Viewing Alone or Together: 
Linking the Viewing Context for Sexually Explicit Internet Materials to Sex-Related Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Online sexually explicit materials (SEM) may be viewed in various viewing contexts (e.g., alone, with friends, with a partner). However, research has not yet determined whether the viewing context can have an impact upon sexual attitudes and perceptions. To this end, data were collected from 303 college students who view SEM and analyzed to determine the relationships. When controlling for gender, findings indicate that individuals who more frequently view SEM alone also report a heightened sexual interest and favorable view toward casual sex. In contrast, the frequency with which SEM was viewed with friends was associated with a decreased sexual interest. Finally, the frequency with which individuals view SEM with a partner is negatively associated with beliefs about the importance of condom use. The paper concludes with discussion of these findings as well as directions for future research.

KEYWORDS
Condom Use, Internet, Online Sexual Materials, Sexual Attitudes, Sexual Media, Sexuality, Sexually Explicit Internet Materials, Viewing Context

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INTRODUCTION

“The Internet is a sexual medium” (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006a, p. 178). Approximately 84 percent of the US population has access to the Internet (Perrin & Duggan, 2015), and the Internet’s inherent properties such as the ‘triple-A’ (Accessibility, Affordability, and Anonymity) have made it possible to easily locate a wide-range of desired information, including sex-related information (Döring, 2009; Short, Black, Smith, Wetterneck, & Wells, 2012). Although it may be difficult to estimate the approximate amount of pornography available on the Internet (see Metz, 2015), some estimates suggest that viewers, in general, have access to several million sites on the Internet that include sexually explicit materials (Ropelato, 2009). In particular, college students are known as heavy consumers of sexually explicit materials (Boies, 2002; Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2001). Although information about sex can be gleaned from many different sources (e.g., schools, friends), the Internet has been frequently identified as one of the major sources for sex-related information (Chia, 2006). Acknowledging the heavy use of sexually explicit materials among college students, it is important to examine how consuming sexually explicit materials may be related to young adults’ sex-related attitudes and perceptions.

One of the key aims of research examining sexually explicit materials is to identify the effects that this content can have upon viewers. There is a fairly large amount of research that examines sexually explicit materials (e.g., Allen et al., 2007; Boies, 2002; Braithwaite, Coulson, Kedlington, & Fincham, 2015; Brown & L’Engle, 2009; Carroll et al., 2008; Morgan, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2011), but these studies often focus more upon viewing that takes place in isolation. However, media consumption does not always take a place in isolation. When information consumers engage in media-related activities (e.g., video game play), they tend to report different experiences, depending on social contexts (Song, Kim, & Lee, 2014). Given that viewing sexually explicit materials occurs in various contexts such as viewing alone or with others (Goodson et al., 2001), it is important to understand how viewing context is related to viewers’ responses about their media experiences. Thus, the present study explores the understudied research area in the sample of college students.

RESEARCH ON SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIALS

Sexually Explicit Materials on the Internet

The term, sexually explicit materials, is often used as a euphemism for pornography, which usually portrays nudity and shows sexual behaviors (Fisher & Barak, 2001). In many other studies, the terminology has been interchangeably used with pornography (e.g., Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, & Giery, 1995; Carroll et al., 2008). In this investigation, sexually explicit materials are any type of materials that show nudity, sexual behaviors, and sex-related information and techniques.
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