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EFFECTS OF SEX IN THE MEDIA

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Where do men and women, boys and girls, learn about sex? What is the impact of those influences? Throughout childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood people learn about sex from many sources, including parents, schools, friends, siblings, and media outlets such as movies, television, magazines, song lyrics, videos, and the Internet. For example, we may learn about French kissing from an older brother’s stories, orgasms from a pornographic movie, oral sex from an erotic website, and rape from a television movie.

Sexual themes in entertainment have been around as long as fiction itself. Many classics were often highly sexual in content, such as Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, or Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew, all of which are filled with overt sexuality and covert double entendres, some of which may be missed today due to the archaic language and the “classic” aura of these works. More broadly, sex has long been a part of popular culture. Roman gladiatorial contests sometime featured scantily clad women as combatants, and sex scandals, sexual entertainment, and young adults pushing the limits on acceptable dress and behavior have long diverted, and on occasion troubled, society.

According to a Time/CNN poll (Stodghill, 1998), 29% of U.S. teens identified television as their most important source of information about sex, up from 11% in 1986. Although the most-mentioned source (45%) was “friends,” only 7% cited parents and 3% cited sex education. In one study, 90% of Toronto adolescent boys and 60% of the girls (mean age = 14) reported having seen at least one pornographic movie (Check & Maxwell, 1992, in Russell, 1998). Also, 29% of U.S. teens rated pornography as their most significant source of sex education, higher than schools, parents, books, peers or magazines (Check, 1995). Surveys of college men have shown that 35–55% report having consumed violent pornography in some form (Demare, Briere, & Lips, 1988; Garcia, 1986).

Throughout adolescence and early adulthood we continually learn about sex, and media are a major source of that information (Chia, 2006; Dorr & Kunkel, 1990; Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002). Moreover, relative to other sources, media are becoming increasingly important (Check, 1995; Greenberg et al., 1993), especially women’s magazines and television (Kallipolitis et al., 2004). The effects of this heavy consumption of sexually oriented media are the topic of this chapter. We begin by examining the nature of sex in the media, focusing on content analysis studies. The rest of the chapter
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presents a review of the research on how consuming sexually explicit media impacts sexual arousal, attitudes, and behavior.

THE NATURE OF SEX IN THE MEDIA

Types of Sexual Content

Sexually oriented media may encompass a wide variety of sources. Some materials in magazines, videos, films, and Internet web sites have labels like "erotic," "pornographic," "X-rated," or "sexually explicit." Pornography is big business, generating $13 billion just in the U.S. in 2006 (IT Facts, 2007). Although sex magazines have greatly declined in circulation since the mid-1990s, that drop has been more than compensated for by video sales and rentals, cable and pay-per-view TV, and especially the explosive growth of Internet pornography, producing over 20% of the total revenue in 2006.

Most scholars distinguish between violent sexual material, which portrays rape, bondage, torture, sadomasochism, hitting, spanking, hair pulling, and genital mutilation, and nonviolent sexual material. Further classifying the nonviolent sexual material is more difficult. Some nonviolent sexual material is entirely mutually consenting and affectionate (sometimes called erotic), depicting vaginal or oral intercourse in a loving, or at least non-coercive, fashion. On the other hand, some nonviolent sexual material is sexually dehumanizing, depicting degradation, domination, subordination, or humiliation. This nonviolent, but dehumanizing, material typically presents the woman with few human attributes besides body parts and sexual appetite. Although often verbally abused and degraded, she appears hysterically receptive and responsive to men's sexual demands. The man appears in the sexually dominant position, and the woman is far more likely than the man to be more exposed or nude.

Sex in media is not limited to explicit portrayals of intercourse or nudity, however, but may include any representation that portrays or implies sexual behavior, interest, or motivation. Sex also occurs in many other places besides explicitly sexual materials. Many news stories, including reports of sex crimes, sex scandals, celebrity starlet social gossip, or tragic excesses like the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, involve sexual content. Sex is rampant in advertising, particularly for products like perfume, cologne, and aftershave, but also for tires, automobiles, and kitchen sinks. For example, one automobile ad on network television featured two women discussing whether a man's choice of a car was related to the size of his penis ("I wonder what he's got under the hood"). See Reichert and Lambiasi (2003) for a set of papers on sex in advertising.

Electronic Media

Since the advent of broadcast media in the 1920s, standards have usually been more conservative for radio and television than for print media, because it is easier to shield children from sexually oriented print media than from X-rated TV. With the advent of widespread cable and video technology, a sort of double standard has arisen, with greater acceptance of more sexual materials in video and premium cable channels than on network television. The logic appears to be that premium cable and rented movies are "invited" into the home, whereas network programming is there uninvited and accessible wherever a TV set is present. A greater problem is the ease availability of sexual materials on the Internet, which has virtually no effective restrictions (Ferguson
& Perse, 2000). Although there is much interest in legally restricting children’s access to sexually explicit sites, there is considerable disagreement about what kinds of restrictions or blocking software would be both legal and effective, without blocking useful non-sexual sites like breast cancer information or art sites. According to a 2002 survey, it was reported that single males between the ages of 18 and 45 years visited pornographic websites more frequently than any other demographic group did (Buzzell, 2005).

Turning to television, the most studied medium, content analyses have shown that, although the sex on network television is not usually explicit, sexual talk and innuendo are rampant, most often occurring in a humorous context. One extensive content analysis study found that 68% of TV shows on network and cable in 1999–2000 contained sexual content, with 65% containing talk about sex and 27% presenting physical sexual behaviors (Kunkel, Biely, Eyal, Cope-Farrar, Donnerstein, & Fandrich, 2003). References to premarital and extra-marital sexual encounters outnumbered references to sex between spouses by at least 6:1 (Greenberg & Hofschire, 2000) and as high as 24:1 for unmarried versus married partners in soap operas or 32:1 in R-rated movies with teen characters (Greenberg et al., 1993). The latter study also found that nudity occurred in all R-rated films in its sample, with female exceeding male nudity by a 4:1 margin. Sex in media is largely without consequences. One study showed only 14% of the discussions about sex on primetime TV contained any mention of risks or responsibilities of sex and only 3% of the portrayals of sexual behavior did (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002). For shows with “intercourse-related content,” the percentage of shows mentioning any risk or responsibility of sex rose from 14 to 26%, but that is still low (Kunkel, Eyal, Donnerstein, Farrar, Biely, & Rideout, 2007).

In 2007, a longitudinal meta-analysis of 25 content analyses (from 1975 to 2004) on sexual content appearing on U.S. primetime network programming (NBC, ABC, CBS, and Fox) found a decrease in the frequency per hour for passionate kissing, touching, and petting, and intercourse from the early 1990s to 2004. Interestingly, however, the amount of sex talk steadily increased from 1999 to 2004. This meta-analysis also found a significant positive correlation between the year and the amount of explicit sexual intercourse, although this type of content did not appear that often (0.025 occurrences per hour). Finally, results showed a recent increase in the frequency of unmarried intercourse and prostitution from 2000 to 2004 (Hetsroni, 2007).

Although content analyses of soap operas showed considerable sexual content in 1985, there was a 35% increase by 1994 (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996). Also in 1994, compared to 1985, there were more themes of (a) negative consequences of sex, (b) rejection of sexual advances, and (c) portrayals of rape. None of these three themes had been very common in the soaps of the 1970s and 1980s. Not surprisingly, R-rated movies and sex magazines had more explicit sex than appeared on television (Greenberg et al., 1993; Greenberg & Hofschire, 2000).

The major focus of this chapter is on sexually explicit materials, including, though not limited to, what is generally called “pornography” or “erotic,” both violent and nonviolent. The term pornography is highly value laden, however, and as such is rather scientifically imprecise. Thus, we will most often refer to such materials as “sexually explicit” rather than “pornographic,” although that term is so widely used it cannot be completely avoided. When we consider effects of sex in the media, however, we need to look more widely than only at what is typically considered “pornography.”
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EFFECTS OF CONSUMING SEXUAL MEDIA

Although many might wish it otherwise, sex, even very explicit sex, does sell. Sexually oriented print, video, broadcast, and Internet materials are highly profitable commercially, a condition which in itself ensures their continued presence. Aside from these economic effects, three major classes of effects of exposure have been identified, namely arousal, attitudinal changes, and behavioral effects. See Gunter (2002), Huston, Wartella, and Donnerstein (1998), Linz and Malamuth (1993), Malamuth (1993), Malamuth and Impett (2001), Mundorf, D’Alessio, Allen, and Emmers-Sommer (2007), O’donlu-Paolucci, Genuis, and Violato (2000), and Pollard (1995) for more detailed reviews of various types of effects and media.

Research on effects of sex in the media has been guided by a variety of theoretical perspectives. Although these theories are not the focus of this chapter, the reader is referred to other chapters in this volume for thorough explanations and reviews of these different perspectives: Morgan, Signorielli, and Shanahan (cultivation theory), Bandura (social cognitive theory), Pett, Brinol, and Pricer (elaboration likelihood model), Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen and Carpentier (priming), and Rubin (uses and gratifications). Each of these perspectives has informed and guided certain areas of research on the effects of sexual media. These theoretical influences are alluded to below, although the focus of the rest of the chapter is on empirical findings on the effects of sexual media.

Arousal

One straightforward effect of consuming sexual media is sexual arousal, the heightened physiological state that energizes sexual behavior. Arousal is measured in either of two ways. The most common measures are self-ratings (e.g., “How aroused are you?” on a 7-point scale). It may also be measured more directly, albeit more obtrusively, through various physiological measures such as electronic sensors measuring penile tumescence, vaginal lubrication, or temperature (thermography).

By most measures, men are typically more aroused by sexual media than are women, especially in response to sexually violent or dehumanizing materials (Malamuth, 1996; Murnen & Stockton, 1997). Sexual violence may be particularly arousing to sex offenders and other violence-prone men and even to “normal” men if the victim is portrayed as being aroused by the assault. Sexually coercive men are more physiologically aroused by slides or verbal descriptions of coercive sex than are “normal” men, who may have developed the ability to inhibit a sexual response in the presence of coercive cues (Lohr, Adams, & Davis, 1997).

Sexual arousal in response to stimuli that would not normally be arousing may be learned through classical conditioning. For example, Rachman and Hodgson (1968) classically conditioned heterosexual men to be sexually aroused by women’s boots by pairing the boots with nude female photos, thus providing a model of how sexual “turn-ons” can be learned. This process could account for the vast individual differences in the specific stimuli that arouse people sexually. Through different experiences, people have all been conditioned to respond to different stimuli through associations with those we love. Myers (2007) reported a friend who was turned on by the smell of onion breath, because his first girl friend loved to eat onions and he has associated that odor with kissing her, through the process of classical conditioning. Because of its connection with a particular person, someone may be aroused by a certain perfume or
cologne, type of clothing, or specific behavior. Media provide many of the images and associations for such conditioning.

The degree of arousal need not be highly correlated with the degree of explicitness. Sometimes people are actually more aroused by a less sexually explicit story than a more explicit one. A scene which cuts suddenly from a bedroom one night to the next morning may sometimes be more arousing than a more explicit version with the intervening night uncut! Censoring a sex scene may make a film more arousing because viewers can fill in their own scripts. When people are allowed to use their own imaginations to construct the ending of a romantic scene, they are more likely to construct a reality that is more arousing to them personally than if they view someone else's idea of what is arousing. The individuality of sexual arousal is the concern that sex therapists have with certain sexual media from the Internet or adult video stores. It has been argued by Carnes (2001) that since the Internet has an unlimited number of websites that feature any sexual desire that the user wants, this leads to sexual arousal because the stimuli are "new." For instance, because of Internet sex websites, a viewer can see images of any desired fantasy, many of which typically do not occur in most people's sexual lives. These images are then "burned" into the brain and are fantasized about during sexual intercourse (Carnes, 2001).

**Individual Differences in Viewers**

Some early studies examined convicted rapists and found them to be aroused by both rape and consenting sex, whereas normal men were aroused only by the consenting sex (Abel, Barlow, Blanchard, & Guild, 1977; Quinsey, Chaplin, & Upfold, 1984), although subsequent studies did not find this consistent arousal effect in sex offenders (Baxter, Barbaree, & Marshall, 1986; Hall, 1989). Under some conditions, however, even "normal" college men were aroused by scenes of sexual violence. For example, men, though not women, were at least as aroused by a rape scene as by a consenting sex scene but only if the victim was portrayed as enjoying the rape and coming to orgasm (Malamuth & Check, 1983; Ohbuchi, Ikeda, & Takeuchi, 1994). The men were not aroused if the victim was shown to be terrorized. Using a similar design, Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, and Baumeister (2003) found that men scoring high in narcissism found a rape scene preceded by affection between the parties as more entertaining and more sexually arousing than low narcissists did. Yates, Barbaree, and Marshall (1984) showed that normal men were equally aroused by depictions of rape and consenting sex but only after they had been angered by a female confederate. Otherwise the consenting sex scene was more arousing. Finally, Bogoer (2001) found that the personality traits of dominance, Machiavellianism, psychoticism, and hypermasculinity were correlated with the likelihood of viewing erotica containing violence, child pornography, or women with insatiable sexual appetites but not with the likelihood of viewing erotica lacking in these themes.

**The Gender Skew**

Explicit sexual materials have traditionally been designed by men and for men. As such, they have a distinctly macho, hypermasculine orientation. Although magazines and videos show all varieties of heterosexual intercourse, they place little emphasis on associated foreplay, afterplay, cuddling, or general tenderness. Women are shown eagerly desiring and participating in intercourse, often with insatiable euphoria. There is
little concern with the consequences of sex or the relational matrix within which most people experience it. Men are much more active seekers and users of sexual material than are women, with an estimated 71% of sex videos viewed by men by themselves (Getlemann, 1999). However, this cannot necessarily be assumed to be due to greater intrinsic male interest in sex; it may merely reflect the pornography industry’s extreme slant to the hypermasculine fantasy. Indeed, a few studies have shown women to have more positive reactions to sexual videos written and directed by women and for women (Mosher & Macan, 1994; Quackenbush, Strassberg & Turner, 1995; Senn & Desmarais, 2004), although men appear to be more likely to seek out sexual media and be aroused by it, even after controlling for content (Malamuth, 1996).

An evolutionary psychology explanation for sex differences in sexual behavior (Buss, 1995; Malamuth, 1996, 1999) would argue that men seek a greater number of sexual partners, while women are more interested in a longer-term commitment from a mate to help raise the offspring. These ideas are consistent with observed findings that men seek out and use sexual media more than women and are generally more aroused than women by them, especially media that visually represent many different potential partners. Women, however, are less aroused than men by typical pornography, preferring more contextually based sexual expressions like romance novels.

The Catharsis Legend

One often hears the argument that consuming sexually explicit material facilitates the expression of sexual urges and thus decreases arousal. This invokes the construct of catharsis, the emotional release that follows the expression of an impulse. This popular idea comes most directly from psychodynamic models of personality, notably Freud. Applied to sex, the catharsis argument predicts that consuming sexual media relieves sexual urges, with the magazine or video, perhaps in conjunction with masturbation, becoming a sort of imperfect substitute for the real behavior. Although a catharsis argument has been used to support loosening restrictions on pornography (Kuchinsky, 1973) and has been reported by sex offenders as a strategy for reducing impulses for committing an offense (Carter, Frettky, Knight, Vanderveer, & Boucher, 1987; Langevin, Lang, Wright, Handy, Frenzel, & Black, 1988), the research support for catharsis is weak to nonexistent (Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999). Viewing sexual material increases, not decreases, sexual arousal, and, after viewing, one is thus more, not less, motivated to engage in sexual behavior. Thus consuming pornography in order to reduce sexual arousal is likely to have the opposite effect. Nor will it reduce the propensity to rape, which is driven by a power motive, not a lack of sexual fulfillment (Frettky & Knight, 1991). See Scheele and DuBois (2006) for a recent conceptual examination of the history and current status of catharsis theory.

Attitudinal Effects

Sex and Values

Many concerns about sexually explicit media involve the attitudes and values they convey. Repeated exposure to media with a more-or-less consistent set of messages may cultivate a worldview that increasingly reflects the perspective of the media (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, this volume). For example, watching numerous sitcoms and movies where characters are routinely sexually active early in a relationship with little
concern of consequences may cultivate acceptance of such a position in the viewer and thus weaken family-taught values against casual premarital sex. Increasing numbers of ads and movies with themes of coercion and sexual violence may desensitize readers to violence toward women. Such effects are especially likely to happen if the character holding those values are respected characters with whom viewers identify. Sexual promiscuity by a prostitute is less likely to influence the values of a viewer than is similar behavior by a respected suburban mother.

One of the major social criticisms of pornography is that it is ideologically anti-women (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993; Russell, 1998), a concern especially levied at violent and nonviolent dehumanizing pornography. It is usually women, not men, who are the playthings or victims of violence by the opposite sex. For example, one sex magazine showed a jackhammer in a woman’s vagina as the opening photo to a story “How to Cure Frigidity,” and another showed a photo spread of a gang rape turning into an orgy with the women appearing to be aroused by the assault. A sex video showed a woman’s breast tied and squeezed for the entertainment of men who were watching.

**Sexual Attitudes**

A large body of research has shown effects on a variety of sexual attitudes and values after exposure to nonviolent sexually explicit materials. After seeing slides and movies of beautiful female nudes engaged in sexual activity, men rated their own partners as being less physically endowed, although they reported undiminished sexual satisfaction (Weaver, Masland, & Zillmann, 1984). Men even reported that they loved their own partners less after seeing sexually explicit videos of highly attractive models (Kennick, Gutierrez, & Goldberg, 1989). Men who saw a pornographic video responded more sexually to a subsequent female interviewer than did men seeing a control video, although this result was only found for men holding traditional gender-role attitudes (McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990). It is as if the voluptuous model has become the norm or “anchor” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) to which real people are compared.

Such effects are not limited to men. Relative to control groups, both men and women who watched weekly pornographic films later reported less satisfaction with the affection, physical appearance, sexual curiosity, and sexual performance of their real-life partners (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988a, 1988b). They also saw sex without emotional involvement as being relatively more important than did the control group, and they showed greater acceptance of premarital and extramarital sex and placed lesser value on marriage and monogamy. They also reported less desire to have children and greater acceptance of male dominance and female submission. Using the same methodology, Zillmann and Bryant (1982) found that participants who had watched sexually explicit films 1–3 weeks earlier consistently overestimated the frequency of oral sex, anal intercourse, sadomasochism, and bestiality in the general population, relative to perceptions of a control group seeing nonsexual films. Teens watching a heavy diet of daytime talk television with frank discussion of sexual topics later overestimated the frequency of such behaviors, relative to a low-viewing group (Greenberg & Smith, 2002). Heavy viewing of soap operas, primetime dramas and overall television predicts a lower sexual self-concept in young adult women (Aubrey, 2007). Such results reflect the cognitive heuristic of availability, whereby we judge the frequency of occurrence of various activities by the ease with which we can generate examples (Glassner, 1999; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, 1974). Recent exposure to vivid media instances thus raises the estimation of the frequency of such occurrences in the real world.
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The sexual material need not even be explicit or graphic to help shape attitudes. Bryant and Rockwell (1994) found that, compared to controls, adolescents who watched a heavy diet of highly sexual primetime programs were more lenient in their judgment about sexual impropriety and how much a victim had been wronged, although these effects were greatly attenuated by open family communication and active critical viewing. One may not even need the pictures. In one study all-verbal print descriptions of sex (e.g., the Penthouse Advisor column) were actually more conducive than photos to fantasizing about one’s own partner (Dermer & Pyszczynski, 1978).

In a meta-analysis of studies examining the relationship of the exposure to sexual media to the acceptance of rape myths, Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, and Giery (1995) concluded that experimental studies show a consistent positive effect between pornography exposure and rape myth acceptance, while correlational and field studies show only a very small positive or nonexistent effect. The relationship was consistently stronger when the pornography was violent than when it was nonviolent, although some experimental studies obtained effects with both types.

Alcohol consumption may enhance existing tendencies to either harshly judge or empathize with a female victim, although it generally decreased sensitivity to victim distress, especially so in “hypermasculine” men (Norris, George, Davis, Martell, & Leonesio, 1999). Alcohol can even affect women’s judgments. Women reading an eroticized rape description while intoxicated were less likely than a sober control group to label coercive sex events as rape (Davis, Norris, George, Martell, & Heiman, 2006).

Pornography, especially videos, may be consumed for one or more of four different purposes (Gunter, 2002). Sexual enhancement creates the mood for sex or gives ideas about specific behaviors. Diversion offers an escape from boredom. Sexual release stimulates sexual fantasies. Substitution replaces a sexual partner. Men are more likely than women to report using pornography for sexual release and substitution. Those who used it for substitution were more likely to show acceptance of rape myths, although those who used it for sexual release were actually less likely to accept the rape myths (Gunter, 2002; Perse, 1994).

Slasher Films: Sex + Violence in Mainstream Movies

Although the studies discussed above used sexually explicit materials, attitudinal effects are by no means confined to clearly pornographic materials. Consider the highly successful horror-film series such as I Know What You Did Last Summer, Halloween, Child’s Play, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Friday the Thirteenth, Scream, The Ring, Hostel, and Nightmare on Elm Street, as well as many lesser known films of the last 40 years. Many are extremely violent with strong sexual overtones. Clover (1992, p. 21) defined a slasher film as a “generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived.” Although some, such as the Scream series and Scary Movie, are framed as “tributes” of the slasher genre, it is not clear that the youthful audiences receive them very differently than the non-satirical films.

Although many slasher films have R ratings in the United States, others are released unrated or direct to video to avoid the “accompanied by parent” requirement of R-rated movies. Given that so many viewings of movies are in DVD format among youth (sometimes in “uncut” versions), the ratings are of limited use, however. Oliver (1993) found that punitive attitudes toward sexuality and traditional attitudes toward women’s sexuality were associated with high school students’ greater enjoyment of previews of
slasher films. Although there has been some trend toward stronger, less victimized female characters in recent films such as Urban Legend, I Know What You Did Last Summer, and Bride of Chucky, the effects of such portrayals remains untested. Gender clearly remains a very salient aspect of these films and men and women respond somewhat differently to them. When young adults wrote descriptions of the most memorable slasher film they had seen and described their emotional reactions to the film, Nolan and Ryan (2000) found that men more often wrote of themes of fear of strangers, while women more often wrote of fear of horrors in the home and in intimate relationships.

Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1984; see also Linz, Donnerstein, & Adams, 1989) examined the attitudinal effects of slasher films. After male college students were initially screened to exclude those with prior hostile tendencies or psychological problems, the remaining men in the experimental group watched one slasher film per day over one week. All of the films were very violent and showed multiple instances of women being killed in slow, lingering, painful deaths in situations associated with much erotic content (e.g., a woman masturbating in her bath is suddenly assaulted and killed by an intruder with a nail gun). Each day participants completed some personality measures and questionnaires evaluating that film.

Over the week, the men became generally less depressed, less annoyed, and less anxious in response to the films. The films themselves were rated as increasingly enjoyable, humorous, and socially meaningful, and progressively less violent, offensive, and degrading to women. Over the week's time, the violent episodes in general and rape episodes in particular were recalled as less frequent. Although these data provide clear evidence of desensitization in men, there is still the question of generalization to other situations.

To answer this question, Linz et al. arranged to have their participants later observe a rape trial at the law school and evaluate it in several ways. Compared to a control group of men who had seen the slasher films rated the rape victim as having been less physically and emotionally injured. These results are consistent with those of Zillmann and Bryant (1984), who found that massive exposure to sexually explicit media by jurors resulted in shorter recommended prison sentences for a rapist. Using Linz et al.'s methodology of rating movies followed by evaluation of an "unrelated" rape trial, Weis and Earls (1995) showed men and women one of four films: rape in a man (Deliverance), man raping a woman (Straw Dogs), nonsexual male aggression toward both men and women (Die Hard 2), and nonaggressive action film (Days of Thunder). They found strong desensitizing effects of the two sexually violent films in men but not in women. Interestingly enough, it did not matter whether a man (Deliverance) or a woman (Straw Dogs) was the victim; both films desensitized men to the female rape trial victim, though neither effect appeared in women. Such findings show that attitudes inculcated by seeing slasher films do indeed transfer to new situations.

There have been some methodological (Weaver, 1991) and conceptual (Sapolsky & Meltzer, 1996) criticisms of this research, and some effects have not been fully replicated in later work (Linz & Donnerstein, 1988). Some have questioned Donnerstein and Linz's conclusion of sharply different effects of viewing violent versus nonviolent sexual materials (Mundorf et al., 2007; Weaver, 1991).

Nor are violent sexual themes confined to horror, or even R-rated, movies. For example, the 1995 PG-rated James Bond movie GoldenEye featured a villain who seduces men to have sex with her and then crushes them to death. It also contains scenes of seduction with very violent mutual battering as a sort of foreplay. The major concern with such
films is the juxtaposition of sex and violence. In countries like India and Japan, rape and other acts of violence against women are even more standard entertainment fare in action-adventure films.

Recently, Internet pornography has begun to be of interest to researchers (see Griffin-Shelley, 2003 for a review). Two early experimental studies (Barak & Fisher, 1997; Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lashambe, 1999) failed to find a consistent effect of amount of Internet sex exposure on any of several measures of misogynistic attitudes. Later work, however, has produced clearer effects. In an extensive correlational study investigating the effect of Internet pornography on adolescent male attitudes, a significant correlation was found between the amount of Internet pornography viewed and recreational sexual attitudes (which included items such as “It is OK to have sexual relationships with more than one partner”), but this effect was mediated by the realism of the pornography (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). Thus, when the sexual actions on the Internet website looked as though they could happen in real life, teenage boys were more likely to have more liberal attitudes toward sex. Similarly, Lo & Wei (2005) found that exposure to Internet pornography was significantly correlated with attitudes toward extramarital sex and sexually permissive behavior (holding hands to sexual intercourse), such that, as the viewing amount increased, so did more accepting attitudes of infidelity, as well as the amount of self-reported sexual behavior by participants. A survey of college students found that viewing sexually explicit material on the Internet was significantly correlated with masturbating online, sending and receiving pornography online, and seeking new people online (Boies, 2002). The same study also sought the uses and gratifications for viewing pornography on the Internet, and responses indicated that men (more than women) use this form of media because they find it sexually arousing, to satisfy sexual needs, to fulfill sexual fantasies, and to satisfy curiosity about new sexual techniques (Boies, 2002).

Thus there is considerable evidence that exposure to erotica, in whatever medium, affects attitudes and values about sex and various sexual issues. We now turn to examining effects on behavior.

Behavioral Effects

Adolescent Socialization

Teenagers who watch a heavy diet of television with sexual content were twice as likely to engage in sexual intercourse over the following year as teens who were light viewers of sexual content, even after controlling for other possible factors (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kauose, Kunkel, & Hunter, 2004). Heavy TV viewing of sexual content was also associated with other non-coital sexual behaviors (heavy petting, deep kissing, etc.). These findings were the same regardless of whether the sexual content was explicitly shown in behavior or only discussed in dialogue.

On the other hand, sexual content in media can have positive effects of increasing knowledge and instigating information seeking. For example, after an ER episode with three minutes on emergency contraception, 51% of viewers reported talking with others about the issue, 23% sought information from another source, and 14% talked to their doctor about it (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002). After an episode of Friends that portrayed a pregnancy resulting from condom failure, about two-thirds of viewers aged 12-17 reported learning that condoms could fail, and most remembered that six months later (Collins et al., 2003).
Teaching New Behaviors

Sometime media may actually teach new behaviors, potentially including some extremely violent and destructive ones. Although examples like men watching a movie depicting a gang rape on a pool table and soon afterward perpetrating a similar act are thankfully not commonplace, the juxtaposition of such events when they actually happen is compelling. Very violent and disturbing images are available on video and Internet, from extreme objectification like a naked woman on a hamburger bun smeared with condiments or women being tortured or even killed in a variety of ways (see Russell, 1998, for many gruesome examples). For obvious ethical reasons, there has been virtually no controlled scientific study of effects of viewing such extreme materials.

In a review of correlational research examining the role of pornography in the sexual development of sex offenders, including the possible role of pornography to incite sexual offenses, Bauserman (1996) concluded that such links have not been reliably demonstrated as general trends. However, sex offenders are a highly diverse group and there may be a subset that uses violent pornography in disturbing ways. Allen, D’Alessio, and Eimers-Sommer (2000) found that, although convicted sex offenders did not consume more pornography than did non-offender controls, they were more aroused by it and were more likely to commit some form of sexual acts afterwards (masturbation, consensual, or coercive sex). Vega and Malamuth (2007) found that the amount of pornography consumption was a significant predictor of sexual aggression in men. Malamuth, Addison, and Koss (2000) came to a similar conclusion examining numerous meta-analyses and empirical studies, with the effect being strongest for violent pornography and those men at high risk for sexual aggression.

Cybersex, defined as communicating online and masturbating (Ferree, 2003), as well as viewing sexual images on the Internet while masturbating, has behavioral consequences for the user as well as the user’s partner and family. Results from an online survey of those impacted by their significant other’s frequent cybersex found that such behavior was a contributing factor in separation and divorce. Furthermore, the majority of couples abstained from having sexual intercourse, resulting from the partner’s (usually female—97%) feelings of isolation and lower self-esteem from not feeling as pretty as the online women, and anger from being lied to (Schneider, 2000). If the user and partner had children, results showed that 14% of those children have seen pornographic images and/or the user masturbating, while 11% of children were adversely affected by the images and users’ cybersex behavior (Schneider, 2003).

Disinhibition of Known Behaviors

Aside from teaching new behaviors, sexual media may also break down natural inhibitions of previously learned behaviors. For example, watching a video with oral sex or bondage may disinhibit the viewer’s prior existing inhibitions against engaging in such behavior. Watching a rape scene where a woman appears to enjoy being assaulted may disinhibit the constraint against some men’s secret urge to commit such a crime. Amount of violent pornography consumed significantly predicted self-rated likelihood to rape, although there was no effect of nonviolent pornography (Demaree, Briere, & Lips, 1988). Check and Guiloien (1989) found that men exposed to a steady diet of rape-myth sexual violence reported a higher likelihood of committing rape themselves.
compared to a no-exposure control group, but the same result was found for a group exposed to nonviolent erotica.

Such effects appear to carry over to new settings. Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1981) showed men a sexually violent film where a woman is attacked, stripped, tied up, and raped. In one version of the film the woman was portrayed as enjoying the rape. Afterwards, men who had seen that version administered more electric shocks to a female, though not to a male, confederate who had earlier angered them in an ostensibly unrelated study. In a similar vein, Zillmann and Bryant (1984) found that participants with repeated exposure to sexually explicit media recommended shorter prison sentences for a rapist than did a control group. Shope (2004) found that men who used pornography, especially if they also abused alcohol, were more likely to batter their partners.

Correlation of Sexual Media to Rape and Other Crimes

One of the main concerns about behavioral effects of viewing sexually explicit materials is their possible relationship with rape and other so-called sex crimes. Most Western nations have experienced since the 1960s a large increase both in the availability of sexually explicit media and in the rise in reported rapes. The relationship between the two, however, has been difficult to clarify. There have been many studies looking at correlations of rates of crimes like rape, sexual assault, exhibitionism, and child molestation, relative to sexual media consumption and changes in the availability of pornography in many different countries (see Bauserman, 1996, for a review). Results have sometimes shown an increase in availability of sexually explicit media associated with an increase in rape rates (e.g., Courit, 1984; Jaffee & Straus, 1987), and other times a decrease or no difference in rates of rape and other crimes (e.g., Kutcherinsky, 1973, 1991). This inconsistency in the literature may be in part due to sampling and procedural differences across studies and in part due to cultural and national differences in social attitudes toward rape, rates of reporting, and likelihood and severity of punishment.

One interesting example of cultural factors is seen in the case of Japan, which has a fairly high availability of sexually explicit materials, including sexual violence, but very low rape rates (Diamond & Uchiyama, 1999). Sexual themes in Japanese art and society go back centuries and continue to be common, without being associated with shame or guilt. Although Japan prohibits pictorial representations of adult genitalia, explicit sexual depictions are not restricted to “X-rated” magazines, books, and films, as in the United States. Why, then, is the incidence of reported rapes in Japan less than one tenth the rate in the U.S. and one-quarter the rate in Western Europe? Although rape in Japan may be more likely to be group instigated, perpetrated by juveniles, and greatly under-reported by victims (Goldstein & Ibaraki, 1983), these factors are unlikely to entirely explain the difference (Abramson & Hayashi, 1984). Japanese society emphasizes order, obligation, cooperation, and virtue, and one who violates social norms is the object of shame. This probably discourages victims from reporting rape but also greatly discourages and stigmatizes those who perpetrate it.

Finally establishing a causal relationship between the availability of sexually explicit materials and the incidence of crimes like rape is extremely difficult, due to the many other relevant factors, including the different varieties of sexual material, cultural differences, changes in social consciousness about reporting sexual assaults, and changing norms sanctioning such behavior. Although there may be positive correlations between
specific measures like sex magazine circulation and reported rapes within a narrow geographical area (e.g., Court, 1984; Jaffe & Straus, 1987), a more general conclusion remains elusive, especially in the age of the Internet where material is available to users almost anywhere.

What About the Context?

Responses to sexual materials are not entirely due to the nature of the material itself. They also depend on a variety of intangible and hard-to-study contextual factors. For example, a documentary on rape or a tasteful drama on incest may be acceptable and noncontroversial, whereas a comedy with the same theme, even with far fewer sexually explicit depictions, may be highly offensive or even be considered pornographic. We react differently to a sexually explicit drawing by Picasso than we do to one in Hustler magazine. Because Shakespeare, Chaucer, The Song of Solomon in the Bible, and serious sex manuals are seen to have serious literary or didactic intentions, the sex therein is considered more acceptable and even healthy.

The context and expectations that are brought to the experience can greatly affect the experiencing of sex in the media. When watching an erotic film with one's parents, one's children, by oneself, in a group of close same-sex friends, or with one's spouse or significant other, reactions to it may differ greatly because of who else is there. Taking a first date to an unexpectedly explicit erotic movie may be a much less pleasant experience than seeing the same movie with a long-term companion. A photo of a nude woman being fed through a meat grinder might be unsurprising in Hustler but shocking if suddenly encountered in Newsweek.

One interesting contextual issue is how to respond to something of clear artistic worth but written at a time with different standards. For example, should Rhett Butler's forcing his attentions on Scarlett O'Hara in Gone with the Wind be seen as rape or as the noncontroversial romantic moment that it appeared to be in 1939? In many old Westerns of the 1940s and 1950s a man comes on sexually to a woman, she initially resists, and finally she falls breathlessly into his arms. Ralph Kramden regularly threatened to punch his wife in the 1950s sitcom The Honeymooners (although he never did so), and Ricky Ricardo occasionally spanked his wife in I Love Lucy. Although such scenes were never sexually explicit, their effect on the modern viewer from a different world is unknown. Do these "safe" shows from an earlier "golden age" of television trivialize or even condone rape or spousal battering? There clearly are sexual messages there.

The relation and integration of sex to the overall plot is another important contextual factor. A sex scene, even a mild and nonexplicit one, may offend people if it appears to be added merely to spice up the story without having any connection to it. Something far more explicit may be accepted much better if it is seen as necessary and central to the plot. Sex scenes in a story about a prostitute may be much less gratuitous than similar scenes in a story about a female corporate executive. Few argued that the graphic pool table gang rape scene in The Accused was gratuitous in that story about the effects of rape on the victim.

The culture can provide important context. For example, some cultures do not consider female breasts to be particularly erotic or inappropriate for public display. Thus, most readers, at least over about age 14, do not consider topless women from some distant culture in National Geographic photos to be erotic, sexual, or pornographic. However, when National Geographic first began to publish such photographs in the early 20th century, it was a carefully reasoned, but risky, editorial decision (Lutz & Collins...
Even within Western culture, standards have changed. In much of the 19th century, knees and calves were thought to be erotic, and the sight of a bare-kneed woman would be considered as scandalous as a topless woman would today. As societies go, North America overall is moderate in what is allowable sexual expression in dress, media, and behavior. Many Western European and Latin American cultures are far more permissive, while many Muslim and East Asian cultures are far more restrictive. Even today, the logic of conservative Islamic cultures insisting on a woman being largely covered stems from a belief that men seeing unclothed sections of women's bodies will be so sexually aroused that they will be unable to control themselves and thus may be driven to sexually assault the women. Thus the dress codes are seen as having the purpose of protecting women.

**MITIGATING THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL MEDIA**

Although not all questions have been answered, results from the research reviewed in this chapter are disturbing, especially given the widespread viewing of sexually violent films by children and young teens and their hugely increased availability through video and the Internet. Some studies have developed and evaluated extensive pre-exposure training and/or post-exposure debriefing procedures designed to lessen the desensitizing effects of sexual violence (Intons-Petersen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Thomas, Shirley, & Blut, 1989; Linz, Fuson, & Donnerstein, 1990). These studies have typically shown mitigating effects on some measures and not on others. Linz et al. (1990) found that men were most strongly positively affected by the information that women are not responsible for sexual assaults perpetrated on them. Offering pertinent information about rape myths reduced desensitization and the inaccuracy of media portrayals after people had seen the sexually violent media. Participants were more impressed with such arguments after they had felt themselves excited and aroused by the film and had seen very specific examples to illustrate the point of the debriefing/mitigation information. In the context of having seen such a film, the specific points of the sensitization training had greater impact. Thus experimental participation may at least sometimes actually decrease rape myth acceptance.

Using a different approach, Wilson, Linz, Donnerstein, and Stipp (1992) measured the effect of seeing a prosocial TV movie about rape. Compared to a control group, people viewing the film generally showed more awareness and concern about rape. However, not all groups were so affected. Unlike women and young and middle-aged men, men over 50 had preexisting attitudes reinforced and actually blamed women more for rape after seeing the film. This suggests that attitudes and experiences of the target audience of interventions must be carefully considered.

In a recent meta-analysis, Mundorf et al. (2007) concluded that studies testing various methods of pre-warning and/or debriefing can completely undo the negative effects of sexual materials and often move attitudes to a less antisocial position than where they were before viewing the material.

**Children and Sexual Media**

All of the research discussed so far has tested adults or adolescents. For obvious ethical reasons, there is no research systematically showing young children sexually explicit
material and measuring their reaction. However, children do see sexual media and are probably affected by them.

One study (Cantor, Mares, & Hyde, 2003) has used an ingenious methodology to study this problem without the unacceptable ethical situation of showing children sexual media. The study asked 196 college students to describe a memory for some sexual media content they had seen. Almost everyone (92%) did so, and 39% wrote about something they had seen at age 12 or younger. Most of these instances were R-rated movies playing in a home with older children or teens (but usually no adults) watching and the child as an incidental viewer. Memories of young children focused on salient physical aspects of the scene, such as nudity, kissing, and "sexual noises." This was in contrast to the over-age-13 memories, which focused more on dialogue, relationships, and themes like rape or same-gender sex. Overall, men's early memories were more positive than women's. Young children felt guilt and concern about what others would think of them. Older children responded more to the content (e.g., anger at rape scenes). Clearly there is need for parental mediation for children exposed to such content, and just as clearly they are often not receiving it.

CONCLUSION

What may we conclude from the research on the effects of sexual media? While there are documented negative effects of nonviolent (especially dehumanizing) pornography, particularly on attitudes toward women, the research is even more compelling in the case of sexual violence. Sexual violence arouses sex offenders, force-oriented men, and sometimes even "normal" young men if the woman is portrayed as being aroused by the assault. For reviews and meta-analyses of results from numerous experimental studies on the effects of viewing pornography, see Allen, D'Alessio, and Brezgel (1995); Davis and Bauserman (1993); Gunter (2002); Huston et al. (1988); Malamuth and Impett (2001); Mundorf et al. (2007); Oddone-Paolucci et al. (2003); and Pollard (1995).

Repeated exposure to sexual violence can lead to desensitization toward violence against women in general and greater acceptance of rape myths. However, the nature of the portrayal also matters. If the woman being assaulted is portrayed as being terrorized and brutalized, desensitizing effects on normal men are much less than if she is portrayed as being aroused and/or achieving orgasm through being attacked. There is nothing arousing or exciting about being raped in real life, and messages to the contrary do not help teenage boys understand the reality of how to relate to girls and women.

Finally, most of us believe that other people are more influenced by advertising (Gunther & Thorson, 1992) and news coverage (Gunther, 1991; Perloff, 1989) than we are; this is the third-person effect (Perloff, this volume). The same is true about the perceived effects of sexual media (Gunther, 1995); we believe it affects others more than it affects us. As society accepts increasingly explicit sexual materials, no one is immune from their reach. The influence is much more far-reaching that the adolescent boy's transient titillation from looking at a Playboy centerfold. What we learn about sexuality from the media forms a large part of what sexuality means to us.

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