

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University	
Faculty	Faculty of Social Studies
Procedure field	Developmental Psychology
Applicant	Mgr. Anna Ševčíková, Ph.D.
Applicant's home unit, institution	Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University
Habilitation thesis	Growing Up in the Age of Sexualized Internet Content
Reviewer	Prof. Dr. Jochen Peter
Reviewer's home unit, institution	Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam

The present habilitation thesis entitled “Growing Up in the Age of Sexualized Internet Content” presents a cumulative thesis, comprising six already published journal articles of the candidate. With one exception, the articles were published in four different, international, peer-reviewed journals. Of four of the articles, the candidate is the first author. Of the remaining two, she is the second author, but has made substantial contributions to the articles (as outlined in Chapter “List of Original Publications”). Five of the six articles are multi-author pieces, one is a single-authored publication. The habilitation thesis further includes an introduction and a conclusion section. I am not familiar with the formal requirements of Masaryk University for a habilitation thesis, but trust that the present work meets these requirements.

The habilitation thesis deals with the both timely and relevant question of what it means for adolescents to grow up in times when sexual material is easily available – for example in the form of Internet pornography – or can be easily produced and distributed – for example by making photos or video clips of oneself or others in sexual or sexualized situations and spread them through digital channels (“sexting”). These developments, which are all triggered by the emergence of digital information and adolescents’ massive use of the Internet, have raised many questions among parents, educators, and policy makers. It seems safe to say that we still know little about what adolescents really do with sexual online material and which consequences it has for their psychosexual and sociosexual development. Although there have been several research attempts in the past 20 years or so, research has difficulties keeping up with the speed of the changes. Another reason for

our still somewhat limited knowledge about the issue is that it is notoriously difficult to study. Apart from general ethical issues in research with minors, topics such as sexuality are challenging for researchers in terms of multiple biases (e.g., self-selection bias, social desirability bias). Valid and reliable data are therefore hard to get,

In this context, Dr. Ševčíková's habilitation makes a sound and much-welcomed contribution to the field. It is based on different types of data: the cross-national EU-Kids II data set, a three-wave panel study from the Czech Republic, and an in-depth interview/ case study with a young Czech man. This wealth of different data needs to be applauded. In terms of sexual material that adolescents are confronted with, the habilitation also deals with different aspects of adolescents' use of sexualized Internet content: intentional and unintentional exposure to sexual and/or pornographic Internet content, excessive use of Internet pornography, and sexting. It is worth pointing out that the habilitation not only focuses on adolescents' use of material that is already online and produced by others, but also on material that they may produce and/or distribute themselves. This reflects a turn in our understanding what 'being sexual in the times of the Internet' means and assigns an active role to adolescents. Dr. Ševčíková's habilitation predominantly uses quantitative methods, but also includes a case study, which discusses issues of compulsive sexual behaviour in depth. Next to this multi-method approach, the habilitation also includes both cross-sectional and longitudinal study types, another aspect that deserves positive mentioning. Finally, it needs to be pointed out that Dr. Ševčíková's habilitation contains one of the very few studies in the field that takes on a cross-nationally comparative perspective (study 1), in which she goes beyond naïve country comparison to an advanced analysis of cultural differences in terms of theoretically motivated contextual factors, such as a country's liberalism.

Dr. Ševčíková's habilitation shows a sound knowledge of the international literature and is up-to-date about the most recent developments. The empirical results of the respective studies are competently worked in throughout the habilitation. Dr. Ševčíková is also familiar with the relevant theories and theoretical developments, which she uses to guide her work. In terms of data analysis, I was particularly impressed of the use of statistically advanced multi-level techniques, which are not only needed for the questions asked in the respective chapters, but are also nicely applied and clearly reported.

Given the various positive aspects of Dr. Ševčíková' studies, it is no surprise that the empirical studies, notably those published already some years ago, have started to make a contribution to the field. As a quick look at, for example, Google Scholar shows, Dr.

Ševčíková's studies are cited by other scholars, which demonstrates the impact of her work internationally. In this context, it is important to realize that the topic of young people, Internet, and sexuality is still a rather small research field, which cannot be compared to established fields of developmental psychology (and their potential impact).

Dr. Ševčíková's habilitation thesis thus presents a sound contribution to the existing literature and advances it in many ways. The quality of the empirical studies is also corroborated by the fact that they have undergone and mastered peer review. There are, however, a few aspects that, in my view, may deserve some more reflection and deepening. It is understood that journal articles, with their space constraints, may not allow for this reflection. Still I do think a few aspects should be raised for further discussion and future research.

First, in various parts, the habilitation makes a difference between wanted (intentional) and unwanted (unintentional) exposure to pornography. The distinction seems somewhat outdated by now for traditional pornography on websites (pop-up windows etc. are less common than before) and remains questionable – how often do adolescents really unintentionally get in touch with that material before it becomes intentional search? At the same time, the distinction may be particularly relevant for sexting and adolescent-produced material sent to adolescents. This difference – and its implications! – could have been worked out more explicitly. In addition, intentional and unintentional exposure may vary in terms of cognitive processing and emotional reactions afterwards. It would have been desirable if this important aspect would have been addressed more elaborately and convincingly than it is currently the case.

Second, desensitization (study 3) is an important concept. It is operationalized in terms of whether adolescents mind or do not mind exposure to sexually explicit material. However, in the media psychological literature it is usually seen as a gradual move from less extreme to increasingly extreme content (similar to what is described in the case study). This is a crucial aspect when it comes to pornography as adolescents, once desensitized, may get in touch with much rougher fare (e.g., violence, simulated rape). Desensitization in study 3 is, in my view, rather habituation and may also signify a more adult, grown-up approach to sexually explicit material.

Third, it is laudable that the habilitation focuses in several studies on age. However, from a developmental perspective age may only present a proxy variable for more profound cognitive, emotional, social, and physical changes. A more critical treatment of the use of

age would have been desirable. In this context, I wonder whether age effects would have persisted if psychological variables (such as sensation seeking) or more other markers of development (e.g., pubertal maturation) would have been taken into account.

Fourth, more generally I wondered why, notably in studies 5 and 6, control variables were not explicitly taken into account, even if only theoretically. For example, in study 5 alternative explanations may be externalizing problems, sensation seeking, peer norms, relationship status. In study 6, peer pressure and peer norms may also be relevant. How stable are the analyses?

Fifth, in the case study (study 4), it remains unclear whether more general obsessive compulsive tendencies were studied and diagnosed in the young man. There is a link to the man's perfectionism, but whether his extreme use of pornography may present a manifestation of other compulsive tendencies is not discussed. In this context, it also may raise some eyebrows that, in the General Discussion, it is stated that the habit of using pornography for masturbation may constitute a key factor responsible for the compulsive use of pornography. There are several millions of pornography users who masturbate to it and do not develop a compulsive use, so there must be another, moderating factor that may be important here.

Sixth, the habilitation uses several theoretical frameworks, for example Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the Media Practice model, or the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model. Overall, however, I was missing a more elaborate discussion of what the various studies of the habilitation as a whole contribute to the theories themselves and to theory formation in the field of study in which the habilitation is situated. What do we know, theoretically, what do we don't we know, what do we need to know? Is there a need for different or better theory formation in the field? What is the explicit contribution of the habilitation to this? Is there a general, overarching theoretical framework possible on the basis of the habilitation?

Seventh, the general discussion states that, due to the sexual double standard, boys and girls approach pornography differently. The sexual double standard is only a manifestation of more general gender differences in adolescents' sexual socialization and some more reflection on this would have been desirable. In this context, it would have been useful to discuss more advanced concepts of gender, for example hyper femininity and hyper

masculinity, or more general the notions of femininity and masculinity, which may not fully correlate with biological sex.

Eighth, the general conclusion also advances the idea that adolescents' use of sexual Internet material is in line with their psychosexual development. This raises a very simple question: Why shouldn't it? Sexual interest and curiosity develop in puberty, so it seems rather straightforward that adolescents also are interested in sexual material on the Internet. Some deeper elaboration on the true meaning of the respective findings would have been desirable.

Ninth, the habilitation does not elaborate much on the content of the sexual material that adolescents were exposed to. For example, pornography may vary from the sexually explicit depiction of consensual, mutually pleasurable sex to rather violent, rape-like sexual activities. Although this is difficult to study with surveys and among adolescents, at least it would have deserved more theoretical attention.

Finally, research among adolescents and on sensitive issues is replete with methodological issues and biases. To what extent are the results presented in this habilitation affected by it? Some elaboration would be appreciated.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

1. Does what is studied in study 3 really capture desensitization or does it rather refer to habituation? (see second point above)
2. How useful is age to indicated developmental processes? What happens if other variables are controlled for (e.g., sensation seeking, pubertal maturation)? (see third point above).
3. How stable were the analyses in chapters 5 and 6 in terms of control variables? (see fourth point above)
4. Were there any other compulsive tendencies studied and/or diagnosed in the young men in study 4? Is masturbation really the responsible factor or shouldn't moderating

factors be studied instead, given the huge number of masturbating pornography users who do not develop compulsive tendencies? (see fifth point above)

5. What do we know, theoretically, what do don't we know, what do we need to know? Is there a need for different or better theory formation in the field? (see sixth point above)
6. Why shouldn't adolescents' use of online sexual material be part of their psychosexual development? (see eighth point above)
7. To what extent may the content of sexual material affect the results? This was not studied, but supposedly has a major impact on what adolescents choose to watch and its consequences? (see ninth point above)
8. To what extent are the results of the habilitation affected by the methodological issues and biases that pervade research on adolescents and sensitive issues? (see tenth point above)

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled "Growing Up in the Age of Sexualized Internet Content" by Anna Ševčíková **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Developmental Psychology.

Date:

Amsterdam, May 13, 2019

Signature:

