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SPECIAL ISSUE: THE ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA'S EVOLVING ROLE IN SEX EDUCATION

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Editorial introduction: the entertainment media's evolving role in sex education

This special issue of *Sex Education* offers a new approach to research into the entertainment media's role in sex education and how entertainment can contribute to learning about sex. The collection features articles from authors around the world. They encompass a range of institutional, disciplinary and professional positions, adopt a variety of methodological approaches, and range from well-established academics to those appearing in an academic journal for the first time. As we discuss below, such diversity was necessary in order to address our theme.

In putting together this special issue, we have aimed to move beyond superficial, one-dimensional research that oversimplifies how (and why) users consume entertainment media. For too long, research into the role of entertainment media in sex education has been dominated by psychological research which assumes that 'learning' is virtually interchangeable with media 'effects' (see for example Brown and Bobkowski 2011; Collins et al. 2004; Eyal and Kunkel 2008; Kunkel, Cope, and Biely 1999). This research tradition correlates media consumption and primarily negative impacts on behaviours and attitudes. In the analyses offered, entertainment media – particularly popular, formulaic, commercialised or fantasy genres – are often described in metaphors that suggest they are not so much forms of cultural expression, but more a form of (damaging) social action, a homogenous, negative and coercive force that 'bombards', 'saturates' and 'dominates' their audiences – particularly children and youth (see, for example, Strasburger 2012).

Another problem with this tradition of research is that entertainment media are treated as carrying singular, simplistic messages, that are held to be identifiable in isolation from their generic, narrative or viewing contexts, and are seen as efficacious in and of themselves; that is, they alone are able to produce sets of behaviours and attitudes in their audiences. Entertainment media are homogenised, with every text treated as communicating much the same message (see, for example, Brown and Bobkowski 2011, 100). Texts as diverse as *Gossip Girl* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – to choose just two examples in which young female characters have casual sex with radically different outcomes – are treated as being the same.

Perhaps surprisingly this research approach, although sitting in the social sciences, includes implicit aesthetic biases. Pleasures are viewed with suspicion; although a prime target is often the supposedly 'unrealistic' nature of media representations, a charge that implies there exists an external reality against which media can be assessed for their degree of correspondence. In turn, this holds up realism as an aesthetic ideal, suggesting that texts should ideally follow coherent, linear and 'probable' narratives, showing character development and moral consequences (particularly of the 'casual sex' the media are accused of promoting; one might note that in this model, 'reality' is what researchers think audiences *ought* to believe about the world, because they will act on that basis).

Audiences, particularly young people, are conceived as products of this environment, powerless victims who cannot resist the false ways of being and thinking offered by the media. The dominant metaphor of passive 'exposure' to the media, and truisms about children spending more time with screens than in schools, suggest that young people are unable to make critical sense of what they encounter. The concept of media 'role models' also assumes that audiences absorb and imitate media content, responding in a literalist way to surface features. Such studies ignore the multiple ways in which media texts can be read and used by different consumers in different situations (see, for example, Bragg 2006).

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of psychology's approach to entertainment media and sex education has been its heteronormativity. Running through study after study is a vision of desirable sexual development in which young people accept conservative sexual ideals of committed lifelong heterosexual monogamy. The concept of 'risk' is used in these studies in order to condemn the media for sending 'permissive' (Eyal and Kunkel 2008, 162) messages to young people, such as the acceptability of sex outside of such relationships (Brown and Bobkowski 2011, 102). Researchers taking these approaches assume that 'remaining a virgin' before marriage is a positive sexual ideal (Kunkel, Cope, and Biely 1999, 230). They condemn 'casual sex' and 'sexual behaviors with two or more partners in the past 12 months' (Eyal and Kunkel 2008, 161). At its most extreme, this conservative approach assumes that sex should only occur within marriage, naming 'engagement in premarital sexual intercourse' as a negative practice, and even explicitly stating that the entertainment media are dangerous because they affect young people's 'moral attitudes' towards sex (Eyal and Kunkel 2008, 165). Some articles in this psychological tradition even imply that the ideal situation for young people is complete ignorance about sex – judging even 'talk' about sex as having dangerous negative effects for young people (Kunkel, Cope, and Biely 1999, 231). Reading this material we might think that we were still in the 1950s: far from engaging with a new digital age, this work has barely begun to comprehend the first sexual revolution.

The theories of culture, learning and individual agency embedded in these research approaches also restrict and limit strategies for change as a response, whether these be increased media regulation, new forms of media content (portraying positive role models) or programmes of 'media literacy' (teaching audiences to be more critical viewers). Dominant psychological framings tend to assume that parents (Collins et al. 2004, e288) and schools provide a positive 'corrective' (Fisher and Barak 1989) to the supposedly negative teachings of the entertainment media about sex – an assumption that much research into those sources of information finds to be unwarranted (see, for example, McKee, Watson, and Dore 2014).

By asking about the media's evolving role in sex education, this special issue runs counter to these theories of media power and meaning and takes a different view of pedagogy. As a whole, the articles collected here acknowledge the ambiguity, complexity and pleasures of entertainment texts and view audiences as active meaning-makers. They do not assume that the 'messages' of entertainment media about sex are necessarily negative, or that ignorance about sex or commitment to premarital abstinence are ideals to which young people should aspire. They do not begin with a belief that parents or schools are a reliable 'corrective' when it comes to matters of sex education. Rather, they uphold a version of healthy sexual development that includes information, discussion and open communication, and are committed to an open-ended, critical empirical approach that is genuinely concerned to understand what might be the most important contributions of different forms of entertainment to the process of sexual learning.

These articles also respond to developments in the nature and scope of contemporary media. The entertainment landscape has changed remarkably over the last few decades (Flew 2008). In particular, the boundaries between forms of cultural production are being reconfigured as they all, increasingly, flow through the realm of the digital. Digital media potentially fragment the entertainment products available to consumers, and have given rise to prod-user cultures whereby the line between producer and consumer is increasingly blurred (Bruns 2009). These technologies create the capacity for new kinds of sexualities and sexual practices, with interactivity and reciprocity at their core. They have underpinned the regeneration of feminism and gay and lesbian and queer activism, which have created the speaking conditions and repertoires through which previously excluded voices now generate their own entertainment media (Taormino et al. 2013). Online spaces such as blogs, forums and Twitter are invaluable resources for these communities. New technologies are being used in multiple ways by young people in their sexual practices and cultures, even if the Internet expands the space available for misogynistic, sex-negative and homophobic discourses to spread and be heard as well.

Entertainment media include a vast, and increasing, range of texts that teach about sex – both explicitly and implicitly – in a range of very different ways. Newspapers and magazines offer sex advice columns, social media platforms invite users to create their own shared entertainment about sex, television programmes tell stories about characters' sex lives, the Internet offers possibilities for everything from fun entertainment sites provided by formal educational institutions to pornography with an educational message. The relationship between the entertainment media and sex education has never been so multifaceted, so contradictory, or so vibrant.

Indeed, one of the most interesting parts of the process of editing this special issue has been the requirement to rethink what we mean by 'education'. It is notable that under traditional approaches to research in this area, if young people learn about sex in a formal school setting this process is referred to as 'education'; but if they learn about sex from entertainment media, the process is referred to as 'ideology' (Fisher and Barak 1989, 302) or as acquiring 'attitudes and beliefs' that might affect their 'behaviour'. In this sense, 'education' is a moral concept rather than a descriptive one: to describe a learning experience as 'education' is to signal approval of what is being learned. As we note above, what is approved is commonly a heteronormative model of sexuality where pleasure is less important than committed relationships and the avoidance of STIs. To learn anything about casual sex or physical pleasure is not to be educated, in this paradigm: it is to be exposed to ideology or erroneous beliefs.

Such a radically changing object of study demands new analytical approaches. Accordingly, this special issue contains a collection of articles that engage with this new entertainment environment, embracing the challenge of innovation and in many cases responding in kind. It includes previously unheard voices in research about sex education. The shifting boundaries between formal education and informal learning are embodied for instance in the article on 'Sense about sex', authored by a group including academics, therapists and sex educators, or the article on sexuality-focused entertainment media in sex education, written by a team including academics, producers of sexually explicit entertainment media, and researchers who are both. Responding to the variety and complexity of current entertainment media and its role in sex education, the articles discuss the role of newspapers, television, films, magazines, books, websites and social media. They also engage in innovative ways with methodologies that reflect and capture these changing landscapes, from traditional quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews

and focus groups, to participant observation, practice-led research, action research and textual analysis.

The special issue opens with Joni Meenagh's article 'Flirting, dating, and breaking up within new media environments'. Addressing the concern of educators about the role that social media play in young people's learning about sex, Meenagh uses an online discussion board and offline face-to-face interviews in order to explore what young people are learning both from and about digitally-mediated intimate relationships. Meenagh's approach is respectful to her subjects – she lets them set the terms and language in which their practices will be discussed, and is generous in listening to their own judgements of their practices. She does not see flirting as a dangerous slippery slope leading to underage pregnancy; rather she accepts that young people must learn to manage intimate relationships and that flirting online can be a useful part of that learning process. The concept of risk – which runs so strongly through so much sex education – takes on a different role in Meenagh's analysis, as she recognises that young people have to learn somehow about intimate relationships, that risk is a necessary part of learning – and that in this context mediated relationships in online entertainment spaces might offer a relatively safe place for young people to do this vital learning.

Silja Nielsen, Susanna Paasonen and Sanna Spisak's contribution "'Pervy role-play and such": girls' experiences of sexual messaging online' is likewise concerned not to feed moral panics. The article does not pathologise young people's sexual activities online, but is rather interested in understanding how young people experience and interpret them. The researchers write about Finland, a context in which there is already more acceptance of the need for comprehensive sex education, even if in practice questions of pleasure are somewhat marginalised and young people are critical of schools' provision. Their research yields new insights into 11–18-year-old girls' online sexual practices and has many parallels with Meenagh's research. Like Meenagh, they respect their contributors and quote them extensively. The voices that emerge suggest that girls can be reflexive, agentic and skilled navigators of online worlds, who make nuanced distinctions between types of sexual contact, resist risk discourses and articulate the pleasures of (peer) sexual messaging. The authors' arguments that 'sexual messaging can be a reflexive site of learning', that online talk offers 'alternative pathways for making sense of sexuality' and their description of the internet as a 'sexual playground' all evoke some very different starting points than the 'fear-based' ones that ground much research into young people's use of online media.

Maria-Jose Masanet and David Buckingham's article 'Advice on life? Online fan forums as a space for peer-to-peer sex and relationships education' addresses both entertainment media and online fan forums. It offers insight into institutions and texts as well as audiences, contextualising the successful youth drama series *Skins*, made for the cable/satellite channel of British broadcaster Channel 4, and analysing how audiences used its accompanying online forum for peer advice and exchange. The authors raise the question of how sex education drawing on entertainment media might require a form of media education as well. This would go beyond simplistically extracting and evaluating media 'messages', as in the psychological tradition described above, and would involve developing an analytical vocabulary for understanding media conventions, representations, institutional constraints and strategies as well as diverse audience interpretations and responses.

Liza Tsaliki's article 'Popular culture and moral panics about "children at risk": revisiting the sexualisation-of-young-girls debate' draws on data from focus groups with girls aged 10–12 in order to argue that the entertainment media, rather than being

understood as risk-laden, 'self-directed' leisure, can be used by young consumers to learn the management of an ethical self in the realms of sexuality and relationships. Tsaliki begins by providing a useful historical context, demonstrating that worries about young people's learning about sex emerge at a distinct cultural and historical juncture – particularly associated with middle-class discourses of childhood development in developed nations in the nineteenth century. The dangers of 'unstructured leisure' became of pressing concern for middle-class reformers – precisely the kind of pleasure without purpose that continues to inform researchers' worries about casual sex. Tsaliki invited girls to comment on pre-existing photographs of Rihanna, and in analysing their responses she notes that the girls' capacity for critical self-reflection is a long way from a passive and uncritical acceptance of any messages about sex to which they are 'exposed' that has so concerned previous research on entertainment and sex education. Tsaliki refers to the 'sophisticated' arguments made by the girls in relation to entertainment's representations of sexuality. As we noted above, previous research has too often drawn a clear line between, on the one hand the consumers of formal schooling, who are seen to be educated by their exposure to teachers and on the other hand, the consumers of entertainment media who are seen to fall victim to ideology. The sophisticated forms of argument demonstrated by the girls in Tsaliki's article provide empirical evidence that this distinction is not in fact correct. These girls are able to distinguish between professional performers' presentations of self on stage and what one might realistically wear in everyday life and they demonstrate a clear understanding of context and genre in their engagement with the entertainment media they consume.

Cyndi Darnell writes about 'Using sexually explicit material in a therapeutic context'. She explains how sex therapy works and how it offers far more than a 'quick fix'. She then discusses why and how sexually explicit material can in some circumstances support clients' search for a more satisfying relationship to their own and others' eroticism. In particular, she notes that such material may enable clients to address deep-seated shame and help them critique dominant narratives about how sex 'should' be, thereby allowing them to accept and sustain desires and pleasures outside the 'norm'. She goes on to give examples of individual clients' journeys through sex therapy, making clear that she seeks out a wide range of sexually explicit material to help them. This is Cyndi's first publication in an academic journal, and we feel privileged to be given insights into the therapeutic process in this way.

In 'Sense about sex: media, sex advice, education and learning', Feona Attwood, Meg John Barker, Petra Boynton and Justin Hancock write collectively under the name 'Sense about Sex', an informal group of therapists, researchers, sex educators, academics and activists. Their innovative actions have included the online Sexualisation Report and drawing therapists, activists and academics into dialogue to improve the accessibility of good quality information about sex and relationships, sexual health and sexual learning. As with Buckingham and Masanet, they have a keen eye for the institutional, economic and social influences that shape existing sex-advice publications and media, their (heteronormative) conventions and representations of sex, and the class-ridden value judgements about 'good' and 'bad' texts that pervade public debates about them. They also highlight more diverse, less mainstream sources of advice for young people in particular. They describe their own attempts to intervene in provision, for instance by creating 'Bad Sex Media Bingo' as a light-hearted approach to challenging stereotypical assumptions in programmes such as the UK's *Sex Box*.

Ruth Neustifter, Markie Blumer, Jessica O'Reilly and Francisco Ramirez write about the 'Use of sexuality-focused entertainment media in sex education'. Each author has a

section in which they discuss their different backgrounds, reflect on their work in academia, sexual entertainment industries and therapeutic contexts, and share their views on the melding of these domains. As in the case of 'Sense About Sex', this range of contributors – particularly by including people who give sex advice and/or create sexually explicit material – is innovative and unusual, identifying potentially positive contributions of entertainment media to sexual learning that is worlds away from what they term 'pathology-concentrated research literature'. Here – as the authors themselves note in the conclusion – the reader can make connections and draw contrasts for themselves between, for instance, Blumer's critical engagement with different modes of production of pornography and her students' criticism of contemporary *Playboy* models, and O'Reilly's account from 'on-set' at *Playboy TV* itself.

Finally in this collection Lauren Rosewarne's article is entitled 'School of shock: film, television and anal education'. As Rosewarne notes, anal sex retains its status as taboo – even as it is now (begrudgingly?) accepted as a suitable part of gay men's sexual repertoire, heterosexual anal sex is still presented in much public discussion as irrefutable evidence of sexual violence being done to women. Rosewarne's suggestion that anal sex can be an intimate and even pleasurable part of a heterosexual sexual repertoire is perhaps the most revolutionary argument presented in this collection: it is certainly not a position one associates with moral panics about sexual learning from the entertainment media, nor with the dominant tradition of psychological research into entertainment and sex education, which would see such a non-procreative act as both too risky, and too 'permissive' in its focus on pleasure. Nevertheless, Rosewarne makes the point that formal schooling has little to say about anal sex, and that in this context entertainment media play a particularly important educative role. Once again, Rosewarne does not dismiss the educative role of entertainment media as mere ideology. Rather, she attends to the complexity of entertainment's function, exploring the range of genres present in entertainment media, the variety of modalities in which they function, and the range of different consumers who engage with it. Using textual analysis she demonstrates that a viewer of entertainment media can encounter representations of heterosexual anal sex as pleasure, as painful, and as an expression of power – suggesting that entertainment does not simplistically insist that any sexual act is necessarily good or bad, but that rather the consumer of entertainment learns about complex and contradictory ways in which sexual acts can be experienced depending on a variety of contextual factors.

We believe that taken together this collection presents an exciting new way to think about what we want young people to learn about sex, what role the entertainment media might play in that process, and how researchers might study and write about the process. We hope that you agree.

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Flirting, dating, and breaking up within new media environments

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Although romantic and sexual relationships are an important aspect of young people's lives, research on how young people negotiate their love/sex relationships is lacking. New media environments provide a new context within which young people negotiate their love/sex relationships; however, what is negotiated is often not all that different from what was negotiated before the advent of new media technologies. Using an online discussion board and individual in-person interviews, this paper explores how young Australians, aged 18–25 years, engage with dominant gendered discourses to negotiate their love/sex relationships within the context of new media environments. Previous research suggests that young people make use of new media technologies to flirt with one another, to initiate new relationships, to maintain their relationships, and to fight and end their relationships. This paper focuses on young people's practices of mediated flirting, surveillance, and breaking up. It considers the creative and agentic ways young people use new media technologies in the negotiation of their love/sex relationships.

Keywords: Internet; Facebook; flirting; young people; relationships

Introduction

Forming romantic and sexual relationships is an important aspect of young people's lives, and there is a growing body of research exploring this issue. Given the proliferation of new media technologies, it is important for social research to consider the impact these technologies have on social relationships. New media technologies have changed the ways young people interact with one another, and many are learning how to negotiate their romantic and sexual relationships within these new contexts. This paper discusses some of the practices of flirting, Facebook stalking, and breaking up that Australian young people engaged in when using new media technologies to negotiate their love/sex relationships. Data for this paper come from a small-scale doctoral study which investigated young people's practices of 'ethics of the self' while negotiating their love/sex relationships and new media environments.

Miller (2013b) has argued that there is no clear distinction between online and offline practices, as 'most people now engage with a mix of communication and identity platforms which usually include a multiplicity of online and offline identities without any clear break between these' (10). How young people engage with new media technologies should therefore not be considered as producing something radically different to or separate from other ways of interacting. Young people make use of digital communication to engage in flirtation, and interpret these practices through dominant gendered discourses of relationship negotiation. They engage with new media technologies to share

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information about themselves with their Friends,¹ and to covertly find out information about others – an activity that is given particular importance in the initial stages of a romantic or sexual relationship, and when a relationship ends. The prevalence of new media technologies in young people's lives has led to diverse experiences of mediated breakups. As we discuss later, young people may make sense of mediated breakups in complex and at times contradictory ways.

Flirting and initiating new relationships

New media technologies provide young people with different tools for negotiating the various stages of their love/sex relationships. Despite cultural shifts in how young people engage in sexual relationships, dominant discourses which shape their sexual subjectivities have remained largely unchanged. The three discourses about heterosexuality described by Hollway (1984) – the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and the permissive discourse – continue to inform much of young people's negotiation of romantic and sexual relationships. While dominant discourses about heterosexual position men as the 'active initiators' of sexual activity and women as 'passively responsive' to men's advances, research has shown that women may make use of a range of strategies to signal sexual interest. Beres (2010), for example, reports that men and women understood and were able to identify both explicit verbal and subtle nonverbal signals of interest – described as *active participation* – and disinterest in sexual activity. Some of the ways in which active participation was read by both men and women included: 'Pushing into their partner, pulling their partner closer, sighing, breathing and moaning' (8). That these signals were easily recognisable to both men and women indicates that men and women are capable of understanding complex and subtle forms of sexual communication.

New media technologies are especially important for young people's initiation of love/sex relationships. According to Pascoe (2010) young people may make use of asynchronous written communication to maintain a 'controlled casualness' in their flirtations. Flirting with someone involves becoming emotionally vulnerable, and Pascoe (2010) has argued that new media technologies allow young people to 'proceed in a way that might feel less vulnerable than face-to-face communication' (123). The ability to flirt and initiate relationships via social media may be particularly important for young men. Dominant gendered discourses about relationships claim that men should initiate romantic and sexual relationships; however, this can involve displaying emotional vulnerability – which is at odds with traditional discourses about masculinity. As Pascoe (2010) writes, young men 'feel less exposed because they can text a girl or leave a message on her MySpace page rather than risk embarrassment by calling her and stumbling over their words or saying something embarrassing' (143). By carefully crafting their messages, young people can ease their way into a flirtatious exchange and avoid the embarrassment of rejection if their flirtations are not received favourably.

Young people may use new media technologies to develop an existing offline relationship into a more intimate relationship (Bergdall et al. 2012; boyd 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Gershon 2010b; Pascoe 2010, 2011). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) have argued that via the information shared on user profiles, Facebook can help college students to identify people amongst their network with whom they may wish to develop stronger relationships. boyd (2010) has stated: 'Social media offer a platform for teens to take friendship to a new level' (91). Likewise, Pascoe (2010) has noted that young people can use the information available through social network site profiles to

learn about their crush – similar to how young people in previous generations would research their crushes through friendship networks.

Mediated surveillance

Employing new media technologies to conduct surveillance upon another person – be they an ex-partner, a potential romantic or sexual partner, or a friend – has become synonymous with the use of social network sites, and has important implications for how young people negotiate relationships in new media environments (boyd 2010; boyd and Marwick 2011; Gershon 2010a, 2010b; Kennedy 2009; Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, and Cratty 2011; Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais 2009; Pascoe 2010; Tokunaga 2011; Utz and Beukeboom 2011). Using new media technologies to monitor another person's online behaviour has become such a common practice amongst young people that it is colloquially referred to as Facebook stalking. According to Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, and Cratty (2011), Facebook stalking is 'a somewhat joking term for obsessively monitoring the social information presented on Facebook by friends, acquaintances, or even virtual strangers who are Facebook "friends"' (711). While the term Facebook stalking specifically refers to behaviours facilitated through the particular functionality of Facebook, other social network sites allow for similar types of behaviour. Both Kennedy (2009) and Gershon (2010b) have argued that Facebook stalking does not refer to stalking in the conventional sense, but to the practice of *covertly* checking out someone's profile on Facebook to gain more information about them. Crucially, 'Facebook stalking is intended to be invisible to the person [being] stalked' (Gershon 2010b, 146).

Mediated surveillance can be anything from a helpful way to learn more about someone else, to a tool for controlling the activities of another person. Pascoe (2010) has argued that practices of mediated surveillance are important for young people because they see them as ways to manage their anxiety around developing intimate relationships and 'put to rest [...] fears about vulnerability and betrayal' (141). However, Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais (2009) have noted that high levels of interpersonal information available on Facebook can provoke feelings of jealousy, particularly in intimate relationships. They found that heightened jealousy often leads to increased surveillance, which may exacerbate feelings of jealousy and create a cycle of jealousy-induced mediated surveillance.

Ending relationships

Ending a relationship can be a difficult, emotional, and uncomfortable experience. Dominant discourses about breakups suggest that they are best conducted in person (Gershon 2010a, 2010b; Pascoe 2010, 2011). However, given the immersion of relationships in new media environments, new media technologies play some role in young people's negotiation of the end of their relationships. Bergdall et al. (2012) reported that young people may use new media technologies to reduce contact with a person they are no longer interested in. They noted that when contact abruptly ended or decreased, there was often confusion about the status of the relationship for one or both partners:

When couples held discussions about the breakup, the status of the relationship was typically clear to both parties. However, when one person abruptly discontinued phone calls to passively communicate that the relationship was ending, the other partner was sometimes confused, and room was left for the relationship to resume later. (578)

Using new media technologies to passively negotiate the end of a relationship may also create ambiguity over the status of the relationship. Gershon (2010a, 2010b) has noted however that this strategy may be useful for young people who are unsure about wanting to end a relationship or re-negotiate its terms.

In her investigation of US college students' experiences of mediated breakups, Gershon (2010b) reported that young people's breakups were often negotiated through a series of conversations that occurred across multiple media. She noted that for some young people, texting 'I want to breakup' was the in-person equivalent of 'we need to talk' – signalling that the terms of the relationship need to be renegotiated, which may lead to the relationship ending. Gershon argued that new media technologies can also be used to end a relationship with a partner who is resistant to breaking up. When one partner insisted on only communicating via one particular medium – such as via email or text messages – Gershon found that this strategy was particularly effective in ending a relationship as it was viewed as demonstrating a firm commitment to ending the relationship. In contrast, Gershon (2010a) has argued that switching between different communication technologies to negotiate the breakdown of a love/sex relationship can create ambiguity about what was being negotiated; switching media 'often made it unclear to participants whether the events unfolding were indeed a breakup or instead a moment for imagining the workings of the relationship anew' (398). New media technologies therefore afford young people a variety of strategies for negotiating the end of their relationships.

Methods

The research reported here was conducted in two phases using two different methods. The first phase consisted of an online discussion board involving 28 young people across Australia, and the second phase involved individual in-person interviews with an additional 12 young people located in and around Melbourne, Victoria. Both phases of the study made use of developmental vignettes to explore young people's negotiation of a sexual encounter. While vignettes are traditionally composed of several unrelated short scenarios, developmental vignettes are composed using a continuous narrative, in which 'each stage of the vignette builds upon previous events' (Hughes 1998, 388). Young people were asked questions at each stage of the vignette to facilitate discussion of particular issues and were encouraged to discuss any personal affinities with the vignette's storyline as it unfolded.

The target group for this project was defined as young people between the ages of 18 and 25 years who used the Internet at least once per day, and study participants were recruited through the use of purchased banner advertisements on Facebook. Participants were recruited using convenience and purposive sampling – that is, they were selected based on their ease to recruit and likeliness to respond, and their shared characteristic of being regular users of new media technologies (Bowling 2009; Schneider et al. 2002).

Ethics approval was obtained for this project from the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee. As a 'thank you' for their time, discussion board participants were offered a \$30 gift certificate and interview participants were offered a \$20 gift certificate from an Australian music and entertainment store.² In order to maintain participant anonymity, they were given the option of choosing or being assigned a pseudonym to be identified by. Online discussion board participants chose unique usernames, which they used to log in to the discussion board. In addition, names, places, and other descriptive details have been changed, with some detail being left intentionally vague where it might otherwise be recognised.

Online discussion board

The online discussion board ran for eight days, and discussed themes of technology use, privacy and safety in technology use, managing sex and relationships online, and the 'sexual ethics' vignette. The sexual ethics vignette was based on Carmody's (2009) sexual ethics education programme, and over the course of 13 threads detailed a young couple negotiating sex for the first time. Twenty-eight young people (15 women, 13 men) participated in the online discussion board. They ranged in age from 18 to 25 years, came from five different states (Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, and Western Australia), and represented a range of sexual identities and experiences. The discussion board was not a 'natural' online setting and therefore must not be considered 'ethnographic'; similar to traditional focus groups, young people came together for a group discussion in a researcher-controlled environment.

Interviews

In-person interviews were conducted with young people living in and around Melbourne, Victoria. The duration of interviews was between one and two hours and each explored themes of technology and relationships, the 'sexual ethics' vignette, and negotiating relationships. Based on feedback from the online discussion board, the sexual ethics vignette was redeveloped into a more detailed eight-part series to explore young people's understandings about negotiating sexual encounters. Twelve young people (six women, six men aged 18–23 years) participated in the interviews. Diversity was sought within this group on the basis of age, gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status. Relationship status emerged as an important consideration after interview recruitment had begun.

Data analysis

The data were examined reflexively to consider how the stories told are co-constructed between participants and researcher. The focus was on how knowledge was 'actively' generated (Fontana and Frey 2005; Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). Thematic analysis sought to reveal the discourses that emerged and to examine underlying assumptions behind the language participants used to talk about their experiences of negotiating their love/sex relationships in new media environments. Importantly, this method of analysis did not seek to determine the 'truth' about the stories told or about the research participants. The goal was not to produce generalisable statements about the 'truth' of the subject of analysis. The aim instead was to deconstruct 'truth claims' in order to demonstrate their inherent instability.

Findings

Flirting

While dominant heteronormative discourses provide young people with an established path to navigate their dating relationships, discourses of how to navigate romantic and sexual relationships in new media environments are not as yet firmly established. Instead, there are only unspoken rules, complicated by differing media ideologies, which take the form of beliefs about how particular media should be used to deliver particular messages (Gershon 2010b).

Significantly, one person's 'rules' for using new media technologies to initiate a new love/sex relationship may not be shared by another. Young people are aware of the

ambiguity created by mediated communication and use this to their advantage, particularly to flirt with someone in whom they are interested. In this study, I asked discussion board participants if and how they used new media technologies to communicate in different ways with their romantic or sexual partners than with people they were not involved with in that way. Reverie described how she was more flirtatious online than offline:

i tend to be more affectionate and flirtatious online than in person. mostly due to exploiting the fact that the net provides something to hide behind and the other person cannot tell the tone of voice and you can easily brush off a misunderstanding by saying something like 'oh, i'm only joking'. (Reverie, F, 22, online discussion board)

Young women have the difficult task of negotiating a sexual double standard whereby they are encouraged to be sexually active – but not *too* active (Bogle 2008; Currier 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Reid, Elliott, and Webber 2011; Ringrose and Renold 2012). New media technologies provide Reverie with a way to negotiate the contradictory claims inherent within dominant discourses about women's sexuality. In particular, being able to claim she was 'only joking' about her digital flirtations enabled her to explore a more active sexual subjectivity online, while maintaining a 'good girl' subject position offline.

The ambiguous nature of text-based communication allows young people to engage in flirtation in a non-threatening way: if their flirtation is rejected, they can claim the flirtation had been made in jest. This strategy allows the individual to 'save face' and avoid potential humiliation (Pascoe 2010). A young person may be embarrassed to tell someone they are attracted to them in person. Through digital communication, however, this same young person can carefully compose a message, send it off, and be embarrassed about it without the other person knowing. However, while new media technologies may make this particular strategy easier to engage in, offline flirtations can also be claimed to have been made in jest.

The ambiguity provided by digital communication can create confusion when trying to interpret the intention behind a message: Is someone flirting, or simply portraying a flirtatious persona? One of the young men interviewed enjoyed using the Internet to flirt with women because it provided a safe way of assessing a woman's interest in him. I asked him what signs he looked for when he was chatting with someone to see if they were interested in him:

Well, I guess if they flirt back it either says that they're just a flirty [sic] person in general or they're interested and you can kind of go from there I guess. (John, M, 18, interview)

John was aware that a woman's online flirtations were not enough to indicate a clear interest in him. I asked him to give me an example of something that someone would do when they were flirting:

Well, always initiating conversation first when we're both online. Like if they're flirting with me or they're interested in me they'll, you know, might always initiate the conversation first and maybe make some suggestive comments and that sort of thing, which is also a lot easier to do on the internet. And yeah, like just that sort of thing, or *a lot* of suggestive comments sometimes. And just generally showing they're interested. Just like in person except you don't really have the barriers of, you know, what you're scared to say to someone, to their face. (John, M, 18, interview)

While media technologies provide a new context in which flirtation can occur, they do not necessarily change how young people signal an interest in one another. Digital communications offer young people a barrier with which to hide the non-verbal

cues that would otherwise be communicated through an in-person flirtatious exchange. Gershon (2010b) argued that in place of non-verbal cues, young people may look for ‘second-order information’ contained within the structure of mediated communications – that is, ‘the background knowledge of a situation and expectations of communication that allows one to interpret the words’ (123).

Decoding second-order information is an important part of interpreting the meaning behind digital communications. John described the cues he looks for in a woman’s text-based communications to determine the intention behind her communication: Is she the one initiating the conversation? Are her comments sexually suggestive? Does she make an effort to engage with his online profile? The woman is described as taking an active role in signalling her interest – giving John the indication that he can move their relationship to another level should he wish to. As with the sexual communication described by Beres (2010), it is the woman’s *active* engagement with John that signals her interest, as opposed to simply her reply to his messages.

Facebook stalking

New media technologies provided young people in this study with a way of more comfortably negotiating the awkward ‘getting-to-know-you’ stage of a relationship. Young people spoke at length about how technologies can be used to flirt and get to know someone better before starting to date with them. Online discussion board participants were asked about how they could use, or have used, the Internet to get to know someone better. One strategy they used was to covertly observe the online activities of others through Facebook stalking. One young man said:

Facebook is a good way to “stalk” people; i.e. get to know more about them by looking through their pictures, their wall, their friends etc. . . . Yes, I have used the internet (facebook, MSN, myspace) to get to know someone better. In fact, I’ve done it countless times. (TheDon, M, 21, online discussion board)

While new media technologies may be used to engage in conversation, Facebook stalking was considered an accepted ‘normal’ activity amongst most of the young people in this study. Provided they did not monitor others too intensely, going through a person’s profile to find out information about them – from their status updates, the ‘About Me’ section, photos, and Friends – was considered routine, particularly with a newly added Friend.

One young woman, MissMax, described how the various functionalities of Facebook allow young people to investigate someone they were interested in starting a relationship with:

looking at friends/[m]utual friends, interests, groups joined, opinions and [notes], photos (esp of past boyfriends/girlfriends!?) and the like. maybe chat using fb chat. write cute notes/silly notes on each other’s walls, plan catchups and events and invite one another. Keep an eye on what the other is doing (“kissed 10 girls at the [club] last night” etc). (MissMax, F, 21, online discussion board)

MissMax described a range of ways of seeking out information about someone; from covertly looking at what information they have posted on their profile, to commenting on their online activity, to initiating conversations by sending them public or private messages. Profiles on social network sites are designed to allow young people to share the seemingly mundane details of their day-to-day lives with their Friends. These details take on added importance however when they become part of an investigation into a potential – or current – romantic or sexual partner (Gershon 2010b; Pascoe 2010). Every

piece of information young people share on their profiles becomes a clue to their life: from whom they add as a Friend, to which groups or interests they list, to the photos and status updates they post. The more information a young person has about a particular person or situation, the better able they are to interpret the meanings that lie behind that person's digital communication (boyd and Marwick 2011). For instance, if someone updated their status to say they kissed multiple people at a club, knowing where this person went out, with whom, and with what purpose in mind, will affect how this status update is interpreted. Kissing multiple people at a club on a person's birthday will likely be read differently than if it was a regular weekend activity.

When I asked Mezza, a 20-year-old gay woman who described herself as constantly connected to social media, about how she used new media technologies within her relationships to look after herself and her own needs, she described some of the benefits and drawbacks of Facebook stalking as follows:

So, for me, and my needs, all I need from someone is to know that they either appreciate me or that they care, and that is pretty much it. And new technology is just a way to speed that up, like instant gratification of that need. Which isn't always a good thing like to have everything just instantly just there. Good things take time. And with this stuff it can really speed it up, like to a point where you're hurtling through a relationship rather than being paced out. (Mezza, F, 20, interview)

The constant and immediate stream of information available about young people on social network sites has changed the ways in which some young people start their relationships. Before young people were able to have constant contact with one another via social network sites, instant messaging, and text messaging, their interactions were often moderated by the presence of adults (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, and Robinson 2010). Spending time together meant being in the same physical space, or talking on the telephone. New media technologies provide young people with opportunities in a non-geographically bound space. There are fewer barriers to restrict their time spent socialising, which means that relationships can develop at a faster pace than previously possible.

I asked Mezza how she thought things would be different if we did not have these technologies. She joked about dating by letters and then continued to discuss the implications of being constantly connected through new media technologies:

You sort of have to try and monitor yourself. If you've got all that information it's just so easy to just be like, "kkk" all the time. You've got to be sort of conscious of yourself as you're doing it, and that involves a lot of clock watching. [laughs] "It's been 27 minutes since she last replied. No, it's not that she hates me." [laughter] (Mezza, F, 20, interview)

Here, Mezza highlighted the difficulty new media technologies present to some young people: the potential to have instant – and constant – contact with others has changed the ways in which some young people interact, with there being no clear-cut cultural frame of reference on how to navigate these changes. Young people have to work out for themselves how best to manage the stream of information available to them about their various Friends. For Mezza, this involved developing a sense of awareness about how often she checked social media and reminding herself that people are not always able to respond immediately. The thrill of beginning a new relationship with someone can however make it more difficult to set limits on how much an individual engages with the information available through new media technologies about their love/sex interest. Resisting the urge to engage in Facebook stalking is particularly challenging given that this practice is conducted covertly; the person being observed need not ever know that their Facebook profile has been 'stalked'.

Breaking up

Ending a love or sex relationship can be complicated; it is often not as simple as one person declaring the relationship to be over. Many young people shared the experiences of using new media technologies to negotiate a conflict within or the breakup of a love/sex relationship.

Blaze, a 22-year-old gay man, had ended a long-term relationship the previous year and was single at the time of our interview. He regularly used the Internet to meet other men for casual dates and sexual encounters, and enjoyed the connection to new people and control over their interactions that he felt the Internet provided. As we discussed the strategies he employed to protect his safety he mentioned he had recently encountered a series of unexpected rejections, one of which had involved ending the relationship via a text message sent during a movie date:

So he said, "I need to go to the bathroom," I'm like, "Okay," then I get this text, it's like, "See ya." And the main thing was that I wish he could've at least stayed so I could've watched the movie, 'cos I was really liking the movie, and then when I got that I was too distracted, so I had to leave too. I mean you can't get dumped in the middle of a movie and then just keep watching it. I had to instantly go out and call my friend and say, "You would not believe what just happened." TSH! (Blaze, M, 22, interview)

Many young people in this study indicated that it was acceptable to use new media technologies to end a relationship, if it was in the early stages. Blaze's experience took place on a first date. While Blaze was understandably distressed at the time this occurred, in his retelling of the story to me – only a couple of weeks after it occurred – he portrayed it as an amusing anecdote. More than any of the other young people interviewed, Blaze possessed a self-assuredness that enabled him to be resilient when he encountered rejection – be this mediated or not. Although this breakup had been made possible by new media technologies, these technologies also allowed Blaze and his date to engage in particular strategies of caring. Before the advent of mobile phones, Blaze's date might have just left in the middle of the movie without informing him he was not going to return. As undesirable as this situation was, receiving the text message may have provided Blaze with some sense of closure. In addition, being able to use his mobile phone to immediately call a friend and discuss what had happened enabled Blaze to care for himself while he was experiencing an upsetting event.

Tom was a 20-year-old straight man who had also ended a long-term relationship the previous year and was single at the time of our interview. He enjoyed hookups³ and did not like to use new media technologies to meet new people or negotiate his love/sex relationships. However, when he was faced with a sexual partner who wanted to pursue something more than casual, he described how new media technologies had enabled him to distance himself from her:

I just became less contactable and that was my way of doing it. . . . I think in that situation I'm likely to, you know, maybe use electronic communication to, you know, maybe just as a sort of barricade to you know, just – I mean, it's pretty obvious if you're getting ignored that someone's not interested. Or not ignored, but I think people are pretty finely attuned to whether someone has [directed] a lot of attention to them or not a lot of attention, especially when that changes, you know. (Tom, M, 20, interview)

Bergdall et al. (2012) have noted that decreasing contact is a strategy commonly used by young people when ending a casual sexual relationship. Tom assumed that by decreasing his contact with this woman she would understand that he was not interested in her. This rejection strategy is effective because, as Tom noted, social norms indicate that a person will pay attention to someone they are interested in. Tom's rejection strategy bore

a similarity to what Reid, Elliott, and Webber (2011) termed a ‘pity date’ or an occasion when a person agrees to see a casual hookup partner again – in a non-sexual context – in order to give that person the opportunity to understand that nothing further will develop. Instead of seeing this woman again, Tom decreased the level of contact he had with her in order to signal that nothing further would develop between them. This raises the question: Why not be direct with her?

Much to their surprise, Reid, Elliott, and Webber (2011) found that both men and women considered the pity date to be a ‘nicer’ option than directly informing a hookup partner that they are not interested in pursuing anything further with them: ‘Although one solution would be simply to refuse the date, students said it would be unkind to be so direct’ (561). Gershon (2010a) found that when one person wants a relationship and the other person does not, communicating via new media technology can help to make the message clear, as it represents a violation of the ‘rules’ of breakup etiquette. A refusal to engage in a face-to-face conversation – or in Tom’s case, any conversation – may be understood as ‘rude’ or ‘uncaring’; however, it is precisely this understanding that makes it an effective breakup utterance.

Discussion

The ambiguity created by mediated communication makes it an appealing medium for use in flirting. Reverie described how she found it easier to be a flirtatious person online than offline. Dominant discourses about mediated communication claim it is less authentic or ‘real’ than non-mediated – or in-person – communication, in part because of the lack of non-verbal cues. However, when they understand how to interpret the second-order information surrounding a message, young people can develop a more nuanced understanding of mediated messages. John looked at the second-order information contained within his online flirtations to determine if a woman was interested in him or simply had a flirtatious persona. The claim that mediated communications are somehow less ‘real’ ignores the lived implications of these forms of communication. While new media technologies can create opportunities for young people to explore their sexual subjectivities in relatively safe spaces, it is important for young people to be aware of what their mediated communications convey in online and offline contexts. Such communications are no less ‘real’ than non-mediated communications; they are simply another way of communicating.

For the young people involved in this study, Facebook stalking could be an accepted part of the courtship process. After meeting someone new and adding them as a Friend, it was expected that both people would engage in some level of investigation of the other person’s profile. TheDon and MissMax described some of the strategies used to gain information about someone they are romantically or sexually interested in. The ability to correctly interpret second-order information is particularly important for young people engaged in Facebook stalking, as it is the meanings behind the messages posted that they are attempting to uncover.

Facebook stalking is dependent upon someone updating their Facebook profile and making those updates visible to others (boyd and Marwick 2011; Pascoe 2010). In order for it to be effective, new information must regularly be inputted into Facebook – or whatever social medium is being used. Many of those involved in this study were aware of the reciprocal nature of Facebook stalking: while they could use new media technologies to gain information about others, others could use new media technology to find out information about them as well. Some young people chose to moderate how much

information about them was available online; however, many were quite open with what they would share – particularly on Facebook, as their Friends were more likely to be people they knew in person. New media technologies provide young people with near-unrestricted contact with one another, and Mezza spoke about how the constant stream of new information can create a desire for instant gratification, speeding up the courtship process in ways hitherto not possible. It is often assumed that young people are using new media technologies in risky ways – particularly in relation to their negotiation of love/sex relationships.⁴ Activities such as Facebook stalking are surrounded by discourses of stigma and risk. Certainly, these activities may present risks. However, these risks can be mitigated through self-awareness and media literacy, as demonstrated by some of the young people in this research.

Although the dominant discourse about breakups claims it is inappropriate to end a relationship using new media technology, there are no set ‘rules’ about how appropriately to conduct a breakup – mediated or not. Negotiating breakups within new media environments presents a complex challenge for young people, as young people must negotiate a plethora of discourses about appropriate behaviour that at times are contradictory. There are a variety of reasons why young people may choose to engage in mediated breakups. Blaze and Tom’s experiences demonstrate that mediated breakups can sometimes be less confrontational and offer effective ways of ending a relationship. While an in-person breakup may be a cultural ideal, regardless of how a relationship is ended, young people are faced with the task of dealing with the hurt of rejection. Whether or not this hurt is made worse by a mediated breakup may depend upon the beliefs about how new media technologies should be used to communicate (Gershon 2010b) that a young person holds.

Limitations and recommendations

The study described in this paper was small scale and exploratory in nature. It looked at the experiences of a small number of young people, and findings from it cannot be generalised to the broader population. However, the findings do suggest directions for future research. In particular, the diverse and creative ways in which young people engage in practices of mediated surveillance warrant further investigation. New media environments are evolving, and new cultures of social media use have emerged since the data for this study were collected in 2010. In particular, Miller (2013a) has reported a substantial decline in Facebook’s popularity in Europe, suggesting that young people are moving on to ‘cooler’ social media such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. The functionality of these different social media will change the mediated practices young people engage in when negotiating their love/sex relationships.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the ways in which young people use new media technologies to negotiate the various stages of their love/sex relationships. Young people make use of the ambiguity of mediated communication to engage in flirtation. They also engage in the practice of covertly observing others online in order to learn more about people they are interested in. Whether a person is met online or offline, examining their Facebook – or other social network site – profile provides important contextual information about that person’s life. These findings have implications for sexuality

education policy and practice, which cannot afford to ignore the multiple ways in which young people make use of new media technologies when negotiating relationships.

Negotiating love and sex relationships is a task further complicated by the advent of new media environments. Through accommodation of and resistance to dominant discourses about mediated communication within relationships, young people create new ways of 'doing' these relationships. Mediated communications are not 'lesser' communications; they are simply different ones. The relative newness of these forms of communication means that clearly established 'rules' about how to negotiate love and sex relationships within new media environments do not yet exist. Accurately interpreting second-order information in particular (a key aspect of traditional relationship development and formation) increases young people's media literacy, thereby enhancing the processes of flirting, stalking, and negotiating mediated breakups, described here.

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Notes

1. The capitalised term 'Friends' denotes a feature of a social network site (boyd 2006).
2. Online discussion board participants were provided with a higher level of compensation as the discussion board required a more intensive time commitment.
3. In their review of literature on 'hookup culture', Heldman and Wade (2010) noted that hooking up can refer to a range of activities, from kissing to sexual intercourse.
4. Examples of this include the sharing of personal information with strangers, and sexting.

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‘Pervy role-play and such’: girls’ experiences of sexual messaging online

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Sexting is one of the recurring causes of concern in public discussion of young people and network media. This paper builds on findings from a survey with 1269 Finnish female respondents aged 11–18 conducted using a popular online community for girls on their experiences of and views on online messages concerning sex and sexuality. Sixty-five per cent of respondents had received messages related to sex from either adults or minors while 20% had also sent such messages themselves. The paper asks how girls experience and make sense of sexual messaging and what motivates them to engage in such interactions. Specific attention is paid to the distinction between unwanted and wanted messages. While messages from unknown people identified as adult were often discussed as unpleasant or ‘creepy’, sexual messaging, role-play, cybersex experiments and discussions related to sex among peers were defined as fun and pleasurable. Girls display notable resilience and describe coping strategies connected to unwanted messaging but equally frame sexual messaging and role-play as issues of choice motivated by curiosity and pleasure. The paper addresses sexual messaging as a form of sexual play and learning, and argues for the importance of contextual analysis in understanding its forms and potentialities.

Keywords: girls; sexual messaging; role-playing games; internet; Finland

Public discussion of children, sexuality and the Internet has largely focused on notions of risk and harm. In Finland, sexual messaging among minors has been associated with grooming and potential abuse, and has been compared to bullying in terms of its harmful effects (Laiho et al. 2011; Saarikoski 2013, 56–57). While parents in the Nordic countries generally wish to grant their children independence in Internet use, they do not wish them to encounter inappropriate content, let alone engage in sexual exchange (cf. Ólafsson, Livingstone, and Haddon 2013). Such practices are however not altogether rare. A recent study found that 18% of Finnish children between the ages of 11 and 16 have received messages related to sex and 3% have sent such messages themselves: these figures are higher than within the European Union on average (Kupiainen et al. 2012, 21–22). According to the same study, children do not necessarily experience sexual messages as upsetting, distressing or harmful (Kupiainen 2013, 7). The question nevertheless remains as to what these messages – received by almost one in five Finnish teenagers – entail. Do they involve adults contacting children, adverts for pornographic sites or messages sent by peers? Furthermore, how do teenagers experience and make sense of such communication?

In what follows, we examine the experiences of sending and receiving sexual messages among Finnish teenage girls with a special emphasis on their motivations and agency. Through an analysis of 1269 responses to a survey conducted on a popular,

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free Finnish-language online community for girls, this paper investigates how sexual messaging feels and how girls make sense of these interactions with friends and strangers alike. In order to make respondents' own voices heard, we make extensive use of excerpts from the survey material.

By way of context, Finland is a fairly wired country with 99% online connectivity among young people aged 16–24 years (Statistics Finland 2014). Smartphone use among teenagers is exceedingly common and ubiquitous connectivity is mundane already for kids in their early teens. In addition to making use of globally popular social media services (i.e. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube), young people spend time online gaming and chatting. Online platforms facilitate interaction among both friends and new acquaintances, and access to entertainment and information alike. Young people recurrently report engaging with sex information online: in addition to information targeted specifically at adolescents, they explore sexually explicit materials and display skill in evaluating these sources (Simon and Daneback 2013). In this sense, online resources function as a casual form and extension of sexual education.

In Finland, some elements of sex education are provided as early as kindergarten. Sex and relationship education was first officially included in the school curriculum in 1970, and is regulated by the National Board of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Nowadays, sex and relationship education is integrated into health education, which is mandatory under the Basic Education Act, as well as into some other curricula – biology in particular. The most important educational objectives of sex education in the 2000s involve teaching responsible sexual action and factual information (Kontula 2010, 380; Kontula and Meriläinen 2007). In contrast to the USA or southern Europe where comprehensive sex education generally has a more limited scope and abstinence is promoted as a positive choice, Finnish education frames sexual health as an issue of physical, mental and social wellbeing. However, although the right to sexual pleasure has been acknowledged internationally as essential to sexual health (Lottes and Kontula 2000), Finnish sex education teachers have reported the understanding of sex as pleasant and stimulating as their third lowest ranked learning objective, placed just above sexual abstinence and the problems associated with casual sex (Kontula 2010, 380). Contemporary Finnish sex education addresses dating, adult sexuality, sexual harassment, sex in the media, sexual and gender minorities, sources of sexual knowledge, sexual rights and sexual legislation. Despite this diversity of foci, sexual pleasure is not a core issue. In other words, variations on 'the missing discourse of desire', which Michelle Fine (1988) identified in US sex education some decades ago, remain evident.

While Finland represents an advanced model of public sex education, one in four young people report having received insufficient sex education and looking for information elsewhere (Kontula 2010, 373, 2009, 84). As we will illustrate, online platforms facilitate sexual exploration, play and learning among teenagers. Building on, and contributing to, studies on sexuality and children's uses of social media, and drawing on original research, this paper offers new insights into how teenage girls make sense of sexual messaging and participate in it (e.g. Bond 2011; Temple et al. 2012; Hasinoff 2014; Kerstens and Stol 2014, 2).

There is notably little research to date on children as senders of sex messages and as participants in online sexual play (for an exception, see Kerstens and Stol 2014). The EU Kids Online project, which interviewed some 10,000 European children on the risks of Internet use, addressed the sexual messages received by children. Online risks identified included pornographic content, self-harm, violence or racism, bullying, violations of

privacy as well as messages connected to grooming or sexual harassment (Staksrud and Livingstone 2009, 367). At the same time, it is important to recognise that these risks do not automatically materialise as harm, given that only 12% of the informants reported having been disturbed or upset by potential risks during the past year (Livingstone et al. 2013, 2). Risk is an issue of potential danger while harm signifies something experienced as disturbing (cf. Livingstone et al. 2011, 14–15). In the free comments section of the survey among Finnish girls whose findings are discussed in this paper, some respondents in fact strongly disassociated sex from harm (also Ringrose et al. 2013).

Usually messages related to sex are nothing but harmless humour or flirt. Not everything is about harassment or fishing for sex online. You need to be alert and tell real harassment apart from humour. (Maria, 15)¹

I don't consider sex or sexuality as something bad to be hidden. I can't understand sexual harassment and don't tolerate it, and under no conditions do I want to upset anyone or cause anything unpleasant with my own messages on the topic. Playing role-games where sex scenes have occurred have been voluntary and the players have known each other fairly well. I think it's harmless exploration of sexuality and release in writing, and I haven't heard anyone being upset about the games. (Emilia, 18)

Our study suggests that a range of factors must be taken into account when thinking about the potential harmfulness of sexual messaging online – including, but not limited to age, social ties and the uses of humour. Practices identified as risky may result in harm, but equally in enjoyable experimentation and play. It is therefore important to examine how risks are encountered and lived with, and how sexual messaging connects to all this. Focusing especially on the relatively little studied positive experiences of sexual messaging among Finnish teenage girls, we examine how they describe their practices and motivations, how they perceive risk and harm, and what role social media plays in learning about sex and sexuality.

Research design and key findings

While this paper closely connects to other research on teenage girls and sexting (e.g. Albury and Crawford 2013; Ringrose et al. 2013; Hasinoff 2014), it addresses predominantly textual, rather than visual practices, defined in the survey questionnaire as 'messages talking about sex'. Consequently, the respondents described a range of such 'talk', from discussions on contraception to proposals of meeting up for sex, sending naked photos, sexual role-playing games and jokes with sexual innuendo. The survey addressed girls' experiences of online sexual messaging in general – on web platforms, in mobile applications and in a range of services targeted at young people and grown-ups alike – through both multiple-choice questions and free-form replies. The services addressed, including the platform where the survey itself was conducted, have been rendered anonymous for the purposes of not singling out any of them specifically as sites of sexual exchange. Most participants discussed the Internet and social media in general without identifying any services by name.

The call for participation was shared in the news section of a popular online community service targeted at girls. The invitation included a brief description on the aims and purpose of the study and emphasised the anonymity of participation. The invitation was made visible only to those users who had marked their age as 13 or more. This was considered appropriate because compulsory sex education in Finnish schools starts in the fifth grade when the majority of the children are aged 11–12 years. If a younger user had put in a false birth year, it was possible for them to see the survey because the service has

no age verification system (children's online services do not require age verification or parental consent within the EU).

No personal data were collected from the participants, no rewards were offered in return for participating and the survey was conducted with the permission of and help from the service in question. No parental research permits were acquired as parents knowing that their child wished to contribute to a study on sexual messaging could have harmed the participants by compromising the privacy of their Internet use. The decision to not collect documentation of informed consent was further motivated by the aim of conducting an anonymous survey with no personal data archived. The survey was open from 30 November 2013 until 22 January 2014, and it elicited 1423 contributions. The participants with no experiences on sexual messaging only saw the first questions as the overall principle was not to introduce them to anything they were not previously familiar with. Participants could quit the survey at any point they desired but submissions were not saved unless they filled in the whole questionnaire. The number of questions shown depended on the answers given, with the maximum number of questions being 16. It was also possible to ask questions via email, but none of the respondents did so. While participants could give voluntary feedback, the vast majority chose not to. The survey was conducted by Silja Nielsen as part of postgraduate research. The use of the data in this paper has been approved by the University of Turku ethics board.

Out of the 1423 respondents, 1372 identified as female, 21 as male and 30 chose the option 'neither'. Given the small number of male and ambiguously gendered respondents, only the replies from participants identifying as female were analysed. Despite the survey being visible to users 13 years or older, two replies were from children aged 6 or younger, 7 or 8 (one reply each), 9 (10 replies) and 10 (13 replies). These replies were excluded from analysis, as were the replies by legal adults older than 18 years ($n = 44$). Since many replies came from 11- and 12-year-olds (61 and 91, respectively), these were included to bring in a younger point of view. This resulted in an overall sample of 1296 replies from girls aged 11–18. Multiple-choice questions provided general contextual insight on specific age groups whereas free-form replies afforded a more detailed picture of how respondents experience sexual messaging and the people they interact with.

In total, 711 girls answered the question asking them to freely describe how it felt to receive sexual messages. These responses can be broadly divided into the categories, 'it didn't feel like much' (31%), 'it was unpleasant or distressing' (30%), 'it felt like a joke/I knew it was a joke/it made me laugh' (14%), 'it was confusing' (13%), 'it was nice' (10%), 'it annoyed me' (4%) and 'can't say' (4%). Three participants responded with 'can't remember' and 6% of the replies were left unclear. Indifference was as common a reaction as perceptions of sexual messages as harmful, unpleasant or annoying (see also Rinkinen et al. 2012). Perceptions of sex-related messages as humorous, fun and pleasant were also common (measuring almost 25%). In addition, 20% of the respondents reported having sent sexual messages themselves. As we discuss in more detail below, it is noteworthy that reactions to sexual messaging varied clearly in tone, content and people messaged with: a message from a familiar peer may be pleasurable while one from an unknown older person may be upsetting and unpleasant. Such crucial contextual distinctions nevertheless disappear in general classifications, such as the one presented just above.

These findings are very similar to those in Kerstens and Stol's (2014) study of Dutch teenagers aged 11–18, in which 10% of girls experienced sexual messages as positive, 45% as disturbing and 45% expressed no particular emotion – indeed, the age ranges of the respondents in these studies are identical. The older the respondent, the more likely she was to address the practice in positive terms: while only 11% of girls under 12 described

liking sexual messages, one-third of teenagers aged over 17 did. And while younger girls routinely experienced sexually suggestive messages as distressing and disturbing, older teenagers were more familiar with sexual content online (see Livingstone et al. 2013). Respondents to our survey similarly mentioned the role of age when asked to describe how they have felt about sexual messages:

I felt a bit baffled sometimes when I was younger but these days, as I've been around a bit more, they don't really bother me, they mainly just make me laugh. (Sofia, 15)

It didn't really move me, I replied that I don't want these kinds of messages and reported them. But when I think about it a bit more, they can also send these kinds of messages to much, much smaller kids, and smaller kids may be scared. (Katariina, 15)

I don't think messages about sex are harmful at all. Of course some little kids thinking about boy-bug-bacteria may find them really gross. But I get on a really good mood from messages that turn me on. (Johanna, 13)

These quotations are telling of the reflexive foregrounding of personal agency characteristic of the responses in general. Contrary to perceptions of children and youth as lacking agency in matters sexual (see Carlson 2012; Simpson 2011), girls exhibited and highlighted their skill in navigating online communication, accounted for their experiences of sexual messaging as context-specific, and outlined their personal likes, dislikes and routines.

Peer play

Positive accounts of sexual messaging ranged from feeling accepted and desired to pleasurable experiences of sexual arousal. Such experiences were generally connected to interaction with people of one's own age. Positive experiences of peer messaging ranged from experiments with cybersex to role-playing games, banter and sex talk. Role-playing games were the most frequently mentioned (and defended) form of exchange:

Role-playing games are between fictitious characters. I started playing them when I was 14. Mostly these games include gay relationships, and sex is described in detail. (Although that's not the main point.) When it comes to sex, the topics range from hardcore submission to oral sex, rape, etc. There are no real limits. (Julia, 18)

Role-playing game including basic smut but sex wasn't the main point. (Aada, 13)

My boyfriend and I sometimes write sex role-play because of the long distance, in English. (Eveliina, 15)

Messages in role-playing games have been very detailed and realistic but not disturbing. Some might consider the messages too crude or lewd but I think it's a matter of attitude. (Anna, 17)

Survey participants mentioned picking characters for role-play from among members of popular bands and characters in films or books: in these games, a framework is agreed on, after which the players – two or more – develop the plot in tandem. Role-playing can include external narrators and dialogue. While sex was the main theme in some games, it was more of a sideline in others. Similarly to narrative porn films, games focusing on sex included a story in order to motivate sexual action. On the online community site where the survey was conducted, users often referred to this as 'pervy role play'. Other, 'non-pervy' role-playing games can be compared to regular narrative films that include one or two sex scenes without these being the main focus.

Forty-three per cent of the respondents had engaged in sexual role-playing games, and their motivations varied from dating to sexual exploration through fantasy. Role-playing facilitates a distanced examination of sexuality through fictitious characters and settings:

one can play a character much older and more experienced than oneself; a vampire or a rock star; a character of a different gender or sexual orientation; and move from one script to another at will. Such distancing in terms of the personal and the intimate may generate a sense of comfort. Like fan-generated slash-fiction focusing on queer sexual encounters among film and television characters, sexual role-playing games allow for experimentation outside normative boundaries of sexuality through the recombination and reimagining of familiar characters, scenes and settings (see Tosenberger 2008; McLelland 2001; also Brown 2012). Among older teenagers, role-playing games may also grow increasingly reflective of their personal likes, dislikes and fantasies.

Not all respondents wanted to engage in sexual play in the guise of fictitious characters. Ten per cent of those who had sent sexual messages had engaged in cybersex – textual descriptions of acts and sensations possibly accompanied by masturbation – outside a role-playing setting (although it should be mentioned that many of the sites that the teens frequent feature avatars and their users are therefore to a degree already engaged in a role-playing scenario). According to danah boyd's (2014) recent study, American teenagers identify social media platforms as spaces of privacy and interaction that are otherwise unavailable in their mundane physical environments defined by the lack of autonomous space free from parental control. Some of the survey respondents here similarly identified sexual messaging with the freedom of exploration:

It was basically a big turn-on and since in my age I'm not allowed to talk about sex online, it was kind of nice. A bit like masturbation via the internet. (Johanna, 13)

Role-playing online can be seen as a continuation and extension of childhood sexual play more generally. Research indicates that physical exploration and sexual play during childhood are exceedingly common (e.g. Friedrich et al. 1998). In a large-scale Finnish study (Kontula and Haaavio-Mannila 1995), one in two respondents reported having played sex games as a child. Through play scenarios such as 'house' or 'doctor', children explore adult interaction, normative social roles, the bodies of others, as well as emotions connected to sexuality (Kontula 2009, 81). Survey respondents wrote about experimenting with sexual scenes in online role-play: expanding sexual games online, they were also able to test their personal boundaries and preferences. These findings are in line with studies conceptualising the web as a private and anonymous space for young people to experiment with sexually explicit material, to try on new identities or practise coming out as gay (Barak and Fisher 2001; Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter 2005; Bond, Hefner, and Drogos 2009).

In public debate, young people's online sexual activities are often perceived as problematic and risky. According to Monique Mulholland, Anglo-European culture frames the relationships between the notions of childhood, sex and risk as both volatile and dangerous: 'Panic and fear serve the purpose of regulating and managing the sexuality of children, hinging on the ways in which childhood was socially constructed in the first instance' (Mulholland 2013, 7). The media, advocacy groups and politicians all participate in the reproduction of a discourse of concern that positions especially teenage girls as exposed to risk from online predators, inappropriate sexual content and conduct (Tolman 2005, 19, 80; Egan 2013; Egan and Hawkes 2010). In contrast, survey respondents in this study recounted online sexual peer play with fondness, generally detached it from notions of harm and described it as fun flirtation and 'harmless exploration of sexuality and release in writing' (Emilia, 18). As Danielle R. Egan (2013) argues, popular discourse on sexualisation is often more telling of adult disquiet than it is about the lives and practices of girls.

Significantly, respondents drew a clear difference between welcome and unwelcome sexual messages:

It depends on whether it's sent by someone older than me or someone my own age. If they're much older than me, it's a bit distressing. (Karoliina, 15)

If I got messages from a boy of the same age ... it was nice. If the message came ... from an unknown man 20 years older than me, it felt oppressive. (Elina, 16)

If the sender of the message is a handsome man or boy, it's easy to go along. But if it's clearly some old and disgusting perv, I tend to block the sender if possible. (Iida, 16)

In contrast to definitions of peer sexual messaging as welcome, pleasurable and fun, initiatives from anonymous users seen as older men were identified as 'disturbing', 'scary', 'annoying' and 'troubling'. This points to the importance of analysing the contextual specificities of sexual messaging in order to make better sense of the experiences of young people. Such contextualisation also helps in analysing existing data on young people and sexting. The numbers and correlations found in empirical research to date help in perceiving general trends, yet they are less helpful in tackling underlying motivations, individual choices and sensations connected to sexual messaging. Drawing distinctions between desirable and unwanted messaging facilitates novel perspectives to debates on youth and sexting, which – despite research-based recommendations (e.g. Albury et al. 2013; Wolak and Finkelhor 2011) – generally fail to acknowledge contextual differences in messaging. It also allows for the development of policies respectful of the rights of children and adolescents.

Quotidian messaging

When asked about their motives for sending sexual messages, almost one in four named sexual arousal as their key motivation. Ten per cent had wanted to have cybersex and 7% had wanted to meet someone to have sex with offline. Respondents could choose several options and hence identify a range of motivations: 44% had wanted to reply to a message, 37% had wanted to see what would happen, 20% had had a crush on the messaging partner and 15% had considered them attractive. They also provided a range of examples on messaging styles and themes:

We've talked about what turns us on, about my curves and what we'll do when the parents aren't home ;) (Aino, 14)

Can I push my plug into your socket? (Amanda, 15)

How long is yours? "Are you a virgin" etc. (Laura, 13)

If I met you IRL, you could do anything to me ;) (Anni, 13)

I wanted a relationship. (Jenna, 14)

I sent a message to my girlfriend and reminded her what a lovely night we'd had when she visited me. (Kristiina, 18)

According to a 2011 study, more than one third of Finnish teenagers had met a dating partner online. Relationships formed online were considered deeper and more real, and many felt themselves to be more interesting and bolder online (Pelastakaa Lapset 2011, 7–8). Our survey similarly points to the centrality of online messaging in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships and casual anonymous connections. According to the 2011 study, teenagers' sex messages address personal experiences, sexual orientation, gender roles, fantasies, masturbation, the actual size of genitalia, oral

sex, casual sex, pornography, contraception and different ways of having sex (Pelastakaa lapset 2011, 9). While our survey was less detailed as to the topics discussed, similar themes emerged:

We talked about the appropriate age for having sex and how it's not all that awful to be a 20-year old virgin. And I've also replied to messages in a polite bye-bye tone (I didn't feel like talking about sex or arousing the partner). (Roosa, 18)

Playful things about masturbation, for example, or, linked to stronger feelings, shy-ish revelations about longing for closeness. (Emilia, 18)

We've talked about sex in general and about our own experiences and fantasies. And then there's been pervy role-play and such. (Aurora, 17)

In contrast to perceptions of anonymous sexual messaging as risky (i.e. as variations of 'stranger danger'), girls described it as a conscious choice. In describing their messaging habits, participants distanced themselves from moralising perspectives and forms of sexuality deemed acceptable for young people. Such vocabularies of choice (Mulholland 2013) can be seen as expressions of agency in relation to that which public debates deem as harmful and dangerous:

I wanted to talk ... about the topic and opinions without any feelings connected to the other person. (Jasmin, 15)

These days 'good sex' is too neutralised in society. It's better to learn the meaning when you're young so you can critically relate to those who try to harass you for real. (Matilda, 17)

Different things, e.g., in connection to school's health education lessons on the topic. (Sara, 14)

Sexual messaging facilitates imaginative play, the comparison of personal experiences and preferences with those of others and – as the excerpts above illustrate – offers reflection on sex education lessons outside the tensions and hierarchies of the classroom. It therefore follows that sexual messaging can be a reflexive site of learning, facilitated by the safety of anonymity and the lack of physical contact. Online talk expands discussions of sexual health carried out at school while also offering alternative pathways for making sense of sexuality:

Depending on the site it can be just fun ... and you just usually play along and it's not anything serious. Usually I take such messages with humour. (Sara, 17)

Most of them I've taken as a joke ... since I know they're either jokes or little kids' blabber and they don't even know what they're talking about. (Ida, 17)

These excerpts present clearly different styles of and motivations for sexual messaging in comparison to those sexual initiatives that were experienced as unwanted and disturbing. Out of these, one in four had involved an invitation to meet up for sex:

Want to screw me? I've got a little bit of everything here and you can tie me down and spank me for starters. I can lick your ... So that you can't walk anymore and I can grab your tits so you'll no longer feel them. Come here and I can do you for free. You can suck my ... And in return I'll suck your ... and squeeze ... (Veera, 13)

Basic stuff like asking if I want to suck their cock etc. (Anniina, 14)

"Did you screw anyone today?" "Do you have a deep cunt?" "Have you been to bed with someone?" "Have you tried fingering?" (Laura, 13)

The not so nice messages have been direct suggestions – the senders only want to get into bed with me. One sender even threatened to kill me if I wouldn't agree to meet up and have sex with him. (Elina, 16)

These citations point to the routine-like nature of sexual messaging in the lives of teenage girls, ranging from casual flirtation to verbal aggression and attempted grooming. The girls also describe a range of strategies and approaches that they adopt and develop for coping with such messaging.

Risk and agency

Survey findings make evident that Finnish teenage girls are aware of both the risks and possibilities related to sexual messaging, and that they define themselves as sexual subjects who knowingly explore their agency. Their messaging practices offer tangible challenges to fear-based sex education discourses that frame girls solely as victims of grooming and harmful conduct online. Respondents describe themselves as active and reflexive agents when describing how sexual messaging feels and how they make sense of it in relation to their knowledge and understanding of online communication more generally (see also Mulholland 2013, 154–160):

The messages caused me no trauma or such. Just made me think of what kinds of loonies there really are online or how some like to kid around. (Noora, 15)

I knew I might come across sex messages or such so I didn't wince. The messages didn't really feel like much. (Petra, 15)

Online you need to be prepared for all kinds of jerks so you can't get upset about everything. (Nea, 15)

Respondents describe the web as a space in which it is possible to encounter unwanted sexual suggestions, proposals and disturbing conduct. They also argue however that this is common knowledge and should therefore not come as a surprise. This seems to indicate that the promotion of online safety and awareness at schools, which started in Finland in 2005 as part of the Internet Safety for Youth project funded by the EU, has perhaps influenced young people's understanding of the risks involved in online communication. Respondents circulate a discourse of concern, as articulated in the online safety campaigns, while also displaying resilience and describing diverse coping strategies when receiving unwanted messages. As d'Haenens, Vandoninck, and Donoso (2013) argue, risk and resilience go hand in hand since resilience can only develop through exposure to risk. Respondents seemed able to tackle adverse situations in a problem-focused way, and to transfigure negative emotions into neutral or even positive feelings (see also Livingstone et al. 2013):

Exciting, and we talked dirty for a couple of weeks. In the end I felt anxious and broke contact since they wanted nude pics and I didn't want to send any. (Aleksandra, 15)

Felt great, someone wanted me. Others didn't feel so very great though, didn't reply to those. (Emma, 17)

I didn't care but it was a bit amusing. I considered it a joke, or then reported it (if sex talk was forbidden on the site in question) or blocked them and didn't reply. (Hanna, 14)

It felt as if I wasn't completely crap but that someone was interested in me. Still I was scared that it was some pedo. (Wilma, 14)

I didn't feel like making a scene about it. Yes, I know that you're not supposed to talk to online pervs but I just forgot about the whole thing and went on with my life. Besides, not all posts with sex acts or pics are always unwanted. (Siiri, 14)

Many of the respondents referred to 'pedos' and 'pervs' when describing unwanted sexual interaction, pointing to the general recognisability of the paedophile as a cultural

figure of harm (cf. Sorainen 2007). Overall, however, respondents experienced some sexual messages as unpleasant, others as fun and yet others failed to evoke much affect at all.

Girls and the pursuit of pleasure

Socially acceptable forms of sexuality are dependent on, and marked out by, public discourses ranging from education to popular culture, law and religion (e.g. Warner 2000). Although sexuality is largely considered intimate and private, regulations and norms concerning it are highly public. In the West, an individual's right to sexual self-determination represents an important standard, so long as it does not conflict with someone else's similar right to sexual self-determination. Exceptions to this principle involve mainly children and attempts to protect them from risk and harm (Kontula 2009, 16). Articulations of concern, risk and danger, in combination with 'the privileged expert voice' (Mulholland 2013, 67) easily efface young people's agency. At the same time, as boyd (2014, 120) argues, young people act and operate within a broad system of networked publics in which they can 'write themselves and their community into being'.

Morality-based sex education discourses position teenage sexuality as a social problem (Carlson 2012; Bay-Cheng 2003, 65) and girls as the gatekeepers of male sexuality – implying that (teenage) boys are driven by sexual impulses beyond their control (Roosmalen 2000; Sparrman 2014; Tolman 2012; Kontula 2009, 122; also Yesilova 2001; Lesko 1996). Our study provides interesting perspectives on the pursuit of pleasure among teenage girls, given how respondents describe sexual messaging as fantastic forms of sexual play and exploration. As David Buckingham and Sara Bragg (2004) argue, young people's sexual lives are ambivalent and contradictory, and their mediated worlds combine realism with fantasy and sentiment with sexuality. Respondents in this study similarly describe actively constructing and working on their sexual identities:

Messages sent to me personally have all been from people I know (approx. of my own age) and they've been playful or meant as flattery. I haven't come across any harassment. (Emilia, 18)

If for example someone messages you with "you're hot, shall we fuck! ;)", I consider it play and reply with something like "your place or mine" even if I wasn't going anywhere or inviting anybody over. Once a guy asked, "want to talk dirty?" And we did. (Irene, 15)

Out of those who had sent sex messages, 9% said they wanted to bully others and 8% had wanted to annoy someone. Four per cent of those sending sexual messages had wanted to joke or clown around, and 2% had sent such messages out of boredom. At the same time, half of those who had received sexual messages identified these with banter:

I wanted to perv out a bit, that's all. + isn't it always nice to fool around a little :D? (Peppi, 12)

Everything between heaven and earth. Usually I talk about it with friends, basic teenage humour pervy stuff, nothing more serious than that :D (Sanni, 15)

"Would you rather shag an elephant or a giraffe?" (Minttu, 16)

While jokes connected to sex are common as such, it may be difficult to tell joking and bullying apart, and some messages could qualify as both. Joking and banter were mentioned throughout the survey as key motivations for sexual messaging. These can be seen as connected to a more general framing of sexual talk and play as characteristically non-serious fun, as opposed to discourses connecting such practices with risk, harm and trauma:

Sarcastic, like for example the teachers that my friends and I most hate would have sex in the cleaning closet :D (Nelli, 13)

"I need help with my husband Pentti since we don't really get on sexually, what can we do?" but much more poorly written. (Saana, 13)

Some basic youngsters' "ahh ahh" messages, so really nothing serious or anything that'd really be sexual harassment. (Ronja, 15)

Such 'ahh ahh' messages may seem suspicious to adult eyes but are not necessarily connected to, or motivated by, sex as such. Bawdy jokes, pastiches of sexual advice columns, parodies of cybersex and mixed references to popular culture all intermesh in teenage messaging practices and are therefore also issues of social literacy. That which parents may see as attempted adult grooming or harassment may in fact be a form of sexual play among teenagers that follows its own norms, conventions and patterns.

Conclusions: the Internet is a sexual playground

The survey respondents considered peer sexual play in positive terms whereas sexual messages from adults were mainly experienced as disturbing and unwanted. These findings should not be surprising as such, yet they point to the importance of recognising the contextual specificities of sexual messaging. Girls addressed online services as sites for sexual experimentation, play and learning: for exchanging information, building intimate relationships and exploring sexuality through role-play. This framing is in clear contrast to perceptions of online platforms as spaces of sexual danger, risk and harm. Online platforms function as avenues for and extensions of sex education. Teenagers' experiences of and thoughts on sexual messaging are therefore also a resource for sex education. Discussions based on young people's experiences – be these positive, negative or ambiguous – are a potential means of engaging students in the sex education classroom and for counterbalancing discourses of risk and harm connected to sex and online communications (together as well as separately) with those concerning resilience, play and pleasure. Sexual messaging also facilitates discussions on sexuality more generally as an issue of fantasy, play and exploration that is not limited to physical sexual acts and reproduction.

Given the organic intermeshing of the online and the offline in the lives of ubiquitously connected young people, there is increasing need to address the social media as a site of sexual exchange and learning. The recognition of young people's own thoughts, experiences and practices concerning this is key to promoting sex education that is up to date, interesting and respectful of the interests of youth. Developing this line of investigation further will also facilitate consideration of both the diverse safety procedures employed by the services that young people frequent – which may remain invisible to both young users and their concerned parents – and the diverse tactics that young people themselves adopt in online communication. All this would result in a fuller understanding of what interests, entertains and bothers young people – female and male alike – in sexual messaging, as well as the kinds of sexual knowledge they may require and generate online.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. The survey was conducted anonymously. We have, however, added pseudonyms here to more clearly indicate to the reader which responses we are drawing on. This paper altogether cites 42 respondents. The citations were translated from Finnish by the authors with the aim of retaining their style and feel.

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Advice on life? Online fan forums as a space for peer-to-peer sex and relationships education

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Previous research has pointed to the potential of entertainment media as a source of informal sex education for young people. New social media may offer additional potential in this respect. In this paper, we consider the pedagogical possibilities and limitations of online fan forums, via a case study of the forums of the controversial British teen drama series *Skins*. We analyse discussions of the realism of the series' representation of teenage life, and of specific issues (virginity, attractiveness and gay sexuality). We compare participants' discussions of their own experiences – in a section of the forum entitled 'advice on life' – with their discussions of the series and the characters. We find that the presentation of issues to do with sexuality sometimes challenges young people to engage in debate, and to move beyond established discourses. However, the value of the series in this respect depends crucially on its 'openness' – that is, its avoidance of fixed moral positions – and on its perceived plausibility and authenticity. The forum emerges as a new space for non-formal, peer-to-peer education that has limitations as well as new pedagogical possibilities.

Keywords: online fan forums; peer-to-peer education; sex and relationships education; *Skins*

Introduction

Research has frequently suggested that the media are a significant source of informal learning about sex and relationships. In the past, most research in this area has adopted a psychological 'media effects' approach, whereby the media are regarded as a powerful source of misleading or harmful messages, and young people as passive consumers. From this perspective, the media are frequently seen as a source of 'bad role models', and as promoting negative practices such as 'premature', 'promiscuous' and unsafe sex (Greenberg, Brown, and Buerkel-Rothfuss 1993; Ward 2003). There is also an older literature on the sexual 'messages' conveyed by teenage magazines (Durham 1998; Garner, Sterk, and Adams 1998), although research has also suggested that these are selectively – and sometimes critically – interpreted by young readers (Kehily 1999; Duke and Kreshel 1998). In general, more recent research in Media and Cultural Studies has developed a more nuanced and complex approach. This tends to regard the media as a source of multiple, often contradictory, messages; and it sees young people as active, and frequently critical, readers of media (Buckingham and Bragg 2004). This is not to imply that the media have no 'effects', but it is to suggest that young people may make sense of mediated sexual content in diverse and sometimes unpredictable ways.

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There has also been growing discussion of the educational possibilities of media in this respect (Boynton 2007; Bragg 2006; Kennett, Humphreys, and Schultz 2012; McKee 2012). As Buckingham and Bragg (2004) found, young people often regard the media as a more useful source for learning about sex and relationships than schools or parents. This may be partly because the media are more accessible and (in some cases) more entertaining and less moralistic in their approach. Although the media may promote harmful practices, they may also make available ideas and representations that challenge young people's preconceptions about sex and relationships; and they may generate debates about ethical issues that move beyond simplistic assertions about right and wrong. Using popular media in an educational context is thus by no means straightforward. As Bragg (2006) implies, it requires a dual strategy, addressing not just the pedagogical content, but also questions about media representation – an approach that brings together sex and relationships education with media education.

This situation is changing further with digital and social media. The advent of the Internet has led to intense moral panics about young people's access to online pornography and the threat of online grooming by paedophiles (Livingstone, Haddon, and Gorzig 2012). Social media have also been seen as vehicles for new forms of sexual harassment and bullying, for example through the practice of 'sexting' (Ringrose, Livingstone, and Harvey 2012); and there is growing concern about young people's display of 'inappropriately' sexual images and information about themselves online (Stern and Brown 2008). This public and political framing of the issue in terms of risk and safety has also tended to dominate research, effectively preventing a more nuanced analysis of young people's online practices. There has been relatively little discussion of young people's use of social media as means of information sharing, discussion and learning about sex and relationships. As Albury has argued, 'we need to consider the ways that young people's media practices, including "searching and search enabling", "showing and being shown", "presencing" and "archiving", might also play a role in the processes of sexuality education and sexual learning' (2013, 42).

Fan forums and teen TV

In this paper, we consider one aspect of these online practices: young people's participation in online fan forums relating to 'teenage' television dramas. Our specific case study is of the forums relating to the controversial British series *Skins*, which will be introduced in the following section. Such forums exist partly to provide viewers with opportunities to share their views about television series as they evolve, to debate recent or future plot developments (see Baym 1999), and in some cases to share fantasies about the characters (as in the writing of 'fan fiction': Jenkins [2006]). Such forums are 'affinity spaces' (Gee 2004) – meeting points for those with similar cultural affiliations or tastes – although they are by no means necessarily confined to 'fans' in the sense of committed enthusiasts. In the case of *Skins*, the official forums set up by the producers also provided opportunities for viewers to share and discuss information about their own sexual lives and relationships, mostly in a heavily used section entitled 'advice about life'. Of course, the programme itself was largely produced by adults (albeit in collaboration with young people, as we shall see) – and to this extent, it could be argued that adults continued to set the terms of debate here. Yet the forums appeared to be dominated by young people, and the topics and forms of discussion were determined by them: contributions were anonymous, and there was very little moderation. To this extent, then, such forums might be seen to provide opportunities for forms of 'peer-to-peer' sex and relationships education that exist outside adult surveillance and control.

Despite their continuing popularity over the years, there has been relatively little research on teenage television series. Most existing studies tend to focus on the texts themselves (Davis and Dickinson 2004; Kaveney 2006), and/or the ‘industry’ of teen television (Ross and Stein 2008; Wee 2010). Although there is a literature on fandom, generally focusing on ‘cult’ US teen series (Gillan 2008; Olsen 2004), there has been very little discussion of how young people themselves interpret or engage with such programmes (McKinley [1997] being one important exception). Storylines centred on sex and relationships occupy a very important place in such series (Alexander 1985; Stern and Brown 2008; Fedele 2011; Masanet, Medina, and Ferrés 2012). Yet within the public debate – and indeed within some discussions of sex education – such programmes are again often seen as a source of ‘bad messages’ about sex and relationships. Fiction of this kind is typically seen to misrepresent the real world, and hence to lead to stereotypical or mistaken assumptions about it (for instance, about the likely incidence of particular forms of sexual behaviour in real life, or about how males and females should behave). Such arguments often seem to rest on questionable assumptions about viewers’ apparent inability to distinguish fiction from reality.

By contrast, the study by Buckingham and Bragg (2004) draws attention to two key dimensions that will be developed in our analysis here. The first of these is to do with viewers’ assessments of the *realism* of the drama. The educational value (or even the effectiveness) of fiction in this respect might be seen to depend upon the extent to which viewers judge it to be realistic; yet, as Buckingham and Bragg indicate, viewers’ judgements of realism are frequently multifaceted, and sometimes ambivalent and contradictory. The second issue here is the relative *openness* of the text. In Buckingham and Bragg’s research, viewers resisted what they saw as the ‘preachy’ approach of the US teen series *Dawson’s Creek*, on the grounds that it seemed to be using drama as a means of promoting simplistic, pre-defined moral messages. By contrast, responses to a storyline in the British drama *Grange Hill* suggested that the open nature of the text – its ambiguity as regards the motivations of the characters and the precise nature of the events that had taken place (around an accusation of rape) – seemed to create space for debate and for the rehearsal of a diverse range of positions on the issue. Both these issues will be taken up more fully in the analysis that follows.

Introducing *Skins*

Skins is a British drama focused on the lives of a group of teenagers in Bristol, in the south-west of England. The series was broadcast on Channel 4’s subsidiary cable/satellite channel E4 between January 2007 and August 2013, for seven seasons in all. The series focuses primarily on characters aged between 16 and 18, in the final two years of schooling (the ‘sixth form’). *Skins* maintained a strong audience share throughout its run, was generally well reviewed and received several awards, although it has also been highly controversial.

There are three aspects of *Skins* that make it particularly interesting in this context. Firstly, it is a series that (unusually) can make some claim to being created by young people themselves. The creators and main writers are a father-and-son team, Bryan Elsley and Jamie Brittain (who was 22 when the series premiered). According to Elsley, the team of writers has an average age of 21, which includes several teenagers who are hired as ‘consultant writers’ (Armstrong 2009); and there have been open competitions for young writers to work on scripts and series development. It could also be argued that the series is highly ‘youth-centred’: adult characters are rarely featured and are often represented as

ineffectual and pathetic (by contrast with contemporaneous US series such as *The O.C.*). The series' creators argue that it attempts to avoid 'adult' moralising and offers viewers the opportunity to reach their own conclusions (Patard 2012) – although as Berridge (2013) argues, it may nevertheless adopt an implicitly conservative 'adult' perspective.

The second relevant aspect is the series' focus on sex and relationships. While *Skins* explores several issues that are often seen to be especially relevant to young people, such as drugs, anorexia, risk-taking behaviour and family breakdown, many of the key storylines focus on love and sexual relationships, including issues relating to consent, gay and lesbian sexuality, and underage sex. The series has provoked considerable controversy in this regard. *Skins* DVDs are rated '18' in the UK (which is extraordinary given that most of the characters are younger than that), and some critics have questioned the claim that it is appropriate or even intended for a youth audience (Hardy 2008). When a remake of the series was aired by MTV in the USA, it became the target of a campaign by the so-called Parents Television Council, which accused it of being 'child pornography'. Following a withdrawal of advertising sponsorship, the series was cancelled, although it has nevertheless been screened in 20 countries worldwide.

The third aspect here is the programme's innovative use of online media, which has been widely seen as a key factor in its success. *Skins* operated an energetic and multifaceted transmedia strategy, including video-meetings with actors, mini online prequels and 'behind-the-scenes' videos, Twitter chats, online games, social networking sites and music playlists for the characters, as well as an extensive official website (Del Mar Grandío and Bonaut 2012). These techniques are now very widely used by youth media producers (Wee 2010); and though they are celebrated by some as manifestations of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006), they also play key functions in terms of marketing, building and extending the programme brand. The forums we examine were hosted on the official *Skins* website: they provided opportunities for participants to share knowledge and create content around the series, but they also served as a means of promoting brand loyalty and encouraging the purchase of related merchandise.

Research questions and methodology

Our key questions here focus on the potential of the programme forums as a means of peer-to-peer sex and relationships education. What kinds of dialogues occur on these forums? To what extent, and in what ways, can they be seen as pedagogical? Are the forums merely an opportunity for participants to rehearse received opinions and common-sense wisdom, or is there genuine learning and debate taking place? What role does the programme itself play in this regard, for example as a resource or a provocation for discussion, or as a constraint upon it? To what extent is this contingent upon viewers' perception of it as more or less realistic, or upon the degree of 'openness' of the text? How does participants' discussion of the programme differ from their discussion of their own experiences?

Our analysis focused on the *Skins* Fan site Forum, which was hosted on the official *Skins* website at www.e4.com – shortly after we completed our research in December 2013, it appeared that the site was taken down, although it is still possible to watch episodes and other video material on the main Channel 4 site. At the time of our research (September to December 2013), the forum claimed over 46,700 members. It used a standard template, enabling logged-in participants to contribute to existing discussion threads and create new threads in addition to those proposed by the moderators. Table 1 shows the structure and topics of the six main sections, with our brief descriptions.

Table 1. *Skins* fan site forum structure.

Section	Content	Topics	Replies
Skins central	Advertisements, participants introducing themselves, competitions.	1173	4149
Skins	Series content, different seasons and episodes. Related music, news, articles, etc.	4239	24,041
Skins characters (+ cast)	Characters' storylines, clothes and appearance, lives of the actors, etc.	556	8928
Advice on life	Participants' own lives, related general topics.	515	8855
This time	Other media products (music, TV, films).	532	6264
Off	Suggestions, downloads and help.	278	7819
Total		7293	60,056

Given our research questions, our key focus was obviously on discussions of sex and relationships; and we were especially interested to compare the participants' discussions of their own lives and experiences with those relating to the characters and storylines within the programme. We selected three relevant topics from the 'Advice on life' section that had attracted the most contributions and page views: they were 'virginity', 'are people gay...' and 'what makes a girl/boy attractive?' While these threads did contain some references to *Skins*, we also searched for references to the same topics in the sections 'Skins' and 'Skins characters (+ cast)'. Eleven discussion threads on these issues were selected in total. Finally, given our interest in the issue of perceived realism, we also selected two threads where participants wrote explicitly about this: 'Is *Skins* realistic?' and 'How realistic is *Skins* compared to your life?' Our sample for analysis includes a total of

Table 2. Forum threads selected for analysis.

Topic	Forum	Replies	Views
Gay			
Advice on life	Are people gay...	51	3179
Skins	Gay or just lost interest?	167	7746
	Really gay?	111	16,760
Virginity			
Advice on life	Virginity	190	10,821
Skins	Sid so desperate to lose his virginity	4	901
	Sid's lost his virginity to Cassie: O	15	1886
	Emily and JJ????	39	1969
	I finally ordered season 3 and 4 through the mail	9	168
Attractiveness			
Advice on life	What makes a girl attractive?	156	9845
	What makes a boy attractive?	91	6902
Skins	Who is your favourite cast member?	97	5880
Reality/fiction			
Is <i>Skins</i> realistic?		15	1628
How realistic is <i>Skins</i> compared to your life?		64	7384
Total		1009	75,069

1009 comments, which together had been viewed more than 75,000 times. A full list of the threads included in our analysis is provided in Table 2.

Our aim here was not to conduct a statistical analysis of the presence or absence of particular issues or terms: although such analysis undoubtedly yields insights, the self-selecting nature of the participants and the more or less spontaneous nature of the interaction make for significant limitations in terms of representativeness. Rather, our approach is more interpretive and qualitative. From our initial categorisation of topics, we sought to identify key trends and tendencies in the data: postings on the different aspects of the topic were cut-and-pasted and compiled into a descriptive taxonomy, which was developed and refined recursively through re-reading and comparing different instances.

Our focus here is not so much on what participants say about the topics but on *how* they discuss them – that is, how they define the topic in the first place, which aspects they count as salient, which kinds of knowledge and frameworks of understanding they use in talking about it, and so on. Our approach is thus broadly ‘social constructionist’ and ‘discursive’ (see Burr 2003). Although we are focusing primarily on discourse, we would not claim that this is ‘discourse analysis’ in the tradition of ‘discursive psychology’: although a closer analysis of this kind would be useful, there are particular difficulties in applying this approach to anonymous ‘found’ data. Ultimately, our approach here is somewhat more descriptive and less ambitious, although we believe it does point to some issues that deserve further analysis.

Realism

As we have noted, the issue of realism has been a recurring concern in debates about media effects. Self-evidently, media texts are not ‘real’: they are mediated representations that are shaped by the formal apparatus of media technology and by the intentions of their producers. However, audiences may perceive them as more or less *realistic*, for all sorts of reasons. This has been a particular issue in responses to ‘teen’ media. One of the abiding problems for adult producers of such material is to do with authenticity: it is quite common for producers to miss their target, and for their work to be summarily dismissed by youth audiences as ‘fake’ or ‘bogus’. It is no surprise to find that this issue also recurs quite frequently, both in reviewers’ responses to *Skins* and in the debates on the forum. Yet while some accuse the series of being stereotypical and unbelievable, others praise its authenticity and even its ‘gritty’ approach.

In terms of education, it might seem reasonable to assume that a text that is perceived to be more realistic is more likely to be taken seriously, and hence more likely to be trusted as a source for learning. However, realism is a complex issue. Texts that are very clearly labelled as fantasy may well have significant educational potential, for conveying messages, for teaching or for persuasion. Indeed, in the field of youth media, fantasy can often be a key vehicle for exploring personal concerns, not least in relation to sexuality – as the success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the *Twilight* series (among many others) would attest. Ang’s (1985) classic study of viewers’ responses to the TV series *Dallas* makes a useful distinction here between ‘emotional realism’ and ‘empirical realism’. As she suggests, a text may be seen to lack empirical realism – that is, viewers may find it implausible or artificial when compared to reality – but it may nevertheless possess an emotional or psychological realism that enables viewers to relate it to their own everyday concerns and dilemmas. Indeed, as she argues, the aesthetic ‘stylisation’ of the programme’s representation of reality may contribute not just to its pleasure for viewers but also to their belief in its underlying realism (Ang 1985, 47). Patard (2012) makes a

similar point in relation to *Skins*, which he argues often uses metaphor and symbolism in deliberately surreal or unrealistic ways to dramatise moral issues. Far from lacking in moral principles, he argues, the series' creators see teen viewers as 'keenly moral'; and this symbolic engagement with moral issues paradoxically lends the series a different form of realism (Patard 2012, 1).

A further complexity here is to do with the different dimensions of realism. Following Ang, this issue has been a key focus of concern in more recent media audience studies (Hall 2003, 2009). Research on young people's responses to television suggests that viewers use a wide variety of criteria for making judgements about the realism of what they watch (Buckingham 1993; Davies 1997; McKinley 1997). Thus, even young children know very well that a drama is fictional, that it has been created by a team of producers and actors, that it is constructed in such a way as to maximise its entertainment value and so on. Viewers use different kinds of knowledge to make judgements about plausibility – would the events we are seeing be likely to happen in this way in real life? – and about authenticity – do these events resemble events that we ourselves have experienced? However, in line with Ang (1985), we would argue that this process may be as much to do with emotion – does this *feel* real? – as with rational judgement. Likewise, in a recent study, Ferrés (2014) uses ideas from neuroscience to address the complex relationships between reality, desire and fantasy, arguing that the relationships between 'truth' and 'falsehood' in people's responses to media often depend on what people *want* to believe, what they desire and what they fear.

In our analysis of the discussion threads that explicitly addressed this issue ('Is *Skins* realistic?' and 'How realistic is *Skins* compared to your life?'), we found a continuum of views. At one end, some participants said that *Skins* was very similar to their own lives, whereas at the other some said it was completely different. However, most argued that it was similar but exaggerated – that it had a basis in reality, even if it was a fiction, and even if some of the events and situations were implausible. In making these more qualified judgements, forum participants used a range of examples from their own experiences, as well as general assertions about the lives of 'teenagers'. Broadly speaking, the level of unrealism or exaggeration was justified by saying that a television show needed such strategies to attract its audience. For example:

Well I think the partying sides of things are practically the same and the drug use also, just exaggerated a bit. The drama obviously doesn't happen as much in real life but that's why its a drama i guess. I think that skins is a pretty good representation of teenage life (in Essex at least).

Several participants also celebrated the programme's authenticity – the sense that it somehow *felt* real – and drew comparisons with their own life experience in doing so. There was frequently a kind of personal identification here, albeit tinged with irony:

I think *Skins* have got it so right! That's why i fell in love with it, the pill-popping, drunk, wasted out of their heads on pot shag rabbits that we really are! I do like to glamorise my life, but it's very close! Oh and yes, i've done it all. Most i'm ashamed of. HOUSE PARTIES = UNFORGETTABLE MEMORIES.

Indeed, some participants claimed that they directly refer to the series in describing real-life experiences, especially ones that carried a desirable element of risk:

I clearly live a very boring life... the instances in my life which are anything like skins are so few and far between that they often result in us saying "ooh that was a very skins night wasn't it?"

my life over the past year has definitely felt like the show skins. a small light-hearted example would be just this morning... i walked home in my clothes from last night, after a heavy night

of partying and drinking. i basically looked and felt like a hooker, walking around the nice neighborhood. i was smoking, and had the crazy hair and smudged makeup. my friend and i both agreed it was a total skins moment.

As these extracts suggest, some participants appeared to have ‘enfolded’ the media back into their own experiences, albeit in quite selective and ironic ways – suggesting a relationship between mediated experiences and direct experiences that is more complex than ‘media effects’ researchers are inclined to allow (*cf.* Coleman 2008).

Even those who failed to see many similarities between the series and their own lives nevertheless claimed that they would like to live the same adventures and that their own lives were boring by comparison. In this sense, the series appeared to offer a model for aspiration, despite the frequently unhappy and disastrous outcomes of the characters’ behaviour:

skins is vastly dissimilar to my life, but a pretty accurate depiction of my cousin’s. he does all that partying, pill-popping, sex in random places, adultery type of jazz. i kind of wish i were him or had more friends like him so i wouldn’t be bored all the time. all my friends do is study... he’s 17 and i’m 18.

As this suggests, *Skins* was interpreted as broadly realistic by many of these young people. Yet behind these judgements lie some more critical observations about its plausibility (its necessary tendency towards exaggeration), as well as a clear understanding of its fundamentally fictional, constructed nature. This was cut across by elements of aspiration: *Skins* might not be much like real life, but real life might be so much better if it was. In terms of Ang (1985), the emotional realism appears to override the perceived lack of empirical realism; or alternatively, as Patard (2012) suggests, this may reflect the series’ ‘really surreal idealism’ – what we might call a form of ‘moral realism’ that transcends concerns about accuracy and plausibility.

All this suggests that the issue of realism is complex and ambivalent. In educational terms, it significantly complicates easy assumptions about the need for realism and the danger of any lack of realism – and the implication that ‘stereotypes’ should be simply replaced by realistic or empirically accurate representations. In the following sections, we consider how this theme is played out in the more specific discussions about issues relating to sex and relationships.

Attractiveness

One of the most prominent issues in the ‘advice on life’ sections of the forum is the question of what makes people attractive. These discussions refer both to physical attributes and to ‘personality’. There are very few differences in how male and female contributors talk about this: both claim to be looking for a unique and distinctive person. They idealise the person they would like to meet:

For physical characteristics I’m not bothered about big tits/little tits, hair colour etc I prefer the little idiosyncrasies that you can only discover once you’ve been intimate with someone (moles, birthmarks, how their hair falls over the nape of their neck). The things that make them unique.

They’ve got to be unique and have something special about them like an eccentric sense of style or wacky sense of humour or strange obsessions.

The majority emphasise that confidence and a sense of humour are important points. They say they want someone who is sure of themselves, with a strong and distinctive personality, someone ‘special’. In some cases, when attempting to exemplify what makes a girl or boy attractive to them, they refer to actors or characters from the series. It is also

worth noting that several participants consider somebody attractive if they are able to share the same tastes in media. For example:

i want a lad who would sit in a posh cafe with me and we'd chat ... about skins;].

As this implies, the observations about attractiveness in real life – as identified in the 'advice on life' sections – are complex and multifaceted, to do with personal qualities and with situations that they would like to share with their ideal partner. There is a strong emphasis on individuality, and the idea of a unique and special person.

By contrast, when participants talk about their favourite character in the series, their observations are much more simple. They usually refer to a particular characteristic they like and do not provide any further explanations. The two characters that are particularly favoured are Cassie and Sid (who were introduced in Seasons 1 and 2). There are just three reasons that participants offer to justify their choice: because he/she is 'sweet' or 'cute', because he/she is 'fun' or because of their physical appearance. In these cases, they do not refer to more complex aspects of the characters or their experiences:

Its gota b Sid he is lovely! and rather cute

cassie cos she is actually so sweet

Perhaps paradoxically, Sid and Cassie are two of the most solitary and least successful characters in the series. They are presented as physically unattractive (or at least uncertain about their physical appearance), as compared with other characters like Michelle or Tony. They are portrayed as sensitive characters, who are often quite isolated and lacking in self-confidence, and this results in some significant personal difficulties. At the same time, this vulnerability makes them different and unique: the viewer may be attracted to them because they seem to need help or protection, and because they are lost and alone. To some extent, this reflects the emphasis on quirky individuality that characterises participants' comments on their own lives; although it also contrasts with the importance that they appear to attach to self-confidence.

Discussions of viewers' relationships with television characters are often premised on the notion of 'identification' – an idea that appears to assume that viewers readily cross the boundary between fiction and reality (see Barker 1989). Yet our analysis suggests that viewers' relationships with television characters – even those who might outwardly appear to be 'like them' – are quite different from their (actual or imagined) relationships with people in real life. Their judgements about television characters are often relatively superficial, while their requirements and criteria for real-life relationships are likely to be much more complex. What they find attractive in a fictional character may be quite different from what they find attractive in a real person. Contrary to the arguments that often inform concerns about media effects – not least in the area of sex and relationships – viewers do not appear to regard characters as 'role models', nor do they necessarily seek to 'identify' with them.

Virginity

Another topic that was the focus of a large number of replies and page views was losing one's virginity. When participants talk about virginity in the 'advice on life' section, they generally regard it as something important and special. They talk from their own experience, using specific examples, but they also represent their views in the form of general claims or maxims. Among the most prominent themes to emerge from our analysis are the following.

Waiting until you are ready: ‘... my advice is do it when you feel ready (and legal) don’t let anyone pressure you, if it feel right then you’ll know when you ready.’

Choosing the right person: ‘... If you Feel your Ready and Hes The Right Guy Then Well Go for It.’

The importance of love: ‘... You really just have to wait tilyour with someone you love, it will make all the difference.’

Getting it wrong can be disastrous: ‘... i Lost mine When i was 14 to someone i didn’t really like on a field when i was drunk i have regretted it ever since its one of my biggest regrets.’

All the above observations conform strongly to an ideology of romantic love: they have a platitudinous quality. Very few participants claimed that they did not give much importance to virginity, and that it was overrated:

Jesus, all these stereotypical replies, its worse than “omgz looks dont matter, its personality”.

First time, you’ll lie there, he’ll pop ya, bout 8 mins later it’ll be too awkward for you to touch.

Not really, but just get it out of the way.

However, the discussions of virginity in relation to *Skins* are quite different. The series appears to represent the issue in ways that confront participants’ expectations and stereotypes, and thereby provides potential for learning. For example, when one male character (JJ) has sex with a female friend simply to lose his virginity, some participants feel confused because this is not the way they expect or believe that virginity should be lost. This is especially the case because the friend, Emily, is portrayed as lesbian, and is infatuated with another character, Naomi. This confusion provokes a moral debate, but also a potential critique of the show’s producers:

i think it was kind of unwise of her to sleep with him. i think it would have been fine if she wasn’t all tangled up with naomi, but their relationship just seems so complicated and fragile right now. emily had really worked to get naomi and it seems like something like this could really fuck it up permanently. i’m kind of confused why they would make her character do this... but i guess we’ll find out.

In this case, the participant appears broadly to accept the account the series offers, but in other cases, there is more direct criticism of the programme and the writers for failing to fulfil expectations:

this was just a complete deviation from all the character development that we’ve seen so far from emily. it was completely disappointing to watch. I’m sure the writers just stuck it in to close up JJ’s whole storyline and to add a little spice into the episode, but otherwise it was unnecessary and actually a step backwards regarding the episode.

In this instance, the series presents viewers with a situation – even a dilemma – that they may not have experienced personally. The way in which JJ loses his virginity, and the girl with whom he does it, make the participants feel confused; and they have recourse to arguments about the constructed nature of the media almost as a kind of defensive reaction. Yet by challenging their preconceptions, the series encourages them to engage in a moral debate about the characters’ behaviour and to speculate about the motivations of the writers.

Here again, there are interesting differences between the discussions about real life and the discussions of the programme. The comments in ‘advice on life’ mostly appear serious

and deeply felt: they are based on personal experiences that are presented as highly significant and sometimes as painful. However, they also tend towards conventional generalisations, and a kind of romantic idealism. By contrast, events in the series sometimes prompt the participants to move beyond these generalisations, and to confront complex choices and dilemmas. As in the research by Buckingham and Bragg (2004), this is especially the case (as with the example of JJ and Emily) where the text is more 'open', and where the internal feelings of the characters or the consequences of their actions – and indeed the motivations of the series' creators – are less clear.

Gay and lesbian sexuality

The final topic we address here is that of gay and lesbian sexuality. This was also a popular topic in the forum, although here again the discussions in the 'advice on life' threads were different in key respects from those focusing on *Skins* itself. In the former, participants debated issues such as whether being gay was a matter of choice, the age at which people know if they are gay, the reactions of family and friends, and so on. In most cases, they speak about their own experience, providing information about specific situations:

I'm 19 and I live in Ireland. I came out last year to my friends and family and thankfully they are really supportive of who I am . . . It wasn't a choice and for a long time I wasn't happy with who I was as a person because of the way homosexuality is perceived in society as a whole . . .

Some participants assert that being gay is not a choice, and justify this by saying that they are gay, but they would prefer not to be because no one wants to be 'hated'. This feeling of rejection is reflected in several comments:

It's certainly not a choice, that's for sure. I DO NOT like being gay and I hate myself for it. But yet I'm cool with other gay guys.
If I had the choice, I would definitely choose straight. But I don't.

honestly, if you could choose to be gay, would there be any gay people at all? i mean who wants to be hated?

Equally, some participants encourage these young people to cope with these feelings and be proud of who they are:

And for the people who hate being gay . . . please dont hate who you are. there is nothing wrong with being gay. i know society is tough, but just imagine trying to live this life even a couple of decades ago?

There is strikingly little homophobic abuse here, but rather an ethos of mutual support; although individuals' sexuality is clearly categorised in either/or terms.

By contrast, when young people talk about this issue in the threads relating to the series, they do so in two main contexts. Firstly, they discuss whether or not the actors in the series are gay in real life. Although they know very well that they are watching a fiction, they are looking for the connection between fiction and reality:

I don't think he's gay in real life because I read an interview with him where the interviewer was asking him about the issue of playing a gay guy, and he said something like "There is no issue, I'm just an actor playing a gay guy, he's just a character".

Some participants express the wish that the actors could be gay in real life. Here, real life (rather than fiction) becomes the focus of a kind of aspiration or fantasy:

i hope hes gay but i doubt it, from the interviews he seems straight. oh well i wish someone would put his biography up, how old is he? dammit i want him to be gay so bad!

However, others criticise this preoccupation as irrelevant:

Okay guys and gals, listen up: unless he comes out, we're never going to know! He could be straight, he could be gay, he could be bi, he could be anything. Even if he comes out as straight, people'll still gossip so there's no point.

And does it really matter? It's not like anyone here's gonna get with him...

Alongside this speculation are instances where (as with the virginity issue) the series appears to provoke debate by challenging participants' expectations. In one episode, Tony, a lead character who is frequently seen having sex with different girls, tries to have sex with another boy, Maxxie. The fact that the series treats the issue in an unexpected way and does not close down the topic – for example by 'explaining' that Tony is really gay or bisexual – encourages participants to discuss their interpretations:

By age 17 I think most people know what they are... tony is bisexual, but I think with him its more about control and power more than who he's actually having sex with. I unfortunately used to know a boy just like him (and he was bi as well)

Here again, the discussion in the 'advice on life' threads appears to be less superficial than the discussion about the programme. However, it is also more assertive, and in some respects more conventional and stereotypical: it seems to rehearse a well-established form of liberal tolerance, along with notions of individual self-esteem. By contrast, when the series appears to challenge these comfortable positions, for example by including unexpected developments or by leaving the characters' motivations open or unexplained, it provides participants with dilemmas that they feel they need to discuss. Participants have to perform interpretive work to make sense of new situations that they may not have experienced personally; and in these situations, the forum provides a valuable means for them to share their understandings, to seek out new information, and to learn from each other.

Conclusions

Can online fan forums of this kind serve as a useful means for peer-to-peer sex and relationships education? Our answer is a qualified yes. As we have shown, the programme provides a pretext for discussions about real life – for sharing and debating 'advice about life'. In some respects, these discussions tend to be more considered, and less superficial, than discussions of the programme itself. However, they also tend towards a rehearsal of received positions – a recycling of familiar and even fairly conventional or 'politically correct' discourses, for example about romantic love or sexuality, which may themselves be strongly promoted within the media (or indeed by parents or teachers in the context of sex education). By contrast, some discussions of the programme seem to involve more intense debate – especially where the participants have to struggle to make sense of events that counter their expectations, or where key aspects are left unexplained. This might be seen to reflect a pedagogy that is based on 'problem-solving' rather than direct instruction.

Realism – or the relationship between fiction and reality – is a key issue here, but it does not necessarily work in the ways that one might expect. These viewers generally see the programme as possessing a kind of authenticity, but they are under no illusion that they are watching a documentary; and in some instances, they are quite ready to dismiss it on the grounds of its lack of plausibility. This 'media literate' approach is occasionally somewhat superficial; but, as for Ang's (1985) *Dallas* viewers, it also affords a kind of 'ironic viewing style', in which they can take the programme seriously and yet refuse to take it seriously at the same time. As we have shown, viewers use a range of criteria in judging the programme's claim to realism: it may be perceived as empirically unrealistic,

but nevertheless possess a kind of emotional or moral realism. Yet ultimately, it does not need to be perceived as highly realistic for it to have educational value; and in some respects, its challenges to realism seem to generate new possibilities in terms of learning.

Ultimately, then, we would agree with the argument of McKee (2012) that entertainment media can be a valuable resource for sexual learning. However, we would also see it as a rather ambivalent one – which, if it is to be used by educators, should be used with considerable care.

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Popular culture and moral panics about ‘children at risk’: revisiting the sexualisation-of-young-girls debate

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In an attempt to resist moral panics over children’s media consumption, and especially girls’ consumption of hyper-sexualised popular media, this paper aims to offer a more positive account of popular culture and young children’s, especially girls’, engagement with it. By adopting a historical approach to modern childhood and the moral panics associated with it, I argue that the consumption of entertainment media and popular culture is a leisure activity which, rather than facilitating or reinforcing female subordination and youth vulnerability, can be seen as a possible source of knowledge about sexuality, about the self and the social world. I draw on findings from qualitative research conducted in Athens with young schoolgirls aged 10–12 years about their favourite popular icons in order to examine the variety of their engagements with, readings and practices of popular culture. Their discursive accounts reveal the intricate ways in which pre-teenage girls make sense of fandom and stardom, discuss taste, fashion and body aesthetics, and construct notions of attractiveness and ethical selfhood.

Keywords: sexualisation; moral panics; leisure; identity; popular culture

In the past few years, several academic publications and task force and government reports in the Anglo-Saxon world have argued that the progressive sexualisation of children and young people exists and is harmful, and proceeded with policy recommendations. Whether it is Palmer’s (2006) best-selling book, *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It*, or similarly minded publications (Levin and Kilbourne 2008; Palmer 2013) and reports (Papadopoulos 2010; the APA’s Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls 2010 revision; the Australia Institute [Rush and La Nauze 2006] or Australian Parliamentary reports [Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts 2008]), such publications have prompted public debate amongst parents, academics, media and retail industry stakeholders. In doing so, they work as cautionary tales about the damage inflicted in children as a result of sexualising and commercialising media, which rob them of their ‘childhood innocence’, and make – girls especially – engage in self-destructive behaviour and an outlandish ‘ladette culture’. Building resilient children (DCSF 2008, 2010) is seen as paramount in order to overcome the syndrome of ‘toxic childhood’ and synonymous with good parenting and good schooling, something that will help children cope with a variety of issues in their online and offline environments.

Within the context of a risk-averse culture, any talk that brings together children and sexuality is bound to be explosive, for children are constructed as being ‘at risk’ from all things sexual, whether this involves child pornography, sex education, children’s media

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encounters with sexual content, or a so-called ‘sexualised’ popular culture. In fact, the degree of access to sexual information children have, and how or when it should be gained, is a contentious issue, as several instances that have grabbed public attention show. For example, the cross-world media hype about Miley Cyrus’s transformation from Disney star Hanna Montana to a crotch-grabbing, tongue-sticking, twerking performer at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2013, is the stuff parents’ worst nightmares are made of. In the meantime, the self-proclaimed ‘I’m-one-of-the-biggest-feminists-in-the-world’¹ Miley has managed to infuriate every other feminist group along the way. Her actions reveal how central is the impact of popular and celebrity culture within the public debate about the sexualisation of young girls, providing various moral entrepreneurs with the evidence needed to argue for closer monitoring and regulation.

However, such a view on sexualisation not only ignores the extent of young people’s actual engagement with media and technology in contemporary Western societies but also the challenge to myths of childhood and sexuality they present. It also obscures the increasing importance of the media and leisure in constructing sexual identities and lifestyles (Attwood 2011), as well as how the striptease culture that this kind of expression represents, makes sex a matter of more democratic public debate (McNair 2002), leading to more diverse and liberating ideas about sex and sexuality.

Popular culture and ‘youth in trouble’

With the intention of casting young girls’ engagement with popular culture in a more positive light, I will now discuss the variety of anxieties that have been historically, and consistently, associated with childhood. For, fears about the impact of popular culture on the young abound, and have been well and critically discussed over the past years. Some accounts take a historical pitch and go back to nineteenth-century anxieties about the supposed effects of ‘penny dreadful’ comics, the romantic novel, the music hall, the telegraph and the telephone and the early cinema (Buckingham 1993; Critcher 2008; Egan and Hawkes 2010; Marvin 1988; Springhall 1998). Others take a more contemporary perspective, and focus, for example, on Britain’s 1950s ‘horror comics’ (Barker 1984a), television, video ‘nasties’ (Barker 1984b), gangsta rap (Springhall 1998), cinema and online media (Buckingham and Jensen 2012). Whatever their take, moral panics (Cohen 1972) frame public debate about children and their relationships to the media. To date, the focus of such panics has involved young men predominantly and the relative absence of girls in these early discourses of anxiety can be attributed to the social construction of women as relegated to the private sphere and, consequently, as not part of public debate. Having said that, inextricably linked to the notion of moral panics is an intrinsic fear of popular culture, as morally debasing, lacking in cultural status and massively produced, as well as concerns about leisure and culture. The Frankfurt School of sociology, temporarily exiled to the USA in the 1930s and 1940s, feared the soporific and depoliticising effects of a hedonistic consumerism, fuelled by standardised mass entertainments in music, film and broadcasting – providing a legacy that continues to shape contemporary understandings of media experiences (Bramham and Wagg 2011).

Moral panics are symptoms of more general anxieties provoked by the rapid pace of social change, as this is effected by technological developments within modernity. A good way to illustrate this is the way in which the social construction of the sexual child evolved in the age of modernity. From the eighteenth-century discourse of ‘sensationalism’ – a belief drawing from Enlightenment optimism that children, with proper education and training by means of adult guidance, would come to tame the inner savage and monitor the

balance between the senses, body and reason – to the nineteenth-century identification of masturbation as dangerous for the body and mind of the individual child and society, the ‘sexual child’ came to be treated with extreme caution and was soon placed under expert scrutiny (Egan and Hawkes 2010). Should parental instruction be curbed, corruption and vice was the result, and nowhere was this threat more prominent than within the new urban culture. Modern urban environments were considered hot-beds of contagious moral pollution, as the spread of print, popular, culture paved the way for mass access to pornographic writings and representations, as well as other kinds of popular culture. Kendrick (1996) has been among the first to point out the class dimension of pornography in that whereas its contents were readily available to upper-class and educated men for some time, its consumption became something to be regulated (as obscene) once the spread of literacy – and the proliferation of popular culture texts such as cards, books, photos – facilitated access to it by women, youth and the lower classes. Hence, modernisation, as exemplified in the contemporary urban condition, imparted traditional norms and mechanisms of social control, yet offered a rare opportunity for moral transformation. The child was the signifier of these contradictions of modern living, constructed as both full of potential vice as well as a site of transformation and hope. In this context, ‘the child functioned as a metaphor for modernity itself’ (Egan and Hawkes 2010, 40).

Modern childhood revisited

Overall, in modern societies the notion that children have yet to learn the skills and conventions of adulthood and have needs that set them apart from others, is deeply entrenched. Backed by the scientific rationales provided by ‘child psychology’, the assumption that children are different is now accepted as a universal human truth and shared by both conservative and progressive proponents of child-rearing (Jackson 1982, 24). This has not always been so, however.

Several accounts trace the historical development of childhood, where, for example in Europe in the Middle Ages, children were hardly treated with the sentimentality and protection taken for granted today. In pre-modern societies, children were more integrated into adult social life, where they were allowed to build their expertise by participating in adult tasks (Jackson 1982, 35). Teaching was not tailored to the needs of the children, who would use whatever manuscripts were available to adults. In fact, not only education, but work, leisure and entertainment were equally shared by children, youth and adults alike (37). Towards the end of the sixteenth century, changes in the nature of childhood started to make their presence felt in children’s attire, which became differentiated from that of adults. Soon afterwards, this tendency would spread to games, rhymes and stories. What adults no longer wanted, as either passé or too ‘common’ for them, was then bequeathed to children (39). In Britain, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that protective legislation barred children from productive work, while compulsory education did not come into effect until 1870. In fact, such was the anxiety about the moral decay of the urban poor, that the ban of child labour in the mines was a direct outcome of middle-class fears about the physical (to a small extent) and moral consequences (to a greater extent) of children working next to adults, all barely clad. So, the fear of the working classes – ‘the dangerous poor’ – and the need to control working-class children and youth by instilling middle-class values in them, along with waning demand for child labour, triggered the deployment of the modern institution we now know as childhood. As scientific rationalism rose in the nineteenth century, the new discipline of psychology redefined childhood as a

set of 'natural' paths of development on the way to adulthood, and its theories have become entrenched in our lives through 'expert' advice, child-rearing manuals, and the practices of teachers and welfare professionals ever since (43).

All these changes in child-rearing practices and images of childhood shape approaches towards children and sex, and towards children's sexuality. Children were not always sheltered from sexual acts, and the lack of any notion of privacy in everyday life during mediaeval times meant that up to the early seventeenth century, children of all social classes would be well aware of physical facts of sex once they were past being toddlers (Jackson 1982, 44).

Through the work of Ariès (1962), which rose to prominence in the 1980s, childhood ceased to be naturalised and was depicted as a cultural phenomenon. Alanen (1992, 9) highlights the role of psychology since the nineteenth century in articulating a view of the child as sensitive, with special needs and powerful emotions, and delineating childhood from adulthood. In doing so, psychology pathologised childhood and promoted the notion of children's incompetence and dependency, which, in turn, shaped childhood policy-making and obscured the visibility of children's everyday reality for years to come. By the time sociology entered academia, childhood was already psychologised, as psychology had firmly established itself as the principal source of scientific knowledge about the child (13). The emergence of a 'new sociology of childhood' during the 1980s and 1990s (Allison and Prout 1990) sought to challenge psychological approaches by viewing children as competent social actors. However, with the media effects approach constituting the dominant conceptual paradigm with regard to children, we find ourselves in the middle of:

... a discussion about whether we should restrict or control children's access to media [...] Framing the debate in these terms focuses attention on a narrow range of phenomena and largely forecloses what can possibly be said about them. Yet, the ways in which this agenda is set in the wider public domain inevitably exert a significant influence on the formation of policy and, by extension, on the funding of further research. Academics in the United Kingdom – and I suspect elsewhere – are increasingly urged to consider the question of impact. (Buckingham 2013, 52)

A question of leisure

Much of the social and academic concern experienced today concerning the sexualising impact of contemporary popular media and culture is related to public invocations of 'youth' and to how we perceive youth leisure. The politics of leisure, like many others here, goes back to the nineteenth century, and to the construction of young people's leisure – particularly working-class youth leisure – as a social problem. The notion of 'unstructured leisure' as a cause of juvenile deviance and generation of social problems emerged during Victorian times, when the increase in the free time available for young people resulted in young people 'with too much in their hands', ending up intoxicated (Blackman 2011, 99). Additionally, from the 1800s onwards there were 'self-directed' forms of leisure for young people and apprentices, such as the 'youth taverns' of northern English towns, public houses ('Singing Saloons') and Penny Theatres ('gauffs') in London and major cities, as well as penny dreadfuls.

As family life was taken to be unknown in city rookeries, nineteenth-century English and French philanthropists wished to organise the conjugal, domestic and parental relations of the poor in the form of the domesticated family, for the family was seen to play a critical role in eliminating illegality, restricting promiscuity and inculcating morality in children. Domesticity was promoted to the working class at the expense of street life,

public bawdiness and vice, thus becoming a form of social regulation (Rose 1989/1999, 129). In this context, the leisure-based popular culture activities of the working-class youth quickly became a target for middle-class moral reform, which resulted, in turn, in the further regulation of young people's leisure activities. Both unstructured and self-directed youth leisure are recognised at policy level as potential social problems. In such a way, from the 1890s onwards, the need for scientific experts to assess young people's behaviour is justified and presented as a matter of 'common sense' (Blackman 2011, 100–107). Ever since, and following the fears associated with any engagement with popular culture as discussed so far, being 'at risk' has shaped the politics of youth policy as part of a new science of prevention of further harm to come, and is linked to tackling initiatives against crime, drug consumption, teenage pregnancy, anti-social behaviour or network technologies.² Significantly, in place of either unstructured or self-directed youth leisure, effective parenting in the new millennium has been about organised and supervised children's activities, as demonstrated in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report on Parenting and Children's Resilience in Disadvantaged Communities:

[...] Parents believed that promoting organised, supervised activities reduced the likelihood of their children coming into contact with risks, provided safe alternatives and offered opportunities for skill and social development. (JRF 2006)

What this means is that in an Internet-saturated world, with all-in-one media devices, children's – almost banal – 'natural' aptitude with digital technologies, through which they participate, play and learn, sits uncomfortably with the standard model of childhood, in which competing narratives clash. On the one hand, there is that powerful marketing narrative which constructs the child as demanding, competent, computer literate and in need of access to digital technologies in order to 'unleash' its 'natural capabilities'. Opposite stands the counter-narrative of the Internet as a veritable Wild West in which unsolicited encounters with pornography, at best, maim young souls for life, or, worse, where rings of paedophiles and child pornographers await to groom unsuspecting youngsters (Facer 2014). In any case, children's online practices (as part of popular culture) are addressed with considerate caution, because they are seen as present-day versions of 'self-directed' youth leisure, and thus, as potentially problem-ridden.

In fact, so powerful is this narrative that the ongoing rise in very young children's Internet use across Europe, the USA, South Korea and Australia (Holloway, Green, and Livingstone 2013) has meant that the continuum of opportunities/risks associated with children's and adolescents' use of online technologies (Hasebrink et al. 2009) has now been extended to cover 0- to 8-year-olds. It may be that we talk about the online skills and literacies of very young children in terms of individual identity-making, a sense of belonging, social connectedness and digital citizenship (15); however, there is growing concern about their practices in video-sharing sites – lest they come across content better suited for a more mature audience – or in virtual worlds (such as Minecraft and Club Penguin) where they are seen to be lacking in resilience due to their young age.

Children's digital safety has been routinely linked with various agendas, ranging from radicalisation and terrorism, to intellectual property, commercialisation and sexualisation and the latest Byron Report (DCSF 2010, 35) is not immune to fears regarding the impact that children's exposure to pornography may have on their well-being. Based on this, Byron reiterates views according to which:

[a]ccidental or involuntary exposure to pornography can be disturbing for a child and the viewing of pornography by children and young people has been associated with the reinforcement of sexist or violent attitudes and behaviours. (DCSF 2010, 36)

This kind of public debate is reignited time and again by the media, which cannot seem to resist any headline that puts ‘porn’, ‘harm’ and ‘children’ in the same sentence (Buckingham and Chronaki 2014).

What all these policy developments reveal is a dominant conceptualisation of youth as experiencing a ‘political deficit’, since youth cannot make the right call and consume ‘the right kind of culture’. Young people need to employ an array of ‘techniques of the self’ (Foucault and Blasius 1993, 203) and train themselves by internalising dominant and embedded norms, to make the ‘right’ decision of their own accord. Through ‘technologies of subjectivity’ such as self-inspection, self-monitoring and self-discipline, we adjust and evaluate ourselves according to criteria provided by others, while thinking all along that ‘we freely choose our own freedom’ (Rose 1989/1999, 11). This kind of governmentality shows how public policy, social stakeholders and experts promote the conditions of consensus about what is ‘risqué’. As a result, ‘what is normal is now defined as deviant for youth, [...] [and children] are defined as vulnerable and therefore require political intervention’ (Blackman 2011, 111).

Revisiting the sexualisation-of-young-girls debate: findings from a qualitative study of 10- to 12-year-old girls’ make over gaming practices in Greece

Following this discussion of popular culture and moral panics, and of the ways in which the entertainment media are seen to promote the sexualisation of young girls, I want to challenge the prevailing views and assumptions about the incendiary effects of sexualised and commercialised culture on pre-teenage girls, and suggest that sexual learning should be set within a broader context – not merely the curriculum-based study of anatomical, medical and relational facts. Instead, it should be seen as pertaining to the construction of knowledge about the sexual self and the social world. In that sense, I argue, girls’ consumption of popular culture illustrates how the entertainment media, rather than being construed as risk-laden, ‘self-directed’ leisure, can be used towards the management of an ethical self, and as part of a broader identity work in which issues of self-governance, appropriateness, taste and aesthetics are raised.

Methodological note

In 2012, I worked with girls aged 10–12 years in 16 different focus groups (4 to 5 girls, each) in 3 primary schools in inner Athens: one state school catering for students of low socio-economic status, many of whose parents are economic migrants (School 1); one private and middle-class school, which is predominantly attended by Greek students (School 2); and a middle-class non-Greek-speaking school (School 3). All the names cited are fictitious, girls were grouped either randomly or in friendship patterns, and focus group discussions were convened by myself and another female researcher.

In an attempt to straddle the divide between the adult and children worlds, I followed Haudrup-Christensen’s (2004) suggestion that when conducting childhood research, adults should perform as an ‘unusual type of adult’, being interested in making sense of how the social world looks from a child’s perspective, without patronising study participants by pretending to be one of them (174). In addition, following Buckingham (1993), the social context of the interview was taken carefully into account, for the latter is best seen as ‘a social event’ (42–45). When adults ask children questions in a school context – in this case, about popular culture – they invite certain kinds of responses, because the subject position we occupy as adults is inevitably predefined as a position of

power in relation to children (63). This suggests that children as participants enjoy a range of discursive possibilities, sometimes seeking to please by employing a ‘critical’, ‘adult’ discourse, and sometimes not.

Out of a variety of themes that emerged during the focus groups interviews, this paper focuses in on the consumption of popular culture through pre-teen girls’ discursive accounts of stardom and identity work. By looking into how girls read and talk about popular culture, multiple subject positions and interpretative repertoires emerge about body aesthetics, appropriateness, taste, media literacy and the ethical self. Participants were asked to talk about their favourite national and international stars. They were then shown three publicly available photos of Rihanna to comment upon. Having sought the advice of my 10-year-old daughter at the time as to which female artist to use, Rihanna emerged as the obvious face of stardom, a face that everyone has an opinion about, which they want to share. The first photograph I shared shows Rihanna in a 2011 concert in Belfast, wearing a multi-coloured, embellished, high-waisted bikini and pink peep-toe ankle booties. In a second photograph, she sports an all-white Max Azria pants suit at the 2011 Billboard Music Awards. The third photograph I shared comes from the 2011 Met Gala, where she wears a lace Stella McCartney one-sleeve dress with a transparent side, a long side-swept braid, Wilfredo Rosado earrings and Christian Louboutin heels.³

The construction of stardom by pre-teen girls: Rihanna and other pop stars

Girls take up different subject positions regarding body aesthetics. Some girls adhere to dominant notions of the ‘slim body’ and find Rihanna to be on the chubbier side, as the following 12-year-olds from School 1 did (Photo #1):

Interviewer: ... does she look fat or slim here??

Eva: ... fat

Anna: ... fat ... – her thighs are eeww!!!! [disapprovingly]

Eleni: ... I don’t like her ... her legs ... I don’t like them, they are fat ... the upper torso is ok ...

Other girls in the same group disagreed, however. Despina thought Rihanna looked just fine weight-wise – it was her outfit she disapproved of – and commented on how body appearance makes no difference when it comes to real talent:

Despina: ... well, I like her here ... I don’t think any woman ... artist ... should be either skinny or fat ... I like her body ... eh, now the bottom she’s wearing – what is it? a swim suit?? – I don’t fancy that ...

... nobody says that Adele looks fat ...

Anna: ... yet Adele is bigger ...

Not all the girls adhered to such ideas about body weight, though. In some cases, there was a critical awareness of the impact that certain popular culture icons have on young fans. Eleven-year-old Sofia, also from School 1, said:

... when little girls watch [female] singers and [fashion] models on TV, they go, like, oh-they-look-so-good and stuff ... and then they see themselves as fat, because they see these [women] who are so slim ... and some may go off eating, they may get sick or die ...

Here, Sofia reveals significant media literacy, being aware of the pressure young girls find themselves under in order to look thin – just like some of their role models. Sofia was also aware of the – sometimes fatal – repercussions of such pressure. The idea that girls will go

off eating as a result of copying celebrity behaviour, reflects a media effects approach. Such kind of literacy, filtered through participants' discourses, leads to particular kinds of regulation and management of the self, and identity construction.

When the 11-year-olds in School 1 were asked whether they fashioned themselves after their favourite pop star, respondents showed diverse practices and subject positions, ruled by the notion of self-governance:

Interviewer: do you follow how your favourite star is dressed in order to determine your own dress style ... at school, for a walk, at a party?

Nena: No!

Jenny: Well, it depends If it's decent enough if it's too short why put them [clothes] on in the first place??

Katerina: I don't want to sport a style similar to a singer's ... I want to have my own style ...

Zina: I don't want to look like everyone else – I want to have my own style ... so, look at Rihanna here [#3], I'd never want to look like that ... I'll follow my own style that suits me best

At first sight, these responses suggest agency in terms of how these 11-year-olds resist the dominant feminist and pro-effects agenda concerning the sexualising impact of celebrity culture on young girls. Instead, they argue in favour of a more personalised style. However, at a deeper level, the way in which study participants self-regulate in terms of appropriateness and decency, suggests, in my view, that they have internalised the dominant tropes of ideal femininity and iconic childhood.

Rihanna's controversial Stella McCartney gown, showing off sidecheek, stirred up discussion among a group of 10-year-olds from School 1:

Asia: here, look ... it's see-through on top, and [there's] fabric underneath ...

[they all laugh]

Nana: yeah, it's dead sexy her hair looks su-perb

Asia: ... she still looks as if she is naked, though

Lila: I don't like clothes like that there's one long sleeve and then none at all

Interviewer: ok, but she's not compromised, really ... you can't really tell what it is you see ...

Laoura: ... Well, I don't like the fact that you can't actually wear this dress and go out

Interviewer: Well, this is an official event, after all ... and a Stella McCartney gown you know

Lila: ... So what?? It's still see-through

Appropriateness, it seems, is related to public perceptions. Being sexy is not always 'appropriate'. It does not matter whether you show the 'full monty' for an outfit to be perceived as inappropriate. What is important is how *other* people perceive it. In this sense, the tropes of appropriate femininity dictate that you do not show too much skin, for this is seen as too provocative. At the same time, there are parallel comments about the gown's style (differences in sleeve length) and usefulness (you cannot go out dressed like that), and about Rihanna's hair styling (the braid looks 'superb').

Turning now to the predominantly middle-class non-Greek School 3, discussions with 10-year-olds point to an intricate subject positioning which brings together fandom, perceptions of body aesthetics and showing skin, personal ethics and issues of performance.

In this school, Francesca and Giovanna started by talking about Shakira. Francesca thought she shows too much skin in her videos, which works against her. Giovanna found her too thin, hence not beautiful, and a bit presumptuous:

Francesca: ... [I don't like Shakira] because she shows too much of her body ...

Giovanna: Yeah ... and because she's too thin ... she's not beautiful ...

Francesca: no, she's beautiful – she has a great body ...

Giovanna: ... well, yes, but she's too thin ... I don't like that ...

Francesca: ... I don't like that she takes her clothes off in public and lies down {talking about her videos}

Giovanna: ... and plays at being beautiful ...

This is a particularly interesting conceptualisation of the body in relation to nudity. Showing too much skin or taking positions that exude sexuality are perceived as undermining the beauty of the body. In this context, the girls seem to have internalised contemporary (adult) rules of appropriateness, which construct nudity and sexual innuendos as something negative, and their management of the self projects that.

Given the chance to comment on Rihanna's Photo #1, Leena said she found the outfit 'shocking':

Leena: I find this shocking ... 'cause this is not right ... the overall style is not working ... in the sense, if you were at the beach, in the afternoon, it would've been ok, but at a concert ... in a city ... well, I don't think so ...

Interviewer: ... but ... aren't you supposed to be dressed up [extravagantly] at a concert??

Leena: ... yeah, but put on a nice dress or something ... not this [outfit] ...

Leena offers a sophisticated argument here, engaging in conventions of appropriateness ('this is not right'), self-regulation and style in order to assert a respectable, acceptable and 'stylish' femininity (some things look nice at the beach but they are not concert material). Such observations suggest that pre-teens bridge cultural capital about celebrityhood and attire, with social conventions concerning iconic femininity. At the same time, it is worth remembering that children are already familiar with 'adult' discourses about harmful media effects. As a result, 'critical' responses may either be an attempt for them to present themselves as 'grown-ups' in front of each other and the interviewer, or an attempt to refute any adult conceptions of possible media influence upon them.

Statements about stardom and the construction of an ethical self in School 3, continued with a different photo (Rihanna's #2), where showing skin is constructed as slutty and is 'tutted' upon:

Katerina: ... this is slutty ...

Varvara: ... yeah, me too, I think she looks slutty in this photo ... her breasts are showing ... it would have been better if she didn't [show] ...

Interviewer: slutty?? she's wearing an off-white suit, and beige high-heeled shoes ...

Milena: yes, and her breast is showing ...

Varvara: ... I think she would've looked better without this ...

Interviewer: without what?

Varvara: without showing her breast ...

Yet when asked why Rihanna wears such gear, 10-year-olds at School 3 offered critical insight in the construction of stardom:

Interviewer: ... Why is she doing that?

Cecilia: ... for the photo-shoot ...

Varvara: ... to be provocative.... 'Cause she wants everyone to be talking about her ... 'cause she's a bit full of herself....

Nonie: ... no, I think it's part of her job.... to be in magazines and such....

Marion: ... for their career....

Later on in the interview, the constructedness of stardom was further emphasised through various discursive accounts of rationalising cosmetic surgery:

Leena: ... [Giovanna] doesn't like that celebrities have plastic surgery to look younger!!!

Francesca: No, Shakira is NOT into cosmetic surgery!!!!

Focus group in unison: Jessie J., Eve Adamou, Kate Perry ... are thin!!!!

Sofia: Stick-thin....

Giovanna: ... well, they take care of themselves [what they eat]....

Sofia: yeah, they practise a lot to stay fit...

Leena: ... ehh, I think that sometimes we need to accept the way we are ... no need for [cosmetic] surgery....

Giovanna Well, stars have surgery in order to stay young!!!

Leena: Hah!! Only to look worse off afterwards!!!!

There is an array of interpretative repertoires on offer here. The girls engage with feminist discourses of cosmetic surgery and seem to understand the thin body as a set of healthy choices and bodily regulation. In terms of media literacy, then, some of the youngest participants discuss the various technologies of self-moderation and governance that popstars employ to control their bodies (proper dietary practices; staying fit; cosmetic interventions). The girls also reflect on the pressure exerted on female stars to look youthful, and the reverse effects this sometimes has. In this, not only can we identify the underlying modality of self-regulation the girls themselves adhere to, but also we can see how they use their cultural capital from popular culture to make sense of sexualisation and sexuality in a critical and complex way.

So far, there is little differentiation in the way in which participants position themselves in terms of social class. Hence, in the middle-class private School 2, too, 10-year-olds (4th graders) also employ an array of frames of interpretation when accounting for the construction of stardom, personal ethics and body aesthetics. When discussing the first image of Rihanna, some of the girls in this group either found her too chubby or they disapproved of the outfit as distasteful:

Tania: ... she's a bit on the chubby side ...

Zoi: ... no, she's alright [weightwise] – it's the outfit that doesn't work ...

Tania: ... and it doesn't match the shoes ...

However, it seems that here, too, participants are familiar with the tropes of stardom and female sexuality:

Kiki: ... this is not too provocative for a singer ... sometimes, they go on stage [dressed] like that ...

Interviewer: why is she doing that?

Kalia: ... so as to attract men's attention ...

Drawing from their cultural capital in popular stardom, girls differentiate between the professional and the casual self, and between stars and their fans. Rihanna, being a star, is expected to dress up in a particular way when in a live gig, which would have been inappropriate for the ordinary woman. Implied is the notion that this outfit is 'professional gear' for a star, although inappropriate for a casual appearance. Furthermore, the girls show literacy in how women use their sexuality in order to attract men's attention.

Participants from School 2 took up diverse subject positions when making sense of body aesthetics (weight) and suggested there is more to being attractive than having the 'right' body shape:

Interviewer (while still talking about Rihanna): ... does being chubbier mean being less attractive?

Kiki: ... definitely not! Facial features count, too!! If a woman was stick-thin but ugly, who would you'd rather most? Someone of a fuller shape but attractive, or someone thin but gross?

Rihanna's extravagant gown in Photo #3 and her hairdo triggered different kinds of subject positions from another group of 10-year-olds in School 2:

Katerina: I like how she looks here ...

Nassia: what, the dress?? Nah ... Too provocative ... too slutty ... the hair is nice though ...

Mariarena: that's right, the dress is too provocative ... her hair is ... wow ... awe-so-me ... the earrings are irrelevant ...

Eva: eeheh, I like her hair veeery much ... her outfit ... yeah, it's provocative ... veeery much so ... I don't like it at all ... The shoes – I like them ... earrings? Yeah, like Mariarena said, totally irrelevant ... overall, I don't like this outfit with those earrings ...

Some of the girls did not like her dress because they found it 'too provocative', 'too slutty', on the basis of a code of 'appropriateness' about how much skin one should reveal. Derogatory comments about the dress, and a dismissal of the matching earrings, are compensated for by praise about the hairstyle or her shoes. Girls' discursive accounts reveal an intricate pattern wherein they construct their fandom about Rihanna on the basis of an ideal (or idealised) femininity in which Rihanna is found wanting in terms of 'decency', while drawing from popular culture repositories about style and fashion (shoes, hair, earrings).

Sixth-graders (12 years) in School 2 draw from their own cultural capital on popular stardom to discuss celebrity attire and the ethical selfhood:

Roina: ... none of them [celebrities] dresses 'decently' ...

Liana: ... come on now, not *all* of them ...

Roina: ... I mean they [stars] all want to look beautiful [in music videos] ...

Liana: yeah, [so] they show off their 'stronger' body parts ...

Roina: ... aha, like their legs, their eyes ... face ... their lips ... their hair ... their back ... [so] they put on some slutty outfit ... for the needs of the video clip though ... they stress what they consider their 'strong' asset ...

Here, Roina makes the point that in order to look beautiful for their music videos, female stars need to ‘put on some slutty outfit’ and ‘stress their “strong” asset’, because, it is implied, this is how the industry works – women artists have to play ‘sexy’ in order to stay marketable.

Conclusions

This paper has aimed to contextualise debate concerning the sexualisation of girls through a historical account of childhood and its engagement with popular media and culture. In one sense, the caution with which the consumption of popular culture is met – especially insofar as the proliferation of online practices amongst young children is concerned – is reminiscent of Postman’s (1982/1994) argument concerning the ‘disappearance’ of childhood.⁴ Only now it is not television that is perceived as being conducive to the destruction of childhood, but Internet technologies – and the content that is made available through them. Within Postman’s context, children’s popular culture (i.e. social media) practices banish shame, as they make adult sexual knowledge directly available to them (here comes a twerking Miley). In addition, much like television was seen some 20 years ago, popular culture and media have brought an end to the notion of age-related and gradual acquisition of (sexual) knowledge for children. Furthermore, the consumption of popular culture in the form of various online practices is constructed as a self-directed leisure form, and as such, conducive to having a negative impact.

The availability of sexual information is hardly ever treated as a positive thing. In this context, Buckingham and Bragg (2004, 4) have suggested that children are used in a ‘politics of substitution’ whereby invoking fears about children’s welfare provides a powerful means of manipulating public attention. In this way, campaigns against pornography become campaigns against child pornography and children’s access to sexual knowledge, with access being presented as evidence of a more general permissiveness exemplified by increased violence, drug use and criminal activity amongst the young. What all this attests to is that within public debate about the sexualisation of young girls, the potential of popular culture and media for sexual education and learning, or for the assertion of agency and the construction of identity, usually goes amiss. As if it was not enough that sex education has always been contentious, the dark suspicion of a direct link between knowing about sex and doing sex has tended to focus attention on protection – how not to get pregnant, how not to catch a sexually transmitted disease and how not to be sexually abused or raped (Mills 1992). Instilling normative heterosexuality, fear of disease or pregnancy and presenting women as potential victims, or men as sexually uncontrollable, is what contemporary sexual education often amounts to. It thereby conceals the specific social, educational and economic perspective drawn upon and the moral values secretly encouraged (and discouraged), as well as the pleasurable sight of sex (Levine 2002). Having fallen prey to contemporary too-much-too-soon public anxieties about conveying too much knowledge to the ‘uninitiated’, and thus inciting experimentation, conventional sex education misses out on the opportunities afforded by entertainment media to enhance sexual development and knowledge.

This paper has tried to make sense of sex education as something bigger than science or relational facts, and discussed it from a broader perspective, one that brings together cultural capital, popular culture and the ethical self. Young pre-adolescents (or ‘tweens’) exhibit a variety of diverse readings, engagements and practices of popular culture – contrary to prevailing moral panics about viral sexualisation. While the notion of agentic pre-teenagers needs to be applied with ‘a pinch of salt’, for the social context of the

interview, conducted by adults, at school, determines the kinds of answers children give (Buckingham 1993), I argue that talking to pre-teenage girls reveals both a variety of interpretative repertoires and the intricate ways in which young women make sense of stardom, discuss taste, fashion and body aesthetics, and construct a notion of appropriateness and selfhood, irrespective of age and social class.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/14/miley-cyrus-feminist_n_4274194.html
2. See, for example, Home Office (2006) or DCSF (2008).
3. Photograph 1 can be accessed at <http://www.gotceleb.com/rihanna-concert-in-belfast-northern-ireland-sept-30th-2011-2011-10-02.html/rihanna-concert-in-belfast-02>, photograph 2 can be accessed at <http://fashionbombdaily.com/2011/05/23/look-for-less-rihannas-2011-billboard-awards-max-azria-white-suit/> and photograph 3 can be accessed at <http://www.redcarpet-fashionawards.com/2011/05/03/rihanna-in-stella-mccartney-2011-met-gala/>
4. Postman (1982/1994) has argued that television was largely responsible for the loss of childhood. While print technology accounted for the emergence of a distinctive youth culture (i.e. a form of childhood) in industrialised societies, television was conducive to the destruction of childhood in two ways: by 'banishing shame', as it made adult sexual knowledge directly available to children, and by superseding literacy as the primary means of communication.

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Using sexually explicit material in a therapeutic context

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For most of us, sex is a subjective, lived experience that is as unique as our genetic make-up, our upbringing, our thoughts, values, feelings, beliefs and ideas. It is through our erotic interactions, or the absence thereof, that we form aspects of our fluid and mutable erotic paths and identities. Despite the proliferation of sexual imagery throughout our culture, many of us still struggle with what sex means to us, what we do, how we experience it and what that says about who we are as people. Some who struggle with this may seek the services of a psychosexual sex therapist. This paper aims to explain how such services function, why they are necessary and how the use of sexually explicit material, in some psychosexual therapeutic contexts, can help unravel the mixed responses we have to sex and our social conditioning, and enhance our overall relationship to eroticism, pleasure and general well-being.

Keywords: sex; sexuality; sexually explicit material; therapy

What always amazes me is people who want to have exciting and gratifying sex but who think it comes ‘naturally’ without practice or knowledge. (Tiefer 2004, 145)

For perhaps most people, sex is a subjective, lived experience that is as nuanced and unique as their genetic make-up, their upbringing and their thoughts, values, feelings, beliefs and ideas (Kukla 2000; Tiefer, Hall, and Tavis 2002; Weeks 2003). It is through our erotic interactions, or the absence thereof, that we form aspects of our fluid and mutable erotic paths and identities. Despite the proliferation of sexual imagery throughout many cultures, many of us still struggle with what sex means to us, what we do, how we experience it and what that says about who we are as people (Timm 2009). Our sexuality and our ideas of eroticism do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are formed and nurtured in response to the world around us (Kukla 2000). Yet in many cases, discussions of ‘pleasure’ are often still associated with ‘danger’ (Lamb, Lustig, and Graling 2013) that can lead to feelings of confusion, especially for women or those whose sexuality sits in conflict with mainstream perceptions of eroticism.

For some of those who struggle with this, the services of a psychosexual sex therapist may be helpful. This paper aims to explain how such services function, why they are necessary and how the use of sexually explicit material, in some psychosexual therapeutic contexts, can help unravel the mixed responses we have to sex and our social conditioning, and enhance our overall relationship to eroticism, pleasure and general well-being.

The dominant sexual narrative

Erotic imagery, both subtle and explicit, is deeply infused into contemporary culture. From advertising to pop music, from the sports field to women’s and men’s magazines, sex and

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its power are everywhere. Yet, despite this faux liberalism, such images generally only depict *one* type of sexuality; primarily that of the slim, young, able-bodied, hard and ever-ready (male) (Zilbergeld 1999) and passive (female) penis-in-vagina heterosexuality as the primary expression we should *all* be striving for (Barker 2013). Countless magazine articles inform us about what we should do, how we should do it and how often in order to be considered 'normal' (Barker 2013). 'Women have been traditionally defined as having a sexuality which is responsive, nurturant and closely associated with reproduction' while 'people learn early on in Western societies that to be a "man" is not to be homosexual' (Weeks 2003, 58). Furthermore, urban myths abound regarding how much sex we could have, should have or might have if we had a (different) partner or were somehow more well endowed, more virile or more orgasmic (Perel 2006). With such a disparity between what culture values and how nuanced the individual experience of sex can be, it is perhaps no surprise many people struggle with managing the burden of this in their own lives.

My work as a sex therapist affirms that for many people, *pleasure* is something of a nebulous concept. In a culture of 'normal' versus 'abnormal' sometimes we forget to (or do not even realise that we can) reflect on the more individual, subtle or nuanced requirements of erotic pleasure and what that means to us as unique erotic beings. In a society that has constructed a very narrow kind of 'acceptable' sexual expression, we may struggle to access meaningful pleasure or see versions of ourselves reflected in the dominant images of sex we are so accustomed to seeing. Thus *good* sex becomes inaccessible. We unsurprisingly find ourselves living in a cultural and sexological climate that overly pathologises and overly diagnoses authentic erotic expressions as problems (Tiefer 2006). Such responses to narrow erotic stimuli get labelled 'sexual dysfunction', a problem to be solved rather than a response to be explored. Individuals are left with few options for understanding themselves outside of the dominant narrative and instead wear the blame themselves. This eventually takes its toll on sexual and emotional well-being. In the face of pathology, the locus of satisfaction shifts from within to outside; and this distinction functions as a mechanism of individual powerlessness.

The consequences of pathology

The very mobility of sexuality, its chameleon-like ability to take many guises and forms, so that what for one might be a source of warmth and attraction, for another might be one of fear and hate, makes it a peculiarly sensitive conductor of cultural influences, and hence of social and political divisions. (Weeks 2003, 1–2)

Sex is something that happens on a variety of levels (Ogden 2013; Lamb, Lustig, and Graling 2013). Physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual dimensions of people's lives are affected by sexuality, not to mention the systemic, cultural and gender-based influences that inform who we are and how we express our eroticism (Ogden 2013; Tiefer 2006).

Whereas at one time sexual problems were seen as psychological and/or relational in their origins, we are now living in an era that tells us we are 'wrong' if we want something outside heteronormative, binary-oriented, intercourse-centric sex (Barker 2011). Deeper and more relational aspects of sex are dismissed in the light of the capacity to sell medication or eradicate 'sex problems' that only decades ago did not exist (Tiefer 2006) as they do now. Furthermore, many clients present with problems they label as inherently male or female, particularly regarding levels of libido and desire, and sexual satisfaction. These gender and sexuality assumptions stem from cultural narratives around how men and women are sexually or how sex *should* be, rather than the validity of their own

experience or needs. Such reductionist narratives of gender, normativity and sexual function not only restrict clients' capacity to engage in profound erotic satisfaction, but also keep them suspended in self-resistance. Thus, the chasm between the 'normal' and the 'actual' can be excruciating. Many would rather tolerate the pain of this than face the reality of being 'abnormal'. For so many, acknowledging authentic eroticism is interpreted or experienced as vulnerability rather than freedom. The result is an internalised shame or deep sense of abnormality that prevents them from experiencing the breadth of erotic possibilities.

In my experience, the reasons people seek sex therapy are varied, but share a longing to feel or be *normal*. However, due to an overly simplified sexual culture and a yearning to conform, medical industries have found a lucrative niche in being able to provide solutions to sex problems that do not require any imagination or self-enquiry. While we may be able to achieve 'harder' and 'faster' results in some cases with this approach, we are at risk of setting up dependency on external requirements and medications to realise satisfaction, without first engaging imagination, guidance or personal inspiration.

Moving towards a more relational or authentic sexual satisfaction in an age of sexual hegemony, means that individual and couples clients who seek professional services like these are seeking assistance in their exploration of making sense of their erotic experiences. Clients engaging such services are not those who are seeking a 'quick fix'. Instead, they are actively encouraged to examine and reframe what it is they want as individuals. I invite them to seek contentment by relearning sex and recreating that which does not serve them, and reframing their experience into something that is a better and more meaningful fit in the broader context of their relationships and lives.

What even is sex (psychosexual) therapy?

In Australia, being a sex therapist, as distinct from any other kind of psychotherapist, means dealing intimately with issues emerging from and directly related to sex, sexuality and the human erotic condition. The very nature of sex and its weight as a social taboo means that it is a loaded issue and one which many health professionals and lay people are not adequately trained in understanding or exploring (Timm 2009).

During my own training, initially in general counselling and then later in clinical sex therapy, I discovered just how many therapists and counsellors of different modalities still shied away from sex issues or felt deeply uncomfortable with sex practices outside the norm, instead preferring to refer on to practitioners considered 'specialists' in the field. While this may be the smarter way to work (due in part to the fear of working in sexual issues without adequate training and also the weight of exploring sexuality and its presence in the therapeutic relationship), I was astounded by how many of my peers found erotic pleasure a profoundly difficult topic to engage with. Upon reflection it later occurred to me that therapists, no matter how well trained, like lay people are still at the mercy of the same social conditioning around sex that paralyses many of our clients.

Furthermore, sex therapy and clinical intervention in Australia, like in many other parts of the world, are broadly understood and discussed within a function versus dysfunction framework. This Cartesian mind-body split focuses on problems and solutions, normal versus abnormal and, with heterosexual couples, 'penis-in-vagina' sex as the primary goal of fulfilling sex (Barker 2011; Tiefer 2006). While a variety of other approaches and modalities also exist within the profession, many of these are still burgeoning or are yet to receive acknowledgement or accreditation from broader professional bodies.

Methodology

In a therapeutic context, I start by inviting clients to gently but critically reflect upon the circumstances that brought them to therapy in the first place, slowly breaking down concepts of 'normal', how they are formed and how they function in the clients' embodied experience of their sexuality. In doing so, I am mindful of the effect that deconstructing a person's (sexual) world view can have, which must be done gently and with caution (Barker 2011), as the weight of not fitting in and its associated emotions can be a heavy burden to bear.

Presenting problems in clinical settings are often self-diagnosed by clients. In some cases the so-called 'dysfunctions' encourage a means of dropping responsibility by allowing the client to fuse their identity with the diagnosis (Yalom 2001), rather than thinking creatively and engaging more fully with their sexuality.

- I am a premature ejaculator.
- I am pre-orgasmic.
- I have erectile dysfunction.
- I have low libido.
- I am a sex addict.

The above phrases are heard frequently in my practice, and when I ask clients how they *know* this or what scale they are using to diagnose such dysfunctions, clients often become confused by the fact that I do not immediately concur or that perhaps there are different kinds of 'normality'. In all cases I ask the clients to describe how these problems present as difficulties for them rather than assuming a fundamental truth about such dysfunctions.

At this stage, which can be a single session or multiple sessions, clients often realise that the dominant narrative they have in their heads, hearts and bodies regarding sex and its expression is contributing to their sense of inadequacy or dissatisfaction. The trouble is that many clients become stuck in this 'story', as all their lives, this 'one view' is the only kind of sex they have known. Inviting clients to reimagine sexuality in ways that serve them better can be challenging, especially when so few expressions or pathways are presented through more mainstream sources. In these situations, clients are left with few avenues to seek inspiration or grant (self-) permission to feel or do otherwise.

Difficulties in practice

One of the troubles in sex therapy is that the very essence of what we are dissecting and exploring (sex, pleasure, arousal and/or satisfaction) is something that is hard to define in words, or in some cases carries legal or social implications. As Weeks (2003, 7) wrote:

Sexuality ... [is] an historical construction which brings together a host of different biological and mental possibilities, and cultural forms – gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires, fantasies, erotic practices, institutions and values – which need not be linked together, and in other societies have not been.

This means we often cannot get to the heart of the matter without first dissecting the powerful social norms that encase sexuality and their deeper significance for us as individuals, in a society that prioritises a more constricted definition of sex.

Sex therapy as distinct from general counselling

In most therapeutic dialogues, clients and therapists will bring the presenting problem squarely into the room – depression, anxiety, grief and so on, are very often present and

embodied in the therapeutic space. However, in conventional sex therapy this is not only (currently) considered somewhat unethical,¹ but in many parts of the world also illegal. Short of actually engaging in some kind of (sexual) physical therapy with the client such as Sexological Bodywork, The Bodysex workshops pioneered by Betty Dodson, or professional surrogacy, which are not approved within clinical understandings of the client–therapist relationship (Society of Australian Sexologists 2014), therapists are often left with few avenues to help clients engage with sexuality at the visceral levels required in order to enable positive, meaningful and measurable change.

While sex therapists will draw on a variety of talk-based modalities in order to work most effectively with clients, what distinguishes sex therapy from other therapies is the need to enhance and understand sexuality in the context of the world in which it is created rather than blindly assume there is a right and a wrong when it comes to sex and its expression (Ogden 2013; Tiefer 2006). As Lamb, Lustig, and Graling (2013, 315) have put it, ‘Pleasure is not merely a biological experience; it is defined, controlled, and evoked through context.’ Furthermore, the nature and use of the Internet as a means of sex education means that society’s ways of exploring sexuality are rapidly changing and eroding traditional values around gender and sexuality (Brewster and Wylie 2008) and sexology as a discipline is struggling to keep up. Because sex does not always come naturally, combined with a failure to teach adequate sexuality at school (Brewster and Wylie 2008), adults cannot be expected to explore this terrain themselves with confidence. Individuals and couples may require extra guidance in the form of sexually explicit material to increase their understanding of diversity and facilitate creativity (Watson and Smith 2012) and permission in the sexual realm.

Using sexually explicit material in a therapeutic setting

Sexually explicit material comes in many forms. Perhaps the most commonly referred to is pornography, generally thought of these days as free, accessible and primarily online. No longer just the print media of yesteryear aimed exclusively at the male heterosexual gaze, sexually explicit material has truly come into its own, making up 25% of all Internet searches (Perrin et al. 2008). During the twentieth century, Internet sexuality was regarded as a male domain. Nowadays, however, sexually explicit material and online interactions can help to co-create a safe space where women (and others) can try out new forms of erotic expression before attempting to integrate these into real life (McKenna and Bargh 1998).

Covering a broader spectrum of sexualities and genders than conventional sexology, sexually explicit material is accessible on demand to virtually anyone of any background, although it is still not part of comfortable day-to-day discussion. While pornographies may be distinguished as a specific type of sexually explicit material with the intention of inciting arousal, not all sexually explicit material aims to create such excited states (Watson and Smith 2012). Within sexually explicit material, illustration, videos, photographs, sex toys, written stories (erotica) and educational papers could be included but not considered pornography as such.

Proponents of sexually explicit material have long held that greater access to information about sexuality/sexual health may diminish anxieties, and encouragement of sexual expression may enhance individual enjoyment and relational connection (Watson and Smith 2012). Sexually explicit material also provides opportunities to see how toys can be used, what real bodies look like, what sounds bodies make during sex and how they can fit together.

While using sexually explicit material in a therapeutic context can aid in providing alternatives to people struggling with sex, clinicians should be knowledgeable about how to use the Internet and sexually explicit material effectively to extend and support clients' sexual knowledge, what material is available and how it can be used to support clients' developing education and well-being. It is also fundamentally important to the therapeutic outcomes that the choice of sexually explicit material is suitable to the clients' tastes and needs (Watson and Smith 2012). In order to manage this, I always ask clients how they would feel about engaging with sexually explicit material before suggesting we use it therapeutically. In many cases, I will ask clients to choose what they would like to use as a way of helping them become more emotionally involved in the process. Being aware of the variety of sexually explicit material available helps in that process. When clients are meaningfully emotionally engaged with what they are consuming, they are more likely to have favourable therapeutic outcomes (Watson and Smith 2012). In addition, the perception of sexually explicit material as offensive or exciting must be determined by the clients' own view of themselves including orientation and sexual identity (Leiblum and Döring 2002) rather than anything predetermined by the therapist.

Case studies²

I always ask clients why they have come to therapy. This is fundamentally important in the beginning stages of my work. Clients need to be able to express, even vaguely, the processes they have gone through to lead them to where they are now. It is generally safe to assume I am not the clients' first port of enquiry, but it is always a good idea to check. In private practice all of my clients are self-referred and/or will be attending of their own free will.

Victoria

Victoria was a married woman in her early 30s. She first came to see me to discuss her concerns regarding feeling disconnected from her husband and peers due to her vulnerable feelings when exposed to sexual imagery. For Victoria, the imagery did not even have to be explicit in order for her to feel triggered. Sexual images, as far as she was concerned, had no place in the world. Any images of erotic expression would make her deeply uncomfortable – from mild sex scenes in romantic comedies through to lingerie commercials and 'nudie' playing cards at informal gatherings, Victoria found herself deeply upset to the point of tears at 'having' to view such imagery without her consent. It was as if she lived in a world where her sexuality was overshadowed by something much larger. Victoria knew that it was the world we lived in, that she could not avoid it and as a result was triggered almost constantly by billboard advertising, TV commercials or women depicted in erotic poses. In this struggle she felt very alone. None of her friends shared her concerns and her husband, although supportive, found her abhorrence of sexual imagery difficult to manage.

As the story emerged, it seemed that Victoria's triggers were not of images of men, but solely of women. There was an inherent distaste about seeing women in erotic and seductive poses that made Victoria feel powerless. Instead of identifying with the women in the images she knew her husband very occasionally desired, her belief was inherently that she was *not enough* – that she was not sexual or beautiful enough to satisfy her husband, even though he had never given her reason to believe any of this was true.

Victoria and I spent several sessions exploring her history with sexuality. She grew up in a strongly religious Christian family and held what would be widely considered to be 'traditional family values'. For Victoria there was something 'inappropriate' about sex that made her not only uneasy but also downright furious – as if sex was something that

other people enjoyed, but not herself. When it came to her own sex life with her husband, she saw it more as a duty than anything she felt she had any right to. Although a smart and powerful woman both personally and professionally, Victoria felt deeply disenfranchised by the images of sex she saw around her.

After several sessions dissecting the relationship she had to her own sexuality and that of her beliefs and values with regard to women and sex, I invited her to bring some of the images she found most troublesome into our sessions. It was one thing to discuss her ideas about what these images meant on a rational and political level, but I was curious to help her explore the more visceral components of the feelings she had and the story that revealed itself when the images were present in the room with us.

Although initially hesitant to participate, Victoria agreed after I explained the rationale, and attended the following session with images she had chosen herself. It is particularly important to recognise that it is the client's willingness to participate that makes such sessions effective. Had she declined to work in this way, I would have been compelled to offer a different means of exploration as a process for her to find some kind of deeper appreciation of her feelings. In this case and in many cases of using sexually explicit material I invite the clients to choose images that have the most resonance for them. In this way I can attempt to avoid shocking them or inadvertently coercing them into seeing something they are not ready for and they also have the opportunity to embody agency in the therapeutic process and participate from a place of informed consent rather than 'doctors orders' or seeing me as the 'expert'.

Throughout our ensuing discussions, Victoria was able to see how her own interpretation of sexuality was preventing her from being able to engage with her eroticism in ways that were satisfying to her. Instead of these images inspiring her exploration of sexuality, they shut her down as she saw them in terms of 'one true way', which was very much a theme in the way she experienced the world in terms of 'black and white' notions of right and wrong. In this way, with the help of exploring the impact of sexual imagery and the sensations and feelings they invoked for her, she was able to reframe what she was experiencing as something more textured than strictly 'good' or 'bad'. Over time, Victoria was willing to reassess the benefit of such dualistic ways of thinking and responding to erotic imagery as just one kind, and not one that was in any way about her.

By being able to experience her vulnerability around sexual imagery in a 'lived' and embodied way with me in the clinical setting, she was able to explore what she felt when confronted with such images in a 'here and now' context. Despite the vast quantity of sexual information now available online, Victoria and clients like her struggle to trust their own instincts or value their own eroticism in the face of the cultural values they have grown up with. Through this kind of reframing, Victoria was able to notice her propensity to get caught in the 'good' versus 'bad' struggle and have more control over her responses to the erotic images that plagued her life.

Margaret

Margaret was 45 years old, lesbian identified and in a long-term relationship with a partner of 10 years with whom she had a child. She initially came to see me because she was convinced she was an inadequate lover. Exploration around what made a lover 'good' as compared with 'bad' revealed that Margaret had only had one female lover and had learned all she knew about sex with women from that one relationship.

Margaret, unlike Victoria, was from a more open-minded background. She was comfortable with her identity as a lesbian, although experienced relational issues within

the relationship which she saw as just a ‘normal part of being in a live-in monogamous relationship’.

In helping Margaret expand her sexual repertoire, I asked her about her beliefs and feelings regarding sexually explicit material. Margaret replied she did not mind the idea of it, but found much of the ‘mainstream’ stuff (porn) not to her taste and not at all reflective of her sexual interests or desires. As we drilled down further into this, she mentioned that she felt the representations she saw of ‘lesbian sex’ in mainstream porn did not represent her or the way she felt about sex.

Based on her requirements for further instruction, and within my limited capacity to teach broad sexualities in a legal clinical context, I referred Margaret to a source I thought would benefit her greatly in terms of building her confidence and also expanding her repertoire without offending her sensibilities around mainstream porn. *The New School of Erotic Touch*³ is a site dedicated to the craft of erotic massage, used by anyone with an interest in sex outside standard depictions of sex in porn. Intended as an educational site, Margaret would unlikely have found the site of her own accord and was happy to trust my recommendation based on our discussion. Margaret reported back that she found the site useful and enjoyed the diversity of bodies and practices she found. She was able to incorporate some of the new information into her personal sex sessions which she and her partner reportedly found fulfilling.

Daniel

Daniel initially came to see me struggling with issues regarding penis size. Despite being in a fulfilling and meaningful (heterosexual) relationship, Daniel has always felt that his penis was too small. After asking Daniel about his relationship with his wife, their sex life and how she felt about his penis, it became apparent that for Daniel this had been an issue since adolescence when he first saw other boys’ penises (flaccid) and he had felt ‘woefully inadequate’ ever since.

As Zilbergeld (1999) notes, men in our culture are valued for their virility and their capacity to be *hard* and *huge*. Men in the same culture who do not fit in to this very narrow mould of masculinity may struggle to find their place, and have fulfilling sexual lives, just like Daniel.

After several sessions working with Daniel, I invited him to step further into the small penis situation by asking him to bring me a series of images of penises he found to be ‘small’. When he arrived at his next session with the images, I asked him about how the process was for him:

Daniel: I hated it.

Me: What did you hate about it?

Daniel: I hated that I have to do this. I hated that once I started looking for the dicks, I couldn’t stop. I hated that I became obsessed with it. I found myself getting so angry . . . (breaks down) but I don’t know why.

As this dialogue continued, Daniel shared with me that he felt so sad that men have to be perceived like this and wished so desperately that his ‘dick was bigger’. In previous sessions he had ruled out the idea of having any surgery – so I did not pursue that option with him. Daniel showed me the images he brought with him, and with each one, I asked him why he had chosen it and what resonated about it. He brought a variety of images, including graphs based on penis sizes across races and nationalities including averages for men of his demographic.

The more we looked at the small penises of other men, the calmer he became with me. Every so often I asked him how he was feeling, and while there was still a melancholy, he eventually became more accepting of his size, realising he actually did not fit into the ‘micropenis’ category, but rather at the smaller end of ‘average’.

Throughout our discussions, in addition to looking at many small penises, we also explored alternatives to intercourse, ways of making intercourse more satisfying for him (his wife had never complained about the size of his penis) and what it meant to be a man in this world. As we further dissected masculinity, it occurred to me that exploring the intersections regarding transmasculinity and cis masculinity with regard to penis size could be another approach we could take.

In the first instance, I invited Daniel to curate the images himself, as I had wanted him to guide the process at his own pace in his own way. Once we were more comfortable with each other’s ways of being, I decided to provide images of my own and brought him various images of nude and semi-nude men, asking him to rate the manliness on a scale of 0–10. Within these images I included a topless image of sex educator and porn producer Buck Angel, and asked Daniel for his reactions (this was especially effective as Daniel had never seen nor heard of Buck Angel). Daniel conceded he was a good-looking man, really manly – if not a little ‘gay’. As Daniel scrolled down the image to reveal Buck’s genitalia, he stopped short. Unsure as to what he was seeing, I asked Daniel to describe what he perceived and how he felt about it. My intention for Daniel in that moment was to have an opportunity to redefine masculinity through erotic depictions that he had not seen before. Of all the men we had looked at, Angel was by far one of the manliest, but with the littlest of penises, in fact with a vulva; an image Angel trades on to make his living and teach around the world.

Daniel’s reinterpretation of masculinity and penis size is a multifaceted and ongoing one. Daniel is still reframing what it means for him to be a man in the world in general, and with a small penis. He has found comfort in being able to share this story in a therapeutic context and found that although challenging, working with the small penis images and drawing on sexually explicit material as a therapeutic and learning tool has been beneficial in fostering greater self-acceptance.

Peta and Tony

Peta and Tony are a queer-identified couple who first came to see me with what is known in sexology as ‘desire discrepancy’ – meaning they wanted different things from sex.

While both of them had broad experience in sexual practices, the nature of the fraught but intimate connection between them meant that sex was often ‘loaded’ with so many meanings and implications that eroticism often failed to flourish under the weight of rigorous analysis and enquiry.

Peta, although having what they called a ‘high libido’ – meaning they⁴ wanted sex more frequently than Tony – struggled to express their eroticism in ways that made them feel confident and good about themselves. Despite their experience, Peta often felt inadequate and unable to satisfy Tony.

Tony found that in the relationship with Peta they were doing much of the ‘emotional’ work, which although they did not mind, they found it difficult to relate to Peta sexually when Tony experienced them as needy and inexperienced. It turned out that what Tony yearned for was to be able to surrender sexually, as a difference in the power dynamic that was so prevalent in the day-to-day machinations of their emotional relating. Tony did not want to also have to coach Peta through sex, so the erotic stalemate became a burden too great to bear.

With neither wanting to hurt each other's feelings, yet both deeply dissatisfied, it became apparent that finding ways to explore sex and power without having to explicitly discuss it was required.

After scoping out how they felt about sexually explicit material, I referred them to the Crash Pad series⁵ as a source of erotic stimulus to fire up their imaginations. As a site that specialised in queer identities and a variety of erotic dynamics, I felt they could get some traction exploring the content of this site and using it as a springboard to discuss ideas around preferences. In this way, Tony could find depictions of sex that they found particularly stimulating and Peta could expand their toolbox of skills based on things that Tony said they found appealing or sexy.

The Crash Pad series experiment worked exceptionally well. Within a few weeks the pair were really enjoying sex on their terms, inspired by scenes they had seen, were communicating better (by their standards) and felt closer overall. By circumventing endless conversations and processing with skills, practice and willingness, the pair were able to move through to the next stage of their erotic relationship with fulfilment and confidence on their side.

In other cases

There is an endless variety of ways sexually explicit material can be used in therapeutic contexts.⁶ In other non-specific cases, I have often referred female clients of many orientations to Tristan Taormino and Ms Naughty⁷ for their emphasis on female pleasure. I find the work of these two filmmakers/curators particularly effective for deconstructing the dynamic of the 'women as victim' mentality when it comes to risk-taking in sexual scenarios, and thinking beyond passive expressions of female sexuality. Images from The Labia Library⁸ showing vulva diversity are especially useful for women who are unfamiliar with just how varied female genitalia actually is.

For clients wanting to learn more about BDSM (Bondage and Discipline [BD], Dominance and Submission [DS], Sadism and Masochism [SM]) and power, especially 'topping' or being Dominant, I have referred them to the writings of Mollena Williams⁹ to read from a submissive's perspective how 'topping' and 'bottoming' can be done well, being mindful of contextualising erotic power dynamics in consensual BDSM, contrasted with normative expressions of power in daily life. This is also an excellent resource for initiating conversations around the more taboo aspects of erotic fantasies and fantasies surrounding race play and power dynamics in erotic exchanges that may require delicate enquiry without being quashed.

Conclusion

The use of sexually explicit material in a therapeutic context creates opportunities for clients to bring sex and its associated emotions into the clinical setting without crossing professional boundaries or violating current ethical practices. Such opportunities also not only contribute to creating learning opportunities, but shift the emphasis within the session from 'therapist as expert', to 'therapist as facilitator', encouraging clients to reflect and explore their responses (mental, emotional and physical) to eroticism in ways that may have been previously inhibited or unimagined. Using sexually explicit material to initiate discussions around taboos, uncomfortable emotions or to mitigate shame reframes sex and its associated thoughts and feelings, by providing a scaffolding for clients to explore new territory. Sexually explicit material can facilitate imagination where there was once embarrassment, and provide answers to questions that may have never had the opportunity

to be asked. Furthermore, learning to critically reflect upon dominant cultural values around sex, desire and performance, allows both clients and therapists greater freedom to choose new ways of being and relating to what is sometimes a hyper-sexualised, but extremely restricted sexual narrative, often bereft of a discernible and meaningful context. In doing so, clients receive permission to develop erotic processing skills and expand their awareness of sexuality, moving away from the deceptively oversimplified narrative that 'sex is natural, so therefore easy', to an appreciation of complexity, the power of self-enquiry and the value of embodied experiences to engage more fully with erotic needs.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Tiefer (2006) explains the restricted dominant model in sexology that overrides genuine explorations of sexuality within the field of sex therapy.
2. The following case studies are derived from clients whose identities have been changed and offer an amalgamation of some of the more common themes that present in sex therapy.
3. See Appendix 1.
4. 'They' is used as a pronoun intentionally for clients whose gender identity sits outside the gender binary of strictly male/female.
5. See Appendix 1.
6. See Appendix 2.
7. See Appendix 1.
8. See Appendix 1.
9. See Appendix 1.

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Appendix 1. Sites of educational and therapeutic value for practitioners and clients alike

Note that the list given below is not exhaustive, but rather an introduction to useful sexually explicit material. New work is becoming available all the time.

- *The Crash Pad Series* (<http://www.crashpadseries.com>) for exploring a diversity of bodies and gender presentations within a consistent narrative framework.
- *Comstock Films* (<http://www.comstockfilms.com>) work is good for depicting intimacy. Hetero and Homo depictions.
- *Sensate Films* (<http://www.sensatefilms.com>) engage BDSM practice beyond cultural stereotypes and reveal its potential for connection and intimacy.
- *Tristan Taormino* (<http://www.puckerup.com>): sex education videos and porn with an emphasis on women's pleasure.
- *Ms Naughty* (<http://www.brightdesire.com>): porn for women and those who love them.
- *New School of Erotic Touch* (<http://www.eroticmassage.com>): explicit videos teaching how to expand erotic touch.
- *Anna Brownfield* and *Poison Apple Productions* (www.poisonappleproductions.com) for light-hearted erotic comedy.
- *Tobi-Hill Meyer* (<http://handbasketproductions.com/>) and James Darling, who work with trans performers and represent trans bodies and desires in a practical way.
- <http://www.ifeelmyself.com> and <http://www.gentlemanhandling.com> are great for normalising masturbation, looking systematically at bodies and pleasure.
- *Nenna Joiner/Feelmore Entertainment* (<http://www.nennaj.com>) makes films about people of colour for people of colour.
- *Nina Hartley's* focus on sexy sex education videos, negotiation, and a joyous approach to creating pleasure.
- *Kink Academy* (<http://kinkacademy.com>): non-explicit giant collection of films of people engaging in all sorts of BDSM practices.
- *I'll Show You Mine* (<http://www.showoffbooks.com>): Show Off Books. Authentic depictions of vulvas.
- *Barbara Carrellas* (<http://www.barbaracarrellas.com>): Carrellas' book *Urban Tantra* is a practical 'how to' guide on touch and erotic expression beyond gender and intercourse.
- *Mollena Williams* (<http://www.mollena.com>): conversations around ethical BDSM practices, taboos and facilitating discussion around race and sexual expression.
- *Large Labia Project* (<http://www.largelabiaproject.org>): user-generated images of vulvas with larger inner labia.
- *Lady Cheeky* (<http://www.ladycheeky.com>): collection of graphic interchange format images (GIFs) and stills depicting empowered eroticism and pleasure for (mostly) hetero cis women.

Appendix 2. Other potential uses of sexually explicit material in therapy

For women

- Facilitation of curiosity – exploring alternatives to intercourse.
- Facilitation of technique – how to touch/be touched.
- Body image – depictions of sexy other than the mainstream.
- Enhancing imagination – permission to think outside the square.
- Antidote to shaming feelings – seeing and being seen as sexual beings without shame.
- Developing safety within self-identity – learning language to explain desire, technique, ways of setting up scenes and consent.
- Examining triggers around shame – exploring bodily function (e.g. ejaculation, anal sex and oral sex).

For men

- Understanding partners' bodies – exploring pleasure beyond penis-in-vagina.
- Critical analysis – mainstream porn power dynamics versus pleasure principles/connection.
- Understanding diversity – what is masculinity/what is sexy.
- Explorations of pleasure – sex beyond the penis, including anal pleasure.
- Redefining masculinity – healing pressure to act out.

For queers

- Developing community – finding like-minded connections, not feeling alone in difference of expression.
- Minimising aloneness.
- Highlighting diversity – exploring bodies of differing expressions.
- Highlighting technique – for sex beyond intercourse/genitals/different ways of engaging with genitals.

For all

- Education – 'how to' guides.
- Safer sex practices.

Sense about sex: media, sex advice, education and learning

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The media are widely acknowledged as important in sex and relationship education, but they are usually associated with ‘bad’ effects on young people in contrast to the ‘good’ knowledge represented by more informational and educational formats. In this paper we look at sex advice giving in newspapers, magazines and television in the UK, in sex advice books and in online spaces for sexual learning. We examine some of the limitations of the information provided, consider the challenges for sex advice in the contemporary context, and outline some of the opportunities for academics, researchers, therapists, sex educators and activists to contribute productively to sex advice giving and sexual learning more generally.

Keywords: sex media advice givers; sex education; sexual learning; agony aunts; UK

Introduction

We are writing this article as members of Sense about Sex¹ – an informal group of therapists, researchers, sex educators, academics and activists who are concerned with the accessibility of good quality information about sex and relationships, sexual health and sexual learning. Sense about Sex initially grew out of a Wellcome Trust funded project on sexualisation, sexual health and public engagement. This drew on various initiatives we as authors had been involved in – both individually and sometimes together – such as the Onsenity Research Network, Gender and Sexuality Talks in London, the Critical Sexology seminars,² and work with groups such as the Outsiders Trust, Brook, FPA, and the Department of Health.

We first used the name Sense about Sex at an event on sex, sexuality and sexualisation, which we organised for the UK Economic and Social Research Council’s Social Science Festival in London 2012. Our projects have included The Sexualisation Report³ and Bad Sex Media Bingo⁴ and those of our group who work as therapists have set up London Sex and Relationship Therapy⁵ as a subgroup seeing clients and providing training in that area. We are interested in public engagement and drawing academics and practitioners of various kinds together to talk critically about sex. We share a concern about common myths and moral panics around sex; we are committed to challenging these, providing information that is grounded in research and critical theory, and making interventions in sex advice and education.

The media are widely acknowledged as important in sex and relationships education (SRE), but they are usually associated with ‘bad’ effects on young people (see, for example, Eyal and Kunkel 2008; Brown and Bobkowski 2011) in contrast to the ‘good’

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knowledge represented by the more informational and educational formats used for giving advice. Yet we know that audiences may find depictions of sex and relationships in entertainment media engaging and useful (see Buckingham and Bragg 2004) and that some entertainment media present sex in ways that challenge conservative sexual norms (see Johnson, Aston, and Glynn 2012; see McKee 2012 for a discussion about sexuality education and entertainment). We also know that audiences use media advice not only for information but for entertainment, to reassure themselves they are actually not as bad as the person they are reading about, or for help – either for themselves directly or to read about someone with similar problems (Ehrenreich and English 2005; Boynton 2009; Kurtz 2014).

Our discussion seeks to move beyond the question of good and bad media and distinctions between information and entertainment to examine media genres that offer sex advice and education, focusing on UK print and broadcast media, sex advice books and the use of online spaces for learning about sex. Our aim is to examine some of the patterns and limitations in contemporary provision and to consider the challenges and opportunities for using media for sex advice.

Sex advice across media

There is no consensus about when the first advice column appeared in a newspaper, but the ‘problem page’ as we know it has been well established within mainstream UK and US print media from the nineteenth century onwards (Bingham 2012). Media advice giving is important. It offers a space to offload, confess or get a second opinion. It is a means of getting confidential help and a referral/signposting to other sources of help. It helps people practise for sharing and disclosing something to friends, family members or professionals. It offers a place to turn to for those who do not have support from friends and family, or have something taboo to share. It is especially important where health or therapeutic services are absent or have not helped (Smith 1983; Kurtz 1987; Boynton 2003; Ehrenreich and English 2005; Kurtz 2014).

Media advice givers have traditionally come from a writing or journalism background or from the caring professions. Those in the former group tend to prioritise audience comprehension and creating entertaining and engaging copy, while the latter favour information sharing and potential behaviour change. There are no set qualifications for media advice givers. Limited guidance on advice giving exists and there is a lack of training, support, supervision and standards. Consequently the advice offered varies in tone, length, standard, accessibility and accuracy (Boynton 2009).

Media advice is popular with audiences (see Smith 1983; Boynton 2009) although its success is not usually measured in terms of helping audiences find solutions to their problems. Advice giving is viewed as ‘entertainment’ at editorial/production level, so incentives to ensure accuracy, compassion and useable advice are absent. Much sex media advice across newspapers, magazines and books is often judgmental and shaming, narrow in scope and focus, lacking different options or perspectives, and fails to situate advice within the specific needs of the audience. It often adopts the aspirational and individualised focus of self-help, constructing people as a project of continual self-development (McLelland 2010). It frequently also depends on a dysfunction/disorder-based understanding of sex (Barker 2011).

The most popular sex advice books are predicated on the idea that it is vital to maintain sex in long-term relationships (Barker, Gill, and Harvey Forthcoming,a, Forthcoming,b). Sex is frequently presented as ‘critical for marital health’ and as the

'glue' that holds relationships together (see, for example, Mintz 2009, 65). The sex advisor is often constructed as the translator who can explain the mysteries of the 'opposite sex' to the reader (see, for example Gray 2003; Corn 2013). Readers, particularly women, are deemed responsible for ensuring that their relationships remain sexual through 'working at it' (see Potts 2002; Gupta and Cacchioni 2013). Happily asexual or celibate relationships are not considered, and there are only occasional tokenistic references to lesbian, gay or bisexual people, or to forms of open non-monogamy (see Barker and Langdrige 2010). Advice books also assume a coital imperative (Tyler 2008) whereby penis-in-vagina (PIV) sex is clearly assumed to constitute 'proper' sex. Other forms of sex are generally relegated to 'foreplay' or a chapter on 'spicy sex' towards the end of the book. Advice focuses mainly on varying positions, locations or outfits for PIV sex, and spicing up one's sex life with tightly policed forays into erotica, kink or the use of sex toys. Books mainly focus on 'what' people do rather than 'how' they do it (Barker, Gill, and Harvey Forthcoming,b).

Across all forms of print and broadcast media the focus is increasingly on the advice giver, rather than the person with the problem and wider audience. This shift has coincided with the rise of the 'celebrity advice giver'. While in the past some media advice givers such as Marje Proops, Anna Raeburn and Claire Rayner became famous for providing advice, more recently UK advice givers have been picked because they are already famous. Examples include Graham Norton (*The Telegraph*), Jordan (*More!*), Jodie Marsh (*Zoo*), Abbie Titmus (*FHM*), Molly Ringwald (*The Guardian*) and Julie Burchill (*Loaded*). Only one of the current *Guardian* newspaper relationships advisors (Pamela Stephenson-Connolly) has any kind of therapeutic qualification, and she is well known partly due to her celebrity status as Billy Connolly's wife and as the therapist who counselled celebrities on the television programme, *Shrink Rap* (2007–2010). The advice of writers such as Tracey Cox, Dr Laura Berman and John Gray is fixed and consistent across media; for example Tracey Cox is known for her 'golden rules' for avoiding a 'sex rut': always finish sex in a different position to which you started it, and never do the same position on two subsequent occasions (Gill 2009, 360; Cox 2011), while Dr Laura Berman presents women as struggling to understand their own mysterious bodies or explain them to partners, whereas male bodies and sexualities are positioned as relatively simple. There is a lack of any sense that either the readers of this advice, or the experts themselves, might be able to grow, change, improve or develop their understanding of sex and relationships.

Recent UK television which takes an advice-based stance towards sex has included magazine programmes such as *The Sex Education Show* (2008–2011) and *The Joy of Teen Sex* (2011), and reality shows such as *The Sex Inspectors* (2004–2006).⁶ As in sex advice media elsewhere, they draw on both entertainment and informational formats and privilege celebrities as experts on sex and bodies. For example *Embarrassing Bodies* (2007–) is a reality medical series which was nominated for a National Television Award for Factual Entertainment in 2013, and whose advisors, such as 'TV's favourite doctor', Christian Jessen, have become well known. However, the reputation of these kinds of programmes is often contested. Talking about or representing bodies and sex runs the risk of being viewed as pornographic; *Embarrassing Bodies* has been described as 'medical porn' by some journalists 'because of the morbid and lascivious forms commentators imagine viewing engagement will take' (Hester 2013, 59).

A common theme across current sex education television is a concern about the effects that pornography may be having on people, as in Channel 4's 2013 Campaign for Real

Sex⁷ programming which aimed to ‘reclaim sex from porn’. This draws on a range of generic characteristics from drama and documentary. One of its shows, *Sex Box* (2013), is related to human affairs/science programming as well as the talk show and reality TV. It is hosted by *Observer* newspaper agony aunt, Mariella Frostrup, an arts journalist. In *Sex Box*, couples occupy a giant box on the studio stage while they have sex, and then talk to Mariella and a panel of experts. Another of its shows, *Porn on the Brain* (2013), draws on the conventions of a science/investigative programme in which ‘journalist and father Martin Daubney investigates how teenagers’ pornography habits have changed, and the effect today’s pornography is having on their brains’.

The Campaign for Real Sex draws on the widely expressed view that involving media of any kind in sexual matters is dangerous, but presents some kinds of ‘quality’ media as recuperable. That these are associated with current affairs and arts presenters suggests expertise that is associated with a form of (middle class and respectable) culture and that functions to make them less visible as media. While pornography is treated as a form of consumption or ‘use’, programmes such as *Sex Box* identify themselves as types of engaged and intelligent ‘talk’.

Sex Box is interesting as an example of the way that this kind of respectable programming privileges talk about sex, making sexual activity both central and invisible – literally putting it inside a box within the studio setting. The kinds of expertise that are drawn on in these kinds of journalism and programming are also highly personalised – Mariella’s advice columns typically draw on her own experiences while Martin Daubney’s expertise is linked to his shifting attitudes on becoming a father. They are underpinned by a notion of ‘media literacy’ as something that can be used to ‘inoculate’ people against particular kinds of ‘bad’ media (Kellner and Share 2005; see Albury 2014 for a discussion), or to persuade them to disengage from these. They also rely on reasserting a hierarchy of ‘good media’ in which information media are better than entertainment, broadsheets are better than tabloids, television is better than the Internet and all of these are better than pornography.

The emergence of sex advice and education online is the most recent development in sex advice media. It has particular importance for young people who routinely express unhappiness with the SRE that is offered in schools. SRE in UK schools remains patchy with only one-quarter of young people saying their SRE was good or very good (Sex Education Forum 2014). Much of it relies on the same narrow interpretation of sex that is evident in advice columns, books and television programmes, and in addition it tends to be focused on risk, contraception, STIs and the ‘dangers’ of online porn and sexting; with an emphasis on information rather than on skills, values and emotions (see Allen 2005; Fine and McClelland 2006; Allen 2011).

Online, young people have a variety of resources available to them which provide opportunities to learn information and skills, to explore their values, to seek support services and guidance, to ask for advice, to hear other people’s experiences, and to be peer sex and relationships educators themselves. However, comprehensive and inclusive SRE websites are few and far between. Some grass-roots sites are widely respected; Scarleteen.com is visited by around three-quarters of a million people each month worldwide and is the highest ranking sex education website online. Young people visit Scarleteen for its information about sex and relationships, for its advice columns, its forum and its live support service.

One of the exciting developments of sexual learning online is that it is not simply one-way traffic as in print and broadcast media. Young people have the space to be critical,⁸ to respond to content and even to produce their own. There is scope for the information they

access to be connected more intimately to their sexual cultures (Collins, Martino, and Shaw 2011). Blogs and tumblrs give young people the opportunity to create or curate their own educational spaces around sex and relationships, describing personal experiences, creating and sharing memes featuring sexual and/or sex educational content, or building activism on sexuality and genders. SRE is also a topic for video bloggers such as Laci Green, a popular YouTube star who has over 1 million subscribers and over 86 million video views, and whose videos focus on sexuality and sexual health, covering topics that traditional SRE does not address.⁹ Increasingly young people are moving towards using more private social media (such as BBM, WhatsApp and Snapchat) to talk about matters they may want to keep hidden (Byron, Albury, and Evers 2013; see also Boyd 2014). Online forums and communities are used to ask questions and share experiences. Scarleteen's forum is staffed and moderated by trained volunteers who engage in around 5000 direct conversations with users each year. Young people may also start conversations about sex and relationships on forums they already use, or they may like the relative anonymity of sites like Reddit, which has a number of moderated sub-topics where users can ask questions, seek advice and share experiences. Crowdsourced responses mean that readers are not being told one thing by one expert but have the opportunity to construct their own best answers from the rich and plentiful material presented to them by their peers.

New challenges for sex advice

As our brief examination of sex media advice demonstrates, it is important to move beyond the question of whether the relationship between media and sex is good or bad and beyond assuming there is a clear distinction between bad entertainment and good information. Instead, we need to be more attentive to different media genres and formats and their relation to sexual advice and education and more broadly to the construction of sexual knowledge. As we have shown, sex advice often presents very conservative views of sex and gender, in addition to drawing clear boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices (Rubin 1984). Advice is frequently dependent on a dysfunction/disorder-based understanding of sex and on assumptions of mononormativity and heteronormativity. It often presents male and female sexuality as radically different, addresses women as responsible for maintaining good sexual relationships with their partners and constructs its audiences as responsible for maintaining 'great' or 'hot' sex in their relationships.

The use of celebrities – whose main concern must be with their own media reputations – to front sex advice media means that advice that challenges sexual norms is less likely to be offered. The fact that the 'success' of any form of media aimed at sexual learning will be measured in terms of shifting copy, attracting audiences and driving traffic makes it more likely that these will privilege the simplistic and the sensational. Media producers who want to be taken seriously struggle to distinguish themselves from the kinds of media with poor reputations for sex education, especially pornography. In order to do this they often emphasise their place in a hierarchy of media genres, privilege talk about sex over sexual activity and highlight a form of expertise which draws on respectable views of sex and on personal experience, rather than on expertise in the sphere of sex and relationships, on critically informed understandings of sexuality, and on the available evidence.

Media advice giving appears to be as popular as ever although formats for delivering advice are shifting. Western advice columnists (particularly in newspapers, magazines and

radio) used to be reasonably well paid in secure jobs (Smith 1983), but media advice giving is expensive editorially. Radio in particular has seen widespread cancellations of popular advice giving phone-ins due to costs. Mainstream magazines are also closing in the UK – *She*, *More!*, *B*, *Loaded*, *Sugar*, *Nuts*, *Company* and *Zest* have all ceased publishing in the past five years (Sweeney 2014), while others struggle to stay financially viable (ABC 2015). Many established advice columns are being cut or are disappearing.

Financial cuts mean that media advice givers are often paid poorly or required to work for free in exchange for promoting a book or product. The opportunity to establish a dialogue with people seeking advice, following them up to ensure they are okay and answering all questions that are submitted is now only a salaried standard practice in one newspaper (*The Sun*, which has Deidre Sanders assisted by six staff who answer all reader correspondence via the paper, email and Facebook group) and one programme (ITV's *This Morning*, where one Agony Aunt, Denise Robertson, and assistant, read and respond to all audience messages, regardless of whether their problems are aired or not).

At the same time, the opportunities to give advice via social media, blogs and websites have grown and new spaces for sexual learning have emerged. Grass-roots sites offer a different experience, in terms of both the kinds of information they provide and the tone in which it is delivered. Other spaces such as tumblr, blogs, YouTube, forums and private social media offer the opportunity for radically different kinds of advice giving and sexual learning, including peer learning and the crowdsourcing of responses.

In this context, the challenge for individuals and organisations wishing to deliver valuable and accessible sex advice is to create engaging, open and credible resources that people want to engage with. bishUK.com (created by one of the authors, Justin) has around 140,000 page views per month. The tone of sites such as Scarleteen and bishUK contrasts with the often didactic and 'finger wagging' tone of SRE in school or in other media. It aims instead to make the needs of young people central and to present them with options about what kind of sex they may want to have (if any). Young people like the humour, the 'no bullshit' approach and the openness, friendliness and credibility of these kinds of sites, all aspects which they report to be important in online sex and relationships resources (see McCarthy et al. 2012; Evers et al. 2013).

But while SRE websites have great potential for giving information and advice (Bailey et al. 2014), they are unlikely to be as beneficial as SRE conducted 'in real life'. The most recent UK National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (2013) examined the sources of sex and relationships information that young people aged 16–24 use and found that school was the most common (39.4% for men, 41.3% for women) compared with the Internet (4.1%/1.9%). Although most young people reported unmet information needs before their first sexual experiences, those that reported school as their main source were less likely to do so (Tanton et al. 2015). They also reported fewer sexual health risk behaviours and outcomes (Macdowall et al. 2015).

As SRE websites become more popular and access to them broadens, they may become more successful in meeting unmet information needs. However, it is clear that there are limitations to online learning. Learning from websites is usually a private experience which is very different to classroom-based SRE. High quality SRE uses methods that are experiential and participatory to help young people to learn information and skills (Sex Education Forum 2014). For example, websites can demonstrate how to use condoms and can encourage readers to practice using them, but this is more effectively

done in a lesson where condoms and demonstrators are available. If delivered effectively, school-based SRE can provide a safe-enough space for people to learn how to communicate and negotiate with each other. They are also vital for participants to explore their values, listen to each other and learn to respect the values of others. Participants are not able to pick and choose bits of an SRE programme as they can on a website, and even the shortest SRE lesson may engage a young person for a longer period of time than the most engaging website. However, there is scope for offline and online models of SRE to work together effectively. Increasingly teachers use online SRE in classrooms and can use them to keep up to date about various topics as well as signposting young people to further information.

In addition to the problems of online sex education, issues around the misuse and abuse of social media, particularly regarding the targeting of marginalised and already vulnerable groups, raise questions about how advice can be ethically and accurately delivered via new media formats. The format of person with a problem seeking help from a columnist is being transferred into new media without the structure of salaried support staff to offer individualised responses to those in crisis. While advice columns have always served the purpose of drawing in audiences, the pressure to sell copy and promote content means controversial problems are now being used as ‘clickbait’. Unmoderated audience comments may compound shaming and judgmental attitudes expressed by agony aunts, who in turn may be enabled to act unprofessionally or even unethically in a further drive to generate audience numbers. If the problem itself does not draw in audiences for disapprobation and blame, then bad advice (and those who give it) may give a secondary opportunity for advice columns to be promoted and talked about. We are now in a situation where those who are asking for advice could be trolled by wider audiences – or agony aunts themselves.

Many of the current changes in advice giving are being driven by commercial pressures to save money on content while increasing revenue via sales or advertising. Within a climate of austerity and cuts, static websites are replacing helplines and interactive messageboards and forums. The quality of service has been cut while the use of lurid problems to drive audiences remains. There are also fewer public resources to refer to due to financial cuts and governmental policies and a greater demand on advice givers because people are unable to get help from existing services. Indeed some advice giving, particularly on television, has shifted to belittling those in need of help and perpetuating narratives of those needing benefits or other forms of support as being scroungers (Wood and Skeggs 2011; Hill 2015; Boynton 2015).

Engaging with sex advice

Given this changing context, we are particularly concerned about the quality of some sex media advice and have made attempts to challenge poor media practice online and in private to editors, commissioners and programme makers. However, this has met with little success. Although guidance for advice columnists and editors does not exist, were it to be offered, it is unclear whether it would be accepted or how it might be enforced. Greater standardisation, training and regulation of advice columns is an option but one that is likely to be highly resisted by editors, producers and media advisors who, when praised, tend to represent the advice column as a source of help and care led by experienced journalists or experts, but when criticised, claim that it is not intended to be expert driven and is primarily for entertainment. The fluidity of definition of what columns are for and who they serve makes it difficult to address quality standards or even to pin down what

media advice giving is about. We are currently reflecting on how best to move forward in challenging poor practice.

One strategy that we are pursuing is to find ways of critiquing poor media advice that move beyond simply complaining to and about media producers. For example, we created a Bad Sex Media Bingo card to draw attention to the typical and often problematic ways in which sex is represented in media. The bingo card lists common characteristics of media representation – for example ‘Only penis in vagina is proper sex’, ‘everyone is gay or straight’, ‘dodgy stats and bad science’ and ‘porn rewires your brain’ for players to spot in examples of sex advice, and also explains why these are a problem and what better ways of presenting sex there are. We have used this as an ice-breaker activity at a few events and for live-tweeting when programmes such as *Sex Box* are aired.

It is debatable whether the self-help format can produce a sustained social or radical challenge to wider cultural assumptions about sex, and sex advice based on this format is likely to always be limited. Self-help of any kind risks lapsing into individualistic projects of self-transformation (Illouz 2008). It is extremely difficult for the reader not to come away with the sense that they – as an individual – need to improve some aspect of themselves, rather than the problem being located – and best tackled – at the level of structural inequalities. It is also difficult, in a single book, for an advisor to reflect the multiplicity of sexual practices and understandings of sex, without defaulting to one approach or narrative at the expense of others. Even books that have explicitly aimed to challenge ‘sex myths’ have ended up perpetuating and reinforcing problematic messages (Barker, Gill, and Harvey Forthcoming,b), perhaps because the ‘myth-busting’ approach always risks challenging the myths, but not the underlying assumptions on which they are based (Eisner 2013). It may be necessary for people to read across multiple texts to enable them to see, for example, the diversity of practices that are considered under ‘sex’ and the diversity of contexts in which sex can take place. Such a reading-across also highlights the contradictory ‘solutions’ that are proposed in different books, such as women being advocated to become *more* dominant and assertive in some books, and *less* so in others.

Perhaps this is where online forums have more to offer than books in the arena of sex advice, given their capacity to display multiple different, often contradictory, ‘solutions’ alongside each other. Yet it is also possible to incorporate multiple views in more traditional forms of advice giving. Those of us who are involved in advice giving ask others to give feedback and criticism on the media we create; an approach that contrasts starkly with most advice giving that takes place in print and broadcast media. For example, one of us (Petra) works as *The Telegraph*’s sex and relationships expert,¹⁰ and addresses the reader’s problems by researching the topic herself, reaching out to researchers and practitioners who focus on that area, presenting a diversity of possibilities in her column, and inviting feedback so that she can correct any errors and improve on advice in that area over time. Another of us (Meg John) has written his own advice book (Barker 2013) and another (Justin) is able to revisit ‘static posts’ at bishUK to rewrite and improve the information as they continue to learn from colleagues, young people and other sources of sex education.

The continued popularity of self-help and the sex advice book format suggests that at least some readers do appreciate having information collected together in one text. Two of the authors (Meg John and Justin) are currently writing their own sex advice book which foregrounds issues neglected in other literature such as diversity (of bodies, relationships and practices), consent and the role of wider cultural messages. They are building on Meg John’s analysis of existing sex advice media (Barker, Gill, and Harvey Forthcoming,b) and the feedback that Justin has received over the years on their sex advice website and

training. This book also takes the approach of focusing more on ‘how’ people engage with sex (tuning into desires, communicating these consensually, diverse ways of dealing with discrepancies and questioning restrictive social norms). As such it hopefully does not set up the need for further advice as the aim is to provide an ongoing set of tools that will apply to all kinds of bodies and forms of sex (see Friedman 2011; Barker 2013; Hancock 2013 for existing examples of this kind of approach). In addition to putting out alternative *content* in this format, we are considering locating our own book within a range of linked sex advice media, including a regular podcast, and online blogs and discussions. Hopefully this will enable a more fluid and plural approach to accompany the inevitably more fixed and singular approach of a single text.

Our aim as a group is to continue to promote critical and open access information to the public on sex and relationships, to support colleagues to work within the media, to enable advocacy and activism across disciplines, for example uniting agony aunts with therapists and mental health service users (see Boynton 2015), and to highlight diverse ways of engaging with and analysing media advice giving, for example Petra’s project (‘No Star To Guide Me, <http://www.nostartoguideme.com>’) that reflects on media advice giving while offering free resources to anyone wanting to offer media advice worldwide.

Our work also includes continuing to analyse the ways in which sex and sexual health are conceptualised in policy (see, for example, Smith and Attwood 2011; Barker and Duschinsky 2012; Duschinsky and Barker 2013) and legislation (see, for example, Attwood and Smith 2010), as well as current mediated sex education (see, for example, Barker, Gill, and Harvey Forthcoming,b), and the broader study of mediated sex and sexuality (see, for example, Smith et al. Forthcoming). Some of us have been active in blogging on these issues (see, for example, Petra’s <http://www.drpetra.co.uk/blog/about-me/> and Meg John’s <https://www.rewritingtherules.wordpress.com/>), on writing about formats such as blogging and how academics might use these (Attwood et al. 2012), and on helping to shape research and professional practice (see, for example, Boynton 2005; Richards and Barker 2013, 2015).

Much more research is needed to develop our understanding of all these areas and their relation to sex advice giving, yet the low reputation of advice giving and sexual learning – and research that investigates both of these – makes obtaining funding difficult. Resources are not the only issue either. We would do well to expand on existing approaches to analysis which remain limited by a focus on mainstream Western women’s media framed by largely feminist readings of texts, or theoretical discussions of media advice giving which provide useful commentaries but little in the way of empirical analysis. Research from within media, such as evaluations of advice giving particularly on radio, is invaluable yet tends to remain within the media industry. Research that does not simply comment on media from the outside but begins to look at how it is built, made and recreated by journalists and audiences is vital. Studies that look at a wide range of media, diverse audiences (including those that are men, LGBT and in the Global South) and include economic, social and health issues as lenses for analysis would also be helpful. Building a productive perspective on the relation of sex and media also needs to go much further in understanding how audiences engage with media whether it is informational, educational or a mixture of these. Understanding the gaps between formal sex education, the kinds of advice giving we have described here and the kinds of learning that can take place by consuming or producing various kinds of sex media remains an important goal. Going forward, it would also be helpful to see more public conversations about what makes for good sex advice and good sexual learning, wherever it appears.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. See <http://www.senseaboutsex.wordpress.com/>
2. For information on the Onscenity Research Network see <http://www.onscenity.org/> on Critical Sexology see <http://www.criticalsexology.org.uk/wp/> and on Gender and Sexuality Talks see <https://www.facebook.com/gendersexldn>
3. See <https://thesexualizationreport.wordpress.com/>
4. See <http://badsexmediabingo.com/>
5. See <http://www.londonsexrelationshiptherapy.com/sense-about-sex/>
6. See Arthurs (2004) for a useful overview of the treatment of sexuality on television.
7. See <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-campaign-for-real-sex>
8. See, for example, Agnes Tan's open letter to her principal criticising sex education in her school. <https://www.facebook.com/agathatheslowtortoise/posts/741950835884958>
9. See <https://www.youtube.com/user/lacigreen>
10. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/petra-boynton/>

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Use of sexuality-focused entertainment media in sex education

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The literature on the impact of entertainment media on sex education is typically pathology-focused, unclear regarding the effects of such usage, and void of dialogue between those who actually work in the areas of sexuality education and entertainment. To address this gap, this paper is the product of joint authorship between media figures from varied sexually-focused programming fields and academics who teach and conduct research in the areas of sexuality and relational health. The authors focus on the role that various forms of entertainment media play in educating members of the public and college classrooms in the areas of sex and sexuality. Additionally, examples of the inclusion of entertainment media in educational contexts are discussed.

Keywords: adult entertainment; entertainment media; pornography; sex education; sexuality studies

Sexually-focused entertainment media can be a powerful and positive part of sex education efforts. (Francisco Ramirez)

The current and potential impact of sexually-focused entertainment media is a popular subject of slanted speculative writing and pathology-concentrated research literature. This exploration is largely void of the voices of the public figures who work in this industry as a form of sexuality education, entertainment, and public outreach. In order to address this gap, two prominent media figures representing different sexually-focused programming joined with two academics who specialise in sexuality, as well as mental and relational health. The four authors seek to use this article as a space in which to share the collaborative exploration and comparison of their professional experiences. It is our goal to contribute to more personalised discussion that allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of why the authors create and use these platforms, how, the concessions that are made in this process, and the authors' hopes for the future regarding sexuality entertainment and education.

The first author (RN) is an assistant professor of couple and family therapy (CFT) in Ontario, Canada, while the second author (MLCB) is an associate professor in a CFT programme in Wisconsin, USA, and is also an American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists Certified Sexuality Educator. The third author (JOR) holds a doctorate in sexology, is a former high school teacher, is a current contributor to a range of popular entertainment sources, is the author of a popular series of sexual self-help books, and is a popular television personality. Most recently she has hosted PlayboyTV™'s reality series, 'Swing'. The fourth author (FR) holds a master's

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degree in public health and works as a sexual and public health consultant. He regularly works with international organisations, including the United Nations and Music Television (MTV™) on issues related to sexual health and sexual well-being. The United Nations organisations with which he works include UN Cares (The UN system-wide workplace programme on HIV), UN DPKO (the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations), UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) and UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme).

Sexually-focused entertainment media runs along a continuum from more mainstream presentations (e.g. MTV™'s '16 and Pregnant') to more explicit, adult works (such as Nina Hartley's series of couples-focused how-to videos or adult entertainment media). While there are arguments to be made regarding differences between mainstream and adult entertainment, there are enough examples of programmes that blur these lines (e.g. PlayboyTV™'s reality and Q & A format shows) that this paper will not attempt to distinguish between the two. The authors see all sexual entertainment as part of a broad spectrum, and engaging in the debate of classification of works to particular categories is beyond the scope of this piece.

Literature review

Researchers suggest that exposure to sexual content in entertainment media is linked to mixed outcomes among young people, including a heightened knowledge of sexual risks and delay of sexual activity (Collins et al. 2003), a hastening of sexual intention (Pardun, L'Engle, and Brown 2005) and earlier initiation of sexual activity (Collins et al. 2004). Despite the potential for both negative and positive outcomes, entertainment media are often scapegoats for alleged deleterious effects – particularly related to sex and violence – often with no regard to the possibility of a non-recursive relationship between consumption of sexual content and behaviour (see Bleakley et al. 2008), nor consideration of the kind of sexual content portrayed and observed (e.g. sexual risks and management of risks portrayed, sexual activity without portrayal of risk-taking), nor discussion regarding with whom the young person watches the entertainment media; research shows, for example, that when parents and young people view and discuss sex-related content together, it helps reinforce teenagers' understanding of sexual risk-taking and ways to manage such risks (Collins et al. 2003).

Teenage and young adult students often encounter a range of sexual issues on a consistent basis, including unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, homophobic harassment, transphobic violence and sexual assault. The observable costs of these diverse challenges include missed classes and assignments, chronic illness, hospitalisation, depression, anxiety, withdrawal from schooling and insomnia, to name a few. These anecdotal observations are in line with research connecting unintended early pregnancy with negative health, economic and academic outcomes (Bissell 2000) and homophobic and transphobic harassment with higher levels of emotional distress, depression and suicide (Bagley and Tremblay 2000). Yet, educators are often unprepared to offer comprehensive education, and effective support around these types of sexually-focused concerns, and this presents challenges as an educator, as well as opportunities for growth.

There are many ways in which to teach about human sexuality. In each of these differing approaches to sexuality education, decisions are made about the methods used through which to conduct such instruction. Some methods are more effective than others. For example, abstinence-only education has been found to be ineffective in preventing

adolescent pregnancy and in delaying the onset of sexual intercourse (Crooks and Baur 2011). In contrast, comprehensive sex education has been shown to lead to increases in sexual knowledge and understanding while not increasing sexual behaviour (Perrin and DeJoy 2003). Generally speaking, college students who participate in comprehensive human sexuality courses report that their knowledge of sexual topics greatly increases, and that the form of instruction was much more comprehensive than their previous ways of learning about sex (e.g. from parents, media, online or from friends) (Rutledge et al. 2011).

There are specific teaching methods that make a course more effective for knowledge gain and attitudinal changes in students. These methods include reaction papers that explore the personal responses of students to the topics at hand; group discussions; tasteful humour; and the viewing of erotic-based educational and entertainment media as part of a comprehensive human sexuality course (Barbour 1989; Kyes 1990; Marsar et al. 2012; McKinney 1987; Sprecher and Pocs 1987). In this paper, we focus upon the use of entertainment media in the forms of primarily television, digital, video and magazine formats when educating about sex. Scant research exists on the incorporation of such entertainment media in sex, couple and family therapy courses in general (Blumer 2010), and more specifically in sex education curricula (Marsar et al. 2012).

Survey research suggests that such media are rarely used in sex education courses (Bragg 2006). Often this lack or limited usage and/or creation of sexuality-focused entertainment media is tied to the position of the institution in which one is an educator, whether the institution is one of higher learning like a university or a commercial institution like a television network. In university settings, there is ongoing debate about the use of such materials, which many academics believe are usable in line with academic freedom, and have value in contributing to student learning around human sexuality in a manner that is comprehensive (Kyes 1990; Rhodes 2008; Rosser et al. 1996; Russell 2015), and administrators', parents' and/or students' claims that such use is pornographic, and in some instances not conducive to successful learning (Sisco 2015; Smith 2012). Often members of teaching faculty are supported in their use of sexuality-focused entertainment media by administration on the grounds of academic freedom. Yet, the occasions when a particular university administration may not be as supportive are often the ones that people hear about more frequently because of the attention paid to such instances by the media. For instance, recently a few universities have been what some educators view as constraining of faculty's ability to teach human sexuality in a comprehensive manner by attempting to require that faculty provide advance warnings to students before sexually-explicit material is used (LaMagna 2014).

Such institutional barriers around the use of sexuality-focused entertainment media in settings with adult learners, particularly young adults, may be a demonstration of a lack of generational understanding. Importantly, on entry into college a fair number of late adolescents/young adults in the USA are already consumers of new media, including erotic and pornographic video content online (Bragg 2006; Brown, Keller, and Stern 2009). Thus, persons from this age cohort may already be making use of new media to learn about and engage in activities related to sex and sexuality (Brown, Keller, and Stern 2009). For example, roughly 30% of women and 50–70% of men have viewed sexually explicit materials online by late adolescence in the USA (Brown, Keller, and Stern 2009); however, most have done so in an unguided manner.

There are two primary concerns associated with young people's unguided viewing of such media: first, the information they view may be inaccurate or misleading; and second, as young people turn to media to learn about sex, sexuality and sexual health they may be

turning away from people offline who may be better equipped to educate (Brown, Keller, and Stern 2009). Paradoxically, however, most young people use this media because of the inadequacies in home and school support they experience when seeking sources of sex education (Bragg 2006). Thus, sexually-focused entertainment media is becoming more important to sex educators and in sex education (Bragg 2006; Brown, Keller, and Stern 2009; Marsar et al. 2012).

In general, students report that sexual knowledge increases after the purposeful inclusion of sexually explicit materials in their college sexuality courses (Rhodes 2008). Not only do students report learning from the media, they also report that the medium appeals to them in a mature, non-patronising way (Bragg 2006). More specific studies focused on sexually-explicit entertainment media in relation to college students have also been conducted. In one US study examining the viewing of erotic videos that included condom usage, post-viewing results indicated positive attitude changes about condom usage (Kyes 1990). In other studies, US college students exposed to video imagery and stories involving gay, lesbian or bisexual (GLB) characters in a course showed a significant decrease in their homophobia levels and increases in their empathy towards GLB persons (Rogers, McRee, and Arntz 2009; Walters 1994). In another US study, sexually-explicit video materials were reported to be the most helpful aspect of a seminar class. In the same study, the authors suggested that such resources were judged to be helpful both in assisting students in exploring their concerns and in clarifying their emotional responses to aspects of sex and sexuality (Rosser et al. 1996).

While research in the area of sexually-focused entertainment media's usage in an educational setting still has gaps, it is clear that engagement with new media is important to current and upcoming generations of teenagers and young adults. The research that does exist suggests that utilising sexual media as a foundation for discussion and critique can help make for more comprehensive education. In this paper, we will explore experiences and difficulties in using sexuality media for education from the points of view of both educators and content creators.

Our backgrounds and reflections

Ruth Neustifter (RN)

I transitioned from working as a part-time university instructor and full-time private practice sexuality educator to an assistant professor position. My work as a sexuality educator focused largely on pleasure, communication and diversity. That experience included the use of a wide range of information dissemination and outreach venues. I remember that as an adolescent, my primary avenues for sexuality education outside of my home took the forms of adult websites and women's interest magazines; the formal education I received during my childhood was not useful in this regard. When I began working as a sexuality educator and mental health professional, I knew that I wanted to focus on reaching mainstream audiences, in both traditional and creative ways. As a result, I found myself conducting workshops in some interesting venues, including church basements, homelessness shelters (Tambling et al. 2012), elder care and community centres, websites, university classrooms, professional conferences, sex toy stores and adults-only weekend events. This work also resulted in the publication of a mainstream sex self-help book (Neustifter 2011), which I wrote in the hope that the average consumer of sexuality information might be drawn to the style and approach.

In my experience as an educator and mental health professional, sexually-focused entertainment media plays an important role in the ongoing sexual development of many

adults and relationships. Although I have been confronted with a variety of studies on the dangers of such media, I remain concerned that much of this body of research has not been designed to capture and relate the potential positive impacts of mindfully created and consumed entertainment media. While acknowledging that some feel there are risks to the use of such media, I maintain that these forms of media remain important to my clients, myself and the larger mainstream culture. As such, every opportunity should be used to maximise their potential for positive sexual change.

Markie Blumer (MLCB)

I began teaching university-level human sexuality courses in 1998 as an undergraduate teaching assistant. My instructor, Dick Skeen, showed entertainment-based sexuality content in his course, including Nina Hartley's 'Guide to ...' series, a feminist-based erotic adult film and editor Susie Bright's (1993) 'Best of American Erotica'. As a student on the course, before I became a teaching assistant, this was the first time I had been exposed to entertainment-based sexuality. The exposure would forever shape my personal and professional selections of sexuality-based media and I believe has helped me, my partners and my students understand more about the vast and diverse world of human sexuality. This class served as a template for my own courses focused on sexuality for years to come.

I teach undergraduate human sexuality courses, graduate sex therapy courses and combination graduate and undergraduate classes focused on gender, sexual and relational identities in individuals and families. In each of these classes, I purposefully and selectively make use of entertainment-based media to help college students of all ages (18–65 years approximately) better understand human sexuality. For instance, in my undergraduate human sexuality class, my students and I read and review the history of Playboy™ magazine. Its prominence and advances for the field of adult-based entertainment media cannot be stated enough. The freedom to see naked bodies and read erotica publicly and legally began in the USA with Playboy™ magazine in 1953 – a landmark for rights around freedom of speech (Crooks and Baur 2011).

In 2010, I attended the Framing the Vulva Conference, held in the USA, and had an opportunity to hear sexologists speak about cisgender women's bodies – specifically their vulvas. One speaker was Vanessa Schick, who presented her research on Playboy™ magazine, which was a content analysis of the centrefolds since its inception. In her analysis of 647 centrefolds, she and her research team analysed the following categories in terms of changes over the decades: mons pubis visibility, pubic hair visibility, labia majora visibility, labia minora size, labia minora colour and general physique (Schick, Rima, and Calabrese 2010). Their findings over the last roughly 60 years were as follows: pubic hair has diminished, labia majora have become less visible, the non-prominence in labia minora has grown, no variation in labia minora colour is shown (only pink or light red), and the height and bust of models have been increasing while weight has remained constant (Schick, Rima, and Calabrese 2010). Her findings and the related discussion and implications were so compelling that I immediately began adding her article and examples of the centrefolds over time to my class during our conversations around the history of Playboy™ magazine. In addition, I included activities in which students reviewed the materials in groups and related their conversations back to their own bodies, sexuality, gender, as well as dominant, cisgenderist and heteronormative constructions of media representations of women and sex.

One of the conclusions that the students discussed in this activity was that the way models are currently represented in Playboy™ magazine makes them resemble living

Barbie® dolls. One student said of the models, 'They are made to look like women on the top and pre-pubescent girls on the bottom.' The students agreed that one implication of people seeing these images was that it sets up an expectation of how women 'should' look that is unrealistic (Schick 2010). Other dialogues that emerged were that expectations of how women's bodies should look play a part in fuelling plastic surgery decisions like breast implants, vaginal rejuvenation and choices of people such as dyeing their labia minora. We discussed not wanting to demonise people who make plastic surgery decisions by choice, but simply coming to the conclusion that such choices are rooted in a society that is ultimately placing cisgenderist, heteronormative, heterosexist and patriarchal ideation upon us all – making such choices not actual independent choices, but rather an illusion of choice (Schick 2010).

Students have further discussed how important the role of Playboy™ magazine has been in terms of entertainment-based sexuality related media. Students reported that aesthetically speaking Playboy™ magazine centrefolds between the 1950s and the 1970s were the most pleasing to them visually, sexually and intellectually, preferring the imagery in them to more modern ones. They said the models looked more 'healthy' and 'natural'. On the whole, the learning opportunities created by seeing centrefolds in Playboy™ magazine and discussing the related research were some of the most fruitful and meaningful ones we had as a class.

In addition, I use video clips from various online websites that house entertainment media in the form of adult and/or erotic videos. Often in class we visit various sites with different videos as a way of comparing and contrasting different types of sexually-focused entertainment media. For instance, I provide examples of educational adult entertainment videos from sites like KinkAcademy.com™, where examples of how to engage in myriad sexual positions, play activities, etc. can be viewed. As another example, I show examples of activities between men and women, women and women and men and men, who do not typically have any relationship with each other outside of the acting situation – what is a typical working context for many adult entertainment companies. In contrast to this, I then show examples of feminist-based erotica, where the participants are often perceived as more genuine, because they are about authentic relationships between people who know each other. For instance, Pink and White Productions® has produced award-winning films like the 'Crash Pad Series', which demonstrates authentic female and queer sex and sexuality. The scenes are with real queer-identifying partners engaging in authentic sexuality. By watching clips from this series in real time, students see safer sex practices and open communication and dialogue between participants and genuine feelings and raw emotions.

Through viewing these different examples of adult entertainment-based media, students have an opportunity to discuss the differences and similarities between educational pornography, feminist-based erotica and mainstream pornography. Dialogue moves from the 'how to' of sex and sexual activities, through mainstream heteronormative and heterosexist portrayals of sex, to queer and feminist portrayals. In other words, there is a transition from, 'What is pornography?' which is where most students start, to 'What can we learn from pornography?' – not just sexually, but about their relationships, identities, one another and ultimately themselves. As this happens, most students report never knowing there was more than one kind of porn and that they are surprised that they can learn about safety, sexuality and relationships from some forms of representation.

As a bonus, the viewing of these materials also affords the opportunity for further discussion of education around safer sex practices, kink, diverse sexual activities and partners and sexual satisfaction. To speak to the latter point, students often ask, 'Is porn

harmful to one's relationship?' To this query, we dialogue about what kind of pornography, frequency in viewing, the demographics around who is watching and if the content is viewed together or separately. I share that, in general, researchers have found that the viewing of pornography is not inherently harmful to individuals or couples (Crooks and Baur 2011), and that in viewing pornography together, couples typically report an increase in sexual satisfaction, as well as greater frequency of sex than those couples whose partners watch it independently (Hertlein and Blumer 2013).

Overall, the use of sexual entertainment media, particularly sexually explicit works of adult entertainment, has been an invaluable resource to my work in sexuality education classes. Being able to engage adults with this material allows us to connect and create an elevated discourse regarding beauty standards, sexism, cisgenderism, heteronormativity and other important topics. By using sexual entertainment media, I am able to provide an immediate, real context to these discussions and encourage the students to become critical consumers of such works. This is a role that cannot be filled by any other media, and would not be as relatable to the students if provided via an academic text alone.

Jessica O'Reilly (JOR)

I stumbled upon both the sex education and entertainment fields by chance. As a secondary school teacher at an alternative school in downtown Toronto, I saw first-hand the costs of sexual health education (SHE) programming that, though well-intended, was dated, incomplete and out of touch with students' lived realities (Flicker et al. 2010). I was eager, but unprepared to offer effective support and referrals to my students despite having undergone extensive training in SHE during my undergraduate years. The complexity, diversity and calamity of my students' experiences coupled with the lack of formal support provided to teachers (e.g. McKay and Barrett [1999] note that only 15.5% of Canadian teacher education programmes provide compulsory SHE training) inspired me to take action. I went back to college with the intention of developing pre-service and in-service SHE programmes for teachers that reflect both mandated curriculum requirements and student need and interest.

My doctoral research involved developing workshops/interventions for pre-service teachers with the goal of increasing their knowledge and comfort with the SHE topics of greatest interest to Toronto's youth: healthy relationships, HIV and sexual pleasure, as identified by Flicker et al. (2010). Upon graduation, I continued to offer these training workshops as a guest lecturer and in-service facilitator; however, these contributions did not constitute a full-time job. To supplement my income, I began writing sexuality articles that blended popular entertainment with education and quickly found myself adjusting my delivery in order to reach wider audiences in television and radio.

When PlayboyTV™ asked me to host *Swing*, I did not even own a television, so I was naturally reticent and suspicious of their motivations. I, like many others, viewed entertainment media (and reality television in particular) as exploitative and inaccurate despite my limited exposure to the medium. A few hours on-set, however, and I was reminded of the ways in which entertainment media can be used to deliver viewer-centred learning, spark relevant classroom discussions, and meet curriculum requirements in the delivery of SHE (sexual health education training).

My experiences working on-set and in the classroom suggest that popular entertainment sources can play a meaningful role in sex education, as they create openings for contextualisation, generate student-centred learning and provide engaging content for media literacy development. I am keen to contribute to a dialogue that explores

the positive potential of entertainment media as teaching tools while acknowledging their limitations. For instance, some of the limitations include issues around casting that emphasises a limited spectrum of ages, genders, and body types, the prioritisation of entertainment over education and other topics.

Despite these limitations, I have seen firsthand many benefits to the inclusion of entertainment media as a tool in teaching sex education. When I visit classrooms as a guest sexual health educator, I receive the most engaged response to pre-selected scenes from popular entertainment programmes such as ‘16 and Pregnant’ and ‘Jersey Shore’. Even if students disagree with the messaging and/or challenge the realism (it is, after all, entertainment), the use of entertainment media fulfils several of their identified sexual health education needs – entertainment media has the capacity to offer up-to-date information and resources, uses everyday language, and balances between a sense of humour and seriousness when appropriate. Researchers reveal that students identify these areas as priorities when learning about sexual health (Langille et al. 2001).

My time with PlayboyTV™ was the culmination of my work as a high school educator, graduate student researcher and advocate for improved sexuality education for high school teachers and students. Of course, as a premium cable television network, PlayboyTV™ is not in the business of sex education. According to Wendy Miller, Vice President of Development and Current Programming, ‘the network is in the entertainment business first and foremost. Of course you can learn a great deal about sex by watching our shows, but that education is merely a by-product of entertainment’ (W. Miller, personal communication, July 24, 2014). Despite this stance, as the host of PlayboyTV™’s reality series, *Swing*, I can attest to the fact that many viewers embrace the programme’s content and messaging as a form of education. Miller also acknowledges the network’s role as a *de facto* source of education and embraces the corporation’s secondary role:

I definitely believe PlayboyTV™ can play a positive role in sex education by offering shows no other network can. We make sure that any information we put out there is accurate and sex-positive with no agenda other than facts. The programs that I oversee are specifically designed to keep couples sexually in sync in order to have happier, more fulfilling relationships. PBS™ [Public Broadcasting Service] hasn’t cornered the market on educational television... We teach our viewers how to have more rewarding sex lives by modelling what they see on PlayboyTV™ entertainment. (W. Miller, personal communication, July 24, 2014)

Swing follows the story of a couple making their initial foray into the world of swinging. In the host role, I support them in preparing for the experience and introduce them to a group of experienced swingers. They have the opportunity to get to know several couples, ask questions and experiment sexually with other singles and couples should the right chemistry be present. When they are done, I step back in to offer additional support and help them to address any potential concerns. Although the programme is cast for entertainment purposes, all interactions, conversations and connections are real. The cast is not directed and there is no script, so the experiences of anxiety, nervousness and awkwardness that tend to surround sexual encounters are palpable to our cast, crew and viewers.

I receive weekly emails from couples indicating that they have used *Swing* as their handbook for exploring consensual non-monogamy in their relationships. Many contend that the programme has helped them to navigate potential challenges and improve their communication. This is unsurprising, as messages of enthusiastic consent, honest communication, sexual negotiation and active listening abound through the programming. Viewers may tune in for the hot and heavy sex scenes, but the conversations that precede

and follow offer education that is not just a corollary to, but an essential component of, the titillating entertainment value.

As one of the few programmes that depicts real live sex between non-actors (including men and women over the age of 50 and of various body types), *Swing* is in a unique and limiting position, and is but one example of entertainment that can be utilised as a tool of education. Although *Swing* is not appropriate for many classroom settings, particularly those with underage students, programmes like ‘*Degrassi: The Next Generation*’ and ‘*Suburgatory*’ tackle many of the sexual health issues that students identify as relevant today, and may be suitable for such environments and populations. From the complex interplay between drugs, alcohol and sex to the subtle nuances of hook-ups, dating and break-ups, such entertainment media offers scenes and scenarios that spark dialogue in the classroom.

Francisco Ramirez (FR)

From the beginning of my career, I have had a passion for what is often called ‘mindless’ television – pacifying, relaxing television that serves as an outlet and escape. For years now, I have been motivated by the possibility of carving out a small section of the television landscape for something that has a strong, positive impact and encourages people to take better care of themselves and each other. Such ideas tend to get frowned upon or shot down in the television world. The success of shows such as ‘*Super Soul Sunday*’ and other popular programming on the OPRAH™ Winfrey Network, however, illustrate how television can be used as a beneficial force and inspire me to continue to follow this goal. Rather than marketing feuds, strife and drama, I want to use television to help audiences learn and feel better about themselves.

In 2010, I started working with MTV™’s ‘*Staying Alive*’, a UK (United Kingdom)-based foundation that works on HIV-related causes worldwide. My initial work with them involved hosting and producing short ‘vox pop’ videos; interviewing young people on the street regarding safer sex, HIV prevention and healthy decision-making. From there, my work led to ‘MTV™ Voices’, where I created additional informational videos under the umbrella topic of social responsibility, focusing specifically on sexual well-being and healthy relationships. The MTV™ Voices content began online, but went on to be shared on television internationally via ‘MTV™ News’.

My experience with MTV™ also includes some tangential work in 2012 with ‘*Savage U*’ – Dan Savage’s show. I was responsible for the creation of online multimedia content on topics that related to each episode. Links to this content were ‘bumpered’ – mentioned at the end of the television programme as a further resource. Finally, I did some interviews with celebrities and hip-hop artists about HIV and sexual health-related issues.

MTV™ is a large and diverse entity with a variety of different sex-related initiatives taking place across many platforms and sources of media, often referred to as ‘channels’ regardless of whether television is involved. One of these sexual health-related efforts, ‘*It’s Your (Sex) Life*’, offers an example of a public information campaign focused on sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy and open communication. Although this is offered by MTV™, it goes beyond entertainment. It was created in conjunction with the Kaiser Family Foundation and launched in 1997, and from that channel other campaigns were created, including ‘*GYT: Get Yourself Tested*’, an offshoot campaign launched in 2009. Both of these initiatives continue to the present and are an important example of what can happen with well-supported projects in this industry. A single channel can create multiple opportunities for content on relevant issues, including those with a sexuality focus.

While the work done by these various channels is important, in my opinion there is room for improvement regarding an integrated crossover between MTV™'s television programming and online initiatives (e.g. the use of programme-end bumpers that direct viewers to the websites, campaigns, hashtags, etc.). In the present day, the use of television programming looks much different than it did a decade ago. Many people may be interacting with two or more screens simultaneously or accessing episodes online; despite this, relevant tangential material from associated websites is not always clearly linked on landing pages for show content. These hub-integrated crosslinks should direct users to a section of the sexual education initiative that is eye-catching and, ideally, related to the current programming. Clearly there is room for more cross-advertisement of these initiatives to broaden their audiences.

A more work-intensive, but worthwhile, method of integrating the sex initiatives would be to take the topic covered by an episode of a show and create new online content for the associated website/s to supplement the show. For instance, the intention of 'Sextra Credit', the online content I created to run alongside 'Savage U', was to take a topic touched upon in an episode of the show and expand upon it in an entertaining, yet educational way. In these ways it is possible to create online sex education content that is not an expensive full season and, indeed, may only be a series of 30-second shorts that integrates with current programming. Particularly if television personalities with large followings can appear in or be directly integrated into the supplemental content, it is possible to cross-pollinate and use a celebrity's existing fanbase to further the messaging.

In addition to coordinating content in order to reach a larger audience, I sometimes find that my role as a sexuality expert carries unfortunate restrictions. On several occasions I have been told to avoid explicit discussions of sexual pleasure from an 'objective' standpoint. For example, it is generally seen as acceptable, from a production standpoint, for a cast member or subjective figure on a show or clip to emphasise the pleasurable aspects of sex. In contrast, when such statements come from the informative 'impartial educator' figure, it may be seen as problematic by the network. When you are in an authoritative position regarding sexual education, there is a need to moderate what you say. There is an omnipresent risk of funding removal or attack from sex-negative organisations that requires special care that what you are saying cannot be misinterpreted out of context. This wariness makes it hard to be honest about what sex is holistically, including the pleasurable parts. My goal in sex education is not to be a parental or professorial figure. Rather, I am most fulfilled when I am a moderator who creates and encourages discussions, turning questions back to the audience and remaining as uninvolved as I can without allowing misinformation to spread. I want to closely emulate the sort of discussions that occur over social media in terms of engaging the audience and having them contribute to their own education.

My hope for the future of sex education and entertainment is that we can use television (and related platforms like social networking, bumpers, online forums, textionnaires, etc.) to address sexuality and to educate with increasing frankness and less shame and misinformation. While the Internet provides an excellent array of sexuality education resources, many of the better resources are difficult to stumble upon by accident. With the creation of a single half-hour of television programming featuring honest, solution-based sex education amidst the thousands of hours of television available across networks in a single day, we could reach so many people in need of help.

While I appreciate the utilisation of sexually-focused movie, television and web content in classrooms and comparable environments, my hope is that the impact is not

diluted. I feel that television and video content can be most useful when the audience is drawn to it for their own reasons and they are engaging because it is entertaining and interesting to them, which is important to keep in mind when utilised across settings. In many ways, the television show is designed to be unpacked and analysed in a social way – in an online forum or via Twitter™ for instance – and I am aware that sometimes bringing it into other environments, where consuming it is framed as an ‘assignment’ or ‘requirement’, may lessen its impact.

Television has a particularly strong ability to establish and re-establish norms. So much of the public’s preconceptions, scripts and stereotypes comes from what is normalised on television, scripted or unscripted. When users of social media, online forums, or even comment sections thoughtfully take content to task and question the stories that are being told, norms can be changed. That is why it is important, for me, that television exists alongside peer-led dialogue, and why educators should aim to facilitate conversations among the audience rather than exclusively lecturing. Engaging with people who use fan fiction to re-write endings or storylines may also be a venue for education. By probing what parts of a show bothered students and why, educators can draw out some of these norms and lessons and help students voice their critiques of the content. To close, sexually-focused entertainment media can be a powerful and positive part of sex education efforts.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we agree on many important concepts in support of the potential and current value of sexuality-related entertainment media in public and educational contexts. MLCB reflects on how students are able to learn important lessons as they progress from considering definitions of pornography to examining what can be gained from varied examples of sub-genres across mediums. JOR states that couples and individuals are able to glean ideas and support for exploration of consent and pleasure in their intimate relationships. Finally, FR discusses the important role of mainstream entertainment in reaching audiences who are seeking to relax and be entertained, while simultaneously offering educational content. At the same time, the authors’ experiences and perspectives offer intriguing contrasts. JOR’s exploration of the positive aspects of Playboy TV may be seen as conflicting with MLCB’s reports of students’ preferences for the bodies of models from the 1950s through 1970s. JOR and FR also shared very different experiences working with Playboy TV compared to MTV. These differences were strongly highlighted in FR’s accounts of institutional constraints that were not mentioned by JOR.

It is not enough that high-quality media be available. All of the authors support the importance of a deeper exploration of what constitutes quality in adult entertainment media for the purpose of offering benefits beyond entertainment to the various audiences upon which each author focuses. It is also necessary that educators and other consumers approach this media with a dedication to critical evaluation in order to benefit from the positive aspects and discard or question those that are less beneficial. Just as the reviewed literature contains conflicting research on the impact of such media on viewers, suggesting both benefits and drawbacks, the experiences of media professionals, educators and mental health professionals recognise a multitude of complexities. The voices of these professionals, however, can also yield valuable considerations for under-explored benefits and lead to potential directions for increasing the positive reach of sexually-focused entertainment media.

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School of shock: film, television and anal education

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Since their inception, film and television have been accused of having all kinds of magical powers to alter behaviour, coerce malfeasance and encourage debauchery. Decades of media theory later, the powers of persuasion are in fact thought to be much more modest. One area where popular media is considered to be particularly influential is education, with film and television being perceived to have a role in teaching audiences about certain topics, notably sexuality. This paper focuses specifically on the education provided by film and television about anal heterosex. Screen depictions have a function in not just putting such a sex act onto the audience agenda but in guiding viewers' reception. In this paper, the use of pleasure, pain and power frames is examined to explore the specifics of the anal education provided by screen fiction.

Keywords: sexuality; framing; heterosexuality; media; deviance

Since their inception, film and television have been accused of possessing all kinds of magical powers to alter behaviour, coerce malfeasance and encourage debauchery. Decades on from the hypodermic syringe and magic bullet powerful effects theories of the media, however, their influence is presumed as much more modest. In contemporary understandings, media power centres less on propaganda and more on cherry-picking the issues that get the spotlight and orchestrating how those issues are framed. In this paper, I focus on the presentation of anal heterosex in narrative film and television. I contend that while the screen depiction of this long-standing taboo places it on the audience's agenda as behaviour worth thinking about, more specifically I suggest that film and television have an educative role, and that depictions teach viewers about anal heterosex, a practice noticeably absent from traditional sex education sources.

This paper begins with a discussion of the anal taboo in society and, more specifically, in media. I outline that while the widespread absence is attributable to the verboten nature of the sex act itself, its limited presence on screen is, at least partly, attributable to contemporary pornification. The idea of the screen as providing an education is outlined, examined and then problematised as an entertaining, yet complicated, education source. Anal scenes from film and television are then described and categorised according to the narrative frames of pleasure, pain and power. Finally, the educative function of media is analysed in relation to society's evolving relationship with taboo sex.

The rarity of anal sex presentations in mainstream – or at least, non-pornographic – film and television means that there is not a deluge of scenes available to analyse. The few screen examples discussed in this paper, therefore, are those that have been identified in previous academic discussions as containing depictions of anal heterosex (Rosewarne 2011; Keesey 2012), as well as those tagged as such on websites (for example, the Internet

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Movie Database). Resultantly, the examples discussed here emerge from a variety of genres. Due to the paucity of representations, conducting a change over time analysis or a genre-comparison study would be difficult and thus, this paper focuses more narrowly on narrative frames which are common across anal heterosexual portrayals. Because there is so little anal heterosexual in mainstream entertainment, it is possible to use frames to make meaningful generalisations about how anal sex is depicted; an analysis that would be much more difficult to accomplish for a practice like vaginal sex which is so widespread, familiar and represented in a much wider variety of ways.

The depictions discussed highlight that in spite of the long history of the anal sex taboo, media does not actually offer a homogenous portrayal of the act. While there are indeed brimstone-type representations – where the act is not merely sexually but socially transgressive – non-vanilla sex is becoming increasingly normalised and thus, in line with changing mores, in some examples anal sex is actually presented as intimate and even pleasurable.

The anal taboo

Anal heterosexual exists as one of the last remaining sexual taboos – described by social researcher Kath Albury (2002, 147) as the ‘last frontier’. While my discussion centres on fictional representations, it is of course necessary to outline the real-life moral and, in turn, legal prohibitions that have imbued anal sex with such a long tradition of controversy.

The concept of the mainstream is, of course, highly contested. Notably, it is a notion underpinned by extensive hypocrisy given that while a range of sexual practices are positioned as deviant, non-vanilla or fringe, a paradox exists in that these are not only routinely practised privately, but commonly enjoyed vicariously and voyeuristically through film and television (Rosewarne 2011). Queer theorist Gayle Rubin (1993, 16) summarised the range of acts that are commonly considered non-mainstream, non-vanilla and, in turn, deviant:

Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in “public” or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys or unusual roles.

Each of these taboo practices has a history as to the whys of their demonisation, but the ‘non-procreative’ element is of course, one key insight into the condemnation of anal sex specifically.

Anti-sodomy laws have their origins in biblical opposition to homosexual relations; as political scientist Raymond Smith (1998, 73) notes, the anal taboo ‘functions as a social control on homosexuality’. While most Western countries have repealed anti-sodomy laws, a number of African and Asian nations retain them and they remain in the legislation of several US states. The long history of anal sex being illegal lays the basis for its taboo; however, other factors centred on psychology and society also help to explain this.

An extension of the prohibition against homosexuality – of which anal sex is commonly considered metonymic – is the routine connection of such sex to disease: since the 1980s, anal sex has been framed as a high-risk sexual practice with potentially deadly consequences. Along with the risk of disease, anal taboos have roots grounded in disgust. Smith (1998, 73), for example, identified that many anal taboos begin in toilet training ‘when children are taught that the anus, which infants experience as pleasurable, is unclean and the symbol of all that is disgusting.’ Into adulthood, the continued linking of the anus with waste manifests in anxieties about bodily excreta, specifically faeces (Menninghaus

2003), and thus works to demonise those who consider the orifice as erotic as disgusting if not also fetishistic.

While anal heterosex is an uncommon depiction on screen, it is indeed detectable and therefore the whys of its presentation need to be examined, particularly in the context of contemporary debates around the influence of pornography on the mainstream. Elsewhere, I have contended that the increased visibility of taboo topics (at least partly) reflects audiences wanting to vicariously experience kinky sex with the benefit of distance and safety (Rosewarne 2011). Others have proposed that the increased interest in practices like anal heterosex – something identifiable in popular media as well as sources like women's magazines and sex advice literature – is attributable to the mainstreaming of porn (Sabo 2012; Ringrose 2013).

The mainstreaming of pornography

Pornification describes the process whereby sexually explicit material once only associated with the seedy and often illegal is now more visible and acceptable. In his book *Striptease Culture*, for example, media theorist Brian McNair (2002, 61) discussed signs of mainstreaming, identifying it as evident in: 'the representation of porn in non-pornographic art and culture; the pastiche and parody of, the homage to and investigation of porn; the postmodern transformation of porn into mainstream cultural artefact for a variety of purposes.'

While discussions of mainstreaming have largely been dominated by feminists concerned with stereotyping, sexualisation and objectification (Sørensen 2003; Levy 2005; Paul 2005; Walter 2010), politics aside, the simple reality is that such mainstreaming has occurred and the presence of sexual practices which once were exclusively contained within porn is now readily found outside of it. While the politics of pornification are not largely relevant to this discussion, the presence of anal heterosex does relate well to feminist concerns with mainstreaming. Anal heterosex in fact, presents quite a literal depiction of such concerns, that its presence in film and television is yet another example of the mainstreaming of men's rights to pleasure at the cost to women's discomfort, if not pain (Jeffreys 1996). While, as noted, there is not a homogenous presentation of anal heterosex in film and television, it is interesting to note that women's pain is indeed one frame identifiable in screen depictions.

Most theorists link pornification to the Internet age: that the Internet is essential as both a disseminator of explicit content but also as a way for audiences – regardless of age, sex, geographic location or personal disinclination to frequent sex shops – to access it. Popular media produced in the Internet age, however, is not the first to include sexually transgressive presentations. Anal heterosex is detectable in numerous films predating pornification such as *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973), *Je t'aime moi non plus (I Love You, I Don't)* (1976), *Body Heat* (1981) and *Body of Evidence* (1993). Such isolated examples, however, are the exception not the rule and, in the Internet age, explicit mainstream film and television depictions of sex are far more easily sourced.

It should be recognised that Internet-driven pornification is not the only explanation for the increase in non-vanilla content. The successes of liberal and third-wave feminism have meant that risqué sexual presentations involving women are no longer exclusively construed as exploitative. While radical feminists frequently interpret such liberalising as a signifier of a backlash against feminism (Faludi 1991; Levy 2005), pro-sex feminists see capacity for such material to be construed as reflecting female sexual agency and, in the cases of non-vanilla representations, as an acknowledgement that female desire is not

necessarily staid or gentle (Rosewarne 2014). Equally, the rise of pro-sex and sexual reform movements has helped the picture of acceptable intimacy to evolve. The film theorist Douglas Keesey (2012, 12) in his work on erotic film, for example, notes: ‘restrictions on what is and is not an erogenous zone have been opened up beyond the merely genital...’

Another factor contributing to the increased presence of non-vanilla depictions is the success of gay and lesbian activism. As a result of the criticism of clichéd and mocking depictions of homosexuality on screen – as well as the growing social acceptance of same-sex desire – the visibility of queer characters has increased as has the depiction of sexualities more broadly (Rosewarne 2013).

The anal taboo in film and television

Whereas prior to the 1990s, the depiction of anal sex in porn was considered an ‘extreme’ presentation (Purcell 2012), nowadays, it is actually a staple. For reasons centred on religion, law, disease and disgust, however, the act remains largely absent from popular culture – a situation that has not gone unnoticed. Keesey (2012, 18) for example, highlights that, even at a time when cinema is liberalising in regard to sexuality, there are still some glaring omissions: ‘mainstream film almost never shows the ass or anus as exciting in themselves, despite the latter’s lasciviously sensitive nerve endings and the fact that anal intercourse can stimulate the prostate and the clitoris.’ While the absence of anal eroticism is likely partly attributable to the aforementioned taboos, elsewhere I present some medium-specific explanations noting that mainstream presentations rarely provide sufficient visual information to know exactly what kind of sex is happening: ‘cinema almost never includes enough detail for audiences to confidentially ascertain the kind of touch that is transpiring – or even whether vaginal or anal penetration is occurring’ (Rosewarne 2014, 85).

Apart from in films uniquely controversial in their display of real sex – such as *9 Songs* (2004) where the anal heterosexual was unsimulated – in most popular media sex acts are feigned and thus actual penetration is never shown. Much, for example, was made of the anal heterosexual in the drama *Crash* (1996) (Creed 1998; Hallam 2012; Robinson 2012). On one level, there are numerous reasons to assume that anal sex was occurring: the narrative centred on transgressive and ‘unusual’ sexual practices and much camera attention was devoted to female buttocks, in turn imbuing the film with atypical anal eroticism. Equally, in a scene where James (James Spader) and Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger) were having sex in a spooning position, the fact that Catherine was talking about James possibly ‘sodomising’ their associate Vaughan (Elias Koteas) links her fantasy to the penetration she was experiencing.

In some scenes, however, a kind of hedging transpires where anal sex *might* be happening but where the act is also open to interpretation. A good example of anal ambiguity transpired in the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013): Walter (Bryan Cranston) and his wife Skylar (Anna Gunn) were in bed kissing when he abruptly rolled her onto her side. Just as he appeared to be positioned to penetrate her from behind, Skylar asked, ‘Walter, is that you?’ and then sharply inhaled: the implication is that the sex that they were having was unusual for them: anal sex is implied – via tropes such as allusions to pain and shock – but is not explicitly shown.

While the anal scenes that I discuss in this article are ones where it seems reasonable to assume that such sex is occurring, in most examples scenes are not explicit enough to show penetration and thus a vaginal reading is still possible.

Film and television as agenda setter

Mentioned earlier was the concept of film and television helping to put anal heterosex onto the agenda. Developed by social scientists Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), agenda setting theory initially narrated the findings of a study undertaken during the 1968 US presidential election where a correlation was found between issues that constituents considered most important and those which the news media covered most heavily. While the origins of agenda setting lie in political science, the theory has been widely used in media studies. For the purposes of this paper, my interest is on agenda setting in the context of the placement of anal heterosex onto an audience's radar via its depiction in popular media. Communication theorists Jane Brown and Susannah Stern (2002, 99) provide a good summary of the relationship between agenda setting and, as specifically relevant to this paper, sex education:

Although rarely thought of as sex educators ... [media] at the very least help keep sexual behaviour salient ... The media are in a unique position to get people thinking and talking about specific issues ...

Elsewhere I have discussed agenda setting in the context of anal sex, highlighting popular media's role in tabling the act without providing specific instructions on how an audience should think about it:

The media does not force us into treating the anus as a penetrable orifice, but by portraying it, celebrating it, and potentially even normalising its sexual use, undoubtedly anal play is put on our radar. Anal sex becomes sexual behaviour to consider. We might fantasise, we might engage, and we might just watch or listen and allow a representation to substitute for our desire to have it ... (Rosewarne 2011, 23)

One signifier of anal sex being on the agenda is people acknowledging having thought about it. One of the most interesting findings from sex researchers Cicely Marston and Ruth Lewis' (2014) work on heterosex, for example, was that anal sex was mentioned by research participants in conversations about their sexuality prior to them receiving any prompting from researchers.

More than simply *thinking* about a sex act, however, is its integration into sex life. Sex research documents a notable rise in reported anal heterosex participation over the past two decades (Johnson, Mercer, and Erens 2001; Hardy 2006; Gindi, Ghanem, and Erbeling 2008; Chandra, Mosher, and Copen 2011; Mercer, Tanton, and Prah 2013; Marston and Lewis 2014). Such research highlights that anal sex is on the public radar and that some people have not merely thought about it, but actually participated in it. While numerous factors influence this, the changing portrayals in popular media undoubtedly play a role. In this paper, I propose agenda setting and education roles for anal sex scenes in film and television but it should, of course, be noted that such presentations can also be construed simply as fantasy. The question of how fantasy might play a role in everyday behaviour is a complex one, but it is certainly not a simple cause-and-effect (Burgin, Donald, and Kaplan 1986; Donald 1989; Mulvey 1989; Kaplan 1990; Penley 1992).

Film, television and framing

Framing is a theory that describes how a story is packaged. While in the context of news this concept is often used to explore a type of bias whereby an audience is manipulated into taking a side and making a moral judgment, framing as related to fictional media explains the way something is depicted within a storyline and thus how audience perceptions about it can alter; something explained by the pioneer of the theory, communications theorist Robert Entman (1993, 51–52): 'Analysis of frames illuminate the precise way in which influence

over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness.’

As related to sexuality, research highlights how framing can be used to guide perceptions about transgressive sexual behaviours: political scientist Alan Yang (2001, 344), for example, discussed the ‘media’s shift in coverage from framing homosexuals as deviant or ill to a framing of homosexuality as a minority group fighting for their civil rights’. The sociologists Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile (2010, 292) similarly discuss media’s common framing of radical feminists ‘as bra-burners, man-haters, and, often, as lesbians’. While there is not specific work on how anal heterosex is framed in popular media, the three frames I propose here – pleasure, pain, and power – are ones that I suggest have impacts on how media educates audiences about the practice and, in turn, influences how the act is construed in the popular imagination. A small range of literature explores the impact of framing on a student’s education experience – for example in Joel Amernic and Russell Craig’s (2014) work on accounting education – in this discussion the frames of pleasure, pain and power are examined as instrumental in shaping informal education about anal sex.

Film and television as educator

Narrative film and television are fictional productions: they centre on fabricated stories. While there is an expectation of truth and accuracy in news articles, conversely, audiences watch film and television because of the fiction. Fiction, therefore, raises interesting concerns regarding education: the very fact that representations are contained within a made-up story highlights that not only is the presentation fictional but that the information source is potentially unreliable. A media item being fictitious does not, of course, preclude it serving as an informant: fairytales and folk stories have long been used to provide moral lessons (Bottigheimer 2004), and equally a role for narrative film and television in the teaching of subjects including history (Marcus 2010), politics (Glover and Tagliarina 2013), and sociology (Gerster and Zlogar 2006; Russell 2009) has been documented. Questions nevertheless need to be asked about the veracity of education delivered in this manner.

In all areas of study, information gleaned from fiction can be problematic: Hollywood’s shortcomings in delivering an accurate portrayal of history, for example, have been discussed at length (Carnes 1995; Palmer 2009; Mintz and Roberts 2010). Similarly, while research highlights how common it is for ‘informal’ sex education to be gleaned from friends and, most notably, popular media (Hall 1996; Balding 1997; Falk and Falk 2005; Levin and Kilbourne 2008; Kaima 2010), it also identifies that such informal education can create knowledge gaps and misunderstandings (Parmelee 1996; Price and Gwin 2012). While this paper does not focus on the accuracy of anal heterosex depictions – and ‘accuracy’ in this context is problematic anyhow given that ‘truths’ are more likely grounded in morality and individual ethics rather than fact – it is nonetheless worth acknowledging that the screen has been documented as sometimes presenting inaccurate sex information. Equally, as discussed throughout this paper, anal sex scenes are invariably brief, often ambiguous and generally provide very little information about the practice beyond tabling it as a sexual possibility. Given the paucity of content therefore, the nature of how the sex act is framed holds particular significance.

Another limitation of popular media as a source of sex education is spotlighted in cultural theorist Kenneth Kidd’s (2004, 96) work on the information provided by teen films like *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999) and *American Pie* (1999): ‘we cannot always

know how they are received.’ Media theorist Alan McKee (2003, 1) addresses this issue in his work on methodology, identifying that in any kind of textual analysis ‘we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.’ While approaches such as audience reception theory interpret the factors impacting upon interpretation (Jensen 1987; Hall 1993), for this paper educated guesses are made about the messages received based upon the frames apparent with the acknowledgement that there is no guarantee of exactly how an audience will actually process such information: depictions might be dismissed as pure fantasy, they may cultivate status quo ideas about sexuality, alternatively they may encourage – or even repel – copycat behaviour.

Representations of sex in the context of fiction are more difficult to analyse than a news report or sex education manual because there is a range of factors at play that are less relevant to news, for example, storyline, intended audience and genre conventions. The biggest difficulty is simply that the provision of sex education is not the goal of narrative film and television. While it is possible that a filmmaker has a social or political agenda (Rosewarne 2012), entertainment and profit are likely stronger drivers.

While information provision may not be the intention – in fact, it might be something filmmakers claim to actively not be doing – film and television nevertheless do have an educative role: they not only transmit information to audiences, but are an enormously influential source of it. Much research, for example, identifies the informal sex education role of popular media (Spanier 1976; Bourke 1994; Hall 1996; Balding 1997; Measor, Miller, and Tiffin 2000; Kidd 2004; Falk and Falk 2005; Freeman 2008). In social scientists Janet Hyde and John De Lamater’s (2010, 7) work on sexuality, they go so far as to contend that ‘the average American’s views about sexuality are more likely to be influenced by the mass media than by scientific findings.’ Kidd (2004, 95) makes a similar claim:

[F]ilms made for teens provide distinct and often disturbing lessons in sex and romance – and that teens probably take those lessons to heart... Certainly such films are experienced by more teenagers – and much more often – than are instructional films or other classroom materials.

Kidd’s point on young people being more likely to engage with film than other sex education material underpins part of the reason why media depictions of sexuality – specifically non-vanilla sexuality – are worth examining: the intention may not be to inform but this is nevertheless a consequence. A number of education theorists identify the role of the proverbial ‘spoonful of sugar’ in education, or the idea that when content is presented as fun and enjoyable, young students (Okon 2013) as well as mature ones (Hoult 2006) are more likely to learn. As entertainment products, film and television serve in this enjoyable educative role. Equally, in spite of the accuracy concerns identified earlier, the merit of popular media in pedagogy has been noted (Sealey 2008). Not only is there a point to be made that media portrayals of sex are erotic education via a pleasurable medium, but also that there is a relevant numbers game at play: many more people will watch – and, likely, pay more attention to – a popular film or television series than they ever would to a purpose-built education production.

Not only are film and television ‘fun’ sources of education, but in fact, they may actually fill gaps that exist in more formal sex education. Marston and Lewis (2014) spotlight such a role for media: ‘anal sex between men and women – although commonly depicted in sexually explicit media – is usually absent from mainstream sexuality education and seems unmentionable in many social contexts.’ In the absence of formal anal sex information, popular media both steps in, and potentially even has amplified influence given the paucity of competing education sources. While the education provided

about anal sex is generally restricted to cursory information linked to pleasure, pain and power, the fact that it is mentioned at all is likely more of an education on the topic than the audience would receive elsewhere.

As noted earlier, while there is no guarantee about how an audience will receive a media message, there nevertheless are some relevant studies that indicate at least some level of impact. In my work on menstruation (2012), I contended that popular media is repeatedly identified as a central source of menstrual information for both men and women. Equally, in my work on menstruation, as well as in my subsequent work on masturbation (2014), I identify a strong interplay between depictions of taboo topics – notably with their recurring themes of catastrophe, humiliation and privacy – and men and women’s thoughts about these topics in real life. While I acknowledge that popular culture is rarely an audience’s sole source of information about such subjects – personal experiences and interactions are likely also substantial contributors – I nevertheless contend that media is an important educator, particularly on the topic of sexual transgression:

Something doesn’t become a taboo out of thin air and taboos are not maintained without repetition. Those around us of course contribute, but media portrayals are a key source in influencing how we think and feel about self-stimulation and thus have an important role in framing our perceptions and providing ongoing reinforcement of it as erotic and guilt-worthy and best done in seclusion. (Rosewarne 2014, 297)

The presentation of diverse sexual portrayals, and their framing inside screen narratives, are the key areas where I contend that media effects – particularly in the context of anal sex – are most easily witnessed.

Framing anal heterosex on screen

Attributable to its continued status as taboo, anal heterosex is not yet a screen or sex-life staple. While not common, depictions of the act are nevertheless identifiable. While there is not the space to provide a comprehensive survey of anal heterosex scenes across film and television – and, as noted, there is not a large sample of such depictions anyhow – instead in this section I discuss a selection of scenes from popular media that illustrate three frames: pleasure, pain and power.

Pleasure

Discussed earlier was the anal scene from *Crash*. Not only was Catherine talking dirty throughout the scene – conveying an impression of enthusiastic participation – but it also appears she orgasmed in the end. The capacity for women to actually – and notably *transgressively* – enjoy anal sex is detectable in a number of examples.

In the romantic-comedy *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), after sex the title character (Renée Zellweger) commented, ‘Daniel [Hugh Grant], what you just did is actually illegal in several countries.’ While – in line with the censorship restrictions placed on mainstream film and television – anal sex is not explicitly shown, the mention of the *illegality* and notably Daniel’s follow-up comment – ‘Shut up, or I’ll do it again... I’m going to give you something to bite on. Here,’ – make it seem reasonable to assume that anal sex has not only transpired, but that it was actually *mutually* pleasurable.

In the suburban-drama *Little Children* (2006), during Sarah’s (Kate Winslet) affair with Brad (Patrick Wilson) the two characters seemingly had anal sex; an act that, again while not made anatomically obvious, coincided neatly with Sarah’s book group reading Gustave Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary* (1856) and discussing the presence of anal sex.

In the comedy *Bad Santa* (2003), while only the legs of a man and woman were visible at the bottom of a change-room, a woman is heard loudly moaning and begging Willie (Billy Bob Thornton) to 'keep going'. In reply, Willie is heard saying, 'you won't shit right for a week.'

In the drama *Lie With Me* (2005), Leila (Eric Blafour) and David (Lauren Lee Smith) have anal sex for what appears to be the first time. This scene in fact, exists on the cusp of pleasure and pain: Leila moans, seemingly in pain but, as is common in visual depictions of sexual pleasure, agony and ecstasy are often indistinguishable and by the end of the scene it is difficult to determine whether Leila pants out the word 'harder' or if, in fact, it is just heavy breathing.

While presenting anal sex as something pleasurable is a positive frame, such scenes also have some very specific educative uses. Discussed throughout this chapter is the role of popular media in putting anal heterosex onto the audience's agenda. More than simply *thinking* about such a sex act however, is its presentation as behaviour worth trying. Such a frame may therefore explain the link between the act being tabled, considered and also sometimes participated in. Marston and Lewis (2014), for example, noted that among the reasons given by research participants for their engagement in anal sex, the perception that 'people must like it if they do it' was a popular one. Film and television are likely contributors to this by providing depictions of people doing it and also framing scenes in a way that flaunts pleasure.

Pain

Mentioned earlier was *9 Songs*. In one scene, Lisa (Margo Stilley) snorted cocaine in an attempt, seemingly, to sufficiently relax her for anal sex: this scene, however, was more indicative of Lisa's expectation that sex would hurt rather than her reality. In other examples the pain is made more explicit.

In the 'Bottoms Up' episode of the drama series *Entourage* (2004–2011), Eric (Kevin Connolly) and his fiancé Sloan (Emmanuelle Chriqui) attempted anal sex for the first time. It was visibly painful for Sloan and they both quickly gave up. Something similar transpired in the pilot episode of *Girls* (2012): Hannah (Lena Dunham) and Adam (Adam Driver) attempted anal sex but Hannah declared, 'please don't do that. That feels awful, thanks,' and they stopped.

In a sex scene from the comedy-drama *Storytelling* (2001), college student Vi (Selma Blair) was instructed by her creative writing professor, Mr Scott (Robert Wisdom), to 'turn around'. She does this and it appears that they have anal sex against a wall causing Vi a great deal of pain; so much so in fact, that she could barely speak. While it appeared that Vi went through with the act consensually, afterwards, she in fact pondered whether it was rape.

Within a scene pain fulfils a narrative function – to showcase, for example, the dynamic between the characters – such pain also frames the sex act in a certain way: it suggests this is an act that men get pleasure from, that women find painful and that women submit to for men and for the sake of their relationships. In real life, pain in fact is the central explanation provided by women for their disinclination to participate in anal sex (Carter et al. 2010; Marston and Lewis 2014). While of course, other factors influence this – personal experience, the experience of associates, and so on – the screen framing of anal sex as something that hurts is likely a contributing factor to women's real-life fear of, and aversion to it.

While I do not discuss demonisation as a specific frame in this paper, this can nevertheless be construed as an outcome of the pain frame. Referring back to the negative

associations of anal sex discussed earlier, one interpretation for the pain frame can be punishment for participation in an ‘unnatural’ sex act and, in turn, serve as a subtle deterrent.

While pain-frame presentations may fuel the perception that anal sex is agonising and an act that a woman would only engage with under duress, another way to think about this is the perception that such sex would only happen because of a man’s coercion, if not his force. In their research on anal heterosex, for example, sex researchers Jonathan Stadler, Sinead Delany, and Mdu Mntambo (2007) identified that while on some occasions women participate for pleasure, at many other times it is about coercion. Coercion is also discussed in Marston and Lewis’ (2014) research. That a woman would not go through with anal sex without a man’s insistence frames the act as potentially one of dominance and submission and raises a number of concerns regarding gender equality on screen.

Power

A particularly common screen portrayal is anal sex framed not merely as painful, but as part of an act of aggression. Keesey (2012, 52), for example, discussed the aforementioned anal scene in *Lie With Me* in the context of Leila and David’s complicated relationship:

By forcing himself on her anally, he [David] puts himself in place of the other man’s body and reclaims his own ‘rightful possession’ of her. He also punishes her [Leila] for thinking she has a right to her own desire . . .

While I did not actually construe the *Lie With Me* scene as necessarily ‘forceful’, the narrative nonetheless implies David’s desire to dominate the sexually liberated – and, in turn, sexually intimidating – Leila. Dominance, equally, is a theme in the *Storytelling* scene which emphasised not only the power disparity of the sex act – Vi looks tiny and fragile compared to Mr Scott; Vi endures pain while Mr Scott gets pleasure – but also the official status disparity between teacher and student.

While the idea of rape in *Lie With Me* and *Storytelling* is ambiguous, in a large number of films anal sexual violence is presented explicitly. Film theorist Joe Wlodarz (2001) discussed the extensive presence of same-sex anal rape in cinema – contending that only through force can this taboo be experienced in our homophobic culture. Similarly, most screen examples of anal heterosex are indeed ones of rape. Anal rape of women, for example, transpires in the French films *Romance* (1999), *Baise-moi (Rape Me)* (2000), *À ma soeur! (Fat Girl)* (2001), and *Irréversible (Irreversible)* (2002) as well as a variety of non-French films including *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), *Teeth* (2007), *Män som hatar kvinnor (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo)* (2009) and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). In each scene, women experience varying degrees of agony; in both the Swedish and the American versions of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth (Noomi Rapace/Rooney Mara) is actually shown having difficulty walking afterwards and is depicted showering off blood; something that also transpired in *Leaving Las Vegas* for Sera (Elisabeth Shue).

Discussed earlier were feminist criticisms of pornification of media, specifically the advancing of men’s pleasure at the cost of women’s discomfort or pain. An extension of this transpires through the power frame whereby audiences receive an education about anal heterosex as an aggressive act. While the idea of it being potentially painful has already been discussed, the power frame more specifically positions it as an act of *violation*. In feminist theorist Natalie Purcell’s (2012, 132) work on pornography, she notes that ‘Anal sex is a notable example of a sexual act that has no inherent valence, but is used by contemporary pornographers to signal debasement’, and that in porn ample

examples exist where ‘taking anal sex is the job of the humiliated and the inferior’. Similar readings can be applied to the scenes discussed in this section: anal sex is framed as a lesson in violation and subordination and something done *to* a woman.

Conclusion

This paper has spotlighted that film and television have roles not merely in putting anal heterosex onto an audience’s radar, but in specifically providing education about the practice. The lack of a homogenous frame for presentations highlights that no single message is being delivered, but instead, that anal heterosex is commonly framed in a range of ways, in turn, offering numerous different lessons. In this paper, the frames of pleasure, pain and power were presented to highlight three ways in which anal heterosex is packaged in film and television and, thus, three different lessons that an audience receives about a traditionally taboo sex act that is seldom mentioned in standard sex education.

This paper has highlighted that media have a pivotal, albeit informal, role in presenting certain sexual practices as topics to think about, to consider, and to then hold a place – be it a positive or negative one – in the popular imaginary. The fact that anal heterosex is treated to such diverse frames reflects that the position of anal sex in society is still in flux and is inevitably open to further manipulation, specifically by popular media.

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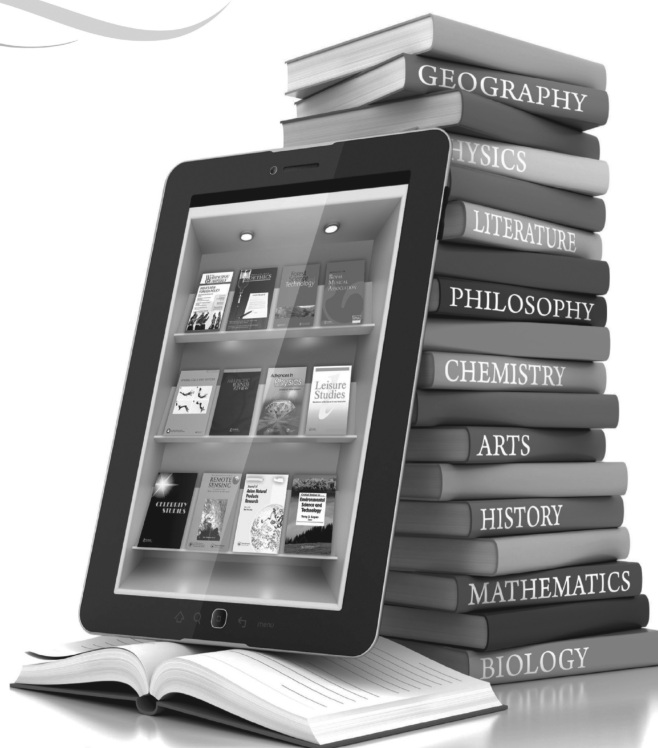
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