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Mass Media Influences on Sexuality

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The mainstream mass media (television, magazines, movies, music, and the Internet) provide increasingly frequent portrayals of sexuality. We still know relatively little about how this content is used and how it affects sexual beliefs and behaviors. The few available studies suggest that the media do have an impact because the media keep sexual behavior on public and personal agendas, media portrayals reinforce a relatively consistent set of sexual and relationship norms, and the media rarely depict sexually responsible models. More longitudinal research, especially with early adolescents is needed to learn more about how media content is attended to, interpreted, and incorporated into developing sexual lives.

The mass media are an increasingly accessible way for people to learn about and see sexual behavior. The media may be especially important for young people as they are developing their own sexual beliefs and patterns of behavior, and as parents and schools remain reluctant to discuss sexual topics.

In the United States, young people spend 6 to 7 hours each day on average with some form of media. A national survey in 1999 found that one third of young children (2 to 7 years old) and two thirds of older children and adolescents (8 to 18 years old) have a television in their own bedroom. Many of those televisions also are hooked up to cable and a Videocassette Recorder (VCR) (Roberts, 2000).

Sexual talk and displays are increasingly frequent and explicit in this mediated world. One content analysis found that sexual content that ranged from flirting to sexual intercourse had increased from slightly more than half of television programs in 1997-1998 to more than two-thirds of the programs in the 1999-2000 season. Depiction of intercourse (suggestive or explicit) occurred in one of every 10 programs (Kunkel, Cope-Farrar, Biely, Farinola, & Donnerstein, 2001).

One fifth to one half of music videos, depending on the music genre (e.g., country, rock, rap) portray sexuality or eroticism (DuRant et al., 1997). Two thirds of Hollywood movies made each year are R-rated; most young people have seen these movies long before they are the required 16 years old (Greenberg et al., 1993). Although teen girls’ and women’s magazines, such as Seventeen and Glamour have increased their coverage of sexual health issues over the past decade, the majority of advertising and editorial content in these magazines remains focused on what girls and women should do to get and keep their man (Walsh-Childers, Gotthoffer, & Lepre, 2002).

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth rarely find themselves represented in the mainstream media. Although a few of the youth-targeted programs such as “Dawson’s Creek” and “Will and Grace” have included gay characters, what some have called compulsory heterosexuality prevails (Rich, 1986; Wolf & Kielwasser, 1991).

The Internet has increased dramatically the availability of sexually explicit content. Computer and Internet use is diffusing more rapidly than any previous technology; as of the end of 1999, more than half (56%) of all adults in the United States were online. It is expected that by 2010 most U.S. homes with children will have access to the Internet (Taylor, 1999).

The word sex is the most popular search term used on the Internet today (CyberAtlas, 2001). The Internet may have both positive and negative effects on sexual health. According to one national survey of young people (10-17 years old) who regularly used the Internet, one out of four said he or she had encountered unwanted pornography in the past year, and one out of five had been exposed to unwanted sexual solicitations or approaches (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000). At the same time, a number of sites, such as the American Social Health Association’s iwannaknow.org, promote healthy sexual behavior and provide young people with advice on communication in relationships as well as methods for protecting against sexually transmitted diseases.

Despite increasing public concern about the potential health risks of early, unprotected sexual activity, most of the mass media rarely depict three C’s of responsible sexual behavior: Commitment, Contraceptives, and consideration of Consequences. Although more than half of the couples who engage in sexual intercourse on television are in an established relationship, 1 in 10 are couples who have met only recently; one quarter do not maintain a relationship after having sex (Kunkel et al., 2001).

Only about 1 in 10 of the programs on television that include sexual content mentions the possible consequences or the need to use contraceptives or protection against STDs. Unintended pregnancies rarely are shown as the outcome of unprotected sex, and STDs other than HIV/AIDS are almost never discussed (Kunkel et al., 2001). Abortion is a taboo topic, too controversial for commercial television and magazines (Walsh-Childers et al., 2002).
Do audiences learn about sex from this array of sexual information and portrayals? The perceived sensitivity of sex as a research topic and a focus on television to the exclusion of other media unfortunately has restricted the kind of research that has been done. Much of the empirical work has been analyses of content that allow only speculation about what effects the content might have on audiences. But an emerging set of studies that go beyond content to address how audiences select, interpret, and apply sexual content suggests that the media may play an important role, especially for young people (Steele, 1999).

**Selection of Sexual Media Content**

When asked where they have learned the most about sex, younger adolescents (13 - 15 years old) rank the mass media fourth behind parents, friends, and schools. Older adolescents (16 - 17 years old) put friends first, then parents, and then the media (Yankelovich Partners, 1993). More than half of the high school boys and girls in a national survey in 1997 said they had learned about birth control, contraception, or preventing pregnancy from television; almost two thirds (63%) of the girls (and 40% of the boys) said they had learned about these topics from magazines (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002).

The media are used as sources of information about sexuality at some times more than others. One qualitative study found three patterns of sexual media use among early adolescent girls (11 - 15 years old) that suggested that sexual portrayals in the media were attended to more when girls were interested personally in learning about relationship norms, strategies for establishing relationships, and tips on how to get sexually attractive. Some girls still found depictions of sex in the media (e.g., nudity in advertisements) “gross” and “disgusting,” while other girls had papered their walls with images of media models they lusted after or aspired to be. Still other girls, typically those who had been involved in sexual relationships, were less enamored with the mainstream media’s sexual fantasy and had turned to “oppositional” media (e.g., fringe music groups, teen-produced magazines, aka ‘zines) that spoke more to the kinds of relationships they wanted (Brown, White, & Nikopoulou, 1993).

We know that patterns of media use differ dramatically by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic level. Girls and women typically choose softer music, and more relationship-oriented television programs, movies, and magazines, while boys and men prefer more action and activity-oriented media and sports programming, heavier rock and rap music, action and adventure movies, music, and sports magazines. African Americans typically view more television than Whites, prefer television programming and movies that feature Black characters, and listen to different genres of music (Roberts, 2000; Roe, 1998). Thus, it is important to consider the media’s effects on sexuality within subgroups: All people will not be seeing the same set of sexual messages—some will see much more than others, some will be seeking out the sexual content, some will try not to be exposed to it.

**Interpretation**

All members of an audience also will not see or interpret the same messages in the same way (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). One striking example of differences in interpretation was found in an analysis of one of rock star Madonna’s early music videos, “Papa Don’t Preach.” When first released, newspaper columnist Ellen Goodman called it “a commercial for teenage pregnancy,” while the religious right said it was a stand against abortion. College students who saw the video differed in their “reading” of the video, too. Although most White females thought the video was about a teen girl deciding to keep her unborn child (“baby”), Black males were more likely to think the girl (Madonna) in the video was singing about wanting to keep her boyfriend “baby.” Since the young men were identifying primarily with the dilemma of the boyfriend in the video, they were less likely than the female viewers to see or hear the cues that suggested pregnancy (Brown & Schulze, 1990).

Other studies also conclude that young males and females interpret media content differently. Ward and her colleagues (Ward, Gorvine, & Cytron, 2001) have shown college students portions of situation comedies such as “Roseanne” and “Martin.” They find that young women are more likely than young men to think the sexual scenes they see are realistic, and the women are more approving than the men of behaviors that are relationship-maintaining (e.g., jealous husband protecting wife) and less approving of relationship threats (e.g., man contemplating cheating).

**Application**

As people attend to and interpret sexual media content, they also evaluate and may or may not incorporate what they are seeing in their own developing sense of sexuality. This is the step that we traditionally have thought of as media effects. Does the sexual content in the media influence how people behave sexually? Are people having sex earlier, with more partners, without protection or affection because of what they see in the media?

The answer to these questions is a qualified “yes.” Qualified, because even though we know a fair amount about the ubiquity of sexual content in the media, we still have only sparse research on the effects of sexual media content. According to classic social scientific methods, an ideal test of the effects of sexual media content would involve either randomized assignment to different sexual media diets, or longitudinal surveys. Such studies would establish whether media exposure or behavior came first, and would allow for generalizations about what kinds of media content cause what kinds of behaviors.

The relatively few correlational and still fewer experimental studies of the relationship between exposure to sexual media content and effects suggest that the media do have an impact in at least three ways: (a) by keeping sex-
ual behavior on public and personal agendas, (b) by reinforcing a relatively consistent set of sexual and relationship norms, and (c) by rarely including sexually responsible models. Three theoretical perspectives often used by communication researchers: (a) Agenda Setting/Framing, (b) Cultivation, and (c) Cognitive Social Learning Theory, help to explain why we expect these outcomes.

**Agenda Setting/Framing**

Agenda Setting and Framing Theories propose that the media tell people what is important in the world around them, and how to think about the events and people who inhabit that world (Kosicki, 1993). Although rarely thought of as sex educators, even the news media help keep sexual behavior salient. The American public and policy makers frequently are faced with news stories about abandoned babies, sex-enhancing drugs, and even presidential sexual affairs. Topics and images that are frequent and prominent in the media become topics that audiences think are important.

Early coverage of the AIDS epidemic provides a good example of how agenda setting and framing work in relation to a sexual health issue. When AIDS was first discovered, the media were slow to cover the story because it was considered a problem only for gay men, intravenous drug users, and a few Hemophiliacs. It took a number of years and the deaths of celebrities such as Rock Hudson for the media to put the problem higher on the news agenda, and even longer for the frame to shift from one of a problem of morality to one of a threat to the public’s health (Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991).

The media are in a unique position to get people thinking and talking about specific issues, while keeping other issues from the public eye. The people who are cited or figure prominently in the stories become known as the heroes or the villains, while some solutions and not others are offered. People use the stories they see both in the news and in entertainment media as reference points about what’s important and to compare what they already know, or think they know about what’s good and bad, and what should be done about problems. The result often reinforces stereotypes and helps define what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior in the culture (Iyengar, 1991).

**Cultivation Theory**

According to Cultivation Theory, television is the most powerful storyteller in the culture, one that continually repeats the myths and ideologies, the facts and patterns of relationships that define and legitimize the social order. According to the cultivation hypothesis, a steady dose of television, over time, acts like the pull of gravity toward an imagined center. This pull results in a shared set of conceptions and expectations about reality among otherwise diverse viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1994).

Tests of the hypothesis have found, for example, that junior and senior high school students who frequently viewed daytime soap operas were more likely than those who watched less often to believe that single mothers have relatively easy lives, have good jobs, and do not live in poverty (Larson, 1996). Exposure to stereotypical images of gender and sexuality in music videos has been found to increase older adolescents’ acceptance of nonmarital sexual behavior and interpersonal violence (Greeson & Williams, 1986; Kalof, 1999). Heavier television viewers have also been found to have more negative attitudes toward remaining a virgin (Courtright & Baran, 1980).

Others have shown that prolonged exposure to erotica leads to exaggerated estimates of the prevalence of more unusual kinds of sexual activity (e.g., group sex, sadomasochistic practices, bestiality), less expectation of sexual exclusivity with partners, and apprehension that sexual inactivity constitutes a health risk (Zillmann, 2000). In one experimental study, college student who were exposed to about 5 hours of sexually explicit films over 6 weeks were more likely than a control group to express increased callousness toward women and trivialize rape as a criminal offense (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982).

Two correlational studies have found relationships between the frequency of television viewing and initiation of intercourse in samples of high school students. However, because these were only cross-sectional analyses, it was not possible to say with certainty which came first—the TV viewing or the sexual behavior (Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Peterson, Moore, & Furstenberg, 1991). It is possible that teens who were becoming interested in sex had turned to sexual content in the media because it was now salient in their lives. It also is possible that the teens saw the ubiquitous and typically risk-free sexual media content as encouragement for them to engage in sexual behavior sooner than they might have otherwise. It is most likely that both causal sequences are operating, but longitudinal studies of young adolescents are needed to conclude that with more certainty.

**Cognitive Social Learning Theory**

Cognitive Social Learning Theory and its earlier variant, Social Learning Theory, predict that people will imitate behaviors of others when those models are rewarded or not punished for their behavior. Modeling will occur more readily when the model is perceived as attractive and similar and the modeled behavior is possible, salient, simple, prevalent, and has functional value (Bandura, 1994). Thus, the theory predicts that people who attend to media content that includes depictions of attractive characters who enjoy having sexual intercourse and rarely suffer any negative consequences will be likely to imitate the behavior.

A related idea is that the media provide cognitive scripts for sexual behavior that people may not be able to see anywhere else (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Sexually inexperienced people especially may use the media to fill in the gaps in their understanding about how a particular sexual scenario might work (e.g., kissing goodnight at the end of a date, having sex with a new or multiple partners). Walsh-
Childers (1990) found that viewers’ own expectations for using condoms were affected by depiction of condom use in a soap opera, for example.

What’s typically missing from the media’s current sexual script, however, is anything having to do with the possible negative consequences of sexual activity or ways to prevent negative outcomes, so it is unlikely that protective behavior could be imitated. Content analyses suggest that media audiences are most likely to learn that sex is consequence-free, rarely planned, and more a matter of lust than love (Kunkel et al., 1999; Ward, 1995). From the most sexually explicit media content, now more readily available than ever before on the Internet, cable TV, and videocassettes, they are likely to learn patterns of aggressive sexual behavior, as well (Zillmann, 2000).

CONCLUSION

In sum, the relatively few existing studies of the selection, interpretation, and application of sexual content in the media suggest that the mass media can affect awareness of, beliefs about, and possibly actual sexual behavior. More research is needed to say more precisely with which audiences, under what circumstances, and with which content effects occur. Such research is especially relevant as access to increasingly explicit sexual material increases and other potential perspectives on sexually responsible behavior, such as parents, schools, and faith communities, remain relatively reticent.

REFERENCES


