

Feature Film's Role in the Sexual Socialization of Young Women

Abigail Mason

University of California, Los Angeles

Introduction

Sexual socialization is a complicated process. We know that there are many ways young people acquire sexual norms. Information can be gathered from their families, schools, peers, and the media. While most people would like to think that the biggest influence on the development of adolescents' normative sexual attitudes would be from those closest to them, research suggests otherwise. In one study (Kaiser Family Foundation & Children Now, 1997) young teens ranked various entertainment media as their top source for sexual information. Similarly, in a study by Bachen and Illouz (1996) only one-third of respondents looked to their mothers for examples of romantic love.

Most people, however, are not aware of the media's potential power and affect on young people's sexuality. Strasburger and Donnerstein (1999) said, "Television and other media represent one of the most important and under-recognized influences on children and adolescents' health and behavior in the 1990s" (p. 129). However, there is limited research regarding sexual content on television and its effects. Even less work has been done on feature films containing sexuality and their impact on the sexual development of youth, even though adolescents make up the largest demographic of moviegoers (Strasburger, 1995). Several studies have shown that there is an effect on both young men and women, but the effect on young women is stronger. There have not been follow up studies to explicitly investigate this phenomenon further.

My study addresses the potential affects of feature films with sexual content on the sexual attitudes and behavior on young women aged 18-25. Thirty R rated films were selected that contain both nudity and sexual content. Participants were asked to note how many of these

movies they have seen. They were also asked questions on (1) the number of sexual partners they have had and (2) their sexual attitudes and perceptions to see if there is a correlation between these variables and feature film viewing.

Significance

Research has been conducted on how television influences the acquisition of sexual attitudes and perceptions. This study relates those findings to the realm of feature film. Content analysis has been performed on feature films to confirm that they are filled with sexual content. However, few studies have investigated whether this sexual content is correlated with sexual attitudes and behaviors of viewers. Some studies have found that the effects of watching sexual media have been stronger and more consistent in females, but these have mostly been based on post hoc explanations. This study investigates explicitly why females seem to be more affected than males by sexual content in feature films.

This study also has important social implications. The glamorization of risk free sex could possibly lead to an increase in the rate of pregnancy and sexual disease among young women. Moreover, research has shown that some feature films present conflicting messages to young women, for example, everyone should be having sex, but don't be promiscuous. As a result, these films could make young women's lives more challenging.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) explains how the media, especially television, can potentially influence thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Cultivation theory suggests that exposure to television, over time, can subtly change

viewers perception of reality; their perceptions can come to reflect the content of the shows they are watching as opposed to the real world. If someone is a high consumer of feature films, the cultivation theory would suggest that his or her perceptions of reality would become more consistent with the content of the films that they are watching. So, if a viewer is a high usage consumer of R rated feature films with explicit sexual content and nudity, over time he or she is more likely to adopt views that are consistent with these portrayals. Such views could include believing that people have sex more often than is actually happening in the real world. Content analysis has shown that the mention of protection during sexual intercourse is a rare occurrence in film. If the films depict sex as being carefree, glamorous, and risk-free without the need for protection, the cultivation theory would predict that over time young women would be more apt to adopt this view.

Empirical Studies

One experiment, which studied 259 undergraduate students, compared the sexual attitudes of students exposed to sexual content as opposed to those that weren't. (Ward, 2002) The students were assigned to one of four groups, each of which watched one of four different video clips. Three of the clips depicted sexual stereotypes (featuring dating as a game, women as sexual objects, and men as sex-driven creatures) and the fourth contained neutral nonsexual content. The video clips were taken from an archive of popular sitcoms and dramas such as "Friends." After the students watched the video clips they were instructed to answer a series of survey questions that assessed their attitudes about sexual roles and relationships, their assumptions about the sexual experiences of their peers, and their regular viewing habits. The results showed that more frequent and more involved viewing were repeatedly associated with

students' support of the sexual stereotypes surveyed. Moreover, women who were exposed to video clips that represented a particular sexual stereotype were more likely to agree with that stereotype than were the women in the control group who saw non-sexual content.

According to cultivation theory, exposure to sexually oriented media shapes viewer's sense of reality. Studies have shown a strong and consistent association between exposure levels and viewers' perceptions. Greater exposure to certain media such as soap operas or music videos has been linked to certain assumptions about the prevalence of sex. For example, Ward and Rivadeneyra (1999) measured the frequency of 314 students' sitcom viewing history, as well as how emotionally involved they were when they watched sitcoms. After this information was gathered the students were shown clips from sitcoms and asked a series of perception and attitude questions. The study showed that females who watched more prime-time television were more likely to adopt a more recreational view of sex. Greater exposure of certain media such as television dramas and sitcoms were linked to females holding more traditional gender role attitudes. The study ultimately showed that watching more television increased the likelihood that viewers would adopt the views of sexuality presented in the shows. Along with the frequency of viewing, the level of involvement was particularly important among women. According to the study, young women who reported identifying with the lead character reported a stronger endorsement of recreational attitudes towards sex, as well as more experience with sexual encounters and a higher expectation of the level of sexual activity among friends. This study shows that it is not only how much someone watches a show that affects their

attitudes, but how much they relate to the characters. So, although films may not be watched as frequently as television, they may be just as powerful. This is especially so because movies are longer and allow the viewer to connect more deeply with the characters.

As mentioned above, research has shown that watching sexual content not only has an impact on sexual attitudes but sexual behavior as well. In one study, researchers surveyed 391 adolescents. They asked them about their television viewing patterns, as well as questions pertaining to their sexual activity. They found that those who more frequently viewed television shows with sexual content were more likely than those who hadn't to have had sexual intercourse. (Brown & Newcomer, 1991)

A substantial amount of the research shows a correlation between viewing television and sexual attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors among participants. This study looks for similar findings regarding film. Research suggests that feature films are filled with sexuality and messages that are potentially harmful to young viewers. Several studies have measured the prevalence and nature of sex in feature films. One study by Bufkin and Eschholz (2000) looked at the 50 top grossing films in 1996 and found that the movies tended to present a patriarchal vision of sex with men in control of sexual relations. They also found that 60% of the films contained at least one sex scene. This is quite a large number considering only half of the films were rated R. The films also tended to depict sex as a completely risk free activity. Of all the films observed, only one mentioned protection and this was during a rape scene. Similarly, another study found that films tend to depict sex that is separated from marriage (Pardun, 2001).

This literature shows that there is a correlation between watching media with sexual content and sexual attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. It also suggests that women tend to be more significantly affected by television and feature films with sexual content than males.

Hypothesis

H1: The more women watch feature films with sexual content and nudity the more likely they are to believe that most women have sex by the time they graduate from high school. H2: The more women watch feature films with sexual content and nudity the more likely they are to believe that the quality men value most when picking a mate is sexiness.

H3: The more women watch feature films with sexual content and nudity the more likely they are to believe that it's acceptable for women to have numerous sexual partners. H4: The more women watch feature films with sexual content and nudity the more likely they are to believe that sometimes women need to be promiscuous to obtain a mate.

H5: The more women watch feature films with sexual content and nudity the more likely they are to believe that everyone has sex before marriage. H6: The more women watch feature films with sexual content and nudity the more likely they are to believe that there's something wrong with being a virgin.

H7: The more women watch feature films with sexual content and nudity the more likely they are to feel pressured to have sex too quickly in relationships. H8: The more women watch feature films with sexual content and nudity the more likely they are to have more sexual partners.

Methods

The survey itself was administered on the UCLA secure server. Before the participants took the survey they read their rights and pertinent information about the study, as required by the IRB. The pool of participants was from the Communications Studies 10 course at UCLA. In exchange for their participation in the study, they received course credit. Young women age 18-24 were eligible to participate. There was a total of 136 participants.

The survey measured participants sexual attitudes and perceptions. The survey consisted of eight questions. Each question used a seven point Likert scale with response items ranging from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1) The participants were also asked the number of sexual partners they have had. At the end of the survey they were asked to check which movies out of thirty listed that they had seen. The films chosen were all rated R for sexual content and nudity. The pool of participants was then broken into low, medium, and high usage groups based on the number of films that they had watched. The usage groups were then given an average score for each of the eight questions asked on the survey.

Results

		Most women have had sex by the time they graduate from high school.	The quality men value most when picking a mate is sexiness.	It is OK for women to have had numerous sexual partners.	Sometimes women need to be promiscuous in order to obtain a mate.	Virtually everyone has sex before marriage.	There is nothing wrong with being a virgin.	I feel pressured to have sex too quickly in relationship.	Number of Partners
# of Movies 0-3	Low Usage	3.5	4	3.3	2	3.2	6.8	3	0.8
# of Movies 4-7	Middle Usage	4.1	3.8	3.6	2.6	4.4	6.6	3.2	1.4
# of Movies 8-16	High Usage	3.9	4.2	3.9	2.5	5	6.5	3.3	1.9

For item one, “Most women have had sex by the time they graduate from high school,” the low usage group averaged a score of 3.5, the middle usage group 4.1, and the high usage group 3.9. The difference between the low usage group and the middle usage group is .6, and the

difference between the middle usage group and the high usage group is .2. The low usage group had the lowest average as expected. The high usage group had the second highest, and the middle group had the highest average. Although it was unexpected that the high usage group ranked second there is only a slight difference between the middle and high usage group. The data suggests that there is a modest association between film viewing and belief that most women have had sex by the time they graduate from high school.

Item two stated, “The quality men value most when picking a mate is sexiness.” The low usage group averaged 4, the middle usage group 3.8, and the high usage group 4.2. The difference between the low usage group and the middle usage group is .2, and the difference between the middle usage group and the high usage group is .4. The high usage group had the highest average as expected, yet the second highest was the low usage group, with the third highest being the middle usage group. There does not appear to be much of a relationship for film viewing and agreement with this item.

Item three stated, “It’s OK for a women to have had numerous sexual partners.” The low usage group averaged a score of 3.3, the middle usage group was 3.6, and the high usage group averaged 3.9. The difference between the low usage group and the middle usage group is .3, and the difference between the middle and high usage group is .3. This yielded the expected results. The low usage group had the lowest average, the medium usage group has the second highest average, and the high usage group had the highest average. The more movies watched, the more likely one is to believe that it is OK for a women to have had numerous sexual partners.

Item four stated, “Women need to be promiscuous in order to obtain a mate.” The low usage group had an average of 2.0, the middle usage 2.6, and the high usage group 2.5. The

difference between the low usage group and the middle usage group is .6, and the difference between the middle and high usage group is .1. This showed the expected results of the low usage group having the lowest average and thus being the least likely to believe that women need to be promiscuous to obtain a mate. Although it was unexpected that the middle usage group would rank higher than the high usage group, there was only a .1 difference. However, there was a larger difference of .5 between the low usage group and the medium usage group. There does appear to be an association between film viewing and this item.

Item five stated, "Virtually everyone has sex before marriage." The low usage group averaged 3.2, the middle usage group 4.4, and the high usage group 5.0. The difference between the low and medium usage group is 1.2 and the difference between the medium and high usage group is .6. This shows a relatively large difference between the groups as predicted with the higher usage groups more likely to believe that everyone has sex before marriage.

Item six stated, "There is nothing wrong with being a virgin." The low usage group averaged 6.8, the middle usage group averaged 6.6, and the high usage group measured 6.5. The difference between the low usage group and the middle usage group is .2, and the difference between the middle and high usage group is .1. This shows a very slight relationship in the predicted direction. As predicted, the low usage group agreed the most. Although the difference between the groups is quite small, the trend is going in the hypothesized direction.

Item seven stated, "I feel pressured to have sex too quickly in relationships." The low usage group averaged 3.0, the middle group 3.2, and the high usage group 3.3. The difference between the low usage group and the middle usage group is .2, and the difference between the middle and high usage group is .1. As predicted the low usage group would feel the least

pressured in relationships to have sex quickly in relationships. There is a trend in the hypothesized direction, yet there is only a slight difference between the groups.

Item eight asked the number of sexual partners the participants had. The low usage group averaged .8 partners, the middle usage group 1.4 partners, and the high usage group 1.9 sexual partners. The difference between the low and medium usage group is .6, and the difference between the middle and high usage group is .5. This shows that those who watch the least sexual feature films have had the least amount of partners, as predicted.

Limitations

After the survey was completed and I received the data back from Tim Groeling, who posted my survey on the UCLA server, it was clear there had been a mistake. Several of the films were grouped together and it was impossible to separate the data. As a result I was unable to count the data from the following films: “Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story,” “Forgetting Sarah Marshall,” “Knocked Up,” “The 40 Year Old Virgin,” “The Girl Next Door,” “Sex and the City 2,” “Freddy Got Fingered,” “American Pie,” and “American Pie 2.” This undoubtedly affected my data and the strength of the relationships found may have been a lot stronger if the films would have been included.

All of my participants were from a communications course at UCLA. This may affect the generalizability of my results. Also, since all of my participants were communication studies students there is a possibility that they may have figured out what the study was looking for, which may have consciously or unconsciously altered their responses.

Discussion

Sexual attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors are influenced by many factors, including family, friends, educational institution, peer groups, and religious institutions. Research suggests that the mass media also play a role. My findings show that there is a relationship between the number of sexual films watched and a number of sexual attitudes and perceptions. Although most of the questions asked resulted in a correlation in the predicted direction, some yielded stronger results than others, and (item 2) yielded no association. That item stated, “The quality men value most when picking a mate is sexiness.” It is possible that this item should have been worded differently. The word “most” may have been a bit strong. Perhaps if the statement was: “A quality men value when picking a mate is sexiness,” more of a result may have been found.

Question 1, 6, and 7 yielded predicted results, but the correlations were not very strong. The strongest findings came from item 3, (“It’s OK for a women to have numerous sexual partners”) 4, (“Women need to be promiscuous in order to obtain a mate”) 5, (“Everyone has sex before marriage”), and 8 (the number of sexual partners the participants had).

Most research focuses on the effects of the most pervasive medium, television. Feature film viewing tends to happen less frequently than television viewing. Film is a medium that is typically consumed occasionally and for relatively short periods of time, unlike television which is watched five hours a day by the average American. Although feature film viewing tends be less frequent, seeing a feature film is more often an event and experience, especially when viewed in the theater. Moreover, whereas television viewing often occurs while viewers are simultaneously doing other activities, feature film is often given more concentration. In this

study we have seen that, regardless of these differences and their possible implications, film also seems to affect the sexual attitudes and behaviors of young women.

In light of these results, the possible impact of sexual themes and portrayals in film on young women should be considered by all concerned parties.

Future Research

Future studies could explore the effects of sexual feature films on men. Little research has been done in this area. Research could also further explore the effects on sexual attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors by honing in on a smaller selection of factors.

APPENDIX

Use a scale of 1 to 7 where “1” means strongly disagree, “7” means strongly agree, and “4” means that you neither agree nor disagree. Remember that you can use any number between 1 and 7.

1.) Most women have had sex by the time they graduate from high school. 2.) The quality men value most when picking a mate is sexiness. 3.) It is OK for women to have had numerous sexual partners. 4.) Sometimes women need to be promiscuous in order to obtain a mate. 5.) Virtually everyone has sex before marriage.

6.) There is nothing wrong with being a virgin. 7.) I feel pressured to have sex too quickly in relationships.

8.) How many sexual partners have you had in total? 9.) Which of the following movies have you seen? Please put an “x” by each that you have seen.

Friday the 13th Bridesmaids Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story Forgetting Sarah Marshall

Knocked up Sex Drive, The Hangover Part 2 Friends with Benefits Bad Teacher Love and Other

Drugs Spread, Observe and Report Not Another Teen Movie Good Luck Chuck Virgin territory

Chloe Crank Road Trip Road Trip: Beer Pong Van Wilder: Freshman Year Hot Tub Time

Machine Zack and Miri Make a Porno Wedding Crashers The 40 Year Old Virgin The Girl Next

Door American Pie American Pie 2 Sex and the City Sex and the City 2 Freddy Got Fingered

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bachen and Illouz, 1996 C.M. Bachen and E. Illouz, Imagining romance: Young people's cultural models of romance and love. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 13 (1996), pp. 279–308.

Brown and Newcomer, 1991 J.D. Brown and S.F. Newcomer, Television viewing and adolescents' sexual behavior. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 21 (1991), pp. 77–91. Bufkin and Eschholz, 2000 J. Bufkin and S. Eschholz, Images of sex and rape: A content analysis of popular film. *Violence Against Women*, 6 (2000), pp. 1317–1344.

Gerbner and Gross, 1976 G. Gerbner and L. Gross, Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, 26 (1976), pp. 173–199. Pardun, 2001 C.J.

Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now, 1997 Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now (1997). Talking with kids about tough issues: A national survey. Palo Alto, CA: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

Pardun, Romancing the script: Identifying the romantic agenda in top-grossing movies, J. Brown, K. Walsh-Childers, J. Steele, Editors, *Sexual teens, sexual media*, Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ (2001), pp. 211–225. Strasburger, 1995 V.C. Strasburger, *Adolescents and the media: Medical and psychological impact*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA (1995).

Strasburger and Donnerstein, 1999 V.C. Strasburger and E. Donnerstein, Children, adolescents, and the media: Issues and solutions. *Pediatrics*, 103 (1999), pp. 129–139.

Ward and Rivadeneyra, 1999 L.M. Ward and R. Rivadeneyra, Contributions of entertainment television to adolescents' sexual attitudes and expectations: The role of viewing amount versus viewer involvement. *Journal of Sex Research*, 36 (1999), pp. 237–249.

Ward, 2002 L.M. Ward, Does television exposure affect emerging adults' attitudes and assumptions about sexual relationships? Correlational and experimental confirmation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 31 (2002), pp. 1–15.