

Exploring the way sexually explicit material informs sexual beliefs, understanding and practices of young men: a qualitative survey.

Abstract

Purpose

Research suggests that exposure to Sexually Explicit Material (SEM) has negative effects on the beliefs, attitudes and actions of young men, but little research has examines how this may happen. The objective of this study was to address this emerging issue and explore the self-reported influence of exposure to SEM on young males in order to better understand implications for sexual health promotion.

Method

A ‘snowballed ‘sample of participants of males aged between 18 – 25 were recruited within one workplace. Of 40 invited, 11 responded to a qualitative survey. The survey data was examined using Thematic Analysis.

Results and Conclusions

The key themes emerging from the data were:- increased levels of availability of SEM, including an escalation in extreme content (Everywhere You Look) which are seen by young men in this study as having negative effects on sexual attitudes and behaviours (Negative effects - That's Not Good). Data suggests confused views (Real verses Fantasy) around young men’s expectations of a healthy sex life (Healthy Sex Life). Family or sex education may offer some ‘protection’ (Buffers) to the problematic norms young people see in SEM.

Introduction

Sexual violence is a major public health problem (Towl, 2018) the latest population level based research from the USA shows that 81% of women and 43% report experience of sexual harassment (Kearl, 2018), which have major life-course consequences for victims and perpetrators.

A recent evidence scan around the effects of pornography on children and young people (Quadara, El-Murr and Latham, 2017) reports that “the most dominant, popular and accessible pornography contains messages and behaviours about sex, gender, power and pleasure that are deeply problematic”.

A comprehensive review of 20 years of research around the links between consumption of pornography and behaviour (Peter and Valkenburg, 2016) show effects on both genders, and in relation to sexual harassment, they found greater sexual aggression, in terms of perpetration and victimization

An Australian study (Davis, Carrotte, Hellard and Lim, 2018) of N= 517 young heterosexual people draws attention to the gendered ways that behaviours in pornography are seen and identified by young heterosexual audiences.

A systematic review (Wright et al, 2016) of the research linking consumption of pornography with actual acts of sexual aggression found good evidence across studies and that violent content may be an exacerbating factor. Research needs to address the emerging issue of increased availability of pornography particularly through digital platforms (Davis, 2018).

Research has already evidenced an impact on the development of adolescents and youth

culture in a number of unprecedented ways and across cultural and global boundaries (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016).

Cross sectional studies have suggested that young people do learn sexual behaviours from the observation of SEM (Hägström-Nordin et al, 2006; Alexy, Burgess & Prentky, 2009) and that this may result in a distorted expectations of sexuality (Tsitsika, Critselis, Kormas, Konstantoulaki, Constantopoulos & Kafetzis, 2009). Peter & Valkenburg, (2010) found more frequent SEM exposure resulted in increased beliefs that it was similar to real-world sex (social realism) and a useful source of information about sex (utility).

However, qualitative work teasing out the mechanisms behind these correlations is limited (Peter and Valkenburg, 2016. Löfgren-Mårtenson & Mansson, (2010) noted that only some young people recognised the unrealistic nature of SEM. Other qualitative research suggests that young people use pornography for ‘instructional purposes’ and having consumed pornography feel pressure to imitate it (Rothman et al 2015). Vulnerability may intensify this relationship as illustrated by interview data from young BME MSM in the US (Arrington-Sanders et al 2015) who had less access to appropriate sex education.

The aim of this research was therefore to begin to explore the mediating factors that exposure to SEM has on the sexual beliefs, understanding and practices of young men through their own accounts.

Methods

A qualitative survey was used to explore use of SEM. An anonymous online survey tool was chosen to ensure participant anonymity and reduce social desirability in responses. The questionnaire did not use a core definition of SEM but asked participants to define what they

had seen. Questions were designed to be exploratory whilst still eliciting core information about sources of use, sex education and perception of what is a healthy sex life.

Using an a workplace (call centre) employing predominately young men, the sampling strategy aimed to recruit young men who could reflect on recent adolescent experience of SEM but also report on how this affected sexual relationships in early adulthood (18-25 yrs) Acquaintance networks were recruited by snowballing contacts and sampling continued to the point at which no novel information was emerging. 40 males, aged between eighteen and twenty-five years were invited to participate in this study, and 11 participants completed the survey (See Appendix A).

Participants completed either hard copy (returned via anonymous envelope) or online version (returned via email) of an anonymous, qualitative survey. Data analysis was carried out through a six-phase approach to inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), exploring the semantic value of the data through generating initial codes before searching for and identifying main themes, Appendix B provides an audit trail from data to theme through an extract of the coding table and a more detailed diagram of themes and sub themes (Appendix B). Rigour of interpretation was underpinned through development of personal reflective statement by the researcher and supervisor confirmation of themes (Meyrick, 2006)

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The University of the West of England's Health and Life Sciences ethics board provided ethical approval for this study all procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Results

Participants included 11 males between the ages of 18-25 years all working at the same workplace. They have been given pseudonyms for anonymity.

The inductive thematic analysis applied to these qualitative survey responses elicited six key themes that were present within the data. These themes are seen as essential in determining beliefs, understandings and actions of all participants. Themes have been labelled and are presented in a logical order "Everywhere You Look", "Negative Effects - That's Not Good", "Buffers, sex education and family", "Real versus Fantasy" and "Healthy Sex Life". The themes are presented in this specific order to illustrate the overarching story running through the data and to inform potential mechanisms . The diagram 1, plots the key themes (in blue) in relation to steps on a pathway and also shows the relevant sub themes.

1. Everywhere You Look

This theme is defined by patterns of exposure to SEM reported by the participants and evidences the ease and range via which this content seems to be accessed with the internet as the most cited source.

“I have mainly seen hard-core porn that I access from free websites on the internet”- Sid

“Page 3, lads mags (Zoo & Nuts)” - Tom

“Explicit music videos, TV girls where you call up” – Richard

“Instagram” – Mo

Participants seemed to demonstrate a measure of social acceptance for the viewing of SEM by adolescent males in the modern world, seeing the behaviour as part of a normal developmental process.

“I think that it is a part of growing up”. - Ross

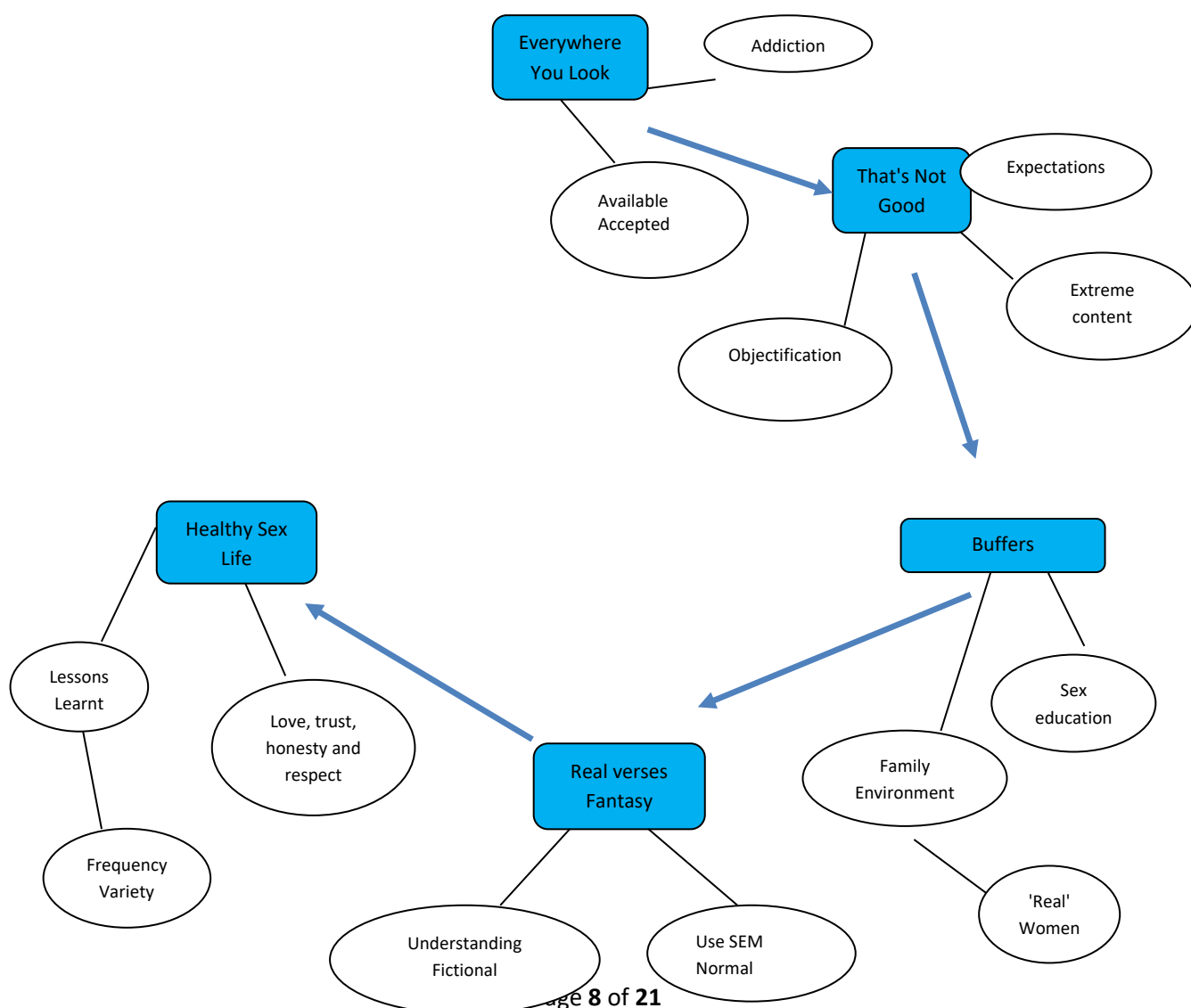
However, some seemed to recognise potential detrimental results, influencing sexual experimentation in adolescent males.

“I worry about the affect it has had on young people, because of porn I have experimented sexually trying to copy things I’ve seen and not all have been positive experiences (sex parties, group sex etc.)”. - Gaz

“When I was not so careful, I found myself getting addicted to porn because of the ease in which I could get hold of it and the reward from chemicals in my brain”. - Alfie

So how might the increased use/normalisation of SEM influence actual behaviour?

1) Diagram of key themes and sub themes



2. Negative Effects - That's Not Good

Participants seemed to be able to recognise potential problems from SEM consumption.

“I would also say it reinforces dangerous ideas of gender hierarchy. Women are usually depicted as submissive and easily influenced by men. Men are usually depicted as the ones in control and as the stronger gender. I believe this has affected susceptible individuals in our society, reinforcing the patriarchy within our society, making strong female attitudes less desirable.” – Bob

“Sex as a product that can be easily accessed and purchased. Changes the way they view girls and women, objectification, girls not as people” - Mo

In this group, the gender stereotypes shown in SEM also seemed to change the way in which young males perceive themselves.

“It can make some men feel insecure about their sexual ability as they can’t necessarily last as long as some male pornstars”. - Richard

“Porn has made me feel less adequate as a man – has a negative effect on my own perception of myself.” - Tom

In addition, participants talked about the ever increasing levels of extremity within SEM content online. SEM could therefore be seen as an influential force in the moulding of more extreme sexual preferences.

“due to the ever increasing availability of porn, the videos are becoming more and more adventurous and shocking in order to keep up with the demand for it to still be deemed exciting”. - Jay

“It has probably made me case hardened. It takes a lot to shock me now, Because of the amount I have seen it doesn’t affect me as much as it used to” - Tom

This increased need for a higher levels of stimulation may lead to expectations on individual to conform to what may be regarded as a ‘the norm’.

3. Buffers

Balancing or alternative behavioural models provided by e.g. family behaviour or sex education were reported in terms of having a positive contribution or as a missed opportunity.

“My sex education at school was terrible. Pornography was not covered at all and it seemed like they were doing the bare minimum They glossed over any details that would actually give you a useful insight in to what being sexually active would actually be like “- Jay

“The human form was not taboo in my household when I was growing up, so I think this gave me an advantage that not all would have. My mother’s art work certainly gave me a very good idea of what a real women looks like”. - Bob

Open family attitudes to sex may act as a ‘buffer’ against the negative potential problematic results of SEM viewing and sex education a missed opportunity to provide a balancing source of healthy ‘norms’. The mechanism of such a ‘buffers’ could be in helping young people distinguish between real and fantasy sexual behaviour.

4. Real verses Fantasy

Participants reported viewing the use of pornography as now being much less stigmatised, and as a normal part of life, discussed openly within relationships.

“It is now normalised. Less of a taboo. It can be talked about with partners”. - Tom

SEM was seen as a ‘trustworthy’ educational source of information, but participants reported a variable influence of SEM on ‘norms’.

“I have learnt a lot from porn – moves – what is expected from me as a male”. - Tom

“I would say it gives young men a very dangerous idea of what sex is and what it provides”. - Bob

“It also affects body image and my view of how someone should look and how sex should look and be”. - Harry

“These explicit materials had a lot less of an impact on my perspective of the human form and I think this mainly due to the knowledge that it is depicting a fictional world, where the people depicted are almost characters of the real world”. - Bob

SEM consumed as the norm may be contributing to confusion around sexual expectations. In this group, different levels of understanding or insight into whether SEM represented ‘real’ sexual behaviour were apparent.

5. Healthy Sex Life

Participants were asked about what a healthy sex life might be. Frequency and quality were common threads within the data theme.

“Frequent and fulfilling with someone that has the same sexual interests as you” - Jay

A variety of sexual experience were reported by participants as important in the avoidance of a boring sex life,

“Being adventurous in the bedroom and having sex regularly” – Richard

In contrast, other respondents raised aspects that took into account partners and relationships.

“Communication is key to sex and porn often teaches methods of causing pleasure that isn’t reflective of what a partner wants”. - Harry

“Being in a committed relationship or being honest about who you are when it comes to engaging in sexual activity. It shows that you have a healthy respect for the other sex”. - Ross

“When there is an emotional attachment – I forget meaningless sex”. - Tom

Communication, honesty, respect and a need for emotional attachments are all reported in describing a healthy sex life but not common features of SEM. The degree to which young men in this group recognised this varied.

Discussion

The results suggest some potential pathways in the relationship between SEM consumption and sexual beliefs, understanding and practices of young men, including the variability of negative effects of SEM and the factors that may shape that.

The contribution of this study is in exploring how young men see the connections between their own SEM consumption and behaviour and more importantly, what they see as protective within their own experience.

Consumption and acceptance of SEM was reported as growing, this is confirmed by prevalence studies (Mattebo et al 2013). Participants reported escalating use of extreme

content and becoming desensitised to this content. With this increased availability seems data suggests normalised or mainstreaming of SEM consumption as simply ‘part of the modern age’ (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Is this problematic?, perception of SEM as ‘real’ varied in this group, some young men may have internalised SEM sexual norms. . Rothman et al, (2015) confirms that young people use pornography for ‘instructional purposes’ and having consumed pornography feel pressure to imitate it. Therefore, we can see how consumption and increasing extreme content could lead to confusion and unrealistic expectations potentially explaining links to sexual aggression in males (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016)

However, this effect may be highly variable. Young men in this study, acknowledged the potential negative effects of SEM on behaviours but only in the abstract, not in relation to their own use.. Data suggests conflicting or confused views around young peoples’ expectations of a healthy sex life and appropriate beliefs and behaviours. The variability of insight into how ‘real’ SEM is, found in this sample could be explained by mediation of problematic SEM use through pre-existing vulnerability (e.g family breakdown) and experience of protective ‘buffers’. Family breakdown has been linked to sexual violence in larger quantitative international literature (Hielman, et al,2014) and an extensive review of research also identified a typical user as “a male, pubertally more advanced, sensation-seeker, with weak or troubled family relations” (Peter + Valkenburg, 2016). Potential harm reduction may require interventions targeted those at higher risk.

On the positive side, family openness around sex or sex education was framed by participants as offering some ‘protection’ or a balance to SEM representations of sex. The findings hint at the importance of addressing possible inadequacies in current sex education (Brown et al, 2009). Data in this study also seems to mirror previously established relationship of family role modelling or openness of appropriate behaviours, attitudes and opinions by primary caregivers to issues such as teenage sexual risk taking (Department of Health, 2013).

The value of sex education is well documented throughout current literature (Department of Health, 2013) and participants reported their sex education as inadequate in general but particularly not covering the issue of SEM. Therefore, programmes such as ‘Its time we talked’ (Crabbe et al, 2011) that directly address pornography with young people require scientific evaluation.

Further research

Although the factors highlighted by the work in relation to problematic consumption of SEM have been confirmed in the wider literature, the pathways of internalising norms and existing vulnerability or buffers would benefit from some larger scale quantitative investigation. Intervention work that addresses pornography in sex education needs to build a solid evidence base through robust evaluation. In the context of recommendations by the Women and Equalities Select Committee (House of Commons, 2016) to make sex education compulsory in their report on Sexual Harassment in School, the government's has done so and is currently consulting on content. New programmes need to be scientifically evaluated along comparable outcome measures to enable greater accumulation of evidence.

Study Limitations

Within the limitations of a qualitative and therefore non generalizable sample, themes would benefit from large sample quantitative confirmation. The participants were also identified through snowballing of contacts via the student/researcher in one workplace, thereby potentially resulting in less diversity. This would not have picked up evidenced effect of deprived areas and problematic masculinities (Lorimer, McMillian, McDaid, Milne and Hunt, 2018) The questions in the survey may have framed some of the themes identified and perhaps a more open style of interview would have enabled greater exploration. Findings are transferable rather than generalizable The interpretation of themes from the data can be influenced by the researchers own life experience therefore, establishing reflexive practice, triangulation and using supervision to confirm interpretation are all methods used to improve qualitative rigour (Meyrick, 2006).

Widespread levels of normalised sexual harassment may be linked to increased availability and consumption of sexually explicit material. Work to address this needs to examine young men's understand of the role of normalised pornography use and find ways to reduce toxic effects. This exploratory study beings to piece together a pathway of causation and affirm the potential role of protective sex education.

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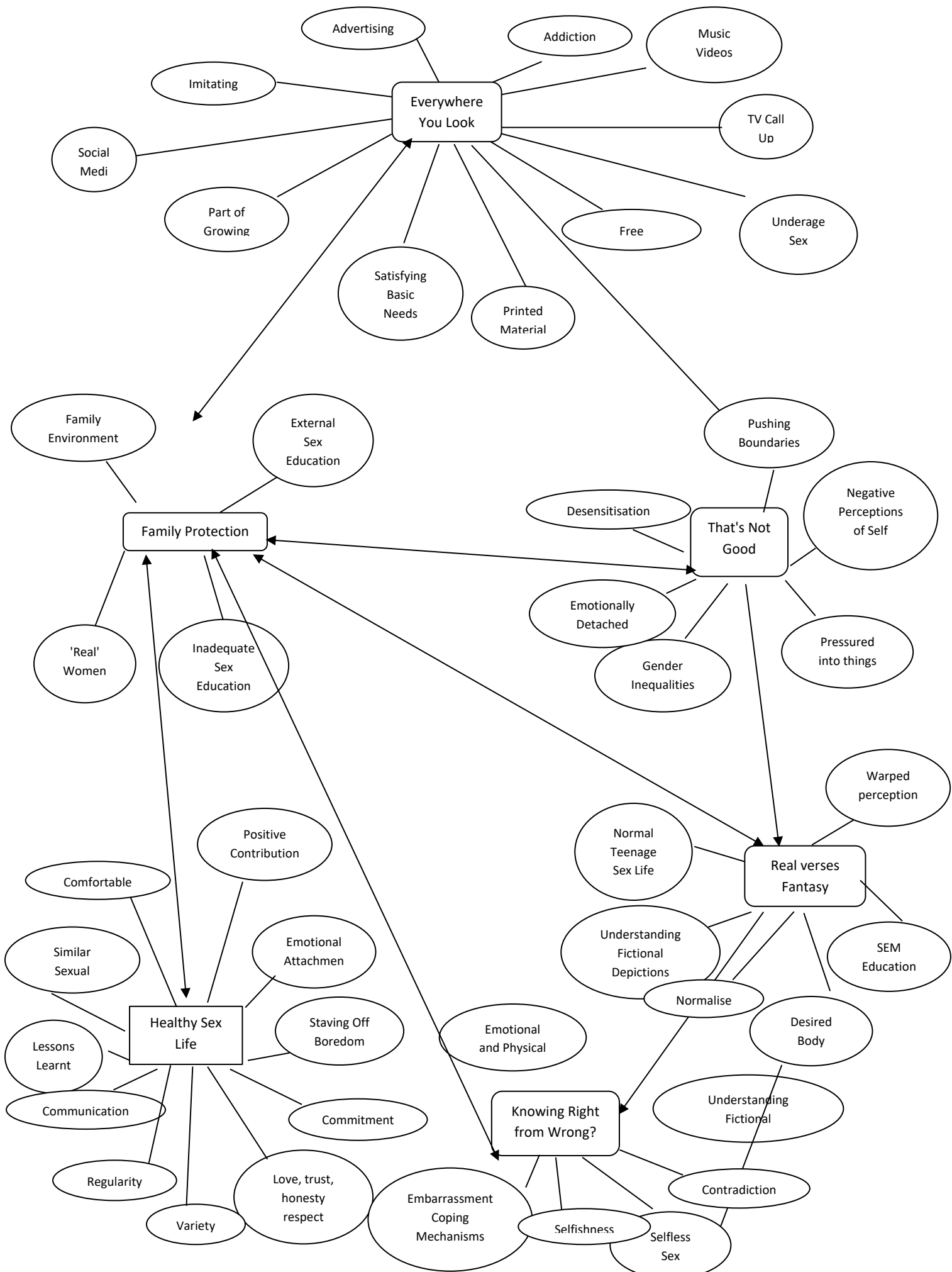
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Appendix A:

Qu. No.	Questions / Responses
1	What type of sexually explicit material have you generally seen? (eg. Page 3, Music videos, Soft porn, Hardcore Porn).
2	How do you feel this has affected you?
3	If you were asked to explain to a stranger how viewing sexually explicit material or pornography affects young men in the modern world what would you say?
4	How would you describe good sex/sex life for a man? What supports your opinions?
5	In your opinion what is unhealthy sex for men? What do you think leads to this?
6	How was sexually explicit material or pornography covered by your sex education? How could it have been better?
7	Is there anything that you would like to add or think you should have been asked? Please add anything that you feel may be relevant in relation to this topic.

Appendix B: Audit trail of quotes to themes – extract of coding table/wider map of themes sub themes.

Code	Example quotation
Printed material	- Page 3, lads mags (Zoo & Nuts)
Music videos	- Explicit music videos
Advertising	- Advertising. - sales pitching (festivals and events)
Soft porn	- Softcore & hardcore porn
Hardcore porn	- I have seen a wide variety of sexually explicit material, including hard-core pornography
Striptease	- strip teases etc performed in strip clubs.
Lesbians	- I regularly view videos of lesbians performing hardcore sex on each other as well as women performing stripteases on a solo basis. Other materials I use involve pictures of individual female models and pictures of lesbians.
Online porn	- All types of porn on websites which stream it
Free websites	- I have mainly seen hardcore porn that I access from free websites on the internet
Social Media	- Instagram - Has the rise of internet dating sites like tinder led to a decrease in the number of people using porn as sex is now 'on tap'.
Films	- films although I don't class this as porn.
Art	- Art (my mother went through quite a big "nudes" phase when I was a child, so her paintings were always hung in our house)
TV call up girls	- TV girls where you call up
Addiction	- When I was not so careful, I found myself getting addicted to porn because of the ease in which I could get hold of it and the reward from chemicals in my brain. - mostly I would say young men could suffer from addiction to this stimulus.



2) Diagram of key themes and sub themes

