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Adolescent Exposure to Sexualised Media Online and the Impact of This Exposure on Offline Sexual Attitudes and Behaviour

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Abstract

Previous research shows 87% of adolescents intentionally seek out inappropriate content online. Viewing sexualised media risks desensitisation, increases problematic sexual behaviours, and distorts attitudes towards sex. The present study examined the impact of sexualised material, together with family, peers, social media use, and mental health on sexual attitudes and behaviours in adolescence. A qualitative retrospective design was adopted and University students ($N=334$) aged between 18 and 21 were recruited via a participation point platform. Participants answered an online survey reflecting on their experiences throughout high school. Measures were developed from previous research. A series of linear regressions and ANOVAs indicated that mental health, social media use, secrecy, and exposure to sexualised material influenced sexual behaviours. Sexual attitudes were influenced by internet safety education, mental health, exposure to sexualised material, and friends' exposure to sexualised material. High social media use increased exposure to sexualised material. No protective factors were found, and internet safety education taught in schools was perceived to be poor or inconsistent. Findings indicated that sexual attitudes and behaviours are strongly influenced by high exposure to sexualised material in adolescence. Interventions should move away from formal education on the risks and dangers of internet use and focus on positive messages, delivered in nuanced ways to maintain the attention of adolescents. Future research should focus on long-term effects of sexualised media exposure on sexual attitudes and behaviours, as well as the driving force for that relationship.

Keywords: Adolescent, Internet, Risk-taking, Sexualized, Vulnerability