THE EFFECTS OF SEXUALIZED MEDIA ON SEXUAL SATISFACTION
A Qualitative Research Analysis on Sexual Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study explored the effects of sexual media associated with perceived sexual satisfaction. It is hypothesized that the socialization of sex through media during early adolescence portrays idealized sexual behaviours and attitudes resulting in unrealistic expectations. These portrayals deliberately exaggerate what sexual behaviours and sexual satisfaction should look like. However, sexual media is constantly changing which makes it difficult to achieve higher levels of sexual satisfaction as sexual scripts from sexual media exposure conflict with real-life experiences. This study was conducted qualitatively through semi-standardized interviews with four college age participants. The results were consistent with previous literature that emphasize the lasting effects of pornography and SEM consumption from adolescence. The participants conceptualized sex in a variety of different ways. In addition, the importance of emotional intimacy was revealed as a major contributing factor in achieving sexual satisfaction.
The consumption of sexually explicit media whether in film, television, or online viewing of pornography have had a profound impact on the ways in which depictions of sex on screen have become standardized within North American culture. The personalization of at home media through the internet and smartphones in a digital age means that those going through sexual development are at risk of acquiring unrealistic expectations about what constitutes as “the best sex ever” and how achievable it is. As a result, sexualized media factors heavily in establishing the rules, boundaries and expectations available to youth and young adults in a critical time of sexual maturity.

Media is considered to be one of the main major agents of socialization (Schaefer & Haaland, 2014, pp. 74) and may cultivate sexual learning and maturity for many individuals. For example, sexual explicit material (SEM) can be observed with high frequency in television programs, including soap operas, movies, music videos, and even in commercials. In Canada, most families have at least one television set (Schaefer & Haaland, 2014, pp. 78). In addition, the availability of personal computers and Internet is increasing at a rapid rate and contributes to easy accessibility for sexualized media (Buzzell, 2005; Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, & Boies, 1999; as cited by Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). With the widespread use of technology, online pornography has become a central source for sex education (Haggstrom-Nordin, Sandberg, Hanson, & Tyden, 2006; Hunter, Figueredo, & Malamuth, 2010; as cited by Sun, Bridges, Johnson, & Ezzell, 2012). This implies a negative impact because pornography does not portray consequences for dangerous sex, and it generally presents an unrealistic nature regarding sexual activities (Pardun, L’Engle, & Brown, 2005; Tsitsika, Critselis, Kormas, Konstantoulaki,
Constantopoulos, & Kafetzis, 2009; as cited by Sun et al., 2012). As a result, this can create a discrepancy between the way media prescribes sexual attitudes and behavior which are not always representative of real-life experiences leading to sexual dissatisfaction.

There are four theoretical perspectives that demonstrate why SEM in media can be extremely influential in an individual’s development of a sexual script, where these scripts detail the way we conceive sequences of actions in events and experiences (Goldstein, 2011). First, the “cognitive scripts” theory underlies the way media presents what sexual encounters should look like, including people’s behaviors, the expression of attitudes and emotions, what should and should not be happening, and the outcomes (Wright, 2011, p. 348; as cited by Sun et al., 2012). Furthermore, Gagnon & Simon’s (2005; as cited by Morgan, 2011) sexual script theory suggests that the foundation for SEM exposure can provide possible and acceptable sexual behaviors including the criteria for sexual satisfaction. The theory posits that SEM gives an individual an idea of what to “script” as “good sex”, the expectations of sexual roles in oneself and of his/her partner, and appearances (Gagnon & Simon, 2005; as cited by Morgan, 2011).

The cognitive scripts theory is compatible with the heuristic model in that heuristic processing allows information processing to be encoded quickly and easily. In this case, SEM from media is shelved in memory structures that may impact later decision-making without much critical analysis (Sun et al., 2012). Therefore, pornography is integrated in our memory as a heuristic sexual script that defines what sexual behaviors look like in an event (Sun et al., 2012).

A third theory that explains how repeated exposure can reinforce pre-existing attitudes and beliefs for SEM is the cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994; as
cited by Morgan, 2011). It suggests that increased frequency of SEM can shape sexual preferences, sexual satisfaction, and sexual behaviors toward the depictions of sex as seen in media (Morgan, 2011).

Finally, observational learning explains why and how individuals imitate sexual behaviors as advocated through media. Consistent with the social cognitive theory, observational learning indicates that realistic models provide demonstrations of what behaviors should be observed, retained, and retrieved (Bandura, & Walters, 1963). Later, memory retrieval helps an individual to reproduce these behaviors in a given context. In this case, sexual media is conceived as realistic models for sexual learning, an effect of perceived realism which may explain the degree to which an individual believes SEM to be real and achievable (Taylor, & Laramie, 2005). As a consequence, individuals rely on these models to imitate sexual behaviors based on observations and memory retention during SEM exposure.

Pornography has can have negative gendered impacts for both men and women. For example, pornography elicits feelings of insecurities with sexual performance and body image regardless of gender (Lofgren-Martenson & Mansson, 2010; as cited by Sun et al., 2012). This may result in consumers developing anxiety over exaggerated portrayals of sexual events because of implied expectations that individuals must look and behave in similar ways in order to achieve sexual satisfaction. Pornography also contributes to persisting gender stereotypes which typically characterizes men as dominant and women as submissive (Brown, & L’Engle, 2009; Haggstrom-Nordin et al., 2006; Malamuth & Impett, 2001; Villani, 2001; as cited by Sun et al., 2012). Not only does this influence the way men feel about their masculinity, but it also reinforces a sexual hierarchy between genders. This can increase acceptance of sexual violence,
and therefore make it unlikely for consumers to attribute intimacy and tenderness to sexual acts (Sun et al., 2012).

To determine the degree to which consumers rely on a sexual script due to SEM exposure, Sun et al. (2012) discovered three important findings in their assessment of men and pornography consumption. First, the association between pornography and sexual insecurities were largely reflected in younger participants than college students. This may reflect the impact of real-life experiences for providing realistic sexual behaviors and thus a change in their sexual attitudes. Second, there was a greater association between the integration of pornography into sex in the younger participants, further demonstrating the reliance on a sexual script. Lastly, men who reported higher frequency of pornography consumption expressed lower levels of enjoyment for intimacy (i.e., cuddling and kissing) with their sexual partners. The researchers concluded that men with high pornography consumption possess more sexual concerns and typically rely on their sexual script for seeking pleasure.

In another important study conducted by Morgan (2011), men reported increased pornography consumption for individual purposes and were more likely to seek out experiences that imitate what was seen in the SEM. They also reported reliance on SEM for solitary sexual activity. This may reflect the abundance of male-oriented SEM which typically emphasizes on the dominant-submissive power relationship while also contributing to the sexual objectification of women (Morgan, 2011). This is consistent with the reinforcement of the sexual hierarchy. In contrast, women reported viewing SEM more frequently with a dating partner, and typically view relationally based SEM. They also reported the belief that SEM consumption is not as socially acceptable because of the degradation of women. Lastly, the study revealed that men’s
SEM consumption began earlier than women, and was more frequent as well. Altogether, these results were consistent with the expectation that SEM exposure during adolescence and young adulthood contributed to developing sexual preferences, sexual behaviors, and lower sexual satisfaction. They also demonstrate marked differences between gender and SEM consumption. Morgan (2011) determined that despite the association between SEM use which may have resulted in initial greater sexual experiences, overall SEM consumption contributes to lower sexual and even relational satisfaction. Consistent with Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) sexual script theory aforementioned, it appears that the sexual preferences derived from the use of SEM largely constitutes to the idea of what “good” sex should consist of in which if such expectations are not achieved, the sexual experience is not as satisfying as idealized. This is because SEM cultivates skewed and idealized notions of female sexual availability, casual sexual encounters, and exaggerated sexual pleasure (Brosius, Weaver, & Staab, 1993; Jensen & Dines, 1998; as cited by Morgan, 2011).

Extensive research has been done to investigate the effects of SEM exposure and pornography consumption. The studies typically analyze participants’ responses in questionnaires to determine whether these effects exist, and if so, to what degree are they manifested in the consumer's’ sexual attitudes, behaviors, and sexual activities. There are few qualitative research studies that highlight the personalized responses to the ways in which sexualized media has affected the participant. Many of these studies use quantitative and Likert scale ratings that are problematic as they are binary in nature and do not leave room for interpretation or the possibility of ambivalence when answering the questions. As a result, the findings of the published articles on SEM are not reflective of media’s influence on individual
attitudes and beliefs as they neglect to acknowledge how an individual prescribes meaning to the images they view when consuming sexualized media. Despite the negative connotations in viewing sexualized media there are potentially positive outcomes for consuming SEM, most significantly media’s role as guiding sexual education in youth. However, this benefit is limited in scope as it leaves a gap in the sexual education process, establishes unrealistic expectations for individuals and sets a high precedent for those entering sexual maturity. This can ultimately become detrimental to overall sexual development as youth age, as they have relied heavily on sexualized media for their education.

The researchers of this study agree with the current findings available regarding sexual satisfaction and expect the results of the current study to be consistent with the literature reviewed. The researchers were ultimately interested in determining whether the socialization of sex through media will have an impact on an individual’s perceived sexual satisfaction. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the standardization of sex as a result of televised events and pornography limits the development of sexual attitudes and beliefs. Consequently, these sexual perceptions cause individuals to be less satisfied with their sex lives because they are perceived to be realistic and achievable. However, idealized perceptions of sex depicted in media are constantly changing and therefore make “the best sex ever” unattainable as they conflict with real-life experiences. This study incorporates a semi-structured interview process to further understand the personalized responses of individuals to properly address the limitations of previous studies using close-ended questionnaires. Thus, this study aims to understand the ways in which sexualized media has been internalized by young adults and how these assumptions
based on the consumption of SEM have manifested themselves within individuals and why these perceptions are enduring over time.

The present study has several limitations that should be noted. The researchers conducted purposive sampling resulting in lack of generalizability and diversity. All participants were acquainted with at least one of the researchers. As a result, specific questions were not asked of the participants as the researcher was aware that some questions may be emotionally triggering for the individual. This was ultimately done to avoid hindering the interviewing process. In addition, the sampling method coupled with an insufficient sample size affected the representation of a more sexually diverse population as all of the subjects identified as heterosexual and cisgender. Further research is needed to adequately address these limitations, specifically the lack of diversity and small sample size.

**Methodology**

*Participants:* A total of 4 participants comprised the sample - 2 women and 2 men - all of whom were college-age, and identified as heterosexual. 3 of the 4 subjects were involved in a romantic relationship. The sample was mostly Caucasian. All participants were proficient in the English language. Participants were selected through purposive sampling consisting of individuals within the researcher’s social network who were comfortable with being interviewed for the study’s purposes.

*Procedure:* The researchers developed 30 questions for conducting semi-standardized interviews. The participants were interviewed separately with the researchers: one participant was interviewed in a study room at the Student Learning Centre on Ryerson University campus, and three participants were interviewed using video chat. Each interview lasted approximately 1-2
hours. Before proceeding with the interviews, participants were assured of their confidentiality and were not aware of the purpose of the study. In addition, participants were briefed concerning the nature and type of study the researchers were conducting, and consent was given by the participants for data collection. Participants were given an alias in order to preserve their privacy.

Data was collected by pen and paper in addition to recording the interviews for transcription. **Objectives:** Questions were designed to assess the participant’s relationship history, beliefs and attitudes concerning relationships, and the importance of the participant’s perspective on the association between sex and relationships. The questions also measured what was believed to be “the best sex ever”, and identify the extent to which SEM and pornography consumption influenced the participants’ sexual attitudes and behaviors in determining the criterion for “the best sex ever”. Sexual satisfaction was also explored to determine the discrepancy between real-life experiences and sexual media.

**Results**

**Sexual media influences:** Consistent with previous literature findings, the results from our study demonstrated that participants were heavily influenced by sexually explicit media and further created inferiority complexes in which the participants in the study felt like they could not adequately perform what they saw in media. This was particularly illustrative in regards to porn: all of our participants vocalized being impacted by viewing pornography and discussed how their socialization of sex through pornography had shaped their sexual education. When talking about the impact of porn, Jenny reflected: “I think it’s made me think it’s a lot easier than it actually is. Like they just stick it in and all of sudden they’re orgasming and it’s the most ridiculous thing ever. I think when it comes to porn it’s so over the top, so fake… I don't know, I have some type
of disconnect with it.” The results from the study also showed that there were gendered understandings of sexual roles within media and many of these depictions objectified women as submissive and men as dominant and in need of control. Eric was particularly aware of this gender gap, noting that “…dudes have a tendency to seek out sex that is kind of like a conquest. It’s like, predatory.” This gender inequality depicted in media ultimately produced discrepancies between the sexual experiences of the individuals interviewed and the standardized scripts porn advocates for. Thus, the inequality of sexuality explicit material in media is more male focused, where females are used as a means to achieve sexual satisfaction. In this sense, sex was seen as a conquest and male dominated.

Additionally, many of the participants within the study discussed their frustration with only the “good” parts of sex being shown in sexualized media, where the bad is often seen as taboo or unconventional. Harvey expressed his irritation with this disclosing that “they don’t show any of the bad sides to sex, only the good so it really fucks with you because you go into it thinking [you’ll experience] the best thing ever.” As a result, the participants in this study noted that they have conflicting ideas between what they are shown in sexualized media to be the perfect idea of sex and what they actually experience. This proved to be an important aspect of sexual education, as both of the female participants in the study vocalized similar sentiments: “I’d probably be pretty lost in terms of what to expect. Media has kinda guided me into what to expect in relationships and sex and that’s both a good and bad thing.” In this sense, media was a major proponent for sexual socialization and education for the participants in our study and their exposure to sexually explicit material led them to recognize the need to dismantle their own preconceived notions about sex. Eric eloquently expressed this, stating “porn is fun, but it’s not
real, they’re all actresses, doesn’t matter if they say they’re not, they’re all getting paid to do these things. That’s their job. I don’t think porn’s wrong. I think porn is fine, like I still use it every once in a while. But I think there needs to be a point where someone says, “You, don’t worry about this. This is a fabricated thing to get you off.”

Criterion for Sexual Satisfaction / "Best Sex Ever": When participants were asked what qualities contributed to "the best ever", the criterion included exploration, spontaneity, intensity, duration, frequency, and the degree of risk i.e., public environments. These items may reflect ideas that were influenced by SEM and pornography. They also appear to reflect variability in sexual activity as one participant characterized the "best sex ever" as "really dynamic because we changed positions and tried new things". The data also revealed that sexual frequency was associated with sexual satisfaction. These findings are consistent with Haavio-Mannila (1997) and Halley & Pollack's (1993) studies. For example, Eric reported that he was not sexually satisfied at the time of the interview because he was not sexually active. However, he also reported that “when I’m at my loneliest, I crave for meaningful sex”, suggesting that frequency alone does not increase sexual satisfaction.

Assessing the participants' beliefs in achieving high levels of sexual satisfaction elicited items attributed to emotional connection. For example, a lack of reciprocated trust weakens the emotional connection between sexual partners and therefore diminishes sexual satisfaction. The importance of emotional reciprocation underlies reported items such as passion, extended intimacy, the ability to "share a moment in time with a partner", and typically is experienced in emotional relationships as opposed to casual relationships. Emotional reciprocation was found to
be an important mediator for relationship satisfaction in Sanderson and Evans's (2001) study. In addition, 3 out of 4 participants reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction.

To further emphasize the importance of emotional connection, the data revealed a consensus between all participants demonstrating that emotional intimacy was more significantly associated with sexual satisfaction and "the best sex" than physical attraction. For example, Harvey expressed that "physical cannot be without emotion as there will always be some emotion even if it's not positive". This implies that despite there being physical attraction, if the emotional component is lacking, then the physical component will also be lacking. Intimate feelings through emotional connection allow sexual partners to develop trust and disregard personal anxiety. For example, Annie feels self-conscious which takes her out of the mindset of having great sex. She reported that "I'm focusing on how I look or what my body looks like or what my face is doing or what noises I'm making." Harvey expressed that he was worried if he could ever experience "the best sex" in the future "not because of the physical reasons just because I realized how amazing sex could be when you're with someone you love." Finally, Eric elucidated the significance of emotional connection as "that deeper connection than friendship that's on a level where you trust someone so much. It's like you're taking all of your organs and then putting them on a try and handing them over and saying, 'I really need these, okay, so just keep them safe, please. I'll be back, but I need those'. You are trusting someone that much and when that trust is reciprocated, it's amazing, and when it's not, it feels like a horrible betrayal." Establishing a certain level of trust and connection was reported to be important for the ability to sexually perform, allows one to feel very emotionally drawn to the person post-sex, and causes
one to forget about worries and stress, encouraging the individual to exert all of their attention and focus onto his/her partner.

For Eric, when asked to recall the most amazing sexual experiences and what made them amazing, he reported that, “I think it’s love...I think that’s what it is, because I look back at the fun kinky shit, and I’m like, that’s fun, but it is not fulfilling by any means. I think it’s love. I think that’s what does it.”

**Definition of sex:** Questions that addressed whether sexual media changed over time resulting in increased content variety was significantly associated with the participants’ perspectives. The data demonstrated that the definition of sex is constantly changing. For example, Jenny was asked if the definition of sex for her has changed over time to which she responded, “sex used to be this special thing that was cherished and now it’s just something to do like an activity… like fucking swimming”. In addition, during young adolescence, Harvey’s initial characterization of sex was a “loving act… you see a successful marriage and are taught that you wait until you’re in love to have sex because that’s how important it was”. Simultaneously, Annie and Eric also reported that sex cannot be defined or classified which ultimately suggests that it is not quantifiable. These results further emphasize that sex was generally acknowledged as a private social behavior that facilitated love between two people. It implies that sex is a concept that is continuously being socially constructed and prescribes a certain degree of normality resulting in a loss of novelty. Consequently, if sex is unmeasurable and the standards are constantly changing, this may imply that sexual satisfaction is impossible to achieve.

According to Schwartz & Young (p. 1, 2009), the researchers argue that the word ‘satisfaction’ can be defined in various ways among different people. The participants were asked
about their idea of the “best sex ever”, if it was obtainable, and if they were satisfied with their sex lives. Most of the participants reported that the best sex ever is achievable, however some were less certain compared to others. Out of the 4 participants in this study, only one participant (Harvey) stated that he considered himself satisfied with his sex life following that he had experienced a version of the “best sex ever” and that it was obtainable, despite the fact that his definition has changed since. Moreover, Harvey reported, “I immediately see it being in a public environment… I like spontaneity but when you’re engaging in sexual behavior nothing else should be going through your mind… the best sex is when everything else is completely disregarded and all you’re focusing on is satisfying your partner and living in that moment”. Two of the participants (Eric & Jenny) appeared particularly skeptical to definitively state if “the best sex ever” was obtainable; they both appeared more hopeful rather than assertive. Similar to Harvey’s view, Eric conceptualized the “best sex ever” into two categories while referencing his past experience with being in love and being in lust. Eric reported that “both [love and lust] can be the best, whereas like on one hand, there’s raw, passion, and emotion, and like, you know, for the most part, it’s just like, two positions, but there’s like a connection there… on the other hand, there’s just like… kinky shit. But I don’t know if there’s like, one best sex. I think there can be multiple kinds of best sex ever”. When he was asked if he thought it was obtainable and real, Eric responded, “No. no, I don’t think you’ll ever have the best sex ever, you probably think you had it and then something different comes and it changes… Unless it’s a thing that can be attained over and over and over.” Jenny supported her answer through what she had seen in her life because she had never experienced “good sex”. When asked if the “best sex ever” was obtainable, she stated “I think so yeah, everything that I’ve seen in my life has told me I can get
it so why would I start believing that it’s not true… Just thinking to when we were kids it’s obviously changed but I don’t think it’s impossible… hard, maybe but not impossible. It has to be real.” In contrast, Annie argued that due to the ever-changing standards it makes “the best sex ever” impossible to attain. She simply noted, “your standards are always going higher and higher and there’s really no ceiling to be reached with this kind of thing”. In agreement with Annie’s perspective, Eric reported “I think it’s a very American thing to say, well North American thing to say, “oh, it’s gonna be the best ever”. It’s a human claim that we put on to sex. I think the best sex ever is just a trap, it’s just something we say…. I think there has to be multiple definitions for it.”

The data indicates that the evolving standards of sex are unobtainable and hold a subjective consequence. It appears that people react and experience things in different environments in a number of different ways, which makes sexual satisfaction unquantifiable. The more sexual experiences one may have the more they can learn to understand how “artificial” sex can be when compared to sexualized media.

**Discussion**

This research ultimately shows that the socialization and education of sex through media is deeply problematic. Baran (1976) has found that without a healthy outlet in which individuals can observe real sexual behaviour, individuals have been dependent on sexualized media as a model for learning leading to sexual dissatisfaction. This was inherent in the findings of the study conducted, as all of the participants noted that sexualized media had given them heightened expectations towards sex that they were unable to reach in their own personal experiences. This is in keeping with the social norms theory which identifies a link between an
individual's perceived behaviour of a social group and how accepting members of the group are of that specific behaviour (Stephenson & Sullivan, 2009). As our participants felt pressured to fulfill the expectations placed on them in viewing SEM, they in turn felt increased levels of anxiety and a decrease in self-esteem creating inferiority complexes when they were unable to perform sexually. By recognizing that they could not fulfill the expectations set out for them in SEM and that they could not belong to this “social group” the participants vocalized that they felt disappointed and embarrassed when they could not perform the way in which sexualized media has defined sex to be.

Furthermore, sexualized media was shown to be crucial in forming cognitive scripts and educational discourses about sex. Many of the participants within the study noted that media had been a guiding force in their lives, without which they would have felt lost in their initial encounters with sex. This is reflective of the cognitive scripts theory, which posits that media outlines and defines the rules, regulations and expectations of behaviour and in turn, controls the foreseeable outcomes in individuals actions (Sun et al, 2012). By guiding the initial education of the participants in the study, sexualized media was able to dictate the social norms and expectations by which these individuals based their sexual habits and assumptions on.

What proved to be the most influential aspect of sexualized media on the participants was the way in which individuals internalized SEM and perceived it to be realistic. Taylor (2005) discusses this further, noting that the implicit and explicit messages within sexualized media is most influential on viewers when they perceive them to be achievable and realistic. Because of
this, the exposure to SEM alters the expectations, attitudes and beliefs of the consumer. This idea of perceived realism was deeply impactful on the participants in this study as the meaning given to the depiction of sexualized media is unlikely to go against the established beliefs and attitudes about sex (Taylor, 2005). As a result, viewing SEM continues to reinforce what they already see and believe and perpetually affects their understanding of sexual experiences. Through this process, the participants in this study were shown to have been affected by the socialization of sexual norms and expectations by creating cognitive scripts based on the SEM they were consuming and by assigning value and importance onto those depictions. When taking into account how detrimental these scripts were on the participants, it can be concluded that the perceived realism of SEM affected achieving sexual satisfaction.

While this research does not comprehensively address gendered relations in sexualized media, it proved to be an influential factor for the participants. There were substantial gender differences discovered in this study, mainly in the specific depictions of men and women in sexualized media and the expectations placed on each gender when performing sexual acts. Both of the male participants vocalized that pornography has been impactful on their sexual and gendered understandings of sex, while the female participants expressed either their complete avoidance of pornography or their disinterest in it. One of the female participants went as far to note that they simply take on the fantasies and expectations of her male partner to fulfill the submissive female role that is expected of women in pornography. This is reflective of what Morgan (2011) has found in gendered experiences of sex: men consume more sexually explicit material than women, using it for individual purposes as opposed to with a partner. This can be explained through gendered understandings of pornography as a male-oriented medium that
often objectifies women based on normalized expectations of masculinity. These gendered expectations placed on the men and women of this study highlight the influences of gendered scripts in sexualized media and how pertinent they are in shaping the expectations of the consumer.

Based on the depictions of “good” and “bad” sex proved to be influential to the participants of the study in dictating what they define as “the best sex ever.” Morgan (2011) found that there have been connections between consuming sexualized media and sexual attitudes and behaviours, ultimately setting up young adults to expect unrealistic sexual experiences. These conflicting ideas, between the reality of sexual experiences and the idea behind what individuals are taught to expect, create a discrepancy in sexual education leading to dissatisfaction. And while more research continues expand the existing literature on sexual satisfaction and media, technological advancements in media drastically influence behaviours. As a result, it is difficult to conclude the true impact of current sexualized media because the technology that shapes media’s influence is continually evolving and redefining sexual standards ultimately blurring the distinction between what is depicted in media and what is experienced personally.

In attempt to explore a contextual definition of sex, there proved to be consistent data throughout the research that led the study to explore its origin. These findings facilitated proper comprehension on how the change in sexual attitudes and behaviors began. One major theme that was apparent in the data was the participants’ comparison for describing how sex used to be (e.g., an intimate interdependent act of love). For example, Jenny reported that the “whole idea of chivalry and being courted is dead now… it’s just so easy to have it now that no one gives a
fuck about making it good…only kinda getting what they want out of it.” She furthered that, “before I started having sex that’s what I thought sex was…just like… this sweeping romantic experience, and when I started having sex it was a huge slap in the face.” Also aforementioned, Eric attributed “the best sex ever” as a North American cultural artifact, recognizing that sexual norms depicted in media are regional and only have meaning with their designated contexts. Finally, Harvey asserted that, “obviously when you’re a kid you see a successful marriage and are taught that you wait till you’re in love to have sex because that’s how important it is.”

According to these data, they reflect the changes that took place in 1960s Sexual Revolution which was a central element in North American culture that challenged traditional codes of sexual behavior and personal relationships until the 1980s (Smith, 1990, p. 416). It associated with a plethora of attitudinal and behavioral changes: free love and easy sex, the ‘Playboy Philosophy’, wife swapping and swinging, homosexuality and living out of wedlock, premarital sex, as well as the normalization of contraception, public nudity, pornography, and the legalization of abortion (Smith, 1990, p. 416-418).

Similarly, the creation of information technology, specifically the advent of the internet has drastically changed the ways in which individuals consume and internalize sexually explicit material. In establishing the “new normal” the internet has had a crucial role in defining sexual norms, attitudes and ideals. In narrowing the diversity of sexual experiences, the internet has effectively created a homogeneous environment that portrays sexual acts as being objective. This creates what Kleinplatz (2013) calls an “idealized uniformity” (2). This had led to a discrepancy between what sexualized media has defined as “sex” and the experiences actually had by individuals. In doing this, sexualized media has created an idea where great sex should be
effortless and had by everyone and those who do not have it are outside the norm (Kleinplatz, 2013). In narrowing down access to sexual education from conversations had with peers and family to a reliance on sexualized media for guidance, SEM has effectively changed the ways in which youth define and expect sexual experiences to happen.

These shifts in technology and societal norms most likely dramatically streamlined SEM and pornography as well as negating taboos, making depictions of sex to appear more normative and socially acceptable. For example, Jenny elucidated that, “we live in a culture that demands new shit all the time and with trends and expectations and it’s all in your face all the time. I can see trying new sex stuff and getting bored and wanting to move onto something else but then getting bored with that. Everything we experience is so temporary these days…” Jenny also likened sex as swimming, indicating that sex itself is deprived of its intimate and romantic functions. Annie referenced the way standards have changed from before and now regarding the popularity of 50 Shades of Grey in which BDSM is more openly discussed, which can be attributed to how sexual attitudes and societal norms surrounding sex have changed over time.

In line with the sexual revolution analysis, McGary (1973) & Reiss (1960) asserted that the shift in change was more attitudinal than behavioral, resulting in the development of the sexual image that was not compatible with how people actually sexually behave. For example, men were susceptible to evaluating their masculinity based on their ability to engage in sexual activities with many women. Much of SEM and pornography also represented women as objects of “sexiness”, in which these ideals were definitive of a woman’s self-worth. Sexual media is a powerful source for prescribing and normalizing changing sexual attitudes and behaviors, and in effect creates an objective lens as to what sex is and should be.
The participants demonstrated that although this objective lens provides initial sexual education and influences early heuristic processing and sexual scripting, the meaning attributed to sex is still fairly subjective in that real-life experiences play an integral role in shaping the way sex is perceived, which ultimately affects perceived sexual satisfaction. The interaction between reproducing what was seen in sexual media and incorporating real-life experiences appears to be an endless dynamic process of conceptualizing what sex means to an individual. The data so far has reflected that on one end of the spectrum, sex can be casual, kinky, and exploratory, but on the other end, it can be expressive, affectionate, and a means for strengthening an emotional bond between partners. All the participants in the study agreed that sex was constantly changing and evolving. Why they feel this way might be explained by individual differences in personal experiences, cognitive scripting, and sexual goals. All these factors can be interpreted as a multidimensional approach for understanding the role of sex and its meanings.

Intimacy was a variable that was not initially expected to emerge consistently in the data. The degree of the emotional connection between two people appeared to predict higher levels of sexual satisfaction and in achieving “the best sex ever”. Engaging in social support, self-disclosure, and interdependent activities are some of the behaviors that strengthen intimacy (Sanderson, & Evans, 2001), and these behaviors reflect the social needs that the participants reported for establishing and maintaining intimate relationships. According to Sanderson & Evans (2001), the fulfilment of intimacy goals is significantly associated with greater relationship satisfaction. They found that participants were more likely to self-disclose and to elicit self-disclosure from their partners when intimacy goals were shared. Intimacy goals also
caused participants to restructure their dating lives to integrate their partners in more meaningful ways, such as being positive about the relationship, and being more supportive.

Consequently, the extent to which intimacy goals are achieved may also predict sexual satisfaction. This association was observed when participants reported that emotional connection was more important than physical attraction for achieving sexual satisfaction and “the best sex ever”. This implies that a relationship provides sexual opportunities that can be more fulfilling than casual sexual encounters. It also implies that even when two partners are in a relationship with each other, sexual satisfaction can become lacklustre as a result of a diminishing emotional connection. For example, Jenny reported that “having a good connection, emotional connection, trust...all that kind of stuff maybe builds up sexual satisfaction. For me, I need some kind of trust, some kind of emotional connection to be sexually satisfied.” In addition, in response to a question that inquired about bad sexual experiences, Harvey mentioned an experience that was not enjoyable and reasoned that it was because of “a lack of emotion from the other person, even though the physical was there.” In fact, for him, “the way to express emotion is through physical behavior, and the way we express physical behavior is through emotion”, a formula he suggested that underlies “great sex”. Clearly, sexual behaviors are implicated in the ability to show affection and feelings toward partners.

The study’s data revealed that in general, frequency in sexual activity required the emotional aspect in order to achieve sexual satisfaction, as reported by the male subjects. This conflicts with Willoughby & Vitas’s study (2012) where they determined that in long-term relationships, men begin to feel less sexually satisfied once expectations for high sexual frequency were not being met. This is reversed in short-term relationships where men reported
high sexual satisfaction despite having actual low sexual frequency even when high expectations for sexual frequency was present.

In this study’s sample, it appears that intimacy determines sexual satisfaction. This finding may be somewhat compatible with the present study’s hypothesis suggesting that early cultivation from SEM and pornography consumption predict lower sexual satisfaction. Although sexual media was not reported to be the most significant factor in predicting sexual satisfaction, it was found that the lack of portrayal of emotional intimacy in sexual media largely constituted to reports of low sexual satisfaction. To elaborate, pornography does not cultivate intimate behaviors during sex, and so consumers do not script any behaviors facilitating intimacy into their sexual learning including their preferences and attitudes. This reflects why casual sex appears to be fun, but not fulfilling. These less meaningful sexual events can contribute to mediocrity in sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, the absence of intimacy promotes notions of “conquests”, and hook-up cultures. They are generally more accepted because emotional sex is not as prevalent as what you typically consume in sexual media.

As previously mentioned, sexual satisfaction tends to be exaggerated in sexual media, so the lack of sexual satisfaction might not be a result of being unable to replicate scripted behaviors but because of something else such as an emotional connection. In this case, it is very possible that it is simply because sex is not depicted as meaningful and intimate. The study’s participants revealed that the lack of emotional connection was the driving factor for not feeling sexually satisfied. Their need for emotional connection may represent the role of real-life experiences that restructured their initial sexual scripts in that sex is an interdependent activity for facilitating intimacy, and not just what Eric described as something casual to “get each other
off” as usually depicted in sexual media. This finding is consistent with various studies that have revealed the positive association between high sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006).

**Conclusion**

While this research illustrates the extent to which individual sexual satisfaction is hindered by sexualized media, further research should be conducted to address the implications of sexual satisfaction in relationships as well as in diverse communities. Future research should reflect the intersectional nature of sexual experiences including sexual orientation, gender identification and racial background while also exploring how relationship sexual satisfaction changes based on the duration of the couple. This research sought to explore the various ways in which the socialization of sexualized media influenced perceived sexual satisfaction. Results show that seventy-five percent of participants were unsatisfied with their sex lives, even when involved in a healthy, supportive relationship. Sexual satisfaction was shown to be multifaceted, including having a subjective criteria for achieving absolute sexual satisfaction based on exposure to sexuality explicit media. The research also revealed that while physical attraction and connection was important to individuals, an element of emotional intimacy was a defining aspect in achieving sexual satisfaction despite it not being depicted in sexualized media. Media ultimately played a significant role for the respondents, both heavily influencing their expectations and education, illustrating that complete sexual satisfaction is not objective, requires deconstructing sexually explicit content and is contingent on an existing emotional connection.
References


