The Ecology of Early Adolescents' Internet Mediated Sexual Interactions

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INTRODUCTION

Early adolescents (11-14 years old) are normally considered to be no longer children, but not yet adults (World Health Organisation, 2003). Early adolescence is usually characterised as a period when sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological changes, begin to happen. LeCroy (2004) opines that early adolescence is a period of multiple, rapid, and profound changes and transitions. During early adolescence puberty increases body awareness, and may initiate the sex drive.

Historically, the academic focus on early adolescence as a critical and vital period emerged from a belief that during this particular phase young people are still innocent and with a potential which required cultivation, protection and guidance (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). In addition, there is also a common conviction among the general public that this particular nature of early adolescence must be controlled by responsible members of society; as young people at these ages are more likely to get involved in unconventional beliefs, behaviours and practices mainly coming through the persuasive influences of the media (Troen, 1985; Williams & Frith, 1993; Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Heins, 2001). It has often been argued that media[1] represent some of the most under-recognized and most potent influences on adolescent's development in modern society (Mastronardi, 2003; Strasburger, 2004; Lwin & Malik, 2012; Spurr, Berry & Walker, 2013; Vandenbosch, L. & Eggermont, 2013). In some cases, it has even been found that media have stronger influence on the early adolescents than family and other social relationships (Johnston, 2000).

In contemporary society early adolescents are in many ways the defining users of Internet (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011; Rambaree, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). It is also being argued that Internet, through its interactive multi-media interface, has created a new pattern and form of interaction that requires more

involvement of early adolescents (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011; Lwin & Malik, 2012; Vandenbosch, L. & Eggermont, 2013). Given the high frequency at which adolescents are using Internet-based technology, it is not surprising that that such interactions may not always be positive (Zweig, Dank, Yahner & Lachman, 2013). In fact, Internet and its relationship with early adolescents have been viewed from two different perspectives. The pessimistic view is that early adolescents become victims of the pervasive and powerful Internet; and, the optimistic view is that Internet contributes immensely towards empowering children and early adolescents and making them more creative and knowledgeable than ever before (United Nations, 2003).

BACKGROUND

Discourses on human development report that early adolescents are hungry for sexual information and during this particular stage of their sexual development information, education, communication and experiences are vital to their mental health; particularly, to the development of a sense of efficacy in dealing with sexual matters in their present and future life-course (Sutton, Brown, Wilson & Klein, 2002). This process of early adolescents' social interaction to learn about and understand their sexuality in comparison with the sexualities of others, especial through the Internet, is a quite normal and natural phase of human growth and development (Teitelman, 2004; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes 2004). Brinthaupt and Lipka (2002, 6) write: '*During early adolescence, the body …intrudes upon one's sense of self and identity to a greater extent than in earlier years*'. This statement holds true in relation to the development of sexual self also. Essentially, as children get older, they gain a greater sense of their sexual self, enhanced by an inter-play of

biological and social changes (Ponton & Judice, 2004; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). At this stage, many early adolescents want to know whether they are 'normal' or different from others in terms of their growth and development, feelings and behaviours (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Social interactions therefore become a strategy for knowing, sharing, learning, and understanding various issues related to one's own personal sexuality along with others in the environment. Thus, it can be said that the development of sexual identity is in its crucial phase during early adolescence and sexual interactions are important for learning to take place.

In the last few decades, the nature of Internet mediated interactions of early adolescents has become increasingly important in order to understand how our contemporary society is being framed and shaped with the invention of new Internet based technologies. For many parents, how the early adolescents are using the Internet have become a major cause of concern, mainly for its socio-cultural and economic reasons (de La Ville, 2007). Although it is commonly known that early adolescents are using Internet for various types of sexual interactions, very few studies have focused on providing an in-depth and full description of such online sexual activities; and their effects on such young users (Sheik & Ma, 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). The nature of early adolescents' interaction of the Internet is becoming increasingly important for many social researchers. Stevenson (2002) argues that studies looking at the impact of the Internet on early adolescent sexuality, for example, should also include love, emotion, desire, pleasure, and eroticism that are an essential part of the meaning and understanding of sexuality.

Within this context, this article describes and explains the ecology of early adolescents' Internet mediated sexual interactions (IMSIs). The discussion presented is grounded on data collected from different research projects, mostly from Mauritian early adolescents, as an example. Figure 1 presents a schema which is purely a simplistic way of presenting the theoretical discussion based on gathered empirical evidence through several studies undertaken by the author over the last few years. The schema is meant to guide the readers through the discussion in this article.

Internet-Mediated Sexual Interactions

Peter and Valkenburg (2006, 178) argue: "*More than any other medium, the Internet is a sexual medium.*" Within this context, the Internet is believed to have a dramatic impact on human social and sexual behaviour (Cooper et al., 2000). Early adolescents who access the Internet are in one way or another exposed to Online Sexual Materials (OSMs), such as porn videos, erotic pictures and so on, and also to Online Sexual Interactions (OSIs) such as chats, plays, messaging and so on. In this way early adolescents engage in experiencing and re/discovering many issues about sexuality through Internet (Subrahmanyam et al., 2004). For example, many early adolescents who use the Internet chat encounter sexual overtures such as getting involved in cyber-sex (Rambaree, 2010; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010; Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell, 2004).

Two important factors that attract early adolescents towards IMSIs are sexual drives and sexual curiosities (Ybarra et al., 2005; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). Sexual drives are part and parcel of human sexuality and involve sexual fantasies, sexual desires, sexual maturity, sexual stimulation, and sexual capacity. During the phase of early adolescence, sexual maturation is accompanied by increased sexual drives and therefore an increasing interest in sex (Weinstein & Rosen, 1991; Subrahmanyam et al., 2004). As a consequence, many early adolescents begin to engage sexually online either with their peers or through readings and viewing sexual materials (Rice, 2001; Thornburg & Lin, 2002; Subrahmanyam et al., 2004). Early adolescents' curiosity about sexuality is a normal part of growing up and contemporary media, such as the Internet, stimulate this curiosity further (Snegroff, 2000). Peter and Valkenburg (2006,179) write that, "…*early adolescents are curious about sexuality and frequently search for sexual stimulation.*" A number of early adolescents therefore intentionally look for OSMs and opportunities for OSIs. In fact, sex continues to be one of the most frequently searched topics on the Internet (Cooper, Scherer & Mathy, 2001; Cooper et al., 2000). Flood (2009) reports:

On the Internet, minors may search for sexually explicit material using a search engine, go to a particular website, ask in a chat room for sexually explicit pictures, visit a chat room focused on sexual dialogue, or sign

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