

Sex And The Media: The Impact Of Television Habits On Sexual Perception

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ABSTRACT

The current study focused on the role of TV in regards to sexual attitudes and perceptions. The participants were 120 female students from an introductory psychology class ranging in age from 18 to 24 years old from a medium sized, Midwestern, public university. They completed three primary measures: television viewing habits, sexual attitudes, and responses to sexual scenarios. Furthermore, half of the participants completed the measures after waiting in a room while viewing sexually explicit music videos and half waited with no TV present. The results supported our hypothesis that those participants exposed to sexually explicit videos before responding to sexual scenarios rated scenarios as less sexual than those not exposed to the videos. These results will add to a growing literature that explores the influence of sexual television on attitudes and give insight into the short and long-term impact of television on sexual perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades television has become a large influence on people's attitudes and behaviors. "Television has been found to reflect and possibly shape the attitudes, values, and behaviors of young people" (Greeson, 1991, p. 1908). Television has become so influential that it serves as a teacher, often providing a common source of information for young adults (Chapin, 2000). The role of media in teens' lives has raised concerns in many areas; however, aggression/violence and sexuality are two key areas of research. The current study focuses on the relationship between TV viewing and sexual attitudes and perceptions.

Concerns have been raised about TV as a teacher of sexuality by social commentators (Ward, 1995) and by researchers. Interestingly, even parents think that television has a large impact on adolescents' attitudes and they recognize that many adolescents spend more time watching television than they do in school or with their parents (Chapin, 2000). A survey completed by 1400 parents found that parents thought television was the second most influential source of information next to themselves. However, only 13% of these parents thought that television provided their children with accurate information (Lowry & Towles, 1989). Louis Harris and Associates (1987) found that the majority (64%) of adults in the U.S. believe that television encourages teenagers to initiate sexual activity (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995).

When examining the research on TV and sexuality, one concern is that television characters serve as role models for young adults. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory states that new behaviors seen by individuals are likely to be observed, and reproduced. Researchers argue that television provides adolescents with models whose sexual attitudes and behaviors are learned and replicated (e.g., Chapin, 2000).

In addition to providing role models, television conveys "sexual scripts that establish norms and expectations concerning how to be sexual, why to have sex, whom to have it with, and what the appropriate sequence of activities is" (Ward, 1995, p. 596). A study of 1043 adolescents found that they considered television to be their greatest source of pressure to become sexually active (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995). Ward found that sexuality was the focus of one-third of the shows popular among young people. Three types of programming that are high in sexual content and have a potentially large influence on young people are prime time shows, soap operas, and music videos.

Studies of prime time television have shown that the most frequent sexual content consisted of verbal sexual implications between unmarried characters. In content analyses of prime time programming, sexual behavior was found to occur in 25 to 50% of interactions between the characters (Ward, 1995), and premarital and extramarital sex occurred more often than sex between married couples (Chapin, 2000). Soap operas tend to have more sexual content than prime time programs, but they portray the types of intimacies differently (Lowry & Towles, 1989). Soap operas generally *show* intimate moments, whereas prime time programs generally *imply* the sexual content.

Over the past few decades, the frequency of sexual incidences on soap operas has increased, especially among unmarried partners. Over 30 million adults and 4 million adolescents watch soap operas on a regular basis (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996).

Finally, music videos are one of the most popular forms of entertainment among young people. Music videos are viewed in over 55 million U.S. homes and the numbers continue to grow (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995). In a study examining the influence of exposure to music video imagery on sexual attitudes, it was found that exposure to sexual imagery had a significant effect on attitudes of sexual permissiveness (Kalof, 1999). Additionally, teenagers who watched less than an hour of MTV (music television) were more likely to find premarital sex appropriate than were adolescents who were not exposed to MTV (Greenson, 1986). A similar study found that college students who were exposed to music videos demonstrated more liberal attitudes towards premarital sex than did unexposed students (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995).

The strong influence that television has on young adults is a serious concern because sexual behaviors are being taught but the consequences are rarely reflected. For instance, there are few references on television to sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, and abortion (Ward, 1995). In reality, half of the HIV infected population in the U.S. is under the age of 25. Rates of syphilis and gonorrhea are extremely high for adolescence; in fact they are the most infected age group (Chapin, 2000). Not only are sexually transmitted diseases a concern, but the U.S. also has the highest rates of teen pregnancy than any other industrialized country (Lowry & Towles, 1989).

The current study examines the short-term effects of media exposure. Several researchers have explored variables that affect or heighten participants' awareness of a variety of subject matters. Generally, called "priming effects," and originally studied mostly in relationship to aggression and the media, the research on these effects suggests that events depicted in media can have temporary effects such that an individual's thoughts and actions are biased by what they have just witnessed (Berkowitz, 1986). James (1986) provides an example of priming: If someone is walking down a hallway and they see a sign posted about a missing child, they would then be 'primed' to interpret a real-life ambiguous adult-child interaction as a possible kidnapping. Although individuals do not consciously recall seeing the poster, it predisposes their interpretation. Priming affects have been found across a wide variety of situations and topics (Fazio, 2001; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994; Todorov & Bargh, 2002). This current study examines the priming effect of the presence of sexual media on sexual attitudes.

We expect that high amounts of television watching habits will be correlated with higher levels of acceptance of sexual content. In addition, it is expected that high levels of television watching will be negatively correlated with the ratings of the level of sexual content, such that participants who watch a great deal of television will view sexual scenarios as less sexual than will participants who do not watch much television. We will also test a priming condition and expect that participants exposed to sexual music videos while responding to sexual scenarios will rate them as more appropriate than those not exposed to sexual music videos. Those participants exposed to sexually explicit videos while responding to sexual scenarios will also rate scenarios as less sexual than those not exposed to the videos.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 113 female students, ranging in age from 18-24 years old from a medium sized, Midwestern, public university. Due to potential for gender differences in sexual attitudes and to sustain an appropriately sized sample, only female participants were used. Participants received course credit for their participation.

Materials and Procedure

Upon arriving to the study, participants signed an informed consent that ensured confidentiality. Each participant was given a number that they wrote on all of their material; their names were never used. All of the participants were told a cover story regarding the need to wait a short amount of time before the study. Approximately half (43.4%) of the participants were randomly assigned to a condition where pre-recorded sexually explicit music videos were playing, the other participants (56.6%) waited with no television. The wait was approximately 10 minutes.

After the wait, participants completed three measures. The first was a "Life at this University" questionnaire, asking the participants how much of their time they spend doing various activities. Embedded in the questionnaire were the variables of interest to this study including: their television viewing habits in terms of how much time and what kinds of shows.

For the second measure participants responded to five sexual scenarios that they rated on a 7-point Likert scale of appropriateness and level of sexual content. An example of one of these scenarios is shown below (Appendix A shows all five scenarios):

Sally goes to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. She and a couple of her girlfriends go to one of the clubs on Bourbon Street where hundreds of people are socializing and having drinks. Sally and her friends have had a few drinks themselves and when a young man offers Sally beads if she'll lift up her shirt, she agrees to do it.

The third measure was a "Sexual Opinion Survey" which contained 12 questions answered using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Gilbert & Gamache, 1984). The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was .80 for the survey. This survey contained items addressing sexual attitudes such as "I would enjoy seeing a pornographic movie" and "Swimming in the nude with a member of the opposite sex would be an exciting experience". After they completed the final measure, they received a debriefing handout explaining our study.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics of TV viewing

The mean number of hours of television watched per day was 1.86 ($SD = 1.16$). The mean percent of the day that the "television was on in a place of residence" was 23.06 ($SD = 22.04$). The results on types of television indicated that "music television" was the largest category with 28.3% of the participants saying it was the most common type of TV on in their houses, and 25.7% rated it as second most watched type of TV. The second most commonly watched type of television was primetime.

Correlations of television habits with scenario ratings

We had hypothesized that high amounts of television watching habits would be correlated with higher levels of acceptance of sexual content. In addition, we hypothesized that high levels of television watching will be negatively correlated with the ratings of sexual content. In contrast to our hypotheses, no significant correlations were found between the variables measuring television habits and sexual and appropriateness ratings (.02-.15). There were also no significant correlations (.02-.15) between amounts of television watched and sexual opinions. There was a significant correlation (.50) between responses on the sexual opinion survey and levels of appropriateness.

Priming results

We hypothesized that participants exposed to sexual music videos while responding to sexual scenarios would rate them as more appropriate and less sexual than those not exposed to sexual music videos. A priming effect was found. As shown in Table 1, the priming effect was found only for the ratings of sexual content of the scenarios. Participants who saw the music videos before completing the questionnaire were significantly less likely to rate the scenarios as sexual than the participants who did not view the videos, $t(111) = -2.11, p < .05$. There were no significant priming effects found on ratings of appropriateness or participants' scores on the Sexual Opinion Survey.

Table 1. Priming effects on the variables of interest

Variable of Interest	Primed Condition ($N=49$)	Unprimed Condition ($N=62$)
Sexual opinion survey	$M = 46.75$ $SD = 12.52$	$M = 45.19$ $SD = 11.52$
Levels of appropriateness in scenarios ^a	$M = 14.91$ $SD = 5.26$	$M = 15.34$ $SD = 4.39$
Levels of sexual content in scenarios ^b	$M = 25.49$ $SD = 6.08$	$M = 27.70^*$ $SD = 5.08$

^a The higher the number the more appropriate the scenario was rated.

^b The higher the number the more sexual the scenarios was rated.

* $p < 0.05$

DISCUSSION

Our primary hypothesis that television habits would be related to sexual attitudes and perceptions was not supported. The results of this experiment supported our hypothesis that those participants exposed to sexually explicit videos before responding to sexual scenarios rated scenarios as less sexual than those not exposed to the videos. However, in contrast to the hypotheses, participants exposed to sexual music videos while responding to sexual scenarios, did not rate them as more appropriate than those not exposed to sexual music videos.

The participants who viewed the music videos saw the scenarios as less sexual indicating that there was a priming effect. The music videos heightened the participants' awareness of sexuality but made them react more blasé to sexuality presumably because the videos predisposed their interpretations. Given the high level of sexual content in the videos, participants were then less likely to rate additional scenarios as sexual. In other words, the videos tended to set the bar for the participants. However, the primed participants did not rate the sexual scenarios as more appropriate as might be expected. Kalof (1999) looked at the influence of sexuality-stereotyped music videos on sexual attitudes. She showed half of the participants a sexuality stereotyped video and the other half a neutral video. Participants scored higher on the sexual attitude scale if they saw the sexuality-stereotyped video. These results are similar to what we found in that a priming effect occurred. We view the variation in our results as suggesting a more complicated pattern. The results can be interpreted to show that the priming effects are stronger for more socially flexible ratings such as "sexual content." In our study, the priming effects were not seen in the more internal ratings of sexuality such as "appropriateness" or one's own sexual attitudes.

It is important to note that participants rated music television as one of the most watched types of television. Since music videos are one of the most popular forms of entertainment, we expected that participants' overall television habits would have a larger relationship with sexual attitudes. Contrary to our results, previous research has found that the more music television that is watched the more liberal the sexual attitudes (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995). Not just music videos but television in general, plays a large role in shaping sexual attitudes among young adults because they are at an age when TV serves as a significant source of information (Greeson, 1991). Overall, previous research has supported that television has been very influential on sexual attitudes and perceptions. However, we found nothing to support these findings. It is also possible that these participants have such a high level of media consumption that the effects of the media are diluted.

In order to more clearly understand the potential relationship between television habits and sexual perceptions, several limitations of the present study need to be addressed. One problem was the potential for self-report bias. For instance, participants reported that the average number of hours per day the television was watched was much lower than the percent of the day the television was on. It may be more socially desirable to report lower levels of TV watching. When participants compared their own television habits to other college students' habits they had very different views of what was average. Regardless of the amount of television the participants claimed to watch, only 5.3% indicated they watched TV at a level "higher than average." Indeed, we were not able to compare high versus low television viewing habits because most of our participants rated their viewing habits as low.

Our study was a sample of convenience because it came from an introductory psychology course at a Midwestern public university and was predominantly white and all female. Our results cannot be generalized to a wider population because of these specificities. In addition, we only used female participants so gender differences could not be explored. Gender differences are likely to be found as females are brought up more conservatively and are socially expected to set limitations on sexual activity (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995). However, females have also been found to be more receptive to external forces such as television (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995). Future research on priming effects should include male samples to more carefully explore these potential gender differences.

Future research should also focus more on what makes a person more prone to be influenced by the media. Factors to be explored could include variables that affect how much a person relates to the television show that they are watching; and what affects their attention to television programming. Overall, the results from this study will add to a growing literature that explores the influence of sexual television on attitudes for a generation of participants who have been raised with a high level of media consumption. Research in this area should continue to delve into both the short-term and long-term impact of television on attitudes and behaviors.

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APPENDIX**Scenarios**

Please indicate how appropriate you feel that the woman's behavior is in each of the following scenarios and also how sexual you feel each of the scenarios is using the scales provided.

1. Sally goes to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. She and a couple of her girlfriends go to one of the clubs on Bourbon Street where hundreds of people are socializing and having drinks. Sally and her friends have had a few drinks themselves and when a young man offers Sally beads if she'll lift up her shirt, she agrees to do it. (please circle the number that best fits how you feel)

Not at all Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Appropriate

Not at all Sexual 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Sexual

2. John and Amanda are seniors in college and have been together for two and a half years. They live together in a one-bedroom apartment. (please circle the number that best fits how you feel)

Not at all Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Appropriate

Not at all Sexual 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Sexual

3. Beth and Matt met four months ago at a party and have been together ever since. They had sex for the first time a month ago and continue to have a sexual relationship. (please circle the number that best fits how you feel)

Not at all Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Appropriate

Not at all Sexual 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Sexual

4. Katie and her friends go to a bar to unwind after a long week. Katie has a few drinks and meets a guy named Dan who she talks to for most of the night. She ends up going back to his apartment and having sex with him. After that night she never spoke to Dan again. (please circle the number that best fits how you feel)

Not at all Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Appropriate

Not at all Sexual 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Sexual

5. Emily and Justin have been together for two years but attend different colleges that are three hours apart. Emily and some friends go to a party one night and she ends up fooling around with another guy. (please circle the number that best fits how you feel)

Not at all Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Appropriate

Not at all Sexual 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Highly Sexual