-Group Study

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The Internet offers adolescents unique opportunities to actively shape their own sexual media environment. The aim of this study was to gain in-depth insight into Dutch adolescents' motives, perceptions, and reflections toward Internet use for (a) finding information or advice related to romance and sexuality; (b) searching for and viewing pornographic or erotic material; and (c) romantic and sexual communication (i.e., cybersex/sexting). Data were collected through 12 Web-based focus groups (36 adolescents aged 16 to 19 years, 72.2% girls) and analyzed through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. The themes that emerged from the focus-group discussions suggest that sex-related Internet use is a complex and ambivalent experience for adolescents. Sex-related Internet use seems an increasingly normalized and common phenomenon. Participants perceived the Internet as a useful source of sexual information, stimulation, inspiration, and communication. Yet they discussed a range of negative consequences and risks related to sex-related online behaviors, particularly concerning pornography's potential to create unrealistic expectations about sex and sexual attractiveness. Participants generally believed they had the necessary skills to navigate through the online sexual landscape in a responsible way, although they believed other young people could be influenced inadvertently and adversely by sex-related online content.

As a consequence of the rapid development and availability of Internet-enabled devices (e.g., laptops, smartphones, tablets), today's youth grow up in a world that offers them 24/7 access to online information, communication, and entertainment (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). This pervasiveness has made the Internet an essential factor in the study of developmental processes during adolescence, including processes in the domain of sexuality. Compared to other media, the Internet is a highly sexualized environment, characterized by an abundance of all conceivable kinds of sexual materials (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). More important, the Internet offers adolescents unique opportunities to actively shape their own sexual media environment. Adolescents can

browse through existing sexual materials; they can create, distribute, and exchange feedback on sex-related content; and they can engage in real-time, virtual sexual interactions with other people (Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). Together, these features make the Internet a particularly attractive medium through which to explore, experiment, and express sexual interests (Boies, 2002; Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2000).

Over the past decade, a number of studies from various parts of the world have addressed the role of the Internet in adolescent sexual development. In doing so, researchers have distinguished several types of sex-related online behaviors, typically in terms of the goals these behaviors serve. For instance, Boies (2002) and Goodson et al. (2000) have differentiated online sexual activities in terms of information seeking, sexual gratification, and relationships. Similarly, Shaughnessy, Byers, and Walsh (2011) have differentiated nonarousal sexual activities (e.g., seeking sexual information), solitary-arousal activities (e.g., viewing sexually explicit Internet material), and partnered-arousal activities (e.g., exchanging messages of a sexual nature with another person). Despite the valuable insights these studies have produced, research in this area is limited in two important

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ways. First, most studies have used quantitative research methods to study overall effects of particular sex-related online behaviors on sexual developmental outcomes. Less attention has been paid to the various contexts in which sex-related Internet use may take place, as well as young people's differential motives, perceptions, and reflections toward the use of the Internet for sex-related purposes (Attwood, 2005). Second, although several studies did use qualitative methods to gain insight into adolescents' views on sex-related Internet use (Attwood, 2005; Häggström-Nordin, Sandberg, Hanson, & Tydén, 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010), most of these studies focused on young people's experiences and opinions with regard to sexually explicit Internet material (SEIM) or pornography. As a consequence, adolescents' motives, perceptions, and reflections toward other sex-related online behaviors that relate to information seeking, entertainment, and communication are less well understood.

A more in-depth understanding of adolescents' sex-related Internet use is important for several reasons. First, as different sex-related online behaviors may serve different goals, knowledge on specific motives of adolescents to engage in such behaviors is necessary. For example, studies investigating online sexual information seeking among adolescents have mainly focused on searching strategies to find sexual health information and the quality of information obtained online (e.g., Buih, Daley, Fuhrmann, & Smith, 2009; Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005; Simon & Daneback, 2013). However, adolescents may also use the Internet to seek different types of information, such as advice or inspiration for enhancing their sex lives. On a related note, qualitative studies among Swedish 14- to 20-year-old adolescents found that searching for and viewing pornography may serve different purposes, and that attitudes and feelings toward pornography are complex and often ambivalent (Häggström-Nordin et al., 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). Second, sex-related online behaviors are not equally common among adolescents. For example, a well-established difference is that boys search for and view pornography more often than girls do (e.g., Cameron et al., 2005; Doornwaard, Bickham, Rich, ter Bogt, & van den Eijnden, 2015; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Shaughnessy et al., 2011). However, not much is known about adolescents' underlying perceptions and reflections toward sex-related online behaviors that may explain such differential engagement patterns. Moreover, these perceptions and reflections may also vary by nation and culture (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg, & Livingstone, 2014; Brugman, Caron, & Rademakers, 2010). To our knowledge, no qualitative studies have investigated Dutch adolescents' motives, perceptions, and reflections toward sex-related Internet use. Third, whereas pornography consumption is a predominantly receptive behavior, romantic and sexual communication on the Internet is notably interactive. A relatively new phenomenon in this domain is *sexting*, a form of cybersex behavior that involves sending sexual photos or videos through smartphones (Lenhart, 2009; Temple et al., 2012; Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013). To understand the potential

consequences of sexting in adolescent sexual development, it is important to gain insight into the contexts in which this behavior takes place, as well as in adolescents' perceptions of this behavior and its potential risks.

This study examined adolescent boys' and girls' motives, perceptions, and reflections toward Internet use for three different sex-related purposes: (a) finding information or advice related to romance and sexuality; (b) searching for and viewing pornographic or erotic material; and (c) sexual communication (particularly cybersex/sexting). By combining these three behaviors in one qualitative research study, this study aimed to increase insight into the ways in which adolescents construct meaning of the different contents they encounter when engaging in sex-related Internet use and, as such, into the complex processes and conditions that underlie the effects of sex-related online behaviors on adolescent sexual development.

Method

Design

This study employed a qualitative design using Web-based focus groups. Focus groups are a useful approach to stimulate discussion of perceptions, opinions, and thoughts around a particular issue. Moreover, focus-group environments tend to be perceived as less intimidating than individual interviews (Krueger, 1994) and may therefore enhance self-disclosure among adolescents—particularly when sensitive topics, such as (online) sexual behavior, are discussed (Morgan, 1998). Self-disclosure may further be enhanced through computer-mediated communication, where participants can anonymously converse with other people (Joinson, 2001; Walston & Lissitz, 2000). As such, Web-based focus groups are an appropriate design to gain insight into adolescents' motives, perceptions, and reflections toward Internet use for sex-related purposes.

Recruitment and Participants

For this study, we recruited adolescents between the ages of 16 and 19.¹ Both boys and girls were recruited, as we were interested in how gender plays a role in adolescents' narratives on sex-related Internet use. Moreover, to increase the diversity of perspectives, we invited adolescents with and without experience with Internet use for sex-related purposes to participate in the focus groups. Participants were initially recruited online. First, we approached moderators of Web sites and forums that are popular among Dutch adolescents through e-mail. We explained to them the study aims and procedures, and asked for permission to post a recruitment flyer on their Web site or forum. The themes of the selected Web sites and forums

¹ In the Netherlands, children aged 16 and older can provide their own consent for participation in research.

reflected the interests of contemporary youth, including gaming (e.g., Gamersnet.nl), magazines for girls, sports, sexual information (e.g., Sense.info), and general youth discussion platforms (e.g., Scholieren.com, Partyflock.nl). After permission was granted by the moderator, the recruitment flyer was posted in a news item or in a sticky/pinned topic (i.e., a topic that is being kept at the top of the forum to attract users' attention). The flyer described the study aims (i.e., "learning how young people think about romance and sexuality on the Internet"), procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and instructions to apply. Apart from the age criterion of 16 to 19 years, no other inclusion criteria were set. Adolescents could express their willingness to participate in the study by sending an e-mail to one of the researchers. Because this initial approach did not generate a sufficiently large number of participants, additional participants were recruited by asking student assistants to spread the flyer among their personal online networks.

Adolescents who applied for the study were sent a brief screening questionnaire asking for demographic information and their experience with Internet use for (a) finding information or advice related to romance and sexuality; (b) searching for and viewing pornographic or erotic material; and (c) engaging in romantic and sexual communication (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Sometimes*, 4 = *Quite often*, 5 = *Very often*). If adolescents indicated to use the Internet for any of the aforementioned online activities at least "sometimes" (i.e., ≥ 3), they were labeled "experienced." Based on this information, participants were assigned to one of several focus groups stratified by gender, age (ages 16 to 17 versus ages 18 to 19), and experience with Internet use for sex-related purposes (experienced versus less experienced). We formed homogeneous groups to avoid potential discomfort—which may hinder self-disclosure—among participants with regard to discussing sexual issues in the presence of the opposite gender or peers with very different experiences. Participants then received an invitation with a date and time to take part in an online focus-group session.

A total of 36 adolescents (72.2% girls, 61% aged 16 to 17) participated in one of 12 online focus groups, each comprising two to four boys or girls. Nearly all participants had a Dutch background (i.e., self and both parents born in the Netherlands); three adolescents indicated that at least one of their parents was born abroad (e.g., Suriname, Hong Kong). Most participants reported a heterosexual orientation (80.6%); the remaining indicated they were bisexual ($n = 3$), homosexual ($n = 1$), or not sure yet ($n = 3$). The majority of adolescents stated to be nonreligious (80.6%). Most boys and girls reported to have some experience with at least one of the behaviors under study, although a minority indicated that they frequently use the Internet for sex-related purposes (i.e., less than one-third for each behavior). Adolescents received a gift certificate worth €10 for participating. Study procedures were approved

by the ethics board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

Data Collection

Focus-group sessions took place in an online chat room. A moderator (the first or second author) led the discussion and made sure typed transcripts were saved. Participants received an e-mail and text message on the day of the session with instructions on how to join the chat room and contact details of the moderator in case they experienced technical problems or delays. Before they joined the chat room, participants were reassured of their confidentiality. Moreover, the chat room offered the option to sign in anonymously.

A topic guide with predetermined questions was developed to start and stimulate discussions. The topics were divided into three sections, covering the three categories of sex-related online behaviors under study: (a) finding information or advice related to romance and sexuality; (b) searching for and viewing pornographic or erotic material; and (c) romantic and sexual communication (i.e., flirting, dating, and cybersex/sexting). Each section started with an introduction to the online behavior, which was formulated in such a way that it made adolescents feel comfortable with the topic being discussed and reduced potential feelings of shame. For example, the section on pornography use was introduced as follows:

Many teenagers sometimes look at pornography on the Internet. Pornography may comprise videos, pictures, or written text. Such sexual images or texts are sometimes referred to as "erotica." We are interested in your experiences with searching for and viewing pornography or erotica on the Internet, and your opinions about this behavior.

After the introduction, participants were then asked about their experience with the sex-related online behavior being discussed, followed by a range of open questions on their motives (to either engage in the behavior or not) and their perceptions and reflections with regard to the behavior. Additional questions were included depending on the themes that emerged during the focus-group sessions. Separate topic guides were developed for experienced and inexperienced participants, although identical questions were used whenever applicable. Prior to use, the topic guide was carefully inspected by coworkers and undergraduate students, and pilot-tested in a focus-group session with three female participants.² Participants could respond to the questions of the moderator and comments of other participants and could post comments themselves. A semistructured approach was used during the focus-group sessions to maintain the flow of the interactions and allow

²Because no substantial alterations were made to the topic guide after this pilot test, data from this focus-group session were included in the analysis.

participants to respond naturally to our questions. Focus-group sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

The analysis process started with a thorough reading of all transcripts to obtain an overall impression of the data. After this initial stage, data were coded and structured in three steps: (a) breaking down transcripts into smaller segments of phrases and coding these segments; (b) describing codes, comparing segments within codes, and structuring codes; and (c) identifying key themes in the data. This method of analysis was done in accordance with the three stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). We used the software program MAXQDA (VERBI GmbH, Berlin, Germany) to facilitate our coding process.

To maximize the quality and reliability of our analyses and findings, we used a researcher triangulation approach in which multiple researchers were involved in the collection and analysis of data (Boeije, 2010). This method is recommended in qualitative research to avoid bias and enhance the accuracy of the systematic coding process. The analysis procedure was further guided and monitored by the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Boeije, 2010; Guba, 1981). A male and a female researcher (the second author and a research assistant, respectively) jointly coded the segments of two focus-group sessions (one composed of boys and one composed of girls) to align their coding strategies. They subsequently independently coded the segments of remaining sessions. During this process, the researchers continuously reviewed and compared their findings to discuss and form consensus on the emerging codes. Multiple rounds of discussion took place during the coding phases with the aim of enhancing the credibility of the analysis used and to develop clear codes. New content was constantly compared with already coded segments, and codes were refined and redefined whenever necessary (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At every step, a third researcher (the first author) reviewed whether the codes were supported by the data, with the intention to enhance dependability. Confirmability was implicitly enhanced, as the same codes and themes emerged from content of new focus-group sessions. No new codes emerged during the coding of the 11th focus-group session, implying that saturation was reached. However, as the 12th focus-group session had already been scheduled, we decided to conduct this session anyway to finalize the data collection. Finally, key themes were identified and interconnected.

Results

Finding Information or Advice Related to Romance and Sexuality

Experiences and Motives. Almost all participants reported to use the Internet for obtaining information or

advice related to romance and sexuality. Adolescents described two types of information they searched for online: (a) sexual health information and (b) “dos and don’t” related to dating and sex. Many girls had used the Internet to learn about contraceptives and their use. Moreover, several participants reported they had searched for information about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Information on STDs was often accessed for a school assignment, although several girls had looked it up out of curiosity or concern. In addition to sexual health information, adolescents used the Internet to obtain advice on dating and sexual activities. They read on Internet forums about “dos and don’t” for a first date, experiences of other people regarding their first time, and instructions on how to perform certain sexual techniques. For example, one girl explained that she had little experience with dating and thus prepared herself for an upcoming first date by reading other people’s advice: “I have searched for information on dating. I was about to have a date with a boy and I wanted some advice. I also wanted to know how other people experienced their first date” (J1, 16-year-old girl).

In addition to searching for information on the Internet, most participants also consulted offline sources for information or advice related to romance and sexuality. Both boys and girls communicated with friends about these topics. In addition, many adolescents said they could ask their parents if they had questions related to sexuality. Girls mentioned their mothers and sisters as important sources for information. However, some adolescents stated they did not feel comfortable talking with their parents about sexual matters and that they preferred to consult friends or the Internet for sex-related information. Several girls said that they would always visit a doctor if they had urgent questions about sexual health issues, such as contraceptives, pregnancy, and STDs. One participant noted, “I have a sister with whom I can always talk about these things and who I trust more than the Internet. I would rather not talk about sex with my parents, but that’s probably more of a personal preference” (E1, 18-year-old girl).

Perceptions. Participants described several benefits of using the Internet for finding information or advice related to romance and sexuality. Many participants reported that the Internet offers quick and easy access to a wide range of information. Some adolescents said that because of the Internet, they did not have to see a doctor for every medical symptom. Moreover, adolescents appreciated the anonymity of the Internet. Questions about dating and sexuality were often considered personal in nature, and participants sometimes felt embarrassed to talk about such issues with family or friends. Because the Internet allows adolescents to find information, ask questions, and share experiences while maintaining anonymity, it was often preferred as a source for romantic and sex-related information over offline information sources.

On the other hand, nearly all participants expressed concern that online information may not always be reliable. Some adolescents described that they encountered a lot of contradictory answers or opinions when searching for information on sexual issues. Especially on forums, where content is generated by users who may not be experts in the field, adolescents found it difficult to discern correct information among the widely varying messages: "I could not really find answers on my questions about contraceptives on forums, because everyone is claiming different things there. Of course, they are 'normal' people who give answers, so you can't be sure that they know what they are talking about" (K2, 19-year-old girl).

Reflections. Participants described several strategies to evaluate the reliability of online information about romance and sexuality. Most adolescents checked whether the website was a reputable source. Websites associated with medical institutions (e.g., pharmacies, health care providers) were generally considered reliable, as were websites explicitly aimed at educating youth about sexuality and sexual health (e.g., the Dutch website Sense.info). Therefore, these types of websites were most commonly accessed for obtaining sexual health information. Adolescents also evaluated the reliability of online information by determining whether the same information appeared on multiple websites. Finally, some adolescents validated online information by checking whether it corresponded with information from offline sources, such as family, friends, or school. It should be noted that not all adolescents believed such offline sources were more reliable than the Internet.

M2, 18-year-old girl: You have to have a critical eye. Always consult multiple sources. If multiple sources give you the same information, it is usually more reliable than when it is provided by only one source.

Researcher (R): You previously mentioned that you would consider asking friends or family if you want to have information about something. Do you think of friends and family members as reliable sources for information with regard to topics such as STDs and pregnancy?

H1, 17-year-old boy: "No, I don't think so. Unless said family member is a doctor."

Internet forums were generally considered less reliable sources for sexual health information, because anyone can generate content on such websites. For this reason, adolescents consulted forums predominantly to read about others' experiences with or opinions on romantic and sexual issues, for example, experiences with different contraceptives or tips on how to act' on a first date. Some adolescents indicated they determined the

trustworthiness of messages on Internet forums by looking at the characteristics of these messages and those who posted them or by checking how often a certain opinion appeared.

R: How do you determine if the information you find is reliable?

J4, 16-year-old boy: When reading comments on Internet forums I usually look at the person's age, at the wording, and their language skills. That often provides a good indication.

Searching for and Viewing Pornographic or Erotic Material

Experiences and Motives. The majority of participants indicated that they had searched for pornographic or erotic material on the Internet at least once. A number of boys and girls described that hearing about it from peers had made them curious and that they wanted to find out for themselves what pornography was about. Among these participants, several had searched for pornography/erotica together with curious friends. Other participants, particularly girls, had searched for pornography to learn about or explore sexuality. They believed that pornography was instructive in certain respects because the visual material taught them how to perform certain sexual techniques, and inspired them to try out new sexual practices with their partners.

R1, 17-year-old girl: I have definitely viewed porn a few times to learn new things. I would then really pay attention and focus on what the actors and actresses were doing, I didn't feel anything while watching it haha.

A1, 17-year-old girl: Yeah me too!

Among these initially experimental users, predominantly boys proceeded to search for and view pornography on a more regular basis. The main reason for these boys to occasionally use pornography was that they found this material exciting and arousing. Other motives for boys to search for pornography were to deal with sexual urges, to release stress, or to fight boredom. Girls, in contrast, rarely reported to use pornography beyond the incidental exploratory or inspirational sessions. Most girls said that pornography was not sexually arousing for them; they believed this material was lacking affection, emotions, and romance. Some of these girls were involved in romantic relationships and expressed that they preferred the intimacy of being with their partners. As one participant noted, "I think I'm looking for intimacy in sex, instead of viewing passionless sex. That is the image that I have of pornography: that it is passionless and loveless" (L1, 16-year-old girl).

Perceptions. Participants held a variety of perceptions toward using the Internet to search for and view pornographic or erotic material.

Liberal Attitude. Most participants shared the belief that each individual had the right to consume pornography, as long as the sex depicted in this material was legal and consensual. Only a few participants found pornography to be problematic. The general consensus among adolescents was that it was up to each individual whether to use pornography.

Female Perspective: Pornography is for Men. The girls in our focus groups perceived pornography to be mainly interesting for boys. They believed that men are more often aroused in general and that nearly all boys use pornography for this reason. Although some girls expressed that they knew girls who used pornography, they generally felt that this material was much less arousing for girls than for boys. However, several participants noted that there may be a social desirability bias involved in girls' reports of their pornography use:

- N1, 17-year-old girl: Quite a few of my girlfriends watch porn ...
- S1, 17-year-old girl: I think girls feel too ashamed to admit that they watch porn.
- K1, 17-year-old girl: Yes, and they are too afraid to talk about this topic.
- J2, 16-year-old girl: I agree. I feel like pornography is more of a taboo among girls than it is among boys.

Some participants noted that pornography might be appealing for boys and girls whose partners are (temporarily) absent or adolescents who are no longer in a romantic relationship and miss the intimacy of being with their partner. Pornography may in these situations function as a substitute to real-life sex for satisfying sexual desires. Moreover, several girls who did not use pornography themselves imagined it would be exciting when viewing it together with their partner.

Pornography is Fake and Unrealistic. Most participants perceived sex in pornography as fake and unrealistic. The most obvious differences between pornography and real-life sexual situations, according to these adolescents, were the lack of emotion, the exaggerated looks and performances of the actors, the long duration of sex, and the submissive role of women in pornography.

- M1, 18-year-old girl: Porn looks really over the top and unrealistic. It looks more like a show than real sex.
- S3, 18-year-old girl: I have never watched porn, but from what I hear it is very fake and exaggerated.

M2, 18-year-old girl: You could even say porn is more like a really bad show.

M1, 18-year-old girl: Haha so true!

R: Can you explain why porn is unrealistic?

B1, 17-year-old boy: Porn is often loveless, women are frequently treated disrespectfully, and the actors do things that aren't comfortable or arousing in real-life.

J4, 16-year-old boy: A guy who is still pounding a woman after an hour of sex ...

Pornography is Misogynistic. Almost all participants agreed that most pornographic material was misogynistic. According to both boys and girls, women in pornography are objectified as obedient sex objects, subordinate to dominant and muscular men whose pleasure and orgasm are the focus of the story. A number of participants found this portrayal of women to be disrespectful. One participant offered this opinion: "[Porn] is very disrespectful toward women. It shows a very unequal picture: men are in charge and women just serve as sexual objects. At least, this is how women are often displayed, especially in videos where they get slapped in their face, etcetera" (P1, 17-year-old boy).

Pornography is Instructive and Inspirational. Although adolescents' perceptions toward pornography mainly reflected neutral or negative associations with this material, many participants also expressed that pornography offered useful information for enhancing one's sex life. For example, the unconcealed visualizations of sexual practices in pornography were considered instructive for learning or improving certain sexual techniques. Moreover, the wide range of sexual positions and techniques portrayed in pornography offered adolescents inspiration for expanding one's own sexual repertoire.

R: Can you explain what you were trying to learn by viewing porn?

R1, 17-year-old girl: For example, I wanted to know how to perform oral sex on a boy.

A1, 17-year-old girl: Haha me too! I searched porn for the exact same reason!

R1, 17-year-old girl: There was a very good video that explained different techniques, such as "the ice cream" or "the butterfly," haha!

Reflections.

Contradictory Feelings. Participants experienced contradictory feelings when searching for and viewing pornography. Many participants noted that pornography is an easily accessible source of entertainment, to get aroused and find sexual stimulation. Moreover, some participants agreed that pornography to a certain extent removed the

taboo surrounding sexuality, which they considered to be a positive aspect. Because pornography is available to anyone and focuses on physical pleasure rather than reproduction, it may function as a means to more comfortably think and communicate about sex and one's sexual desires.

- R1, 17-year-old girl: The positive sides of porn are obviously the excitement it brings and its educational value. It definitely enriches your sex life.
- A1, 17-year-old girl: Positive sides: You can learn something from porn, it helps you to get aroused, and it is very easy to find.
- R: Do you think that pornography can have positive effects?
- M2, 18-year-old girl: Perhaps that it takes away the taboo? For example, by viewing porn you may be able to express yourself more to your girlfriend or boyfriend, with regard to what you like and don't like when having sex. Because you are more familiar with yourself and "the world of sex."

On the other hand, for some participants there seemed to be a taboo around the use of pornography itself. Several boys and girls explained that even though they felt aroused and excited while viewing porn, they often experienced mixed emotions afterward, such as embarrassment, discomfort, or an anticlimax.

- S2, 17-year-old girl: While watching porn, I often masturbate. Because nobody knows that I'm doing this, I feel really sneaky.
- S2, 17-year-old girl: Porn is really awkward if you think about it. Somebody does something really intimate on a video that is not supposed to be public. That is why I feel awkward when watching pornography. It feels like I'm invading somebody's privacy.
- J4, 16-year-old-boy: When I am aroused, pornography is fun to watch. But afterwards I regularly ask myself what I just looked at. Not that I view very absurd stuff, but it often is very unrealistic.
- B1, 17-year-old-boy: That sounds very familiar. I immediately leave the website after I'm done.

Unrealistic Sexual Expectations and Copying Behavior.

Because sex in pornography was perceived to be different from sex in real life, participants believed that viewers of pornography may develop unrealistic expectations about

several aspects of sexual activity, including the duration, performances, and physical experience. More specifically, they claimed that viewers may come to believe that sexual intercourse lasts a long time and is always wild and rough. Moreover, several participants expressed that sex in pornography looks better than it is in real life:

- P1, 17-year-old boy: In reality, sex is totally different. I often hear that it is not that big of a deal.
- R: Do you mean that pornography could possibly create an unrealistic image of sexual intercourse?
- P1, 17-year-old boy: Yes, according to my friends it does. Their first time clearly did not meet their expectations.
- H1, 17-year-old boy: I also think that my first time was not that special. I enjoyed it and it was good and all, but it was very different from what I expected.
- C1, 18-year-old-boy: I do think that other people get an unrealistic picture of sex.
- R: Why do you think that?
- C1, 18-year-old-boy: Porn stars are too perfect, and the sex looks better than it actually is.
- J5, 19-year-old-boy: Yeah, the actors' performances are really exaggerated.

Although virtually all participants believed that they could distinguish pornography from reality, many boys and girls expressed that especially younger adolescents may adopt the sexual practices they are exposed to when viewing pornography. Several participants described that pornography may function as a sexual "instruction manual" to these young adolescents, which could result in undesirable effects. For example, both boys and girls noted that by viewing pornography boys may believe that girls are readily convinced into having sex and are willing to engage in the same sexual practices as porn actors.

- A1, 16-year-old girl: I think that men may believe they can easily seduce a woman into having sex because the women in porn are depicted as "easy." [... They] are often very willing to have sex. Already after a few seconds they are making out and taking off their clothes. I think women are being depicted quite negatively [in porn], because they are so easily seduced.
- R: Do you think watching porn influences beliefs about male and female roles?
- M5, 19-year-old girl: I do believe that an increasing number of boys believe that persuading

women in real life is as easy as it is in pornography. This is obviously not the case.

A number of adolescents believed that viewing pornography could potentially lead to copying more deviant forms of sexual behavior, including dangerous and violent sex.

M2, 18-year-old girl: I read something disturbing a while ago, that men don't understand that women don't actually ask to get raped if they are dressing provocatively? What the hell! That really drives me mad.

R: That's correct. This phenomenon is called a "rape myth."

M1, 18-year-old girl: Maybe they have viewed too much porn and as a result they do not realize anymore that women are also human beings rather than sex objects they can "use" to pleasure themselves ... unbelievable.

J3, 19-year-old girl: I think there are people who develop wrong ideas and weird fantasies about having sex by viewing porn. They may eventually want to put these fantasies (for example, choking your sex partner during sex) into practice, even when their sex partner does not want this.

Female Perspective: Increasing Insecurity. Participants described that viewing pornography may result in increased insecurity among adolescents. Girls in particular expressed fears that the extreme and exaggerated performances of porn actors may lead boys to expect similar performances and activities from them.

L1, 16-year-old girl: I would really feel like: "Damn I can't do any of those things that porn stars do!" I really think this causes feelings of insecurity among girls.

M4, 17-year-old girl: I think it could also make boys insecure, but it certainly applies to girls, in my opinion.

In addition to worries about their sexual performances, the glamorized and idealized bodies of porn actors made girls feel insecure about their own appearance. It is important to note that this effect was mentioned by girls who did and

girls who did not view pornography. Because girls believed that virtually all boys used pornography, girls who did not view this material themselves were indirectly affected by pornography's portrayals.

A2, 17-year-old girl: My first boyfriend used to watch a lot of porn, just like any other boy. It made me feel quite insecure. [...] I became insecure because I wanted to meet his expectations.

R: Do you mean expectations with regard to your appearance or with regard to your sexual performances?

A2, 17-year-old girl: Especially with regard to my appearance. If you continuously see perfect bodies in porn, then maybe you won't appreciate a "real" body anymore, when having real sex. For example, porn stars always have big breasts and perfect vaginas.

Romantic and Sexual Communication: Cybersex/ Sexting

As part of the section on romantic and sexual communication, participants were asked about their motives, perceptions, and reflections toward online flirting, online dating, and cybersex/sexting. However, because participants in our study had little experience with online flirting and dating apart from occasional "for fun only experimenting," we report findings on cybersex/sexting only.

Experiences and Motives. Only a few participants indicated that they had sent sexual photos or videos of themselves to others through a webcam or smartphone (cybersex or sexting). This had usually been in the context of a romantic relationship. However, the majority of participants stated that they did not and would never engage in cybersex or sexting behaviors. An important reason for them to withhold from such activities was that they had witnessed or heard about leaking and spreading of sexual imagery of peers (e.g., schoolmates), for example, after a breakup.

R: Have you ever sent a sexual photo or a video of yourself to someone, for example through your webcam or smartphone?

M1, 18-year-old girl: No, it might sound silly but I believe that sending sexual photos is completely ridiculous. They can end up everywhere! Even if you send them to your boyfriend or

girlfriend, they can easily forward these pictures.

On the other hand, almost all participants reported they had received sexual photos or videos from others. In most cases these photos or videos were not intended for them but forwarded by friends or classmates. Adolescents did not always know the person in the sexual imagery. Participants highlighted a number of potential motives for young people to engage in cybersex or sexting behaviors. Several adolescents noted that sending sexual imagery of oneself can be exciting and arousing, and that thrill seeking may drive this behavior. Others thought that peers engaged in cybersex or sexting to seek attention. However, there were also participants who believed that pressure may underlie cybersex and sexting behaviors. According to these adolescents, young girls may be coerced into taking and sending sexual imagery of themselves. These girls may be particularly vulnerable because they are in love and either trust their partner or don't want to risk losing the relationship if they do not comply.

- E1, 18-year-old girl: I think it often involves young girls. They are naive and put too much trust into boys. Many boys aren't as sympathetic as they act around girls. Once the relationship is over, they will even upload these personal photos online.
- R: So it is often girls who are sending these photos of themselves?
- E1, 18-year-old girl: [Yes,] they want to be adored and want to be liked by the boys.
- J3, 19 year-old-girl: Boys do it as well, but I think girls do it more often.
- E1, 18-year-old girl: I don't think many girls do it on their own initiative, I think most of them do it because they are being pressured or being pushed.

Perceptions/reflections. The majority of participants perceived cybersex or sexting behavior as risky and irresponsible. They argued that there is a fair chance that photos or videos will be forwarded and spread among many people. Of significance, however, was the clear distinction that participants made between cybersex/sexting outside a romantic relationship and cybersex/sexting between romantic partners. Whereas the former was considered simply foolish, adolescents generally were approving or understanding when romantic partners exchanged sexual photos or videos in mutual agreement. One participant expected cybersex/sexting to become a substitute for real-life sex when he was going to be in a long-distance relationship:

C1, 18-year-old boy: It's dangerous, but at some level I understand why someone might do it. You must be able to really trust someone. For example: next year I might be studying abroad for 6 months, and I definitely don't rule out the possibility that I will try something like that with my girlfriend.

When asked if they ever forwarded, or considered forwarding, sexual photos or videos received through third parties, most participants indicated that they would never do this because they did not want to further infringe the victim's privacy. However, other and predominantly younger participants stated they did forward such imagery, mainly because they believed the person on the photo or video should not have been so foolish to send it in the first place. Other participants said that their decision to forward sexual photos or videos depended on the situation and person involved:

- R: Would you consider forwarding photos that you receive?
- E1, 18-year-old girl: It really depends on who it is in the photos. But I wouldn't upload them on the Internet.
- S5, 18-year-old girl: No I would not forward the photos. But I might forward them if the photos were not personally directed to me.
- E1, 18-year-old girl: Me too. I might tell a friend though.

Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this Web-based focus-group study was to gain more in-depth insight into adolescents' motives, perceptions, and reflections toward Internet use for different sex-related purposes: (a) finding information or advice related to romance and sexuality; (b) searching for and viewing pornographic or erotic material; and (c) romantic and sexual communication (i.e., particularly cybersex/sexting). The themes that emerged from the focus-group discussions highlight that young people choose to engage or not engage in these sex-related online behaviors for a variety of reasons, and that each of these behaviors may elicit both positive and negative experiences and opinions among adolescents. In what follows, the behavior-specific motives, perceptions, and reflections that were described by participants are integrated and discussed in terms of several overarching key themes.

The overall, central story that permeated the focus group discussions was "sex-related Internet use as a complex and ambivalent experience." This core phenomenon included several key themes that together describe the multifaceted role of the Internet in adolescent sexual development: *normalization*

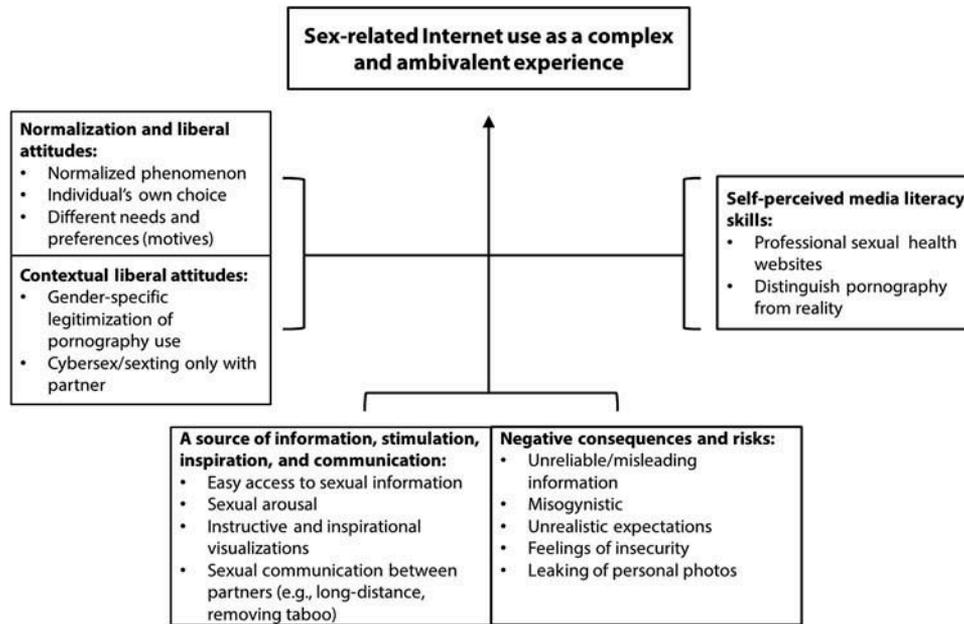


Figure 1. A model of adolescents' motives, perceptions, and reflections toward Internet use for sex-related purposes.

and liberal attitudes toward Internet use for sex-related purposes; ambivalent opinions and experiences, with sex-related online behaviors perceived as both useful sources and risk factors for adolescent sexuality; and (self-perceived) media literacy skills to navigate through and deal with the online sexual landscape (see Figure 1).

Normalization and Liberal Attitudes

Overall, the results of the focus-group discussions seem to suggest that sex-related Internet use has become a normalized phenomenon for adolescents. This normalization might be the result of the proliferation of the Internet, which has permeated young people's lives and is now strongly intertwined with nearly all domains of their daily functioning, including school, friendships, leisure, identity, and also sexuality (Madden et al., 2013). In addition, the increased sexualization in mainstream media that has been taking place over the past few decades (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999; Ward, 2003) may contribute to perceptions that sex-related content is a normal, common thing (Häggström-Nordin et al., 2006). The present findings suggest that, perhaps as a consequence of this normalization, young people generally do not seem to question whether sex-related Internet use is a good or a bad thing. Participants in our focus groups had a liberal attitude toward sex-related online behaviors, stating that each person has different needs and preferences and that it is up to each individual to choose whether to engage in online behaviors. This seemingly normalized and liberal stance toward using the Internet for sex-related purposes is supported by previous qualitative studies among

Swedish adolescents (Häggström-Nordin et al., 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010).

Yet despite this general liberal trend, a more gender-specific attitude seems to surround the use of pornography. Most girls in our study considered pornography to be mainly for men. Consequently, regular use of pornography was largely restricted to the male focus-group participants, consistent with previous findings (e.g., Cameron et al., 2005; Doornwaard et al., 2015; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Shaughnessy et al., 2011). This gender difference could reflect a diverging preference for pornography's content, which usually portrays sexuality in a way that is more appealing for boys than for girls (i.e., made by men for men). On the other hand, girls' different experiences with and attitudes toward pornography may be explained in terms of a cultural double-standard script in which it is more taboo for women to enjoy pornography (Hammarén & Johansson, 2007; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010), an idea which was confirmed by several female participants in our focus groups. An interesting observation in this regard was that some girls expressed that viewing pornography could potentially be interesting when it was viewed with a romantic partner or when they missed the intimacy of being with a romantic partner. This more contextual attitude toward pornography use by girls was also identified in the study by Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson (2010), who noted that enjoying pornography was considered appropriate for girls if the situation was right or if it was used together with a socially accepted (i.e., romantic) partner. In contrast, boys generally seemed to have a more instrumental approach toward pornography.

A similar contextual, albeit more gender-neutral, attitude was identified among our participants in relation to cybersex/sexting behaviors. Here again, exchanging sexual photos or videos was judged much more appropriate if it took place within the context of a romantic relationship. As such, our findings indicate that not all behaviors are equally normalized among all youth, and that especially among girls sex-related Internet use is still to a considerable degree legitimized by romance (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010) or the absence of romance.

Ambivalent Opinions and Experiences

The variety of perceptions and reflections toward sex-related online behaviors that arose in the focus-group discussions indicate that sex-related Internet use is experienced as a complex, multifaceted, and ambivalent phenomenon by young people. On the one hand, participants considered the Internet as a useful, versatile, and easily accessible source of information, stimulation, inspiration, and communication with regard to sexual matters. On the other hand, concerns were expressed about a range of negative consequences or risks related to sex-related online behaviors. For example, participants noted that although the Internet is the easiest and quickest way to find answers on sex-related questions, online information can be unreliable and potentially misleading if the wrong sources are used. Moreover, although cybersex/sexting can be exciting and fun, participants believed there is a considerable risk that personal photos could be forwarded.

Another main finding was related to participants' opinions and experiences toward pornography. On one hand, participants agreed that pornography's visualizations of sexual behavior can be arousing, as well as instructive and inspirational for enhancing one's sex life. On the other hand, they strongly expressed that pornography's portrayals of sexuality are fake, unrealistic, and misogynistic (i.e., men in power and women as subordinate sex objects). Consistent with previous studies (Hägström-Nordin et al., 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Mattebo, Larsson, Tydén, & Hägström-Nordin, 2014), participants in our study believed that such portrayals can function as a frame of reference for younger adolescents, generating unrealistic expectations related to sexual performances and body ideals. The belief that pornography creates unrealistic expectations seems to increase feelings of insecurity among adolescents, particularly among girls who fear that they do not meet the standards of the exaggerated performances and glamorized bodies in pornography. An important finding that emerged from the focus-group discussions was that these fears were expressed by girls who used pornography themselves *and* by those who did not—a process that may be triggered by the general belief among girls that boys' conceptions of sexuality and female bodies are largely shaped by pornography. As such, our findings suggest it is not direct exposure to pornography per se but rather perceptions of the content of these materials, in combination with beliefs

about other people's (e.g., boys') exposure to these materials, that potentially elicit effects. Such second-order effects of sex-related Internet use warrant more attention in both research and intervention efforts.

The ambivalent opinions and experiences described by participants may be a response to the current societal climate toward sex-related online behaviors, which is characterized by a generally negative, fear-fraught public debate about pornography and numerous media literacy initiatives. This climate, in combination with the normalization of media sexualization, may elicit contradictory perceptions and reflections toward sex-related Internet use among adolescents. Longitudinal cohort studies extending into young adulthood may offer more detailed insight into how and to what degree these ambivalent opinions and experiences influence young people in the long run.

(Self-Perceived) Media Literacy Skills

Our findings suggest today's adolescents deal with a complexity of norms, messages, opinions, feelings, and expectations related to sexuality and sex-related Internet use. This requires the appropriate skills to navigate through the online sexual landscape in a responsible and critical way. Most participants in our focus-group study believed they possessed the necessary skills to avoid potential risks related to sex-related online behaviors and perceived themselves as cautious, responsible, savvy Internet users. They stated they were aware which Web sites generally contain reliable information related to sexual health. Moreover, all participants in the focus groups believed they could distinguish between exaggerated pornographic portrayals of sexuality and real-life sexual interactions and relationships. However, participants did believe that others, particularly younger individuals, are at risk of adopting the beliefs, expectations, and behaviors portrayed in pornography, although none of the participants considered themselves in this at-risk group. It is important to note that these statements reflect self-perceived media literacy skills and do not provide any evidence of adolescents' actual level of media literacy. It is common for people to believe that negative consequences or risks apply only to others and not to themselves (i.e., the third-person effect). Moreover, even if people believe they themselves might be susceptible to media influences, it is often difficult to see and/or admit when this is occurring (e.g., Cameron et al., 2005; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). Multimethod approaches in which qualitative studies are combined with research methods that are less sensitive to informant bias (e.g., experimental or longitudinal studies measuring related concepts) are therefore needed to study the complex role of the Internet in adolescent sexual development, as well as young people's ability to deal with this medium in a responsible way.

Regardless of adolescents' self-perceived ability to put pornographic content into perspective, findings from our study highlight that there is room for improvement in

adolescents' media literacy skills. Media literacy initiatives should continue to address how pornography's exaggerated portrayals may influence adolescents' sexual expectations *and* how these expectations affect their (future) partners. Moreover, the finding that participants in our focus groups believed that engaging in cybersex/sexting could be acceptable in the context of a romantic relationship, despite their awareness of cases in which photos were spread after a breakup, indicates that media literacy initiatives should focus more attention on these relatively new and potentially risky forms of sexual communication among adolescents.

Limitations and Conclusion

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the data from this research. First, results from a single qualitative study cannot be generalized to the wider population of adolescents, such as adolescents from different age groups, nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual orientations. It is therefore important that future studies research similar topics in other settings. Moreover, our recruitment process may have resulted in a selective sample. Participants were drawn from different sources (websites and forums as well as student assistants' personal networks), and more girls than boys participated in the study. In addition, as adolescents volunteered for participation in the focus-group discussions, we do not know the views of adolescents who did not want to talk about sex-related Internet use or participate in the study. However, by inviting adolescents with and without experience with Internet use for sex-related purposes to participate in the focus groups, we aimed to increase the diversity of perspectives and gain a more complete understanding of the differential ways in which adolescents navigate through the online sexual landscape. It is important to note that several of the themes that emerged in the focus-group discussions were similar to those described in previous studies among Swedish adolescents (Hägström-Nordin et al., 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010), thus increasing the validity of the findings presented in this study.

In sum, the core phenomenon, "sex-related Internet use as a complex and ambivalent experience," that was identified in this study highlights the multifaceted role of the Internet in adolescent sexuality. Although sex-related Internet use is becoming increasingly normalized in young people's daily lives, the stories of their experiences, opinions, and feelings with regard to Internet use for sex-related purposes are varied, contextual, and ambivalent. This complexity needs to be included in theoretical perspectives and research efforts on the role of the Internet in adolescent sexual development.

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