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Perception of Sexuality among Teenagers in Beijing: Online Pornography, Family Impact, and Morality Education

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of insufficient sex education in China and increasing online porn exposure, the current study addresses the lesser-explored question of how teenagers perceive and process sexuality. The data comes from six semi-structured interviews with high school students in Beijing, conducted as part of this paper. Results suggest that inadequate or absent sex education contributes significantly to unwanted exposure to pornographic information online, primarily as a result of unguided, proactive information-seeking. The most important finding is that this process has led to, on the one hand, the perpetuation of a "culture of silence"—teenagers do not talk about sex and may instead oversimplify inappropriate sexual behaviors as singular family issues. It is, in more ways than one, important for the process of curriculum updating to address these attitudinal oversights, bridging the silence by empowering parents and teachers to encourage critical discussion.

Keywords: Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Teenagers, Perception of Sexuality, Online Pornography, Qualitative Study.

1. Introduction

As the internet has dramatically developed in the past decades, many teenagers have become internet users. In 2022, the number of minor Internet users has exceeded 193 million, and the Internet penetration rate of minors increased from 93.7% to 97.2% between 2018 and 2022, reaching saturation [1]. Under this environment of an information boost, it has become more likely for those under ages to be exposed to pornographic information online. Concurrently, statistics have shown that the number of minors committing sexual crimes has been on the rise, with 5160 in 2020, 7591 in 2021, and 9122 in 2022 [2]. This alarming trend, set against the backdrop of ubiquitous internet access, makes it an urgent necessity to educate them about sex and let them have the correct perception of sexuality.

Nevertheless, the implementation of sex education in China has generally been considered inadequate in the past few decades. Although the issue has been raised since the new millennium, modern Chinese specialists in sex education were more concerned with emphasizing self-discipline and sexual morality [3]. For example, the materials used by teachers mainly address the physiological aspects and do not cover sensitive topics such as sexual behavior, sexual rights, contraception, and prevention of unwanted pregnancies [4]. This approach is a significant departure

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from the global standard of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), which is defined as a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality [5]. While these curricular deficiencies are well-documented, their consequences on student perception are not; in CNKI, only two articles have mentioned the impact of cyber pornographic content on Chinese teenagers and sex education [6]. Much less is known about how the information affects a teenager's perception of sexuality, as well as how it impacts the outcome of afterward sex education. Specifically, there is a critical gap in understanding the cognitive frameworks and attributional patterns teenagers develop when they are left to personally navigate the collision between unregulated online content and conservative moral instruction.

Therefore, this paper will focus on how online sexual content affects the perception of sexuality among teenagers in China. It specifically investigates the situation in which teenagers get in touch with cyber pornographic information unintentionally and examines how morality education conducted in family and school impacts their subsequent development of a perception of sexuality after they encounter sexual content. By exploring these lived experiences, this study provides vital insights necessary to address existing problems and move toward a more effective model of sexuality education in China.

2. Methodology

This study's data collection consisted of six semi-structured interviews with high school students in China. Participants were chosen based on theoretical sampling, a method used to ensure the data collected could capture a diverse range of perspectives from Chinese teenagers who have been exposed to pornographic information. As detailed in the sample characteristics in Table 1, participants vary in their family background, age of first exposure to pornographic information, gender, and prior sex education background. A series of open-ended questions (see Appendix) was designed to understand how online sexual content affects their perception of sexuality.

Table 1: Sample participant characteristics

Name	Gender	Age Exposed to Pornographic Information	Parents' Attitude to Talk about Sex	Sex Education Before the Exposure
Alex	Female	10	Willing	None
Eloise	Female	15	Unwilling	Yes
Linda	Female	9	Unwilling	None
Peterson	Male	11	Willing	Yes
Raphaël	Male	9	Willing	Yes
Samuel	Male	11	Unwilling	None

The site of the study was Beijing, a highly developed and international city. The reason for choosing this site is that if there are problems with sexuality education here, the issue probably reflects the situation in other, more underdeveloped parts of China. The respondents, in turn, were all recruited from the international division of the same school. While this may limit the diversity in social backgrounds, respondents were generally more open-minded regarding discussing sensitive

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matters, thus allowing a more direct investigation of the research question. In order to further elicit frankness, interviews started with sharing recent information on adolescents involved in sexual offenses. This also helped reduce the very strong element of social desirability that is normally involved in such sensitive issues. The interviews were conducted both off and online via WeChat; after getting their oral consent, all were recorded and stored in the researcher's secure laptop.

The process of qualitative data analysis involved a systematic coding procedure based on the method described by Corbin & Strauss (1990). Open coding is the first stage of our coding process, in which we let the data speak for itself and do not try to force it into a preconceived coding frame. This is followed by axial coding, which picks up connections between codes and organizes them into categorical headings. Narrative coding was found to be most appropriate in giving details between the descriptions of participants on issues of sex education and pornographic information. Thereafter, with the use of selective coding, these categories were refined into a coherent theoretical model that answered the research question: "How does online sexual content influence the perception of sexuality among teenagers in China?"

3. Results

3.1. Rare effective sex education before unwanted exposure

Of six participants, three reported that no sex education had been conducted before they were exposed to online pornographic information, and another one reported experiencing sex education beforehand but did not consider it beneficial. Initial contact with such material was often accidental; three of the four participants mentioned above either got into contact with the information intentionally or by accidentally clicking on sexual advertisements that popped up when viewing films or novels. For example, Linda reported being exposed to sexual descriptions while reading novels online in Grade 3 and then clicking on links to more explicit novels. She had no experience in sex education before the exposure.

"After the third grade, I was extensively exposed to online novels. I started reading pirated novels and gay novels. At first, there were sexual scenes, but the description was obscure because Baidu Tieba's review is rigorous. Then, I started reading pirated novels. Back then, many pirated novel websites had sexual advertisements."

—Linda, a G10 student, exposed to pornographic information when 9 years old

3.2. Proactive exposure leads to a lack of scientificity

A distinct pattern came from the accounts of the participants. After almost all of them spoke of having experienced accidental exposure initially, they reported that they had then gone on to look for such content, driven mainly by curiosity and a physical impulse. This subsequent unguided exposure is likely to form misconceptions of a scientific view on sexuality. Linda had noted that online porn information can be accessed pretty easily "just by simply clicking on sketchy websites," and she had emphasized that this information is often unrealistic and misleading.

"And then there's a book about Wu Zetian's autobiography that deeply impressed me. A description inside depicts Wu Zetian's first sex experience with the emperor. At first, I looked at it and thought, 'Wow, it is too exciting.' Later, I will delve into the feasibility of these [exaggerated] things, whether they will cause harm to the human body after implementation or whether their behavior is as 'beautiful' as described in novels or pictures. If we simply accept it, there must be some deviations. There are too many exaggerated or unrealistic things."

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—Linda, a G10 student, exposed to pornographic information when nine years old

This also allowed over-explanations to be created where the impressions stood in conflict with the real scientific knowledge of sex. For example, a common pornographic novel misconception is the fact that there is no possibility for pregnancy during the rhythm period. In actuality, the risk of pregnancy is there all the time because of the usual fluctuation of the ovulation date. Sadly, this false cognition is still well-formed among teens, brought up frequently online and not into classes.

3.3. The oversimplified attributions of teenagers' inappropriate sexual behaviors to their family

During the interviews, the role of morality education was frequently mentioned by participants. Four out of six participants responded that they believe family moral education took up most of the responsibility in sex education. They often identified inadequacies in the family as a primary reason for other teenagers to violate morals and have inappropriate sex behaviors. For example, Raphaël recounted his junior high school classmate's experience, where the girl's family had significant changes. He attributed her subsequent inappropriate sexual behavior almost entirely to her parents' divorce.

"[The incident] was not caused by pornographic information; the family of origin caused it. At that time, there was a girl in my junior high school whose parents were probably divorced. Then, she and a boy in their class did a lot of indecent things..."

—Raphaël, G10 student, sex education conducted in Grade 3 by his mother

Peterson echoed this pattern of attribution when discussing another incident, again stressing that family reasons were the primary cause.

"There was one incident [in which a girl had sex with others], and it was quite astonishing. The mastermind behind that incident was my elementary school classmate and good friend... He is also quite unfortunate. His mother has encephalitis, and he must take care of her, and he is also penniless. He is under much pressure and lacks family attention and cultivation. So, in this situation, I think there may also be some family reasons for this..."

—Peterson, a G10 student, exposed to pornographic information when eleven years old

Raphaël and Peterson oversimplify teenagers' inappropriate sexual behavior as emanating from the family. Thus, it is revealed that the most important point is that their narratives show they do not think such a complex issue could be, and how many factors including the family, among others, would collaboratively influence on teenagers' sexual behavior. While it is undeniable that China's self-discipline and sexual morality in sex education have played a role, this one-sided teaching may inadvertently prompt such simple-cause reasoning, overlooking the scientific and psychological complexities realistic sex education aims to address.

3.4. Lack of transparency

Transparency from parents and teachers is also one of the significant prominent issues. With Chinese parents having little knowledge of sexuality education, they mostly maintain a passive attitude [7]. This passive response is usually read by adolescents through a lens of morality and respect. Answering the question, "What is your parents'/teachers' attitude towards sex?" Linda says with quite some frequency, among many other things, respect. They think the parents and teachers are very frank, actually they are not willing to open and frank on these issues. This perception indirectly proved that the lack of communicative transparency from parents and teachers is transmissive, fostering a similar reluctance in their children.

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"I think they want to teach us how to respect others. Because many people associate pornography with disrespect towards others, their words and actions blend these two things. I think incorporating some objectification of others, including insults towards others and this unequal perspective, is inappropriate in their language."

—Linda, a G10 student, exposed to pornographic information when nine years old

This transmitted reticence manifested in participants' own behavior during the interviews. Although explicit questions were asked, it was notable that no participant used clinical terminology for genitalia. They avoided mentioning the organs and the mechanism even while responding that they "clearly knows" their perception of sexuality. Moreover, while discussing further contact with pornographic information, most participants subconsciously avoided describing what kind of information they received. Samuel, for instance, when being asked if he had intentionally searched for pornographic information online, hesitated for half a minute to speak out loud and covered his face while responding. This non-verbal cue provides powerful evidence of an internalized discomfort with the topic.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study would have meaningful theoretical implications for understanding how online pornographic information about the sexuality of teenagers in China. Results based on descriptive data reports indicate that the morality education program of China tends to act as a double-edged sword since it is highly likely to have kept some of the teenagers away from inappropriate sexual acts, but has imposed a wider perception of sex upon them. This, in combination with the passive attitudes of families and teachers, builds a communicative channel of non- transparency that eventually transmits with teenagers' desire to build the oversimplified, mono-causal-attribution tendencies as observed in the findings.

Compared to previous research, this article focused more on the teenager's perspective and their perception-making process. While much of the previous literature has emphasized learning from Western models of CSE or has overlooked the current situation in China where moral education is overly emphasized and physiological education is lacking, this study illuminates the direct cognitive consequences of that specific environment. The "oversimplified attributions" observed can be seen as a direct result of the curricular gaps identified by UNESCO and UNFPA (2018), where a lack of scientific frameworks leaves students with only the morality-focused models to make sense of the world. By revealing this mechanism, this article contributes to the development of a comprehensive sexuality education system that is more suitable for the unique context of China.

Perhaps the most critical implication of this study is that future improvements in sex education should not only be applied to learners, but also to educators. The finding that teenagers have a simplistic understanding of the role of families is not a failing of the teenagers themselves, but a reflection of the education they receive. If the attitudes of teachers and parents towards sex education remain unchanged, it will become difficult to change the current situation. Therefore, any meaningful reform must include programs that equip parents and teachers with the knowledge and confidence to move beyond silence and engage in open, fact-based dialogue with young people.

To acknowledge the study’s limitations, it is due to time constraints that only six interviews were able to be completed. Hence, the sample is relatively limited. The hope is that in the future, more participants will be engaged from several schools in Beijing as well as from the less developed regions until theoretical saturation is achieved. The good practice for the future is to involve parents and teachers in research to provide a better viewpoint and to verify the results.

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5. Conclusion

Within an environment characterized by the convergence of both lack of regulation and over saturation of Chinese adolescents with online information, juxtaposed with the legacy of a culture of silence by traditional educators, this paper makes an attempt to explore the lived experiences of these teenagers in making sense of their sexuality. Viewed from the perspective of this study, adolescents, in the absence of such education, had developed certain cognitive coping mechanisms with a tendency, most prominently, to oversimplify complex behaviors on a single unitary dimension of family issues. Therefore, the development of an efficient CSE system becomes, in many ways, a surface-innovation task of curricular reforms from a much-deeper long-engrained challenge of inculcating new communicative patterns and an appetite for critical thinking. It will take an immensely courageous shift to move the nation from a pedagogy of silence to one of vibrant openness, honesty, and empathy if healthier understandings of sexuality are ever to be developed in China.

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Appendix: interview protocol

1. In what grade (age) did you first encounter pornographic information on the internet? Through what channels did you come into contact with it?

2. Have you taken the initiative to search for this information in the future?

3. Do you think pornographic information is easily accessible to minors nowadays?

4. Did the school teach life and health courses at that time? Have you had any experience in life and health education?

5. What attitudes do your parents and teachers have towards sex and sex education?

6. Do you think that exposure to pornographic information has an impact on the physiological and scientific understanding of sex? (Example: Reasonable and scientific contraceptive measures, normal organ physiological structure)

7. Do you feel that the impact of first impressions is more profound when learning physiological knowledge in junior high school biology/other courses in the future? (e.g.: Some cognition has not been corrected; impression has not changed)

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8. Have there been any unfortunate events around/within oneself that have been influenced by certain beliefs in the future? (Example: Early pregnancy, sexual violence, online PUA, victim of nude photos)

9. If everything could be redone, how do you think discussing sex/what kind of sex education would be helpful to you?