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Understanding the role of entertainment media in the sexual socialization of American youth: A review of empirical research☆

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Abstract

Whereas it is often suggested that the media have assumed a prominent role in the sexual socialization of American youth, empirical evidence supporting this premise has been slow to accumulate. To provide both the fuel and motivation for future research in this area, this review presents a comprehensive overview of the existing state of the field, covering research on both magazine and television content, and on both high school and college student samples. In addressing the three central issues of what, how, and where/to what extent, this review first examines the nature and prevalence of sexual content both on TV and in magazines. It then describes several theoretical mechanisms outlining how potential influence might occur, and then presents findings examining such influences. Overall, evidence indicates that frequent and involved exposure to sexually oriented genres such as soap operas and music videos is associated with greater acceptance of stereotypical and casual attitudes about sex, with higher expectations about the prevalence of sexual activity and of certain sexual outcomes, and, even occasionally, with greater levels of sexual experience. In light of these findings, I offer a working conceptual model of the media's role

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as a sexual socialization agent, and conclude by outlining 14 specific suggestions for future research.
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Sexual socialization is often described as the process by which knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality are acquired. It is an intricate, multidimensional process that occurs gradually over many years and involves coordinating input from several sources. The messages received cover a range of topics, including everything from information about the biology of reproduction to values and attitudes about dating, sex, love, and romantic relationships. The messages also come in multiple forms. Although the popular image of "the sex talk" is of a verbal, one-time talk about sex, this is not the only nor even the most frequent mode of transmission. Instead, sexual messages are transmitted both verbally and nonverbally, directly and indirectly, and are frequently subtle, ambiguous, and inconsistent.

Where do these messages typically originate? Parents are generally acknowledged as the initial sexuality educators of their children, teaching about love, affection, and body modesty from birth. In terms of concrete information about sex, students typically report learning the most from their same-sex peers (Ballard & Morris, 1998; Davis & Harris, 1982; Handelsman, Cabral, & Weisfield, 1987; Kallen, Stephenson, & Doughty, 1983; Spanier, 1977). Yet while parents and peers are important sources of sexual information, they are not the sole sources, and possibly not the most influential. The media, and television and magazines in particular, are currently believed to be critical educators about sexual relationships for today's youth. Across several studies, the media generally rank among the top three sexual informants, often following peers or schools in importance (e.g., Amonker, 1980; Andre, Frevert, & Schuchmann, 1989; Thornburg, 1981). Indeed, young teens in one recent study ranked entertainment media as their *top* source of information about sexuality and sexual health (Kaiser Family Foundation & Children Now, 1997). Similarly, 94% of youth surveyed by Bachen and Illouz (1996) indicated that they looked to TV and to movies for examples of romantic love; only one-third looked to their mothers. Given that peers and even parents may have developed some of their conceptions about sex from the media, it is likely that the depth and breadth of the media's influence have been underestimated.

Several theoretical and practical circumstances explain why television and other media are likely to play a critical role in educating American youth about sexuality. First, sexual content is pervasive in the media. From primetime sitcoms and dramas to feature films, the media present adolescents with countless verbal and visual examples of how dating, intimacy, sex, and relationships are handled. It has been estimated (conservatively)

that youth will encounter approximately 10,000–15,000 sexual references, jokes, and innuendoes each year (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999). Second, this content is highly accessible and widely consumed. Surveys indicate that young people watch 16–17 h of TV weekly and spend 38 h each week using media of some kind (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). This is typically more time than youth spend in school or interacting directly with their parents (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Third, the media are often forthcoming and explicit about sexuality when others are not. In comparison to other sources, the media are more supportive of sex, typically focusing on the positive possibilities of sex rather than its problems and consequences (Brown & Keller, 2000), and covering topics such as passion and sexual pleasure that other sources may avoid (Strasburger, 1995). Finally, because their sole purpose is to draw an audience, the media are intentionally appealing, compelling, and engaging. While other socializing agents, such as churches and schools, are strongly invested in socializing adolescents to accept mainstream attitudes, values, and beliefs, media outlets are more likely to turn out what they believe adolescents want in order to make a profit (Arnett, 1995). Given the lack of alternative sources of information coupled with the media's accessibility, openness, and appealing nature, it is only reasonable to expect that the media would play an important role in sexual socialization (Brown, Walsh-Childers, & Waszak, 1990).

The media's potential influence as a sexual educator is not lost on teens and their parents, who frequently express concern about its impact. For example, a study of 1000 adolescents (Howard, 1985) found that TV is considered to be their greatest source of pressure to become sexually active, followed closely by popular music. A recent poll of 1000 adults revealed that 90% of Americans believe that media depictions of sex contribute to young people's having sex (Impoco et al., 1996). Thus, not only do youth admit to using the media as a source of sexual information, but both teens and adults acknowledge the potential impact of their content.

Yet despite various indications that the media are substantial contributors to the sexual socialization of American youth, little empirical evidence has been produced demonstrating the nature and extent of their impact in this area. For example, in studies of sexual communication, the focus has been on parental input (e.g., Fisher, 1987; Jaccard & Dittus, 1993), with some work on peer communication (e.g., Daugherty & Burger, 1984; DiIorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). In theoretical models of sexual socialization (e.g., Benda, DiBlasio, & Kashner, 1994; Christopher, 2001; Strahle, 1983), the media's role has not typically been incorporated. Even media effects research has given limited attention to sexual content. Instead, stemming partly from several government-funded initiatives, the focus has been on media violence, with approximately 1000 studies exploring its impact (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999). Whereas this oversight likely stems from several factors, including the complexity of sexuality as a construct, the

protective nature of parents and schools, and a lack of training in assessing media effects, continuing to exclude the media only obscures powerful direct and indirect influences on the sexual socialization process. It is time that the media's role as a sexual socializer be brought to the foreground. As noted by Strasburger and Donnerstein (1999), "Television and other media represent one of the most important and underrecognized influences on children and adolescents' health and behavior in the 1990s" (p. 129).

Accordingly, the goal of this review is to summarize existing findings concerning both the sexual content of mainstream American media and their impact on the sexual attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of American youth. Three main questions are addressed. First, what are the sexual messages conveyed by the media and how frequently are they depicted? Second, to what extent does regular exposure to this content shape what young people feel and believe about sexual relationships? Third, how can the field move forward to begin to fill some of the critical gaps? Over the past 30 years, a small but important body of literature has amassed examining these questions. It currently consists of approximately 64 content analyses and 36 effects studies which are summarized here. These studies were compiled using both electronic and ancestral search mechanisms that were as exhaustive as possible. Electronic searches were conducted under PsychINFO and the Web of Science, using the following keywords: *sexuality* and *sexual roles*, in combination with *media*, *television*, *advertising*, *magazines*, and *music videos*. Ancestral searches were conducted by examining the reference sections of each of the articles uncovered and all available review articles in the field. To keep the review manageable, I excluded unpublished studies (i.e., no dissertations or conference papers), studies focusing on mass media genres without a visual component (i.e., no studies on popular music lyrics or popular books), and studies that examined the impact of pornography or exposure to sexual violence.[1] Finally, this review expands on previous summaries of the field (e.g., Brown et al., 1990; Greenberg, 1994; Greenberg & Hofschire, 2000; Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998; Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999) by examining media other than television, and by including studies that tested children, adolescents, or college undergraduates (typically emergent adults). My goal is to present a concrete overview of the existing state of the field in order to provide both the fuel and motivation for future research.

[1] Although youth sometimes gain access to pornographic materials, my intent was to document the nature and impact of mainstream media content designed and targeted for a general audience (i.e., material that might be reviewed in *People* magazine). It was also decided that including studies examining the impact of media violence would cloud definitions of "sexual relationships," and would best be included in reviews of media violence.

The nature and prevalence of sexual content in the media

Television's sexual portrayals

Research describing the messages about sexuality and sexual relationships presented on television indicates that sexual content is prevalent, varies somewhat by genre, and appears to have been increasing over the past two decades. Uncovered for this review were 41 published studies that conducted statistical analyses of television's sexual content. Most of this research focuses on content presented on prime time comedies and dramas (15 studies), music videos (14 studies), and daytime soap operas (9 studies). In assessing the nature of the sexual content on television, researchers have typically recorded a block of programming, and have then analyzed the dialogue and actions of the characters for sexual acts or references to sexual acts. The dominant method has been to develop a list of physical and intimate behaviors, such as kissing, affectionate touching, and intercourse, and then to count the number of times these acts are displayed visually or referred to verbally. Additional variables documented in these analyses have been the gender and marital status of the participants, the genre of the program, the sex of the initiator, and the participants' attitudes toward the actions (i.e., positive or negative). Resulting is typically an overview both of the types of sexual behaviors commonly depicted and of the frequency with which sexual issues are discussed.

Six consistent findings have emerged from these efforts. First, it is commonly reported that television's sexual content is not typically visually graphic, but is instead dominated by either verbal innuendo or less explicit physical acts of flirting, kissing, hugging, and erotic touching (e.g., Cassata & Skill, 1983; Kunkel, Cope, & Biely, 1999). Explicit visual indications of sexual intercourse are rare, for example, making up only 2 of the 505 sexual incidents observed in one study (Olson, 1994a). Instead, *the* most common type of sexual content on primetime programs, and on situation comedies (sit-coms), especially, is often verbal suggestiveness or innuendo, occurring anywhere from 2.99 to 10.82 times per hour (Sapolsky, 1982; Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991; Shidler & Lowry, 1995; Silverman, Sprafkin, & Rubinstein, 1979; Sprafkin & Silverman, 1981). Here, sexual content is typically presented in a humorous context through jokes, sight gags, and double entendres (e.g., Suls & Gastoff, 1981). On daytime soap operas and primetime dramas, where the tone is more serious, passionate kissing and erotic touching are the dominant modes of sexual expression (e.g., Greenberg, Abelman, & Neuendorf, 1981; Lowry, Love, & Kirby, 1981; Lowry & Towles, 1989b), as are verbal references to sexual intercourse such as "having an affair" and "going to bed" (Greenberg et al., 1993c; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996; Greenberg & D'Alessio, 1985). Thus, TV's sexual content is often verbal, and when visual, the behaviors depicted are mostly precursory (e.g., flirting, kissing).

Only a few studies have attempted to analyze more deeply the specific content of these verbal comments and innuendoes. Kunkel et al.'s (1999) report of sexual content in four samples indicated that from 57 to 67% of the programs contained some talk about sex. Breaking "talk" down into specific types, the authors report that 59–74% was talk about prospective interests, 18–21% concerned past sexual experiences, and only 0–6% involved expert advice/technical information. Using 17 thematic categories, Ward (1995) analyzed verbal references to sexuality and sexual relationships appearing in 36 episodes of the 12 programs children and adolescents view most. Approximately 29% of the interactions between the characters on these episodes contained references to sexual issues, extending to a high of 50% of interactions for some programs. Most prevalent were messages in which dating was treated as a game or competition (11.8% of the sexual messages), in which men commented on women's physical appearance (11.5%), in which women noted that they were attracted to specific types of men (9.6%), and in which sex was characterized as a defining feature of masculinity (9.6%).

A second common finding across the existing studies is that the bulk of sexual action and language occurs outside of marital relationships. Evidence indicates that verbal and visual references to sexuality originate more frequently from people who are not married than from people who are married. Although the exact ratio of unmarried to married sexual content varies from study to study, ranging from as low as 2 to 1 to as high as 23.7 to 1, sexual depictions among unmarried partners are *always* more common (e.g., Fernandez-Collado, Greenberg, Atkin, & Korzenny, 1978; Greenberg, Graef, Fernandez-Collado, Korzenny, & Atkin, 1980; Greenberg et al., 1993c; Lowry et al., 1981; Lowry & Shidler, 1993). For example, in their analysis of the sexual content appearing in 52.5 h of soap operas, Lowry and Towles (1989b) reported 285 references to unmarried sexual intercourse and only 12 to married sexual intercourse. These descriptions may be somewhat misleading, however, for they do not take into account whether or not partners are in a committed relationship. Addressing this oversight, Larson's (1991) year-long analysis of one soap opera revealed a "norm of exclusivity," in which 83% of the kisses occurred between people who were either married or in a committed relationship, and in which characters typically kissed only one or two partners over the course of a year. It appears that while couples engaging in sexual acts and sexual dialogue may not be married to each other, they are also not likely to be promiscuous.

A third consistent finding has been the lack of discussion and depiction of sexual planning and consequences, with few references to sexually transmitted disease, contraception, pregnancy prevention, and abortion. Of the hundreds of sexual acts and statements uncovered, references to STDs and pregnancy prevention typically make up from 0 to 4.8% of the total (Lowry

& Shidler, 1993; Lowry & Towles, 1989a; Lowry & Towles, 1989b; Shidler & Lowry, 1995). For example, one study of 105 h of soap operas from 1989 and 1990 revealed that only 4 of the 505 sexual acts coded (.79%) referred to pregnancy prevention and none to STD prevention (Olson, 1994a). This is not to imply, however, that sex is presented in a uniformly positive context on television. Although *physical* consequences of sexual acts are seldom noted, *emotional* consequences (i.e., betrayal, pain, embarrassment) are frequently highlighted. As a result, the tone of sexual statements can be positive, negative, or neutral, and commonly include denials that sexual acts occurred, rejections of proposals, and disapproving comments (Greenberg, 1994; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996; Shidler & Lowry, 1995). Thus, the *emotional* fallout of sexual decisions are given some attention, especially in movies and on soap operas where high drama is required; however, minimal attention is given to the *physical* consequences of sexual behavior, with few sexual encounters resulting in pregnancy or disease.

A fourth trend uncovered is that the nature and prevalence of sexual content vary across genres (e.g., Franzblau, Sprafkin, & Rubinstein, 1977; Signorielli, 1987). For example, while sexual references are reported to be more prevalent on soap operas than on primetime programming, primetime programs typically contain more varied sexual activity, more premarital sex, and greater explicitness (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1981; Greenberg et al., 1993c). Moreover, talk shows feature little sexual action, but are teeming with sexual talk that is often quite personal and graphic (Greenberg, Sherry, Busselle, Hnilo, & Smith, 1997).

Because of their distinct format, music videos have been examined using an analytic approach that emphasizes imagery over dialogue or lyrics, with reports indicating that 44–76% of videos contain sexual imagery (Baxter, De Riemer, Landini, Leslie, & Singletary, 1985; Brown & Campbell, 1986; Gow, 1990; Greeson & Williams, 1986; Pardun & McKee, 1995; Sherman & Dominick, 1986). One analysis of 40 videos from 1990 found that 90% of the 30-s intervals coded contained implicit images of sex (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993). As with other genres, the sexual content of music videos has been noted to be more implied than overt, relying heavily on innuendo through provocative clothing, suggestive dance moves, and light physical contact (e.g., Vincent, 1989). For example, in one study of 203 music videos from Black Entertainment Television (BET; Jones, 1997), it was reported that 42% of hip-hop videos featured fondling, 42% featured characters in hot pants, and 58% featured a female dancing sexually. This imagery has been found to vary across musical genres, however, with lower levels reported in country and classic rock videos, and higher levels appearing in rap, rhythm and blues, and pop videos (DuRant et al., 1997; Hansen & Hansen, 2000; Tapper, Thorson, & Black, 1994). Thus, the nature and prevalence of sexual content on TV appear to vary both within and across genres.

A fifth consistent finding is a strong difference in the degree to which women and men's bodies are sexualized. Across many TV genres, a common finding is that women are depicted as sexual objects more often than men. In music videos, for example, women more frequently than men are presented in provocative and revealing clothing (e.g., Andsager & Roe, 1999; Seidman, 1992), are objectified (Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993), and typically serve as decorative objects who dance and pose and do not play any instruments (e.g., Arnett, 2002; Gow, 1995; Vincent, Davis, & Boruszkowski, 1987). For example, in the 182 videos analyzed by Seidman (1992), 37% of women wore revealing clothing compared to 4.2% of men. In R-rated movies, the presence of nudity is equally asymmetrical; here, instances of female nudity are reported to exceed those of male nudity in a 4:1 ratio (Greenberg et al., 1993b). Similar sex differences have been reported from commercials. For example, in the 505 commercials sampled by Lin (1998), women, in comparison to men, were more likely to be shown in a state of undress, exhibited more sexiness, and were more often depicted as sexual objects (9.2% of men vs. 20.8% of women).

Grauerholz and King (1997) reported a similar focus on women's bodies in their analysis of the prevalence of sexual harassment on primetime programming. Of the 81 episodes analyzed, 84% contained at least one incident of sexual harassment, with an average of 3.4 incidents per program. The most frequent acts were sexist comments (33.3% of the incidents), in which a wide variety of words were used to describe women (e.g., *broad*, *bimbo*, *dumbass chick*, *toots*, *fox*, *babe*, *blondie*). The next most frequent occurrences were verbal sexual comments (32% of the incidents). These typically focused on women's bodies or body parts, especially on their breasts. The third most common category was body language (13%) and generally involved men or adolescent boys leering at women or girls. In total, the authors report that approximately 78% of the harassment focused on demeaning terms for women or on the sexualization of their bodies.

Finally, there appear to be modest to large increases in the frequency of sexual references over the past decades, although the rates differ significantly across studies depending on the manner in which sexual content is defined. Typically, higher rates are obtained when less explicit categories of verbal suggestiveness and innuendo are included as sexual content. For primetime programming, the overall rate of sexual incidents or references per hour has witnessed a 10-fold increase from 1.04 to 1.72 times per hour in the late 1970s, to 9.66 to 15.8 times per hour in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In terms of specific types of references, verbal references to sexual intercourse among unmarried partners were placed at .71 times per hour and at .52 times per hour in two studies based on programming from the late 1970s (Fernandez-Collado et al., 1978; Greenberg et al., 1980), and increased to 2.88 times per hour for programming from the early 1990s (Shidler & Lowry, 1995). Evidence therefore indicates that the last two decades have

brought increases both in the overall prevalence of sexual content on TV, and in the frequency with which premarital sex is featured.

In summary, sexuality on television involves multiple allusions to and depictions of spontaneous, glamorous, unmarried, nonrelational sex. Also prevalent are examples of marital infidelity, the objectification of women, and "lighthearted" sexist comments. Verbal references to sex are more common than are visual depictions, which typically focus on flirting, kissing, and erotic touching. Little attention is given to the physical consequences of sexual decisions such as pregnancy, STDs, and AIDS. Although prevalence rates vary by genre, gender, and the sexual act in question, the overall rates appear to be increasing.

Sexual content in magazines

Equally abundant yet more graphic are the sexual images and messages in mainstream magazines, believed to be one of the most accessible media for information about sexuality (Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998). Where TV implies and insinuates, magazines are explicit and direct, exposing readers to nude and provocatively posed models, frank discussions of sexual techniques, and specific suggestions on how to improve sexual relationships. For example, evidence indicates that in women's magazines, discussions of dating, love, and marriage typically dominate (e.g., Duffy & Gotcher, 1996), making up the largest category of topics raised on the covers of some magazines (McMahon, 1990), and the most frequent content of articles about interpersonal relationships (e.g., Duran & Prusank, 1997). Moreover, analyses indicate that references to sexual issues have increased over the last decades. Scott's, 1986 analysis of six general interest magazines (e.g., *Reader's Digest, Life*) reported that sexual references increased 68% from 1970 to 1980, to a ratio of .88 per page. In addition, Carpenter (1998) reported that the percentage of items/articles mentioning sexuality in *Seventeen* has increased steadily over time, from 30.2% in 1974, to 38.2% in 1984, to 52.6% in 1994. Given their frequent focus on sexual relationships, and the increased prevalence of sexual content in general, it is important to examine the specific types of sexual messages that magazines convey.

In reviewing the literature, which at this point focuses heavily on teen girl and women's magazines (Carpenter, 1998; Duffy & Gotcher, 1996; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Durham, 1996, 1998; Garner et al., 1998; McMahon, 1990; Prusank, Duran, & DeLillo, 1993; Smith & Matre, 1975), several recurring themes emerged concerning the sexual messages expressed by magazine articles. One of the most dominant themes reported across the studies and across magazines was that presenting oneself as sexually desirable and thereby gaining the attention of men is a focal goal for women. Analyses indicated that girls and young women are repeatedly encouraged to look and dress in specific ways and to use certain products in order to be more

attractive to and desired by men. Indeed, attracting the attention of boys by looking "hot" and "sexy" was the focus of many of the articles, text, cover lines, ads, and photographs analyzed. Findings also revealed that not only were female readers given advice on how to look and dress to attract men, but also on which attributes are *most* successful in attracting men (i.e., innocence), and which are *least* successful and should be avoided (e.g., being bossy, acting like a mom; Garner et al., 1998). Therefore, in much of the content of mainstream magazines geared toward adolescent girls and young women, researchers report a heavy emphasis on the centrality of heterosexual relationships and on the need for women to become sexual objects to gain the attention of men.

A second and related theme reported was that in magazines, the work of relationships is depicted as the exclusive domain of women (Duran & Prusank, 1997; Garner et al., 1998; Prusank et al., 1993). Analyses indicated that men are frequently portrayed as lacking relationship skills, as incapable of expressing themselves verbally or emotionally, and as inept, incompetent, unaware, and at times, uncivilized. The assumption is that men need to be taught about emotional intimacy and about romantic relationships, and that women are expected to serve as the tutors and therapists (Garner et al., 1998). However, it is argued that this depiction of young women as sex therapists and as communication teachers rather than as friends and partners is problematic for it advocates the subordination of self for others and encourages young women to suppress their own concerns and insecurities (Garner et al., 1998).

A third prominent theme reported across these analyses is an emphasis on differences in the sexual nature of women and men, differences corresponding to the sexual double standard (e.g., Carpenter, 1998; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Durham, 1996, 1998). The dichotomy set-up is typically one of female allure, passivity, and responsibility, and male sexual aggressiveness. Researchers reported that male sexuality is commonly depicted as aggressive, urgent, insatiable, and relentless. The natural virility and sexual appetite of men is a prominent theme of magazine articles, and men are characterized as being in a constant state of sexual desire and readiness. Women's sexuality is portrayed quite differently, with little emphasis on women's sexual desires and appetites, but strong emphasis on their need for caution and discretion. It is reported that advice to girls about sex appearing in magazines like *YM* and *Seventeen* (Durham, 1998; Garner et al., 1998) typically has a cautionary tone, warning girls to refrain from sexual activity before they are ready and to avoid one-night stands. Indeed, prominent in magazines' discussions of sexuality are references to sexuality as a form of victimization of women by men, which appeared in 62% of the sexuality articles analyzed from *Seventeen* in 1974 and in 46% from 1994 (Carpenter, 1998). Thus, traditional sexual roles are strongly supported by mainstream magazines, with women emerging as

romantic, sexual objects[2] and victims, and men as lecherous sexual agents for whom love and romance are secondary.

A fourth theme noted across the content analyses is that magazine content presents conflicting and contradictory pictures of female sexuality (e.g., Durham, 1996, 1998; Garner et al., 1998). First, while magazine articles are frequently sexual and explicit, and repeatedly encourage female readers to be sexually alluring to men, readers are also warned *not* to be too sexually active, and are frequently encouraged to wait and abstain. According to Durham (1998), this results in a construction of girls' sexuality that simultaneously obligates them to be sexually attractive *and* committed to sexual "responsibility" or even chastity. Second, conflict is noted to stem from magazines' simultaneous emphasis on women's independence and self-determination, and their considerable reminders of the overarching imperative of "finding" a man and achieving success as wives and mothers (Durham, 1996). Therefore, while young girls in teen magazines are given agency to say no, that agency is overwhelmed by the message that their primary goal should be to please men and not offend them (Garner et al., 1998).

A fifth theme emerging from the content analyses is that substantial aspects of women's sexuality are conspicuously absent in mainstream magazines, distorting portions of their true world realities (Duffy & Gotcher, 1996; Durham, 1998; Garner et al., 1998). Repeated mention was given to the lack of representation of young women's own sexual desires, or of homosexuality or masturbation as appropriate expressions of sexuality. Equally minimal are discussions concerning the danger of AIDS and other STDs and of methods of prevention (Johnson, Gotthoffer, & Lauffer, 1999). While young women are repeatedly encouraged to attract men's attention and to teach men about intimacy, little encouragement is given for young women to discuss issues of pregnancy, birth control, or AIDS with their men (Garner et al., 1998), or to discuss how their partners can better please them.

Overall, the sexual content of magazines is reported to construct a traditional portrait of sexual roles, and of the female sexual role especially, with a heavy emphasis on women's pleasing men through enhancing their beauty and promoting their sexual availability (Garner et al., 1998). The sexual double standard is frequently upheld, while minimal information is presented concerning sexual risks and consequences, homosexuality, and women's sexual agency. Some improvements have been noted over the past decade, including a recognition of young women's sexual desires (e.g., Carpenter, 1998), and an emphasis on the importance of open and honest

[2] One exception, here, may be *Cosmopolitan*, which is reported to tutor women in aggressive strategies for voracious sexual appetites (Durham, 1996). This magazine does not typically follow the relational, contextual angle of sex for women that often appears in magazines such as *Glamour* and *Seventeen*.

communication, the need to know oneself and one's partner, and the notion of intimacy as a process (Prusank et al., 1993). Yet researchers continually expressed concern that these humanistic messages might be overshadowed by the dominant themes which were frequently very traditional. As one research team commented, the central message sent to young female readers is that "the road to happiness is attracting males for successful heterosexual life by way of physical beautification" (Evans, Rutberg, Sather, & Turner, 1991, p. 112).

Magazine advertisements

A small body of work has examined the prevalence of sexual content in magazine advertising, focusing both on the levels of nudity and on the sexual explicitness of the content and images. One approach has been to examine the extent to which sexual images and references are used to draw viewers to television programs. Examining the advertisements for upcoming programs appearing in *TV Guide*, researchers have found that approximately 21% contain references to sexuality or to sexual issues (Soley & Reid, 1985; Williams, 1987). It appears as if titillation is used quite regularly to entice viewers.

A second approach has been to examine the level of explicitness of the sexual imagery and of the dress of the models in mainstream or specialty magazines (e.g., Rudman & Hagiwara, 1992). Here, the central concerns have been: How bare are the bodies and how sexually intimate are their poses? Two central trends have emerged from this literature. First, studies consistently report differences in the way that female and male models are dressed and portrayed. In comparison to their male counterparts, female models are more likely to be scantily clad, nude, dressed in a sexually explicit manner, and posed in sexually exploitative and submissive postures (e.g., Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999; Rudman & Verdi, 1993; Solely & Kurzbard, 1986). For example, across two women's magazines examined in one study (Soley & Reid, 1988), female models were suggestively clad, partially clad, or nude in 38% of the single-sex ads; such was the case for men in only 20% of the single-sex ads. This discrepancy was even larger for the two men's magazines analyzed, in which 76% of the women in single-sex ads but only 17% of the men were suggestively clad, partially clad, or nude. A second trend emerging is that advertising displays of both sexes have grown more sexually explicit over time and contain more nudity (Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2001; Reichert et al., 1999; Solely & Kurzbard, 1986; Soley & Reid, 1988). For example, a recent analysis of 2545 ads drawn from 36 issues of six magazines (Reichert et al., 1999) reported that 40% of female models were dressed provocatively in 1993 compared to 28% in 1983. At the same time, 53% of 1993 ads containing a woman and a man involved sexually suggestive contact; such was the case for only 21% of the mixed-sex ads in 1983. Thus, in magazine advertising,

women more than men are frequently posed in suggestive, sexualized, and submissive postures, nudity is growing more common, and poses between female and male models have become increasingly intimate.

Sexual content in feature films

Adolescents comprise the largest demographic segment of moviegoers (Strasburger, 1995), and increasing numbers of movies with sexual themes are targeted specifically to them (e.g., *Cruel Intentions*, *American Pie*). However, little empirical data have been gathered concerning the sexual content of feature films. In the five published studies identified for this review, evidence indicates that this content is quite substantial. In their analysis of the 50 top-grossing films of 1996, Bufkin and Eschholz (2000) indicated that 60% of the films contained at least one sex scene. This number is quite large considering that only half of these films were rated R; the others were rated PG or PG13. In addition, there was only one reference to the use of protection in the 30 sex scenes studied, and this was during a rape. In the 15 films analyzed by Abramsom and Mechanic (1983), protection was never even mentioned. Others note the large disparity in portrayals of marital and nonmarital sex. In their analysis of the top 25 movie video rentals of 1998, Dempsey and Reichert (2000) found that not only was sexual behavior exhibited more frequently among unmarried versus married partners (85% of total behaviors versus 15%), but that the sexual behaviors of unmarried partners were typically more explicit (i.e., implied intercourse versus passionate kissing). A similar disparity was reported in an analysis of 16 R-rated films from 1982, 1983, and 1984 that were popular among teens (Greenberg et al., 1993b). Here, references to sexual intercourse between unmarried partners accounted for 45% of all sexual activity coded, and outnumbered references to married sex in a 32:1 ratio. Finally, Pardun (2001) reported that romance, sex, and marriage are commonly separated in popular films, and that depictions of marital sex are least common and least compelling. With their abundant sexual content and "larger than life" status, feature films hold tremendous potential as attractive sexual educators. Further study of this genre is sorely needed.

In summary, data gathered across several different media illustrate a relatively consistent picture of the media's portrayal of sexuality. Sexual references and imagery are quite prevalent and have been increasing in number and explicitness since the 1970s. This content frequently treats women as sexual objects, upholds the sexual double standard, and glamorizes nonrelational or unmarried sex while giving minimal attention to married sex or sexual planning. The resulting messages are often quite conflicting, especially for young women, who are encouraged to be sexually attractive yet not too sexually active, and are informed that "everyone is doing it," but are cautioned about "reputations" and pregnancy risks with little concrete

information about prevention. How do young viewers use and integrate this material in developing their conceptions about sexuality and sexual relationships? This next section provides an overview of theoretical models and mechanisms exploring *how* this process might work.

How might media exposure affect sexual attitudes and behavior? Theoretical mechanisms

In understanding the media's role as an agent of sexual socialization, it is important to address the issue of mechanism. More specifically, how might media content get into the minds of viewers, shaping their sexual attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors? Whereas initial speculations may have taken the "magic bullet" approach (hypodermic needle model; for review, see Harris, 1994), in which it was assumed that content is absorbed unchallenged by passive viewers, current theorizing acknowledges the general complexity of the dynamics involved. Viewers, even the youngest of children, are not mindless drones, soaking up and imitating all media images. Indeed, many viewers are exposed to the same sexual content, but their subsequent beliefs and behaviors are not equivalent. In many current approaches, viewers are believed to construct meaning from the content presented based on their existing worldviews, schemas, and personal experiences—a notion that focuses on selective effects based on individual differences (Harris, 1994). Consequently, any given content must be integrated with viewers' existing perspectives and with input from other sources (e.g., peers, family), and is likely to mean different things to different people. It is also now assumed that connections between media exposure and viewers' social attitudes are bi-directional. While media content may influence viewers, it is the viewers who actively select and are drawn to specific content.

Because no causal model specifically addresses the media's role as a sexual socializer, research in this area has been either atheoretical, or has drawn support from one of three general theoretical models. For survey research examining the media's influence on viewers' sexual *attitudes* and *assumptions*, cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) has been the dominant model referenced. This theory proposes that television's consistent yet restricted images and portrayals construct a specific portrait of reality, and as viewers watch more and more television, they gradually come to cultivate or adopt beliefs about the world that coincide with this portrait. Under these claims, this perspective focuses on people's regular exposure levels and on the differing perceptions of "heavy" versus "light" viewers. If content analyses indicate that sex on TV is glamorous, prevalent, recreational, and relatively risk free, the cultivation model predicts that frequent viewers will be more inclined than sporadic viewers to endorse and accept this perspective about sexuality. Additional

work by Shrum and colleagues (e.g., Shrum, 1996; Shrum & O'Guinn, 1993) examining the specific psychological processes driving cultivation effects point to the role of construct accessibility, arguing that specific associations and assumptions are more accessible in memory for heavy viewers compared to lighter viewers. Although cultivation theory has been heavily criticized for its assumption of uniform media content and its minimal attention to viewer choices and interpretations (e.g., Harris, 1994; Perse, 1986; Potter, 1986), it remains one of the most widely used models in this area.

A second theoretical perspective commonly used is Bandura's cognitive social learning theory (Bandura, 1986, 1994), which examines the influence of observational learning on the adoption of specific *behaviors*. Here, the general notion is that through the observation of media models, viewers come to learn which behaviors are "appropriate" and "inappropriate"—that is, which will later be rewarded or punished (Donnerstein & Smith, 2001). These behaviors are not necessarily imitated immediately, but instead the knowledge is stored as behavioral scripts (Huesmann, 1988) to be retrieved and applied when individual circumstances elicit it (Huston et al., 1998). The theory has been expanded from its original form to acknowledge both the role of cognitive processes and the interactive influences of environmental forces (Bandura, 1994). Currently several factors are believed to determine who and what are modeled. More specifically, observers are believed to be more likely to learn and model the behavior of models who are perceived as attractive, powerful, and similar, and whose behaviors are rewarded or not punished, salient, simple, possess functional value, and are possible. This theory would predict that observing attractive TV characters enjoying sexual intercourse with few negative consequences will lead teens to perceive this behavior as appropriate and to store this information for later use (Brown & Steele, 1995).

A third theoretical perspective supporting research in this area is priming theory (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994) which draws from several cognitive theories focusing on schema activation and accessibility (for reviews see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Srull & Wyer, 1989). This perspective is typically used for examining short-term effects of media stimuli presented in experimental settings. According to this perspective, the presentation and processing of a stimulus with a particular meaning "primes" or activates semantically related concepts and calls them to mind. Such priming makes this schema-related information temporarily highly accessible, increasing the likelihood that subsequently encountered persons, stimuli, or events will be appraised in the context of the primed and accessible schema. Hence, conceptually related material viewed or experienced after the exposure will seem more acceptable or appropriate. This process may also lead to longer-term effects via chronic accessibility. Here, the notion is that frequently activated schemas become readily accessible, and are therefore likely to influence judgments regardless of priming manipulations or situational influences

(Bargh, 1984; Higgins & King, 1981). Thus, if sexual stereotypes are frequently encountered, related schemas are frequently activated; with each activation, those particular schemas or ways of viewing the world grow stronger and more valid.

In addition to these specific causal models, others have attempted to outline the larger configuration of components that comprise media influence. One recent example is the Media Practice Model developed by Steele and Brown (1995), which asserts that media practice can only be understood in context. According to this model, adolescents' selections, interpretations, and uses of the media are heavily influenced by basic sociocultural factors such as gender and race, by adolescents' developing identities, and by a multitude of conditions in their lives, labeled "lived experience," which encompass neighborhood influences, family life, friendships and peer culture experiences, and religious backgrounds and beliefs. The notion is that adolescents carry their particular life histories with them, and that their perceptions of media content are filtered through these experiences. This model also highlights the ongoing reciprocal nature of media uses and effects, assuming that these processes interact with each other and with the viewers' current and emerging sense of self or identity (Brown, 2000). Although this model does not make predictions about effects, it provides a useful framework of *how* to study connections between sexuality and media use.

Finally, it is frequently noted that numerous factors mediate and moderate these processes, determining under what conditions media effects will and will not occur. These factors include both characteristics of the media content, such as the genre, complexity of the messages, and attractiveness of the protagonists, as well as several features of the viewer, such as age, sex, cognitive capacities, and perceived realism. Paramount among these factors is age or developmental level, which exerts influence both directly and indirectly. For example, developmental level directly affects viewers' ability to process, understand, and evaluate sexual content, which is often quite adult in nature. In one study (Silverman-Watkins & Sprafkin, 1983), younger adolescents (12-year-olds) had more difficulty correctly understanding televised sexual innuendoes than did their older peers (14- and 16-year-olds). Developmental level also affects viewers' perceptions of and reactions to sexual content. For example, interviews with adolescent girls about their media use revealed striking differences in how sexual content was perceived depending on the girls' level of physical, personal, and sexual development (Brown, White, & Nikopoulou, 1993). Many of the preadolescent girls (e.g., those not yet menstruating) were disinterested and disgusted by sexual content, while many of the older girls were intrigued and solicitous. Using retrospective data from 214 college students, Cantor, Mares, and Hyde (2001) found strong age of exposure differences in the emotional and physical impact of students' early encounters with sexual media. For example, experiences with sexual media recalled from childhood (ages 5–12) elicited

more embarrassment, guilt, confusion, and sexual learning than did experiences recalled from adolescence. In considering the research questions and relations under study, it becomes apparent that the dynamics of *how* media use affects sexual socialization are neither simple nor direct, but instead are likely to be age dependent, and to involve multiple constructs, mechanisms, and contributing variables.

Impact of media portrayals on viewers' sexual attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors

The prevalent yet limited nature of the media's portrayals of sexuality has raised concern that heavy exposure to these images may lead to stereotypical or casual attitudes toward sexual relationships, distorted expectations, and irresponsible sexual decision-making. Although research in this area began only in the early 1980s, approximately 36 studies have been published examining links between media exposure or involvement and young viewers' sexual attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors. These studies are listed alphabetically in Table 1. Within this group, approximately 39% of the studies employed experimental designs, more than half focused on undergraduates, and nearly all chose television as the medium for investigation. The overall trends indicate that media exposure is indeed linked to sexual outcomes, and that exposure to specific genres typically contributes more than overall or total viewing. Evidence also suggests that these connections are often sex-specific, with females more consistently affected, and that viewer involvement, while seldom examined, may be more influential than viewing amounts.

Sexual attitudes

The largest set of studies in this field focuses on contributions of media exposure to students' attitudes about sex and sexual relationships. Here, the dominant question has been: Does regular exposure to the media's portrayals of sex as recreational, risk-free, and superficial encourage viewers to adopt a similar perspective? Drawing mainly from the cultivation model, this question is typically investigated by comparing students' exposure levels with their agreement and disagreement with selected statements about sexual relationships. Overall, survey research indicates that greater regular exposure to or involvement with sexually oriented genres, such as soap operas and music videos, is associated with more liberal and more stereotypical sexual attitudes, especially among women (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987; Strouse et al., 1995; Walsh-Childers & Brown, 1993; Ward, 2002), with stronger endorsement of certain dysfunctional beliefs about relationships (Haferkamp, 1999), and with a greater acceptance of sexual harassment

Table 1
Summary of 36 empirical studies examining the impact of media exposure on sexual outcomes (organized alphabetically)

Author and Year	Method	Sample ages	Demographics	Theoretical base	Outcome
Alexander (1985)	Survey	Chn: 10–14	Unspecified	Uses and gratifications	1
Baran (1976a)	Survey	UG: X = 19.3	Unspecified	Ecological systems	1
Baran (1976b)	Survey	Teens: 14–18	Unspecified	Ecological systems	1
Brown and Newcomer (1991)	Survey	Teens: 13–18	76% White, 24% Black	Cultivation, social learning	3
Bryant and Rockwell (1994), S1	Expt	Teens: 13 and 14	Unspecified	No explicit theory	1
Bryant and Rockwell (1994), S2 and S3	Expt	Teens: 13 and 14	Unspecified	No explicit theory	1
Buerkel-Rothfuss and Mayes (1981)	Survey	UG: X = 19.3	Unspecified	Cultivation	2
Buerkel-Rothfuss and Strouse (1993)	Survey	UG: X = 18	White lower to upper middle class	Cultivation	2
Calfin, Carroll, and Shmidt (1993)	Expt	UG	All White, middle class	No explicit theory	1
Carveth and Alexander (1985)	Survey	UG: X = 18.95	Unspecified	Cultivation, uses and grats	2
Courtright and Baran (1980)	Survey	Teens and UG	Mixed SES and race	Ecological systems	1
Davis and Mares (1998)	Survey	Teens: X = 15	76% White	Cultivation	1, 2
Fabes and Strouse (1987)	Survey	UG: X = 20.3	Majority White	Social learning theory	1, 3
Gan, Zillmann, and Mitrook (1997)	Expt	UG	All White	Priming, schema theory	2
Greenberg, Linsangan, and Soderman (1993a)	Expt	Teens: 14–17	60% White, 40% Black	No explicit theory	1
Greeson and Williams (1986)	Expt	Teens: 13–16	All White, working and middle class	Social learning theory	1
Haferkamp (1999)	Survey	UG: X = 19.40	79% White, 10.6% Black	Cultivation	1
Hansen and Hansen (1988)	Expt	UG	Unspecified	Priming, schema theory	2
Hansen and Krygowski (1994)	Expt	UG	Unspecified	Priming, schema theory	2
Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, and Reed (1995)	Expt	Teens: 11–16	All Black, lower income	Priming (implicit)	1

Kalof (1999)	Expt	UG	All White, middle class	No explicit theory	1
Lanis and Covell (1995)	Expt	UG: X = 22.8	All White, middle class	No explicit theory	1
Larson (1996)	Survey	Teens: 7th–12th	91% White	Cultivation	2
MacKay and Covell (1997)	Expt	UG: X = 24	All White, middle class	No explicit theory	1
Olson (1994)	Survey	UG: median = 21	66% White, 13% Latino, 11% Black	Cultivation	1, 2
Peterson, Moore, and Furstenberg (1991)	Survey	Chn: 7–11/11–16	All White (Black data not used)	Discuss multiple models	3
Potter and Chang (1990)	Survey	Teens: 12–18	66 % White, 23% Black, 11% other	Cultivation	1, 2
Rudman and Borgida (1995)	Expt	UG: X = 24	Unspecified	Priming, schema theory	3
Sigal, Gibbs, Adams, and Derfler (1988)	Expt	UG	Unspecified	No explicit theory	2
Signorielli (1991)	Survey	Teens: HS seniors	85% White, mixed SES	Cultivation	1
Solderman, Greenberg, and Linsangan (1988)	Survey	Teens: 13–19	52% White, 48% Black, mixed SES	Social learning, others	3
Strouse and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1987)	Survey	UG: X = 19	Unspecified	Cultivation (implicit)	1, 3
Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Long (1995)	Survey	Teens: 13–18	83% White	Cultivation (implicit)	1, 3
Strouse, Goodwin, and Roscoe (1994)	Survey	Teens: 11–16	87% White	Cultivation, uses and grats	1
Walsh-Childers and Brown (1993)	Survey	Teens: 6–8th	70% White, 30% Black	Social cognitive theories	1
Ward (2002)	Survey/Expt	UG: X = 20.3	68% White, 15% Asian, 10% Black	Cultivation, priming	1, 2
Ward and Rivadeneyra (1999)	Survey	UG: X = 19.4	54% White, 26% Asian, 12% Latino	Test multiple theories	1, 2, 3

Note. Expt = experiment; UG = undergraduates. For Outcome: 1 = sexual attitudes, 2 = sexual expectations and attributions, and 3 = sexual behavior.

(Strouse et al., 1994). For example, women with higher levels of media exposure were more likely to agree with statements like "virginity is not important for marriage" and "most women like to show off their bodies." In addition, heavier viewing has been linked to holding conflicting views about marriage, such that high school seniors who are frequent viewers are more inclined than are lighter viewers both to aspire to marriage and a family, and to question the prevalence and probability of happy marriages (Signorielli, 1991). While results are typically in the affirmative, the effects produced are seldom direct or sweeping, and null and counterintuitive outcomes have been reported (Davis & Mares, 1998; Fabes & Strouse, 1987; Olson, 1994b,[3] Potter & Chang, 1990).

Regular viewing amounts have also been linked with students' attitudes about their own sexual status and experience. Being a frequent TV viewer and perceiving media characters as sexually more competent and as experiencing more pleasure than oneself have been associated with holding negative attitudes towards remaining a virgin and with less satisfaction with one's own sexual experiences (Baran, 1976a, 1976b; Courtright & Baran, 1980). This is a powerful connection for it demonstrates that media images may make youth feel inadequate, perhaps by creating expectations that cannot be fulfilled (Sapolsky, 1982). At the same time, evidence indicates that students who *were* satisfied with their initial and current sexual experiences attributed greater realism to media portrayals (Baran, 1976a; Courtright & Baran, 1980). Thus, idealizing media sex is associated with students' views about their own sexuality.

However, my review of this issue also uncovered the complex nature of these links, which often varied by the genre in question and by the sex and race of the participants. For example, in their longitudinal study of teens' media habits, Walsh-Childers and Brown (1993) reported that while more frequent viewing of soaps and sitcoms predicted *increased* acceptance of relationship stereotypes among Black teens, greater total viewing predicted *decreased* acceptance of these stereotypes for White teens. Similarly, Alexander (1985) found soap opera viewership to be a *positive* predictor of men's perceptions of the importance of communication for relationships, but to be a *negative* predictor for women. The complex workings of viewer sex and media genre were seen full force in a study reported by Ward and Rivadeneyra (1999) that examined connections between two types of media exposure, five types of viewer involvement, and two categories of sexual attitudes. Frequent soap opera viewing among male undergraduates predicted a weaker acceptance of recreational notions about sex but had no

[3] For example, Olson (1994a, 1994b) found that while soap opera viewers reported less need for contraception than did nonviewers, these two groups did not differ in their endorsement of premarital sex nor their disapproval of adultery.

connection for women; instead, among young women, frequent viewing of primetime programs predicted a weaker acceptance of "old-fashioned" courtship norms. Viewer involvement also played a large role, but for women only. Here, stronger identification with popular TV characters and stronger usage of TV to learn about the world predicted greater acceptance of recreational attitudes about sex. The dominant trends across the literature, then, indicate that frequent exposure to certain television genres is linked to attitudes that elicit displeasure with virginity, and support nonrelational sex, sexual harassment, and stereotypes about relationships. Moreover, these findings appear to be stronger, broader, and more consistent among women than among men.

Several attempts have been made to examine the causality of these associations through experimental means. Here the typical approach has been to expose one group of students to sexual content, another group to nonsexual content, and then to compare the sexual attitudes of the two groups on measures administered immediately after the exposure. Because of their heavy sexual imagery and popularity with younger audiences, music videos have been a frequent choice for experimental stimuli, with several studies examining their impact. Although the results obtained are typically conditional, occurring only for some designs or for some dependent variables, evidence does suggest that students exposed to the sexual and sexist content of music videos offer stronger endorsement of casual and stereotypical attitudes about sex than do students exposed to nonsexual content (e.g., Greeson & Williams, 1986; Kalof, 1999), and that female viewers are more affected than are male viewers (e.g., Calfin et al., 1993). For example, in one study (Johnson et al., 1995), girls exposed to eight sexist, nonviolent rap videos were more accepting of teen dating violence than were girls without such exposure; boys' attitudes were not affected.

Investigations employing genres other than music videos have also been conducted, but with mixed results. Laboratory exposure to sexual scenes drawn from primetime soaps and dramas was found to increase teens' acceptance of sexual improprieties in one study (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994), but to have no effects on their beliefs in another (Greenberg, Linsangan, & Soderman, 1993a). Additionally, experimental exposure to magazine ads featuring women as sexual objects produced a stronger acceptance of sex role stereotyping and of rape myths among male undergraduates (Lanis & Covell, 1995; MacKay & Covell, 1997), but mixed results among females, who offered both stronger (MacKay & Covell, 1997), and weaker endorsement (Lanis & Covell, 1995) of these constructs than did women in control groups. Offering more decisive evidence, Ward (2002) reported that regardless of their regular viewing levels and sexual experiences, young women (but not men) exposed to primetime TV images depicting men as sex-driven, women as sexual objects, or dating as a game offered stronger support of each of these stereotypes than did women in control groups. While these

particular media responses are likely to be short-lived, as are many priming effects, they are also likely to be repeated during at-home viewing of similar content. Therefore, despite the occasional null and conditional findings, the dominant trend produced by the experimental studies indicates that students exposed to sexual content are more likely than those exposed to neutral or to no content to offer a stronger post-exposure endorsement of casual, sexist, and stereotypical notions about sexual relationships.

Sexual expectations and attributions

A second concern in this area has been the extent to which media exposure shapes viewers' sense of social reality. For example, do the media's frequent depictions of specific sexual actions or outcomes (e.g., affairs, divorces), make them seem more prevalent? Does media exposure shape the way in which the sexual actions of real-world women and men are perceived? As predicted by the cultivation model, findings in this area reveal strong and consistent associations between exposure levels and viewers' perceptions. Greater exposure to sexually oriented genres (e.g., soaps, music videos) has been linked to viewers' assumptions and expectations about the prevalence of sex and of certain sexual behaviors frequently depicted on TV (e.g., Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993; Larson, 1996; Olson, 1994b; Potter & Chang, 1990; Ward, 2002), often creating the expectation that "everyone is doing it." For example, undergraduates who frequently watch soap operas offer higher estimates than do less frequent viewers of the numbers of real people who divorce, have affairs, have abortions, or sire illegitimate children (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Mayes, 1981; Carveth & Alexander, 1985). Talk show viewing has been found to produce the same effect, such that high school students who are frequent viewers overestimate the numbers of sexually active youth, and the number of teen pregnancies (Davis & Mares, 1998). By contrast, frequent viewers of action/adventure programs have been found to offer lower estimates of divorces and affairs (Potter & Chang, 1990), most likely because sexual relationships receive less emphasis in this genre. Evidence is also emerging that viewing amounts are not the only avenue of media influence here. Regardless of their viewing amounts, young women who identified more strongly with popular TV characters assumed that greater percentages of their peers were sexually active (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). It appears, then, that frequent *and* more involved viewers are likely to cultivate expectations that sex is prevalent, and that sexual relationships are often fleeting.

Drawing from the premises of priming and schema theories, studies have also tested whether experimental exposure to sexual content affects students' perceptions of women encountered in the real world. Here, it appears as if neutral women encountered after sexual content has been viewed appear to take on attributes of that content (e.g., Hansen & Krygowski, 1994),

appearing more sexual themselves. For example, exposure to sexually suggestive hip-hop videos featuring Black female performers lead White students to attribute fewer positive traits and more negative traits to subsequently encountered Black women (Gan et al., 1997). Others report that viewers' impressions of flirtatious or sexy women and men are affected by the nature of the media content just viewed (Hansen & Hansen, 1988; Sigal et al., 1988). For example, in their 1988 study, Hansen and Hansen asked undergraduates to watch three music videos and then to evaluate the taped interactions of a male and female job applicant. While students who had watched the neutral music videos later perceived the man's sexual advances toward the female applicant to be akin to sexual harassment, students who had viewed the stereotypic music videos perceived his sexual advances as appropriate, and thought less favorably of her if she rejected him. Hence, by means of contrast and comparison, viewers appear to draw from fictional content in developing expectations about real-world sexual interactions.

Sexual behavior

The potential effects of media exposure on viewers' sexual behaviors and sexual decision-making are often critical concerns, especially for government agencies and public health officials. Might exposure to abundant images of and verbal references to glamorous, spontaneous, and risk-free sex actually encourage young viewers to behave accordingly and discourage responsible sexual decision-making? These are difficult links to establish, however, both because of the complexity of sexual behavior and because the use of experimental methods to establish causality here is nearly impossible. Moreover, much of the potential impact of media exposure on sexual behavior is likely to be indirect, working through the media's effects on viewers' attitudes, schemas, and belief systems. Nonetheless, tentative evidence is building that greater television exposure is linked directly to viewers' sexual behavior.

Although their amount of *total* television viewing has *not* typically been related to viewers' level of sexual activity (Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Peterson et al., 1991; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987), stronger results have been obtained when exposure to more specific genres of programming were examined. Among young women, frequent viewing of music videos has been linked with both a greater number of sexual partners (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987), and with more sexual experience, especially for women from low-quality family environments (Strouse et al., 1995). For undergraduate men, frequent viewing of soap operas has been linked to having more sexual partners (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987). For both sexes, adolescents whose TV diets included higher proportions of sexual content were more likely to have become sexually active over the course of the study than were adolescents whose diets included lower proportions (Brown &

Newcomer, 1991). Work comparing the media habits of pregnant and nonpregnant adolescents indicates that while pregnant adolescents view more soap operas and more television overall than do nonpregnant adolescents, their media diets are actually lower in sexual content than those of nonpregnant teens (Solderman et al., 1988).

Other studies have examined associations between levels of viewer involvement and students' sexual behaviors and experiences, with mixed results. For example perceiving TV's typical sexual situations as likely to happen in their own lives predicted greater levels of experience with sexual relationships among college students (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999); however, four other dimensions of viewer involvement tested (e.g., level of active viewing, identification) were inconsequential. Evidence also indicates that selecting a media figure or peer as a model of sexual behavior is related to more frequent sexual intercourse, but not to the number of sexual partners nor the frequency of birth control use (Fabes & Strouse, 1987).

Few studies have employed experimental means to examine the impact of mainstream media exposure on sexual behavior. In the only such study identified, male undergraduates were exposed to 16 commercials depicting women as sexual objects (Rudman & Borgida, 1995), and were then asked to interview and evaluate a female confederate. In comparison to young men in the control condition, men exposed to the sexist images asked more sexist questions during the interview, recalled more about the woman's appearance and less about her personal background, and rated her as friendlier, more hirable, but less competent. Moreover, the interview behavior of these primed men was perceived to be more sexualized by both the female confederates and independent observers. Together, these findings offer tentative support of a link between exposure to sexual content and a variety of sexual behaviors. However, with little longitudinal or experimental evidence, the meaning of these associations remains unclear, indicating that media exposure shapes viewers' sexual attitudes and behaviors, and that viewers with liberal sexual attitudes and behaviors are drawn to programming that confirms their beliefs.

In conclusion, the literature as summarized here provides conditional yet consistent evidence that media exposure is associated with students' sexual attitudes, expectations, and behaviors. Frequent and involved exposure to sexually oriented genres such as soap operas and music videos is associated with greater acceptance of stereotypical and casual attitudes about sex, with higher expectations about the prevalence of sexual activity and of certain sexual outcomes, and even occasionally with greater levels of sexual experience. Moreover, experimental exposure to sexual content has been found to prime these attitudes and expectations in the laboratory, enhancing the strength of the correlational findings. In many cases the effects appeared to be stronger among women than among men, especially concerning the media's impact on sexual attitudes and behaviors. Whereas conditional

results are commonly reported, with outcomes varying by the genre and by the dependent variable investigated, the overall trend reveals that media exposure and involvement are likely to play prominent roles in shaping the sexual attitudes and expectations of American youth.

Discussion and suggestions for future research directions

> We are educated by the entertainment media, even if unintended by the source and unnoticed by the audience. (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 8)

By default or by design, the media have assumed a prominent role in the sexual socialization of American youth. Their sexual messages are prevalent, exciting, glamorous, and perceived by youth to be realistic—all qualities of a powerful role model (Bandura, 1994). Whereas it is assumed by parents, teachers, and youth themselves that the media play such a role, empirical research has been slow to investigate it. Summarized in this review are the existing, published content analyses and empirical studies that have explored this connection. The overall trends indicate that media exposure *is* linked to sexual outcomes, especially for women, and for exposure to sexually oriented genres. Yet because of the limited diversity of the samples, the atheoretical nature of many of the studies, and the general challenges of assessing sexual content, more work is needed in several areas before stronger conclusions can be reached. Indeed, with the majority of published studies (61%) using correlational rather than experimental designs, many authors note that the associations discussed may also reflect sexualized youth seeking out content that validates their current sexual attitudes and behavior. Accordingly, in this final section I discuss current limitations in the field, offer a conceptual model of the media's role as a sexual socializer, and discuss several directions and topics for future research.

A central limitation of the current research is that many of the approaches to this topic have borrowed heavily from the study of media violence and may not be wholly appropriate in the study of sexuality. For example, in assessing the nature and prevalence of sexual content on television, the focus has been on counting the frequency with which sexual *acts* and nudity are depicted, just as media violence research has counted violent acts for years (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; National Television Violence Study, 1996). Yet whereas this approach has allowed us to quantify and track the prevalence of sexual images and references on TV, its insight is limited because parallels between sexuality and violence are limited. First, sexual content is typically more verbal than violent content. Consequently, focusing on specific visual sexual acts omits a great deal of sexual content. Second, because research on media violence examines dysfunctional or illegal behaviors, using this as a model may steer us to view

sexual content only as bad and inappropriate. This perspective is often supported by public health officials, understandably concerned about high rates of STDs and teen pregnancies. However, although violence is usually a negative, an aberration, something only a few people encounter and most hope to *avoid*, sexuality is a normal part of human lives and relationships, something we all possess and frequently aspire to *improve*. It is natural, healthy, and often very positive, thereby differing from violence in critical ways. Finally, Gruber and Grube (2000) remind us that sexual activity might not be learned by observation and modeling in the same way as aggression. Indeed, much of sexual socialization involves transmitting a belief system and set of moral values. It is not clear, then, if the conceptual models employed in understanding aggression in the media will or should work equally well in understanding their sexual content.

In rethinking our approach to the study of sexual content in the media, it may be more appropriate to borrow from the sexual socialization literature which focuses on the values communicated (verbally and nonverbally) from various socialization agents. Here, the emphasis is more on the sexual messages, themes, and information communicated and received, and on their perceived utility and importance. Questions commonly asked within this approach include the following: "How do the source and timing of the messages affect their utility?" "Are positive/instructional messages equally influential in shaping sexual outcomes as are negative/prohibitive messages?" (e.g., Jaccard & Dittus, 1993; Ward & Wyatt, 1994). Accordingly, a first step in this reconceptualization might be to develop a working conceptual model of the media's role as a sexual socialization agent. Such a model would not replace other theoretical approaches to media effects, but would illustrate how media use works over time to shape sexual beliefs and behaviors. A first attempt at such a model is provided in Fig. 1.

With this model, it is expected that numerous dimensions of media use will affect viewers' beliefs both about sexuality and about themselves as sexual beings, which, in turn will affect their sexual decision-making. Thus the media's influence on behavior is believed to be more indirect than direct, working through these belief systems. This model also incorporates sexual messages received from other socialization agents, which are expected to shape the impact and pursuit of media messages. Viewer demographics are believed to affect all components. Finally, the model includes a number of bi-directional arrows that highlight the systemic nature of these processes. Hence, just as past media exposure may shape viewers' beliefs about sexuality which then influence their sexual decision-making, their current sexual behaviors are likely to shape future media choices and interpretations. Several specific suggestions for future research (as adapted from Ward & Caruthers, 2001) follow from this model and from the literature summarized in this review.

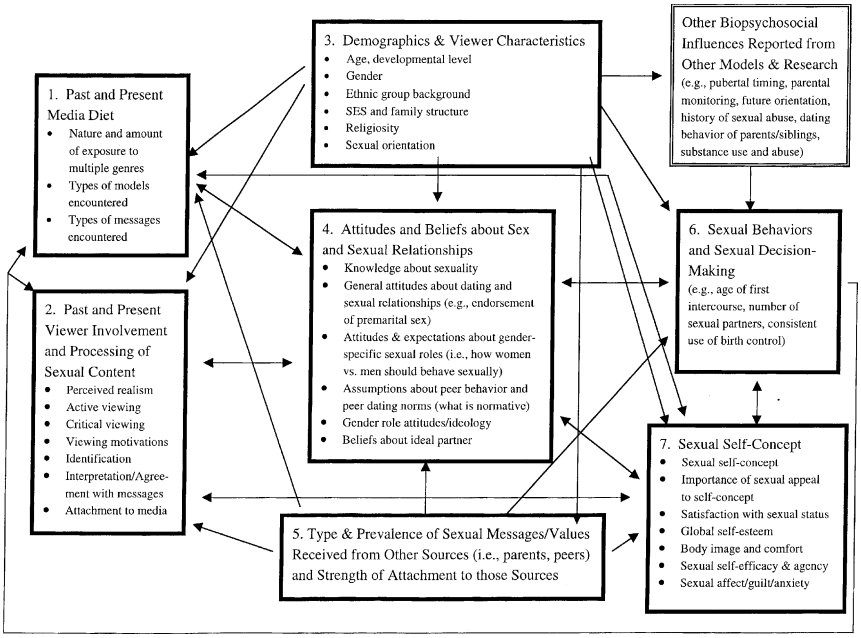

Fig. 1. Working conceptual model of the media's contribution to sexual socialization.

Box 1: Past and present media diet

1. *Future content analyses need to assess more specifics about sexual content*. Because much of television's sexual content is verbal and not visual, and because this content includes themes about love and intimacy as well as messages about lust and desire, content analyses need to expand to investigate the broader array of sexual themes conveyed. Knowing that a kiss occurred or that a reference to sexuality was made is informative on one level, but offers minimal insight about the themes and values expressed. To what extent is the sexual double standard encouraged? Are women rewarded or punished for being sexual? Is virginity stigmatized? Is being a "player" revered among male characters? Although analyses of magazine content have covered some of this territory, further work is needed examining specific characteristics about the sexual messages expressed by television and other media.

2. *Future content analyses need to examine the prevalence of positive portrayals of sexuality and of sexual health*. As we move away from notions that all sexual content is negative and that all viewers are negatively affected, further investigation is needed of the alternatives. More specifically, to what extent "do different media portray healthy interpersonal sexuality, that is, sexuality that is consensual, honest, mutually pleasurable, protected, and

non-exploitive" (Huston et al., 1998, p. 48) as defined by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States? How are parents and partners shown sharing sexual information with each other? What healthy sexual practices are depicted? In women's magazines, a great deal of concrete sexual information is passed along, in addition to advice about maintaining relationships. What type of sexual content is available in other types of magazines? These questions await coverage by future content analyses.

3. *Need to expand domains of media exposure to include other genres.* As noted earlier, a majority of the research in this field has focused on the sexual content and potential impact of primetime comedies and dramas, daytime soap operas, music videos, and magazines. While further work is required to fully understand their influence, expansion into other domains is warranted as well. Study is needed concerning the sexual content and impact both of other media, such as feature films, popular music, men's magazines, and the Internet, as well as other formats of television programming, such as talk shows, reality programming, and cable networks (e.g., Lifetime, HBO). For example, despite repeated reports documenting the sexual nature of mainstream magazine articles, no published study to date has investigated their influence on the sexual attitudes and behavior of young audiences. Further study of the Internet is needed as well, especially given the explicitness of some of its sexual content, and its interactive nature, which allows users to interact anonymously with many people (Stern & Handel, 2001). General study is also needed of whether individual media and formats are equally influential. For example, is sexual content depicted in a situation comedy equally influential as similar content presented in a music video or film?

4. *Need to employ more expansive assessments of media exposure to address media diets and media histories*. Current assessments of media exposure have been more general than specific, tapping the general *quantity* of exposure to a specific medium or genre. It is assumed that the nature and intensity of the sexual content are not likely to differ greatly within a medium or genre. Yet as media markets continue to diversify and to focus on specific audience niches and consumer interests, this assumption may be less valid. Adolescent boys watching *WWF* Smackdown, reading *Flex*, and listening to Eminem are likely to be exposed to somewhat different messages about sexuality and sexual roles than adolescent girls watching *Dawson's Creek*, reading *Teen*, and listening to N'Sync. Thus, it can no longer be assumed that investigating the number of hours participants spend consuming medium X captures the diversity of the actual messages received. Instead, as the Media Practice Model argues (Steele & Brown, 1995), research must begin to examine the content and impact of specific media diets.

Assessments of media exposure also need to begin to examine participants' histories of media use. One assumption underlying much of the thinking in this area (i.e., the cultivation model) is that viewers exposed to greater

levels of sexual content during their formative years (e.g., ages 5–15) will be more accepting of the sexual stereotypes depicted than those exposed to fewer such images. However, direct assessments of media *histories* are seldom made. Instead, survey data typically examine links between current media use and current conceptions of sexuality. This information is useful in addressing the larger issue only to the extent that current media habits are representative of a person's lifetime of media use. Yet has this link been established? Media habits change throughout the life course, and tastes and interests are likely to change and evolve as well. Assessments capturing exposure levels at only one point in time may not fully represent the nature and quantity of exposure over the years.

Box 2: Viewer involvement

5. *Need to examine dimensions of media use other than amounts of exposure. More attention is needed concerning the contributions of viewer involvement (e.g., identification, perceived realism, parasocial interaction, active viewing, critical viewing, viewing motives)*. A majority of the studies in this field focus strictly on the *amount* of media exposure involved, with minimal attention given to aspects of viewer involvement such as identification and perceived realism. Yet it is highly likely that media influence operates along avenues other than amounts of exposure. Indeed, there is a richness in our experience with television programs and their characters that is not easily represented by the amount watched. A particular viewer may not watch a great deal of television, but if she is especially connected to specific portrayals (e.g., Erica Cane on *All My Children*, or Samantha on *Sex and the City*), these characterizations may strongly affect her conceptions of sexual relationships. Many hypothesize that viewers' identification with particular characters, the level of realism they assign to the portrayals, the degree to which they actively or passively view the content, and their particular viewing motivations (e.g., for learning, for escapism) will enhance or diminish any content effects (e.g., Dorr, 1986; Harrison, 1997; Levy & Windahl, 1984; Perse, 1986; Potter, 1986; Rubin, 1994). Because these behaviors may or may not coexist with frequent viewing, important avenues of television's influence may be overlooked if the sole focus is on viewing amounts.

6. *Need a greater focus on how sexual content is interpreted*. Accompanying this exploration into the diversity of sexual content should be work examining how sexual content is interpreted by viewers of different ages. It cannot be assumed that all young viewers will interpret a piece of content similarly to each other or to older viewers (Brown, 2000). Also, it cannot be assumed that all viewers accept the messages presented; some may reject and resist them. Although some research has examined students' processing and interpretations of specific sexual content presented both on television and in magazines (Brown & Schulze, 1990; Durham, 1999; Kalof, 1993; Meischke, 1995;

Thompson, Pingree, Hawkins, & Draves, 1991; Treise & Gotthoffer, 2002; Ward, Gorvine, & Cytron, 2001), further work is needed assessing the meaning and importance of sexual content for individual viewers.

7. *Need to investigate the nature and impact of critical viewing skills*. If not all viewers are negatively affected by media messages, the question remains: what skills are some viewers using to resist them? It is possible that viewers with more advanced critical thinking skills may be more adept at sifting through media falsehoods and exaggerations. Consequently, further study is needed of the role that media literacy training can play in shaping how young people use, interpret, and apply sexual content (Brown, 2000). It is also possible that viewers with more direct experience with sexual relationships will be more critical of these images, although the findings reported earlier from Baran (1976a) weaken this argument. In general, greater understanding is needed of how sexual content is critiqued, accepted, and rejected.

Box 3: Demographics and viewer characteristics

8. *Further investigation is needed of the role of gender*. As reported in this review, effects of sexual media content were often stronger and more consistent among female viewers than among male viewers. Because this outcome was seldom expected, only post hoc explanations have been offered thus far to explain it. An obvious first explanation is that perhaps men depend less on the media for their sexual learning, and instead rely more on other sources such as friends and siblings. It is more likely, however, that men *are* affected by media portrayals, but perhaps are less affected than are women by the media genres examined thus far, namely comedies and dramas, soap operas, and music videos. Perhaps in both their intentional and incidental sexual learning males rely more on media genres that have received less research attention, such as action-adventure films, video games, commercials, and men's magazines.

A second explanation for these gender differences may be ceiling effects in sexual attitudes. For many of the sexual attitudes examined (e.g., endorsement of premarital sex), males are generally more likely than females to endorse the notion in question (e.g., Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Consequently, it may have been difficult for additional media exposure to produce stronger agreement among men with statements they already supported. Perhaps a truer test of the strength of the media's influence on men would be to examine their effects on statements that are initially less sex-differentiated or that males are less likely than females to endorse.

Finally, a probable source for the gender differences in the outcomes is the gendered nature of sexuality itself. A sexual double standard prevails in this culture in which sexual attitudes, expectations, and behaviors vary greatly by gender (MacCorquodale, 1989; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). The dichotomy set-up is one of male sexual aggressiveness

and female passivity and responsibility. Male sexuality is constructed as natural, urgent, and relentless (Tolman & Higgins, 1996), with a central notion that being sexual with women is a significant sign of masculinity. As such, young men are expected to be "players" and to "sow their wild oats." The dictates and expectations are direct, clear, and typically consistent. For women, the expectations and sexual messages are more complex, contradictory, and fluctuating. Feminist researchers (e.g., Fine, 1988; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 1994) consistently note that women are exposed to and internalize many contradictory messages about femininity and female sexuality. One central conflict is between being "a good girl" and a sexual being. In our society, young women are expected to be sexually attractive, but not too sexually active or assertive. They are expected to be alluring enough to attract a man and establish a loving relationship, but must also act as the "gatekeepers," as the responsible ones in setting sexual limits. These roles not only require a great deal of complex decision-making, but also carry heavy potential consequences, including damage to one's "reputation" and unwanted pregnancy. As a result of these contradictions, complexities, and consequences, it is likely that women must continually work to decipher society's expectations of them, and may be especially open to accepting portrayals from the media as clarification. As noted earlier, much of the content of women's magazines is geared toward this purpose, with articles frequently focusing on *how to* attract men, read their signals, and hone relationships skills. Moreover, because traditional notions of "success" for a woman depend more heavily on relationship success than they do for men, women may be especially attuned to any directives in this area, fictional or otherwise. These are a provocative set of hypotheses that warrant further testing and development.

9. *Need to expand the demographics of the samples tested.* Despite repeated reports that Black and Latino youth watch more television and attend more movies than their European American counterparts (e.g., Greenberg, 1993; Roberts et al., 1999), research examining the impact of media use on these populations has been sparse. For example, of the 25 empirical studies examined here that even reported demographic information about their samples, 80% used predominantly White samples, and only one tested an ethnic minority group exclusively. While these patterns mirror those of psychological research in general, they make it difficult to judge how social demographic factors affect the processes in question. As a result, it is unclear whether the media's sexual content may affect minority youth *more* because of their greater exposure levels or *less* because of the lack of minority representation on the screen. Additional work is needed to address this critical issue, work that compares responses and effects across ethnic groups and that examines within group differences as well.

10. *Need a developmental focus that looks more directly at age differences in key phenomena and that follows participants to explore how the media's*

influence on sexual outcomes changes over time. Although age and developmental level have been found to play a central role in both the selection and perception of sexual media content (Brown et al., 1993; Cantor et al., 2001; Silverman-Watkins & Sprafkin, 1983), little of the existing *effects* research has taken a developmental focus. In much of the research conducted thus far, researchers typically drew participants from a specific age range, such as high school students or undergraduates, and then tested media effects for that one group. Few studies examined the nature of the media's influence across several age groups, and even fewer followed participants over time to explore how the media's influence changed with age. Consequently, both broader cross-sectional studies and longitudinal work are needed. The degree to which viewers' attitudes and expectations are affected by exposure to sexual content are likely to vary at different points in the developmental trajectory. It is typically assumed that younger viewers, who presumably possess less information and less first-hand experience in the area, would be more affected than older viewers (e.g., Van Evra, 1998). Yet because few broad age comparisons have been conducted, this remains an assumption to be demonstrated. Perhaps it is those who are most removed from the dating scene (e.g., children, adults in long-term marriages) who are most vulnerable to accepting the media's images of sexual relationships. Attention is also needed concerning the role of developmental transitions (e.g., puberty, starting college), and of the possible contributions of their accompanying uncertainty and upheaval to the importance of media portrayals. In addition, it would be informative to follow participants into adulthood to assess both the long-term effects of childhood media use and the larger contributions of age and experience. Such longitudinal work would also help clarify causal directions.

Box 4: Attitudes and beliefs about sexual relationships

11. *Need to consider the gendered nature of sexual beliefs and attitudes*. Much of the current research has studied sexuality in general, focusing on links between TV exposure and viewers' general attitudes about sexuality (e.g., endorsement of premarital sex). However, a good portion of TV's sexual content is gender-specific, emphasizing different messages for women than for men about expected sexual behavior (Ward, 1995). These differences typically fall in line with the sexual double standard, with a focus on women as sexual objects and men as sexual actors and aggressors. Consequently, more direct tests are needed of how TV exposure affects viewers' endorsement of these gender-specific sexual themes.

12. *Need to include more comprehensive and standardized measures of sexual attitudes*. In assessing viewers' endorsement of both general and gender-specific beliefs about sexuality, stronger outcomes may be achieved if more comprehensive and standard assessments of sexual attitudes are included.

In a majority of the studies presented here, viewers' sexual attitudes were measured using a small number of items generated by the researchers. To strengthen both the constructs themselves and our ability to compare results across studies and across fields, it would be beneficial to incorporate more comprehensive and standardized measures of sexual attitudes.

Box 5: Sexual messages/values received from other socialization agents

13. *Need to explore how sexual messages from the media interact with messages from other sources in shaping sexual conceptions*. Because the media are but one of many sources contributing to sexual socialization, it would be informative to examine how their input works with that of other agents. Whose messages are most influential? Do youth who receive a strong foundation of sexual input from other agents (i.e., parents) give less weight to media claims? Because few have assessed contributions of the media and other agents in the same study, minimal evidence exists on which to make such comparisons. In addition to examining what each source contributes, it is also necessary to consider the strength of participants' attachment to each source. Current summaries of the field indicate that sexual topics communicated by parents may be less influential to adolescent sexual risk-taking than the general warm and communicative nature of the parent–child relationship (Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001).

Box 6 and Box 7: Sexual behaviors and sexual self-concept

14. *Need to expand sexual outcomes examined to include both aspects of sexual self-concept and sexual behaviors other than virginity status*. Up to this point, most of the sexual outcomes studied have focused on viewers' attitudes about premarital sex or sexual stereotypes; viewers' estimates of the prevalence of sexual activity; and viewers' age of first intercourse or number of sexual partners. Additional outcomes warrant examination to more fully represent the breadth of human sexuality. For example, does media use relate to viewers' attitudes about safe sex or birth control? Because TV seldom presents or discusses these issues, do more frequent viewers believe they are less important? Do frequent viewers consistently use protection themselves? How does media exposure relate to viewers' *intentions* to use protection, abstain from sex, or change their risky behaviors? How does media use affect the kinds and level of communication about sex between partners and the quality of sexual relationships (i.e., are they consensual, honest, mutually pleasurable, protected, and nonexploitive; Huston et al., 1998)?

Finally, we need to begin to study the role of the self in these dynamics. Having an awareness of the sexual double standard, for example, may be of little consequence if one applies its principles only to others and not to oneself. Research needs to begin to incorporate the importance participants

assign to their sexuality, assessing their sense of sexual agency and efficacy. Included in this domain are a viewer's beliefs about and comfort with her/his body. For example, does media exposure make one feel more or less comfortable in one's own skin? How will this level of comfort affect agentic behavior both in terms of sexual acts and contraceptive use? Answers to these important questions await further study.

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