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The Role of Sexually Explicit Material (SEM) in the Sexual Development of Black Young Same-Sex-Attracted Men

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Abstract

Sexually explicit material (SEM) (including Internet, video, and print) may play a key role in the lives of Black same-sex sexually active youth by providing the only information to learn about sexual development. There is limited school-and/or family-based sex education to serve as models for sexual behaviors for Black youth. We describe the role SEM plays in the sexual development of a sample of Black same-sex attracted (SSA) young adolescent men ages 15–19. Adolescents recruited from clinics, social networking sites, and through snowball sampling were invited to participate in a 90-min, semi-structured qualitative interview. Most participants described using SEM prior to their first same-sex sexual experience. Participants described using SEM primarily for sexual development, including learning about sexual organs and function, the mechanics of same-gender sex, and to negotiate one's sexual identity. Secondary functions were to determine readiness for sex; to learn about sexual performance, including understanding sexual roles and responsibilities (e.g., “top” or “bottom”); to introduce sexual performance scripts; and to develop

models for how sex should feel (e.g., pleasure and pain). Youth also described engaging in sexual behaviors (including condom non-use and/or swallowing ejaculate) that were modeled on SEM. Comprehensive sexuality education programs should be designed to address the unmet needs of young, Black SSA young men, with explicit focus on sexual roles and behaviors that may be inaccurately portrayed and/or involve sexual risk-taking (such as unprotected anal intercourse and swallowing ejaculate) in SEM. This work also calls for development of Internet-based HIV/STI prevention strategies targeting young Black SSA men who maybe accessing SEM.

Keywords

Sexually explicit material; Black gay men; Early sexual experiences; Sexual identity; Porn

Introduction

Adolescent males engaging in sex with other males have limited access to sources of information about same-sex sexual activity (Bruce & Harper, 2011). Sexual health topics that focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) sex are frequently omitted from formal sexual education in public schools (Forrest & Silverman, 1989; Telljohann, Price, Poureslami, & Eaton, 1995). When topics about sexual health are addressed, most topics focus on defining same-sex sexual orientation, tolerance and prejudice, health issues, and myths about homosexuality (Telljohann et al., 1995) but focus less on sexual activity (Blake et al., 2001). Few states have worked toward developing a comprehensive sex education curriculum that meets the needs of LGBT youth (Kann et al., 2011). As of 2012, 30 states have no law that governs sex education, 25 states mandate state sex education (abstinence-based), and 6 states mandate that sex education either bans the discussion of homosexuality or includes material that is biased against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) adolescents (Seicus, 2012). As a result, alternative sources like early sexual experiences, the Internet and sexually explicit material (SEM), defined as any pictorial material displaying direct physical stimulation of unclothed genitals, masturbation, and/or specific sexual acts including print, video, or Internet (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010), provide same-sex attracted (SSA) men information about sexual education (Kubicek, Beyer, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2010; Kubicek et al., 2008; Mutchler, Ayala, & Neith, 2005).

Significance of this Study

Research has suggested that adolescents use SEM for overall curiosity about sex, to learn specific sexual acts, and for individual pleasure (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006a; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). SEM can help SSA young men to learn about sex and to provide a confirmation of their growing awareness of their sexual attractions (Kubicek et al., 2010) and to explore various sexual roles as they attempt to solidify their sexual identity (Erikson, 1980). The current literature has mostly focused on heterosexual, White, college-aged students (Hald, Kuyper, Adam, & deWit, 2013). Studies that do examine use of SEM in SSA men have been predominantly quantitative samples of mostly White men (Hald, Smolenski, & Rosser, 2013) and have focused on SEM as a source of modeling risk-taking behavior like condomless (or bareback sex) in young men engaged in sex with other men (Rosser et al., 2012; Stein, Silvera, Hagerty, & Marmor, 2012). Such

approaches, though informative, are not generalizable to all groups of SSA young men and leave out a nuanced understanding of perspectives on how SEM may impact the sexual development of young Black men who may experience higher levels of emotional distress from perceived discrimination about sexual orientation than non-Black peers (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009).

Larger social norms regarding sex and sexuality are thought to dictate the level of access to same-sex information sought or obtained by Black youth (Chatman, 1996). Black SSA youth experience stigma and discrimination from members of the Black community, which, some researchers have reported, results in higher levels of homophobia in Black versus White communities and families (Buttaro & Battle, 2012; Jeffries, Marks, Lauby, Murrill, & Millett, 2013). Such factors can result in silence about sexuality and estrangement from family and friends, thereby limiting one's access to important information (Brooks, Etzel, Hinojos, Henry, & Perez, 2005; Ward, 2005). Additionally, young Black SSA men may experience additional discrimination from the White gay community (Harper, Jernewall, & Zea, 2004; Warren et al., 2008; Washington, 2001), which may further marginalize and isolate Black youth from sexual development resources.

It is unknown how young Black SSA men use SEM to learn about sexual behavior and sexual conduct within first relationships. In a sample of mostly heterosexual Black men, SEM or pornography, acted as a key source of sexual information during early sexual socialization providing men with information (Hussen, Bowleg, Sangaramoorthy, & Malebranche, 2012). Young Black men in first same-sex sexual relationships describe being socially isolated in their communities (Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez, 2009; Rosario, 2004) and, as a result, rely on non-traditional informal structures, such as sexual partners, to learn about the larger community and sexual scripts (Arrington-Sanders, Leonard, Brooks, Celentano, & Ellen, 2013). Some have suggested that Black SSA men access the Internet more than other groups (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; Rosser et al., 2012). Internet use may result from a desire to obtain anonymous information for young men who are sorting through sexual attraction to other men (Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009) and connect to a larger community where sexuality topics can be discussed (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001a, 2001b; Spink, Cenk Ozmutlu, & Lorence, 2004). Further, the combination of gender and sexual role expectations, and concepts of masculinity in Black communities (LaSala & Frierson, 2012) may make SEM more attractive to Black adolescent men who are attracted to other men because of the need for an outlet to escape from social marginalization and isolation.

The present study seeks to understand the role and function of SEM on sexual development among Black adolescent males who engage in sex with other males and whether young men describe that SEM impacts sexual and risk-taking behavior during first same-sex sexual relationships.

Theoretical Approach

The minority stress model and sexual script theory are useful for framing the study's goals. The minority stress approach acknowledges the stress that individuals experience as a result of being a member of stigmatized sexual minority groups (Meyer, 2003). For Black SSA

young men, this would refer to membership in a marginalized sexual orientation and racial group. Minority stress occurs when individuals are isolated from social structures and norms because of their minority status (Black race and sexual orientation) (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Link & Phelan, 2001). As a result, individuals are isolated from basic health needs (sexual education) and positive social interactions with similar persons (other Black SSA young men) (Cooley, 1992), and they may be more likely to seek alternative sources for information.

SEM use by Black SSA men may be developmentally appropriate as it assists developing adolescents with information about one's sexual self, including information about sexual attraction and physical activity involved in sexual acts. Sexual script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) suggests that individual sexual behavior results from interacting with sexual guides and/or sexual scripts on three levels: the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic. Sexual scripts are acquired during childhood and adolescence and influenced by stage of development and sexual media (Eggermont, 2006; Štulhofer, Buško, & Landripet, 2010; Tolman, Kim, Schooler, & Sorsoli, 2007). Sexual scripts help individuals to develop a set of attitudes about one's own sexual being, and a belief system of how individuals should behave and the perception of behavior from others (Simon & Gagnon, 1987). Viewing of SEM during a critical period of development, where sexual patterns and practices are first learned and reinforced, may promote engagement in similar sexual behaviors. For example, adolescents exposed to SEM earlier are more likely to have sexual debut within 2 years of exposure and earlier initiation of oral and anal sex compared to later exposure (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Häggström-Nordin, Sandberg, Hanson, & Tyden, 2006; Peter & Valkenburg, 2008, 2009; Rogala & Tydén, 2003).

Methods

We recruited 47 Black (including African-American, Black-Caribbean, Black-Arab, Black-White) biologically male adolescents, aged 15–19 years, who reported having had any prior (anal or oral) sex with male partners to participate in a baseline semi-structured qualitative interview about first same-sex sexual experiences and three follow-up interviews (every 4 months). The lower age boundary of 15 years was chosen based on research that suggests first same-sex sexual debut occurs around 15.5 years (oral sex) and 17.2 years (receptive/insertive anal sex) (Kubicek et al., 2008). This study focuses on findings from the baseline survey and the first qualitative interview. In order to avoid emotional trauma associated with recall of coerced sexual experiences, including experiences of child sexual abuse, these interviews focused on non-coerced sexual experiences.

Participants were recruited using a plurality of approaches including snowball sampling, venue-based outreach at community-based organizations and community events, at area clinics (adolescent, STD, and school-based health clinics), and advertisement on social network Internet sites (> 18 years). Potential subjects who screened eligible and were consented to participate in the study were provided up to six study referral coupons to be distributed among members of their social and sexual networks. On average, participants referred 1–2 contacts for the study. Participants were provided remuneration of \$10 for each social contact who was eligible and consented to participate in the study. Most participants

(40.4 %, $N=19$) were recruited through snowball sampling. Written consent was obtained from all participants. Youth (<18 years) were allowed to consent for participation in this study if they were seeking sexual health information, testing for sexually transmitted infections or HIV, and other confidential services covered under the Maryland Law (Article 20–102 of the Maryland Annotated Code). A waiver of parental consent was granted through Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine Institutional Review Board.

Participants completed a 10-min audio-recorded computer-assisted self-interview survey on demographics, relationships, sexual history, and risk. Questionnaire items were derived from prior studies assessing STI/HIV risk in adolescent males in same-sex sexual relationships. The brief questionnaire was then followed by one in-depth face-to-face, semi-structured qualitative interview lasting 90–120 min conducted by a trained interviewer. Participants were provided refreshments/snacks, reimbursed US \$40 for their time, and provided bus tokens for transportation. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Unique identifiers were used during the interview and pseudonyms replaced names and places to ensure participant confidentiality. Qualitative analysis software (NVivo 10, Version 10; QSR International, 2012) was used to facilitate coding and analysis.

The interview focused on the participant's first romantic relationships and sexual experiences with other males. An interview guide was developed with feedback from experts focused on sexual development of SSA youth and researchers with experience working with Black gay and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men. The guide was grounded in phenomenological and constructivist frameworks that provided a general structure for discussion but required participants to provide their own definitions based on life experiences and perceptions. Thus, participants were provided with a sample definition of SEM based on Hald and Malamuth's (2008) definition as "any kind of material aiming at creating or enhancing sexual feelings or thoughts in the recipient and, at the same time, (1) containing explicit exposure and/or descriptions of the genitals and (2) clear and explicit sexual acts such as vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse, oral sex, masturbation, bondage, etc.," but asked to define, using their own words what SEM meant to them and then through in-depth exploration determine factors that have influenced SEM use. Youth were also encouraged to discuss additional information that was not covered by the interview guide. Sample questions for the interview are provided in Table 1.

Qualitative Analysis

Two coders independently evaluated transcribed data to identify and collapse codes and key themes that emerged from data. The transcripts were double-coded until coding had high interrater reliability (Cohen's Kappa >.80). Coding disagreements were discussed by reviewers and recoded upon consensus.

We analyzed data using categorical and contextualizing analytic methods. We first read the interviews multiple times in their entirety to hear and understand codes that emerged from the data. We then deconstructed narrative data and rearranged those data by categories to facilitate comparisons. We examined participant's responses using a contextual strategy to examine adolescents' description of first same-sex sexual experiences within the developmental and social context of their lives. We concentrated on the participants' life

experiences and the meaning of the phenomenon, in this case the use of SEM prior to first same-sex sexual experiences.

Questions elicited content and meaning and allowed participants to elaborate on responses, as well as clarify ideas and feelings experienced with SEM prior to first same-sex sexual experiences and romantic partners. Participants also made clarifications between the types of media used, the type of SEM watched, and their preferred type of sexual actors. We then connected the codes under larger headings. This process allows the researcher to understand the larger framework and structure of the phenomenon (Schutz, 1970).

To ensure quality and credibility of the emergent themes from qualitative interviews, we conducted two validation checks. The first consisted of two-member check-in group validation checks (after the first five interviews were complete and halfway through the interviews) with five gay and bisexual Black men 19–23 years of age (in each group) to respond to initial interview themes and identify additional areas for inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). This age range was chosen because of its proximity to the age of the participants and to recruit young adults who could reflect on their adolescent developmental experiences. The second check in consisted of a focus group with “experts” from the community who had extensive work with the gay, bisexual, and transgender community to independently verify the themes that emerged from the qualitative analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Table 2 presents the characteristics of the sample. Participants were on average 17.7 years old (SD 1.2 years), and reported a mean age of first sexual experience was 13.95 (SD 2.71 years). The mean age of first oral sex was 13.6 (SD 3.2 years) and the mean age of anal sex was 14.7 (SD 1.9 years). Most participants ($N=31, 66\%$) self-identified as gay or homosexual and reported not being in a current relationship ($N = 28, 60\%$). While participants described a range of first same-sex sexual experiences, oral and anal sex was the most common reported ($N=31$ or 65%).

Participants commonly described having watched SEM prior to/around first same-sex sexual experience ($N = 39, 83\%$, Table 3). Many participants could not recall age of first SEM use. Those that could recall age of first use described being introduced to or using SEM during a wide age range of 6–17 years old. Participants who described exposure prior to 10 years old, described discovering a family member’s video (DVD) material or being introduced by an older sibling or friend. Among the participants who described having used SEM, most described having utilized Internet material ($N=30, 79\%$) and some watched DVD movies ($N=4, 10.5\%$). Few participants described using print material or interacting with someone via a webcam. Type of SEM varied from gay to straight porn—with nearly half of participants ($N=16, 42\%$) viewing gay porn only, one-third ($N=13, 34\%$) viewing straight porn only, 13.2% ($N=5$) viewing straight porn and then transitioning to gay porn, and 11% ($N=4$) viewing both gay and straight porn prior to first experience. Participants preferred watching sexual actors that were similar to them in ethnicity (i.e., Black or biracial), but this did not influence their partner selection in current or past sexual relationships.

Several themes emerged from the interviews about the use of SEM around the time of first same-sex sexual experience in the sample. Participants described using SEM primarily for exploration related to general sexual & sexual orientation development, including learning about the appearance and function of sexual organs, the mechanics of same-gender sexual activity, and the process of understanding and exploring one's sexual identity. Secondary functions included exploration related to determination of readiness for sex and learning about sexual performance, including understanding sexual roles and responsibilities (e.g., learning to perform as a "top" or as a "bottom"), introducing sexual performance scripts, and models for how sex should feel (e.g., pleasure and pain).

Many youth described being introduced to SEM by family members, peers, or sexual partners. Family members (e.g., father, brothers, cousin) commonly introduced SEM to help participants learn about sex in general. Some family members also introduced SEM to pique interest in opposite-sex activity and discourage same-sex activity. Throughout all of the themes, the influence of peers and/or sexual partners influenced whether SEM was used prior to first same-sex. Influence of peers and/or sex partners was less impactful during repeat SEM use. Few youth described naturally finding SEM on the Internet or in a sex store (Table 3).

Qualitative Themes

General Sexual and Sexual Orientation Development—Participants described that SEM served as a "manual for sex." Participants learned about how sexual organs function and how to masturbate and ejaculate. Most participants described having little to no experience with sex and SEM provided knowledge about sexual organs and about same-gender sex, including the mechanics of sex between men and how sex should be performed.

The day after I watched the porn with them (cousins), it was just ringing in my head like I wonder if there is gay porn out there that would show me what to do and how to do it. So I actually went on the Internet and looked it up on the porn site and it came up.

Jeff, 16 y/o gay male

SEM served the purpose as a visual aid or tutorial, because same-sex sexual activity was not talked about in schools or at home and participants described not having resources to ask questions about sex.

I guess you watch (porn) to learn. I'm a visual learner. So I guess since I watched it and I was like, okay, well this is what you do and that's what you do and then I guess I just took it from there

Brian, 16 y/o gay male

Back then, the only one that was really talked about was AIDS and HIV, and we only talked about it through school, but when we're talking about it in school, male-on-male sex or it being transferred like that wasn't talked about just because it (gay sex) wasn't supposed to be going on.

Jeff, 16 y/o gay male

Participants who watched porn based on curiosity or by mistake, described continuing to watch SEM to learn more about the mechanics of sex.

I think I just got on the computer again and started looking up stuff, how to do this and how to do that, what it's like, how to take it. I was very curious to be sure.

Larry, 19 y/o gay male

Most described that this was the first time they had watched sexual intercourse (including vaginal or anal intercourse), so they sought information about what goes where and how to perform the sexual act.

Many participants described using SEM to help discover and navigate their sexual orientation exploration and identity development. They often described that watching SEM served as a confirmation of their sexual orientation as gay. Youth commonly described not getting aroused from straight porn or paying attention only to male actors and being aroused by gay porn as an indication that they were either gay or bisexual.

I started straight porn but I noticed that I didn't like it because it had a female in it for real and I didn't like it. It was just something that I would just look at the guy. I watch it but I just look at the guy do the stuff.

Troy, 18 y/o gay male

Others described that by being attracted to the male partner in straight porn they began to recognize their sexual orientation/identity. One participant vividly recalls by being turned on to gay sex he actually helped sort through his sexual attraction to other men.

Porn taught me a lot. I first started out with straight porn. Porn actually helped me realize that I was gay. When I was watching porn, it started from just boys and girls but I started looking at the guy more. So then I got interested in two guys and a girl and then it just went to two guys and then to more guys and that's when I noticed, "Wow, I don't like girls anymore

Travis, 19 y/o gay male

Participants described being attracted to men on electronic media who were muscular and had a large penis and as a result, describing looking for sexual partners who had similar features.

...you're attracted to the build of the person in the porn and what they're doing and then what they're doing makes you masturbate and then I guess that's why you say you're attracted to somebody like that person

Brian, 16 y/o gay male

I can say it probably influenced what I'm attracted to because now I know what turns me on and what turns me off and I realized that from just browsing through videos. I feel like porn kinda sets a standard for me since now I know what I like and what I don't like

Alex, 18 y/o gay male

Readiness for Sex—Youth described watching SEM to determine their readiness to have sex. Participants described if they felt aroused by the sex and that they understood how to perform the sex, they were more likely to be ready to engage in sexual activity. SEM served as a bridge to begin sexual activity by calming nerves about sex and helping them to mentally prepare for initiation of sexual activity.

”I was like, Okay, let me watch what he’s talking about.” That’s when I saw it and I’m just like, “Okay, it’s kinda amazing. It’s kinda interesting. I wanna try it.”

Lucky, 19 y/o bisexual male

I felt like from watching porn, I didn’t feel like I did much so I was like I’m probably still not ready but at least I know what it looks like

Larry, 19 y/o gay male

While this frequently occurred alone, it also commonly occurred in the context of a sexual relationship. Participants described partners using SEM to engage participants in having sex to introduce sexual scripts and to promote starting sex for the first time. One participant described it as “that was the first time I ever watched porn and he (partner) said ‘Why don’t we do this.’ and we did.”

Learn About Sexual Performance—Sexual performance was a key theme that emerged among participants as a reason why they watched SEM. Sexual performance included learning about position and sexual roles in certain positions; how adolescents should act during sexual activity with sexual partners; and how sex should feel (experiences of pain and pleasure). It was common, in this sample, that youth described sexual development as a process that occurs over time and not all at once where participants described learning about sexual performance through a series of experiences and experiments to determine what felt enjoyable.

After participants described having resolved their sexual attraction to individuals of the same sex, youth described having to make decisions about sexual roles during sexual activity and whether to act as the insertive (top), receptive (bottom), or versatile (both) partner. We did not find that participants explicitly described personal development of feminine characteristics or masculine characteristics as a result of watching SEM. Instead, we found that several participants used SEM to clarify sexual roles and responsibilities during most first same-sex sexual experiences, but not necessarily to clarify one’s own sexual role. Participants described self-identifying as preferring the receptive or insertive role prior to watching SEM. Participants who identified with the receptive described identifying more with the female or the receptive partner while participants who described identifying with the insertive role identified more with the insertive partner who was usually a muscular male. SEM was most helpful in providing instruction about how to perform in the insertive or receptive role during first penetrative experience. The participants in this sample did not specifically describe racial preference of SEM actors for certain sexual positions (i.e., insertive partners being Black race only and receptive partners being White race only). Instead, participants described watching SEM with sex partners or alone to model how to perform in certain sexual positions.

He (partner) told me to watch gay porn and so that's what I did and I kind of saw how it was done. One day, he asked me if I wanted to try it and I said, "yeah, sure" and that's when I proceeded to top him

Trent, 18 y/o gay male

Other participants described watching SEM alone to learn how to perform as an insertive or receptive partner in preparation of having sex. This included watching opposite-sex SEM to determine what would work as the insertive or receptive partner.

I looked at porn and all that, and I know a lot of stuff on girls, so I just thought maybe you do the boy the same way.

Oliver, 19 y/o bisexual male

Participants who described utilizing SEM more than once described using it to learn sexual performance scripts. Sexual performance scripts focused not only on learning about sexual roles and positions, but also on gestures and sounds.

I used to make big noises and this, that and the third... and I got that from the porn 'cause when they came, you know, "Ahhh!" So I used to be like, "Ahhh!

Dorian, 19 y/o bisexual male

In addition, health protective behaviors that occur during the sexual activity were sometimes learned from SEM, with participants watching how sex actors used condoms and lubrication in certain positions. Alternatively, when unprotected sexual activity was depicted in SEM, it was common for participants to describe having engaged in similar behavior as a result of having seen a similar script in SEM.

Some people would eat cum, some people wouldn't. I would eat cum, I wouldn't. So sometimes I might spit it out, it was a good feeling.

Dorian, 19 y/o bisexual male

This participant's quote is representative of how some youth commonly described how they modeled their experiences from what they had observed and how modeling reinforced positive feelings toward the activity in subsequent sexual activity.

Watching SEM to learn sexual scripts also occurred commonly with partners. Partners would use SEM immediately prior to engaging in sexual activity and then reenact what they had watched while having sex. One participant described it as "that was the first time I ever watched porn and he (partner) said, 'Why don't we do this?' and we did." This occurred mostly with participants who were very nervous about their first same-sex sexual experience. Sex partners would provide additional resources to help ease the concern and worry about sex.

Youth also described learning about whether sex should or should not feel good. If sexual actors felt very aroused, then participants described assuming that their first experience should be very sexually aroused. Similarly, some participants assumed that anal sex should hurt because it looked uncomfortable or painful on SEM.

Like it teaches you a lesson. Although sex hurts when you watch the gay porn, it's like they'll get over it. You have to get used to it. I understand that it's going to hurt but I just got to get used to it. That's why I watch gay porn.

Troy, 18 y/o gay male

This participant's quote is representative of how he assumed anal sex should feel because of having watched SEM to prepare for sex. This was a recurrent theme about sex being painful but that individuals had to "get over it" and eventually it would be comfortable.

Repeat SEM Use—During repeat follow-up interviews four months later, we found that SEM use continued to resonate with the youth. Most youth ($N=29$, 85 %) who described having used SEM at the first interview reporting having used it in the last 4 months. Among the SEM users, over half (59 %) described watching SEM 21 or more times in the past 4 months (Table 1). Repeat users mostly ($N=14$, 48 %) described watching gay porn only, but straight and gay porn was also fairly common ($N=13$, 45 %). Participants who described not using SEM around first same-sex sexual experience ($N=8$, 17 %) did not report any SEM use at the follow-up interview. In repeat users, SEM was used to learn new sexual positions and to better understand what sexual positions would be more comfortable during sex. Participants also described by watching pornography frequently they were able to "research" about sexual positions and what should feel good during sex.

...I was watching gay porn to learn a couple tricks...so I was doing research on the sexual positions, like missionary, 69, doggie style and stuff like that. And I got some amazing facts from it, so...

David, 15 y/o gay male

Users also described using it frequently with masturbation for sexual release. This youth describes that after watching SEM the first time, he did not watch it to figure things out. He watched it because he enjoyed watching it. It was physically satisfying to watch.

It (porn) didn't teach me anything. I didn't look at it as a teaching tool. I just looked at it to watch it and bust a nut (ejaculate)

Oscar, 18 y/o gay male

It (porn) was just something that I liked. It was just something to watch. I really don't watch porn to figure out things to do. I mean I can do that but I don't. I just watch it just to watch it

Andrew, 19 y/o bisexual male

These quotes reveal how for many youth repeat SEM use became part of their normal sexuality and experiencing pleasure and not just about directions or modeling certain behaviors.

Eight (17 %) youth described not watching or using SEM at all. Youth had a hard time articulating reasons for non-use, but mostly described not being aroused or not seeing the point of SEM. One participant described not using SEM because the adult film actors could not physically perform how he performed so it provided no use for him.

Discussion

This study extends previous research that has examined the role of SEM in adolescent same-sex sexual development. The study demonstrates key processes where SSA Black male adolescents may be using SEM to assist with sexual development, including sexual orientation and attraction; to determine readiness for their first same-sex sexual experience; and to assist with developing sexual scripts. For the young men in our sample, SEM use was a sex positive experience aiding in the acquisition of information about same-sex sexual experiences. This work suggests that young SSA men use SEM to help develop their sexual self. This supports other work suggesting that adolescents use SEM for sexual exploration, including important concepts of adolescent identity development like the evolving sexual self (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

SEM also provided these men with an anonymous space to learn about the mechanics of anal sex, sexual position (including performance as a receptive or insertive partner), and more general information about sexuality. It also helped sort through emerging sexual attractions to members of the same sex. This is consistent with prior research that has found that without access to sexual health information in the schools that focus on same-sex sexual relationships, young men are likely to search out information about same-sex activity from the Internet and sexual partners (Kubicek et al., 2010; Rhodes, 2004). Such a finding may be similar among all groups of SSA young men, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Kubicek et al. (2010) suggests that while parents may be a potential source for sexual health information, youth are unlikely to seek parental information because of stigma associated with one's same-sex attraction or the challenges associated with discussing same-sex sexual activity. In addition to the lack of space to discuss same-sex feelings and attraction openly, participants in this study also described that male parent figures commonly introduced SEM to pressure participants to engage in opposite-sex relationships. Research has suggested that SSA Black youth are less likely to disclose their same-sex attraction to father figures and fathers may be more likely to have negative reactions to such disclosure (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Voisin, Bird, Shiu, & Krieger, 2013). One reason may be because father figures are likely to introduce heteronormative scripts to adolescents that further isolate them and may exacerbate or attenuate sexual risk behavior (Hussen et al., 2014).

As a result of limited resources to learn about same-sex activity, in this sample, SEM was resourceful in learning about how to engage in sex with a man. Others have suggested that young men in same-sex sexual relationships use SEM as a source of sexual information (Kendall, 2004; Kubicek et al., 2010). Many young men in this sample described significant gaps in their sexual knowledge at the time of their sexual debut. SEM prior to first same-sex sexual experiences provided a script for how the young men should perform during their first same-sex sexual act that often promoted risk-taking behavior, including condomless oral and anal sex.

Script theory suggests that viewing SEM may influence preferences for various types of behaviors during sexual activity; including depictions of unsafe sex prompting or reinforcing

condom non-use (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). This may particularly impact young SSA Black men who may be more likely to imitate sexual scripts because of greater perceived realism and more positive views toward SEM during adolescence (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006b). Since Black youth are typically not being exposed to comprehensive sexuality education programs that explore same-sex sexual activity, or gay/bisexual specific sexuality education in schools (Harper & Riplinger, 2013) or in homes, they may not be introduced to counter-narratives that promote condom-protected sexual activity between two men. Comprehensive sex, sexuality, and anatomy education programs will need to be designed to address the unmet needs of young Black men in same-sex sexual relationships (Harper & Riplinger, 2013), with explicit focus on sexual roles and behaviors that may be inaccurately portrayed in SEM.

Research has suggested that sexual behavior is influenced by cultural and social concepts of sexual identity, gender role, and masculinity (Williams, 2004). SEM likely transmits messages about gender roles and norms that are often portrayed through the sex actors. In some SEM focused on Black men, masculinity can be over dramatized, where tops are presented as hyper masculine and bottoms are expected to submit to hyper masculine actors (Morrison, 2004). As a result, one might expect that adolescents who use SEM may pick up on such social messages about gender roles and norms and mimic those findings within their sexual relationships. A better understanding of how same-race SEM that promotes certain messages about gender roles and norms impacts the healthy sexual development of young men engaging in first same-sex is needed.

In this sample, participants described preferring to view racially similar SEM. This supports other work that Black SSA men are attracted to sexual partners that are of their same race (Berry, Raymond, & McFarland, 2007; Bingham et al., 2003). Dense intra-racial sexual networks among Black SSA men may promote HIV risk due to higher baseline prevalence in the Black community (Berry et al., 2007). More work is needed to understand whether the content of Black gay sites promote same-race partners and how such sites contribute to sexual behavior in young Black men. Specific sites that target certain racial groups and have equal rates of condom use and non-use across the site may normalize condomless sex in young men (Downing, Schrimshaw, Antebi, & Siegel, 2014; Rosser et al., 2013).

More work is needed to explore whether the use of SEM among young Black men in same-sex sexual relationships is promoting risk behaviors. We found that participants who described repeat use described using it for additional information about sexual position and performance. Youth who use SEM frequently may be more likely exposed to behavior promoted on SEM and mimic behavior that promotes risk within sexual relationships. Some research has suggested that repeat viewing of SEM is associated with sexual risk behaviors among men in same-sex sexual relationships (Eaton, Cain, Pope, Garcia, & Cherry, 2012; Stein et al., 2012); however, our data does not enable better understanding of frequent exposure as a promoter of risk behavior in this population. Further, research has yet to specifically determine whether there is a direct causal link between use of SEM displaying high-risk sexual behavior—and high-risk sexual behavior in young Black men in same-sex sexual relationships.

The results of this work should be viewed in the light of limitations and the qualitative nature of the data. The primary purpose of this study was to understand experiences of young men during first same-sex sexual experiences and how those experiences may impact sexual behavior. Feedback from the participants indicated that pornography or SEM was an important construct to examine in how they prepared for their first same-sex sexual experience. As such, we used a phenomenological framework to allow men to describe those experiences. We did not ‘a priori’ approach this topic using previously explored questions about condom use and non-use. While we used an age cutoff that was appropriate based on the literature (Kubicek et al., 2008), the group may not reflect the reality that some Black male adolescents are initiating sex at a much earlier age. In order to recruit a representative sample of young men, we used an innovative plurality recruitment approach to recruit participants which tends to be more representative of the population than one strategy alone (McCormack, 2014).

In spite of these limitations, these data provide an important first step into understanding how Black young men use SEM prior to and during their first same-sex sexual experiences. It also provides potential directions for researchers, specifically to delve deeper in the contexts surrounding first same-sex sexual experiences and the possible roles popular culture plays in pedagogy during adolescent/young adult development. Providers can increase and strengthen advocacy for safe spaces for young men to receive accurate, honest, and thoughtful information on how to develop safe, satisfying sexual relationships. Policy makers might work closer with stakeholders in pornography industries most utilized by Black SSA men to communicate the performance nature of SEM.

Implications

The findings of this work call for more research to explore how young, Black SSA men are using SEM and whether it may act as a key factor in promoting unprotected sexual activity and other high-risk sexual behaviors. In light of multiple young adult film actors becoming HIV positive (Smith, 2014), the Los Angeles City Council mandated condom use in adult films in 2012 (Lin III, 2012). Despite this, there appears to be an increased market that reinforces condomless sex in order to maintain its market share (Hurley, 2009). Since the Internet is a key source of information about sexuality for SSA youth (Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2011) and its expansion due to mobile devices is likely, we may see that more SSA youth use Internet-based SEM to learn about same-sex sexual activity in general and anal sex in particular.

With widening access to SEM via the Internet and other virtual platforms (i.e., mobile devices), this work speaks to a need for greater research and outreach on platforms to provide all SSA young men, regardless of race/ethnicity, with appropriate information about how to protect themselves during sex and not mimicking what they see in porn. It also suggests that a wider system-level approach may be needed to provide information or disclaimers to users about potential risk for HIV and sexually transmitted infections associated with condom non-use and other potential activities presented as a part of SEM (ejaculation into the mouth or in or rubbed into the anus). Perrin et al. (2008) and Downing (2012) have suggested that a warning or rating system (such as used in video games or

movies) would help warn consumers about the high-risk content on SEM. This may be particularly relevant for young adolescent men view these sites.

Additional work is needed to develop internet-based HIV/STI prevention strategies targeting young Black SSA men who maybe accessing SEM. Policy makers will need to work with adult film industry stakeholders, providers, parents, and educators to create structural changes that promote a comprehensive sexual health paradigm for SSA youth. While there is no law yet that supports comprehensive sexual health education, there is pending legislation with the Real Education for Healthy Youth Act (S. 372/H.R. 725), introduced in February 2013 by the late Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Representative Barbara Lee (D-CA).

More policy level strategies are needed that insure federal funding is allocated to comprehensive sexual health education programs that provide SSA young men with the skills and information needed to make an informed, responsible, and healthy decisions prior to first same-sex. This may also include providing youth accessing SEM explicit information about risk behaviors portrayed on sites, information about sexual development, STI/HIV prevention, and access to testing resources. Communication between adult film industry stakeholders, parents, policymakers, and adolescents has the potential to identify and develop targeted strategies that provide accurate information about healthy same-sex sexual behavior and promote same-sex sexual development in young men navigating their first same-sex sexual experiences.

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Table 1

In-depth interview sample questions

Domain	Questions
SEM overall	
Experience with using SEM	Tell me about the first time you watched pornography (or other sexually explicit material, like magazines, internet, etc.) How old were you? Where were you when you first watched porn? Who did you watch it with? Tell me about how you got introduced to porn?
Type of SEM	What type of porn did you look at first (gay or straight or both)? Why? After watching (insert the type they watched first) porn did you watch another type? If so, why? Was there a particular ethnicity of the sex actors you preferred watching?
Arousal/attraction	Tell me about what turned you on or off about watching pornography? Do you think that ethnicity influenced whom you were attracted to? Why or Why not? Were there features of the sex actors that turned you on when watching porn or looking at SEM?
Function of SEM	
Overall purpose of SEM	What did you get or hope to get out of looking at porn?
SEM usage around first same-sex sexual experience	Tell me about whether you used porn or other SEM before the first time you had sex What did you want to get out of it? Why did you look (or not look) at pornography or other sexually explicit material?
Learning about sex	Tell me about whether or not you felt that watching porn or SEM helped (or did not help) you learn about sex?
Sexual role	For some people when watching porn/SEM they identify or don't identify with a certain sexual position or role Was there a person in a particular role or sexual position that you enjoyed watching? Did you identify with one of the sex actors in a particular role or position? You described earlier that you are a (insert preferred sexual position/role identified by participant), how did watching porn or other SEM influence that?

Table 2Demographic characteristics of the study population ($N=47$)

Characteristic	Mean (SD), % (N)
Mean age of participant	17.7 (1.2)
Race/ethnicity	
Black/African-American	89 % (42)
Mixed race (at least one parent AA)	11 % (5)
Sexual orientation	
Gay or homosexual	66 % (31)
Bisexual	32 % (15)
Straight or heterosexual	2 % (1)
Gender identity	
Male	91.5 % (43)
Female	2.1 % (1)
Transgender	6.4 % (3)
First same-sex experience	
Age at first same-sex sexual experience	13.9 (2.7)
Age at first oral sex sexual experience	13.6 (3.2)
Age at first oral sex sexual experience	14.7 (1.9)
Age of sexual partner at first same-sex experience	16.7 (5.7)
Recruitment	
Snowball sampling	40.4 % (19)
Outreach at youth venues	8.5 % (4)
Internet advertisement	21.3 % (10)
Clinics (1 academic, 1 community-based, 2 STD clinics)	21.3 % (10)
School-based health centers	8.5 % (4)

Table 3

SEM usage

Characteristic	Mean (SD or range), % (N)
Range age of first SEM use	6–17 years
Use of SEM around FSSSE	
Yes	81 % (38)
No	19 % (9)
Type of SEM	
Gay only	42 % (16)
Straight only	34 % (13)
Gay and straight	11 % (4)
Straight then gay	13 % (5)
Source of SEM	
Internet	79 % (30)
DVD	10.5 % (4)
Television	5 % (2)
Magazines	2.6 % (1)
Webcams	2.6 % (1)
Repeat SEM use at 4 month follow-up interview	
Yes	76.4 % (29)
No	23.6 % (9)
Frequency of SEM use at 4 month follow-up interview	
1–5 times	20.7 % (6)
6–10 times	20.7 % (6)
11–20 times	0%
21–30 times	17.2 % (5)
More than 30 times	41.4 % (12)
Type of repeat SEM	
Gay only	48.3 % (14)
Straight only	6.9 % (2)
Gay and straight	44.8 % (13)