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Media and Sexuality

Paul J. Wright

This chapter provides a review of scientific research on media effects and sexuality, with a particular focus on studies from the past two decades. Scholars interested in the effects of sexual media have primarily been communication scientists studying the role of media messages in sexual socialization processes and outcomes. Their examinations of mainstream entertainment media, social media, and sexually explicit media designed to arouse the consumer (aka “pornography”) are reviewed herein. Due to space constraints, topics receiving the most attention from scholars and the public are prioritized; citations are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Theory

Media sex effects research, for many years, tended to be either based on theories not originally developed with sexual media in mind, or variable analytic and not tied to any particular theory (Ward, 2003). This changed with the development of the sexual script acquisition, activation, application model (₃AM) of sexual media socialization (P. J. Wright, 2011). First articulated in the context of mainstream media effects on youth sexual behavior, the model has since been applied to a wider array of sexual media, age groups, and outcomes.

The ₃AM is a critical synthesis and integration of a variety of mass communication, information processing, and behavioral theories, as well as conceptual and empirical work not tied to any particular named theory. It posits a multipart sequence for socialization effects due to sexual media exposure, a variety of pathways through which effects can result, and a large number of moderating factors at each step of the model. This complexity makes a brief encapsulation difficult, but the following paragraphs summarize its essence.

The ₃AM specifies both mediating mechanisms and moderating factors that operate simultaneously. At the level of mediation, the model proposes that the socializing effects of sexual media are carried through the acquisition, activation, and application of sexual scripts. Sexual scripts are symbolically imparted guidelines for sexual behavior; they answer questions about who should be engaging in what types of sexual activities with whom, when, how, under what circumstances, and to what consequence. Accordingly, the sexual scripts people possess have

a direct impact on their sexual beliefs and attitudes, which can ultimately impact their sexual behavior. The model asserts that exposure to sexual media can result in the learning of novel sexual scripts (acquisition), the priming of already acquired sexual scripts (activation), and the utilization of sexual scripts to guide one's own activities or judgments about other people's activities (application). The model further proposes that scripting effects can be specific or abstract. A specific scripting effect occurs when the observation of a particular behavior affects the viewer's beliefs or attitudes about that specific behavior. An abstract scripting effect occurs when the viewer deduces the general principle or belief guiding the modeled behavior and then references this information to guide beliefs and attitudes about different, but conceptually related, behaviors. In this way, the model predicts that viewing specific sexual behaviors can lead to modified cognitions of not only those behaviors but also of behaviors not depicted.

At the level of moderation, the model proposes that a number of factors either increase or decrease the likelihood that sexual scripts observed in media will be acquired, activated, and applied. These include *content factors* such as model attractiveness, behavioral rewards and punishments, and depiction prevalence; *audience factors* such as existing sexual scripts, personal motivations, psychological involvement, identification, perceptions of norms and risk, evaluations of functionality and realism, moral views, and efficacy; and *situational factors* such as script-situation correspondence, time pressure, and sexual arousal. Additionally, *accessibility* moderators are specified for the stage of sexual script activation (e.g., recency, frequency, and duration of exposure, message vividness).

The model has evolved to recognize that several of the variables originally specified as moderators can also operate as mediators, depending on the person and situation. For instance, although differences in existing sexual attitudes and normative perceptions can result in divergent reactions to the same sexual depictions (moderation), it is also possible that certain depiction elements can lead to shifts in specific sexual attitudes and norms that ultimately influence other sexual cognitions or particular sexual behaviors (mediation) (P. J. Wright, 2018b; P. J. Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016a). The sections that follow demarcate studies of moderation and mediation, and emphasize variables theorized as important by the 3AM.

Mainstream Media

After many years of calls with few responses, studies investigating the effects of sexual depictions in mainstream media have now become common, cross-disciplinary, and cross-global. Following the findings of content-analytic studies, researchers have hypothesized effects on variables related to a more permissive approach to sex, more diverse and frequent sexual experiences, sex associated with increased sexual risk, increased perceptions that others are sexually experienced or engage in permissive or risky sex, sexually aggressive cognitions and behaviors, and a more gendered view of heterosexual sex. For certain types of mainstream media, researchers have also hypothesized positive effects on perceptions of and attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women.

Numerous cross-sectional surveys have explored mainstream media use and various cognitive and behavioral outcomes. For example, greater mainstream media consumption has been associated with more positive (or permissive) attitudes toward sex outside of marriage, one night stands, sex in public, casual oral sex, having ongoing sexual relationships with more than one person simultaneously, and sex as an exchange of favors (e.g., Chia, 2006). In terms of social perceptions, mainstream media use has been correlated with higher estimates of others' frequency of sexual intercourse, sex with multiple partners, sex in public places, extramarital sex, and teenage pregnancy

(e.g., Woo & Dominick, 2001). With regard to gender and heterosexuality, more media use has been associated with the belief that men are sex driven, women are sexual objects, and dating is a battle between the sexes (e.g., Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). Finally, a few studies have found direct or indirect correlations with more acceptance of same-sex sex, willingness to interact with gay men, and positive attitudes toward homosexuality (e.g., McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2017).

At the level of sexual experience, greater mainstream media use has been correlated with (among other behaviors) intercourse initiation, intercourse frequency, one night stands, and multiple sexual partnerships (e.g., Ybarra, Strasburger, & Mitchell, 2014). In terms of sexual risk, intention to have sex while intoxicated, reduced perceptions of pregnancy risk, lower intentions to avoid sex if protection is unavailable, and unrealistically optimistic beliefs about life after an unintended pregnancy have all been correlated with greater mainstream media use (e.g., Martins & Jensen, 2014). Finally, with regard to sexual aggression, media use is associated with rape myth acceptance, tolerance of the use of force to have sex, heightened perceptions that rape accusations may be false, reduced intentions to seek and adhere to sexual consent, and attempted or completed rape (e.g., Kahlor & Eastin, 2011).

Although rarer, longitudinal surveys have assessed changes in attitudes and actions over time, as well as selective exposure as a confounding, alternative explanation for observed effects. For example, Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2015) found that, among Belgian adolescents, girls' and boys' magazine use over six months predicted valuing their body more for appearance (e.g., sex appeal, physical attractiveness) than for competence factors (e.g., physical coordination, stamina). Aubrey and Smith (2016) found that television and magazine use predicted more positive and permissive attitudes toward "hooking up" (i.e., casual, uncommitted sex) among U.S. college males eight months later; similarly, music video exposure over the course of a year predicted belief in rape myths among Dutch female adolescents (van Oosten, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2015). Further, a year's worth of television and movie use among Flemish youth was associated with a reduced fear of contracting AIDS (Lemal & Van Den Bulck, 2009). Moreover, Brown et al. (2006) found that mainstream media use among white adolescents in the U.S. predicted intercourse initiation two years later.

Corroborating experimental studies have also been conducted. With regard to gender, exposure to images of sexualized women led British women to report an increased valuation of their body in terms of appearance (e.g., sex appeal, physical attractiveness) rather than competence factors (e.g., strength, physical fitness) (Halliwell, Malson, & Tischner, 2011). Galdi, Maass, and Cadinu (2014) reported that exposure to sexual television segments led to an increased favorability toward nonrelational sex in Italian men; similarly, Romero-Sanchez, Toro-Garcia, Horvath, and Megias (2017) found that experimental exposure to magazine covers with sexualized women led to an increase in self-reported rape proclivity among certain Spanish men. On a more positive note, experimental exposure to sympathetic cinematic depictions of lesbian women and gay men led to a stronger belief among Chinese college students that sexual orientation is innate and more positive attitudes toward expressions of same-sex sex (Zhang & Min, 2013). Also, in terms of sexual risk, Finnerty-Myers (2011) reported that exposure to television programming depicting negative consequences of unintended pregnancy led to more positive attitudes toward condoms and intentions to avoid risky sex among certain U.S. college students.

Associations between the use of mainstream media with particular sexual themes and related sexual outcomes have not always been found, however, suggesting that some effects are indirect or contingent on moderating factors. That contingency factors attenuate main effects has long been understood. It is only more recently, however, that scholars have realized that the lack of

a direct association between two variables does not preclude the possibility that one may indirectly affect the other through an intermediary (i.e., mediating) variable.

A variety of potential mediators between exposure to mainstream media sex and sexual cognitions and behaviors have now been studied. Of particular interest are those that are both theoretically predicted and have been studied in multiple samples. One potential mediator that meets these criteria is self-efficacy. Seeing media models successfully enact sexual behaviors may increase viewers' confidence that they can do the same. Early evidence suggests that self-efficacy is indeed a mediating factor. In their longitudinal study of U.S. adolescents, Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott, and Berry (2005) found that baseline television exposure predicted heightened sexual self-efficacy (e.g., the ability to talk about sex with a potential partner), which in turn prospectively predicted a higher probability of having initiated intercourse. In their experimental study of U.S. college students, Moyer-Gusé, Chung, and Jain (2011) found that exposure to a soap opera featuring a sexual health discussion led to an increased likelihood of participants engaging in discussions of sexual health two weeks later, in part due to an increase in sexual discussion self-efficacy.

Another mediator is normative perceptions. Recurrent depictions of particular sexual viewpoints and practices may influence viewers' normative perceptions and result in corresponding adjustments to their sexual judgments or behaviors. As one example, Gottfried, Vaala, Bleakley, Hennessy, and Jordan (2013) found in their two-wave panel study of U.S. adolescents that sitcom viewing at an earlier wave predicted intercourse initiation at a later wave, in part through the perception that peers are engaging in sexual intercourse. As another example, Chia (2006) surveyed emerging adults in the U.S. and found evidence suggesting that more frequent television viewing was associated with more personally permissive sexual attitudes via heightened perceptions that peers' sexually permissive attitudes were affected by television viewing. Understanding of the role of normative perceptions should be considered preliminary, however, as measures and samples have differed, as has the consistency of results.

Perception of risk is another mediator of mainstream media sex effects. Observing positive consequences and no (or infrequent) negative consequences could reduce viewers' inhibitions and encourage parallel sexual behavior. Fisher et al. (2009) surveyed adolescents in the U.S. and found that television viewing was associated with various indicators of risk perceptions about sexual intercourse, including lower expectations of negative consequences (e.g., STIs, pregnancy) and higher expectations of positive consequences (e.g., fun, enjoyment). Sitcom viewing specifically has been shown to predict intercourse initiation over time, in part through risk perceptions (e.g., lower perceptions of harm and higher perceptions of benefit) (Gottfried et al., 2013). Also, viewing a television program that sanitized unintended pregnancy through humor led males to reduced perceptions of the negative consequences of unprotected sex, which in turn predicted stronger intentions to engage in unprotected sex (Moyer-Gusé, Mahood, & Brookes, 2011).

Additional potential mediators are beginning to be investigated, such as affective engagement, counter-arguing, and psychological reactance. Another—sensation seeking—is of particular interest because this variable has typically been conceptualized as a stable trait that could only confound associations between media consumption and sexual behavior. Instead, in their multi-year, multi-wave panel study of U.S. youth, O'Hara and colleagues (2012) found that earlier movie consumption led to later increases in sensation seeking, which in turn led to earlier sexual debut and higher levels of risky sexual behavior. Findings such as these suggest that variables that have traditionally been modeled only as "controls" may need to be re-envisioned as potential mediators or moderators.

Similar to the increasing focus on mediation (mechanism), an increasing number of studies are focusing on moderation (contingency). The key question in this regard is why some viewers are more, while others are less, affected when exposed to the same sexual depictions. Given the emphasis on youth in research on mainstream media sex effects, it is not surprising that parental factors have been the focus of many studies. However, studies tend to examine patterns of parental behavior surrounding media with youth sexual outcomes, rather than studying how parental behaviors may moderate the effects of youths' actual media use. But a few studies have explored whether associations between media use and youth sexuality vary across differing types of parental behaviors using formal moderation analysis. A central focus has been on parental media intervention strategies, such as setting restrictions on the use of media or discussing media that has been viewed. For example, in their longitudinal study of adolescents in the U.S., Ashby, Arcari, and Edmonson (2006) found that the combination of frequent television viewing and no parental content restrictions resulted in the highest rates of sexual initiation. In contrast, the lowest initiation rates were found among youth who viewed television less frequently and had content restrictions placed on their use.

Parental media intervention has not always emerged as a relevant or consistent moderator, however. It may be that parental behaviors more core to the formation of sexual scripts, such as engaging in direct and candid discussions about sex, are more important buffers than behaviors specific to media alone. For example, P. J. Wright, Randall, and Arroyo (2013) found that U.S. collegiate women's viewing of teen mom reality television predicted a higher likelihood of pregnancy-risk behavior when their fathers did not communicate with them about sex while growing up, but a lower likelihood of pregnancy-risk behavior when their fathers communicated often with them about sex while growing up. Other research suggests that parental sexual values may also moderate media effects (Starr & Ferguson, 2012).

Additionally, perceptions of media realism have been a theoretically important focus of research. In an early experiment, Taylor (2005) found that the effects of exposure to sexual television depictions on U.S. college students' permissive sexual attitudes were generally limited to students who perceived such depictions as realistic. In a more recent survey of U.S. adolescents, Martins and Jensen (2014) found that associations between teen mom reality television viewing and unrealistically optimistic perceptions about the lifestyles and finances of teen moms were strongest among those who perceived the genre of reality television as realistic. In an experiment conducted with collegiate men in Spain, Romero-Sanchez et al. (2017) found that the effects of exposure to sexualized images of women from men's lifestyle magazines on self-reported rape proclivity were only present when participants perceived men's magazines as realistic sources of learning about sex and gender. Results such as these leave little doubt that realism perceptions are a moderating factor under certain conditions. But the absence of moderation either for some outcomes (Taylor, 2005) or for some contexts (Ferris et al., 2007) indicates that additional research and conceptualization are needed.

Another theoretically important variable that has received some attention is perceived similarity with media characters. Most studies, though, have not tested perceived similarity as a boundary condition on the effects of exposure. Instead, they have correlated measures of perceived similarity directly with the outcomes of interest in their particular studies. The experimental study with college students in the U.S. conducted by Moyer-Gusé et al. (2011) points a bit more directly to the moderating importance of perceived similarity. In the exposure condition (a soap opera featuring sexual health discussion), identification with the characters predicted an increased intention to engage in sexual health discussions. But a recent experimental

study with adolescent girls in the U.S. provides the most direct evidence. Behm-Morawitz, Aubrey, Pennell, and Kim (2017) found that exposure to teen mom reality television was only associated with more positive attitudes toward becoming a teen mom when perceived similarity was high. However, perceived similarity did not moderate exposure effects for other outcomes, such as belief in myths about teen pregnancy. Like the research to date on perceived realism, this inconsistency, as well as the overall paucity of studies that have directly tested for moderation, indicates a need for additional research and theoretical nuance.

Other potential moderators have been studied (e.g., previous sexual experience, age, media multitasking, recency of exposure, whether depictions are visual or verbal), but two are especially important to note because of how frequently they have been investigated. The first is gender (primarily studied as male/female). No clear pattern can be deduced from these studies. Sometimes gender is a null moderator, other times associations are stronger for men, still other times associations are stronger for women (Collins et al., 2004). The second is ethnicity. Some studies have found interactions between ethnicity and exposure on youths' sexual risk behavior, such that particular groups show no effect (Brown et al., 2006). But when those groups are isolated and studied on their own, exposure is associated with sexual outcomes in expected ways (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). It is not argued here that gender and ethnicity should not in and of themselves be tested as moderators. However, the variability of results to date, as well as a lack of a convincing rationale for the variability, suggests that understanding may be furthered better by individual difference assessments that are more psychographic in nature.

Social Media

Scholars have also begun to examine the nature and impact of sex found in social media, such as Facebook and Instagram. This body of research is in its infancy compared to the study of sex in mainstream entertainment media, but certain commonalities can already be identified.

First, studies tend to focus on adolescents and emerging adults. Second, cross-sectional and longitudinal survey research, as well as experimental findings, suggest that posting and viewing sexual posts may increase the likelihood of certain risky sexual beliefs and behaviors (e.g., van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, 2015; C. L. Wright & Rubin, 2017).

The primary focal point of the research to date is sexual objectification. Findings suggest that social media activity is associated with girls' and young adult women's self-sexualization, objectified body-consciousness, and decreased sexual assertiveness (e.g., Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015). The more girls and women use social media, the more they may compare themselves to others who self-sexualize, and the more they may feel like they too should self-sexualize (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015). However, no convincing evidence exists that posting sexualized photos on social media is the result of or increases offline sexual agency (Ramsey & Horan, 2018).

Sexually Explicit Media

Unlike the study of mainstream media sex effects, investigations into the impacts of pornography have been conducted for many decades. The traditional emphasis on sexual aggression and satisfaction has been expanded to include many additional points of analysis, several of which correspond thematically to the sociosexual domains of interest to mainstream media sex

researchers. Specifically, similar to mainstream media sex scholars and following the results of content analytic studies, pornography researchers have hypothesized that exposure to sexually explicit media increases the likelihood of sexual attitudes and behaviors that are more unrestricted, risky, and gendered, but also more tolerant, particularly of lesbian women and gay men. Aggression and sexual satisfaction have continued to be important areas of inquiry.

Although still relatively rare, meta-analyses of the pornography literature have been much more common than meta-analyses of the mainstream media sex literature. It is not surprising that most pornography meta-analyses have focused on sexual aggression, given the longevity of the research area and its obvious social and public health importance. Early meta-analyses found that pornography exposure could increase the likelihood of nonsexual aggression and rape myth acceptance (e.g., Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010). More recently, P. J. Wright, Tokunaga, and Kraus (2016b) found in both cross-sectional and longitudinal survey studies that pornography consumption was associated with committing actual acts of sexual aggression. Results were similar in the U.S. and internationally and did not vary by gender. Although both associations were significant, the effect size for verbal sexual aggression was stronger than for physical sexual aggression, and the general pattern of results suggested that more violent content may have an exacerbating effect.

It has been hypothesized that reduced interpersonal (relational and sexual) and intrapersonal (self and body) satisfaction may be caused by viewing pornography, due to upward comparisons between one's own and one's partners' sexual appeal, acumen, and availability in comparison to the idealized actors and hypersexual scripts in pornography. Recent meta-analysis results suggested that pornography consumers are more likely to find fault with their partners than themselves (P. J. Wright, Tokunaga, Kraus, & Klann, 2017). Pornography use was unrelated to intrapersonal satisfaction. Conversely, pornography use was associated with lower interpersonal satisfaction in cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal surveys, and experiments. Analyses by gender, though, suggested that detrimental interpersonal satisfaction effects may be more likely for men than women.

Only one meta-analysis has been conducted on the (relatively) newer topics of interest. Tokunaga, Wright, and Roskos (2018) meta-analyzed the literature on pornography and impersonal sex, one of the most commonly studied areas of unrestricted sexuality. This study found that pornography consumption predicted a more impersonal approach to sex among adolescents and adults, women and men, and across the various countries with inclusive data. Both experimental and correlational data, including from cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys, yielded similar findings. Importantly, mediation analysis fit the hypothesis that pornography consumption predicts increased impersonal sexual behavior through more impersonal sexual attitudes, while confounding analysis did not support the hypothesis that the association between pornography consumption and impersonal sexual behavior is spurious and due to pre-existing impersonal sexual attitudes.

The sexual risk behavior that has received the most attention is condom use. Some studies have focused on general population samples, whereas others have specifically focused on gay men. General population studies have yielded mixed results, with some samples finding the anticipated association between pornography consumption and condomless sex and other samples resulting in null associations. Two recent studies of heterosexual individuals—one conducted in Germany (P. J. Wright, Sun, & Steffen, 2018a) and the other in England (P. J. Wright, Sun, & Steffen, 2018b)—may help to reconcile these findings. They suggest firstly that due to condomless-sex floor effects among monogamously committed couples, associations

may primarily be found among individuals not in monogamous relationships. They suggest secondly that while frequency of consumption is important, it is the combination of consuming pornography and perceiving it as a source of sexual information that is most likely to result in condomless sex. Because of the higher incidence of condom use in gay pornography, associations between pornography consumption and condomless sex may only be present among gay men who specifically prefer to view pornography depicting men having sex without condoms (Rosser et al., 2013).

The gendered outcome that has been studied most frequently is the sexual objectification of women. Associations between pornography consumption and perceiving women as sexual objects have been found across methods and several countries. In a cross-sectional survey study of Japanese college students, Omori and colleagues (2011) found that both online and offline pornography consumption were associated with stronger perceptions of women as sexual objects. In a longitudinal survey study of Dutch adolescents, Peter and Valkenburg (2009) found that earlier online pornography consumption predicted later notions of women as sexual objects for both boys and girls. In an experimental study with emerging adult males in the U.S., P. J. Wright and Tokunaga (2015) found that exposure to nude centerfolds increased objectified cognitions about women both immediately after exposure and approximately 48 hours later.

Finally, a series of longitudinal studies with adults of varying ages in the U.S. have queried the supposition that pornography's unrestricted approach to sex may increase acceptance of sexual relationships that were traditionally stigmatized, such as same-sex relationships. Taken together, their results suggest that viewing pornography increases the likelihood of a liberalization in attitudes toward nontraditional sexual roles and relationships, which in turn predict more support for a variety of rights for gay individuals (P. J. Wright & Bae, 2013; P. J. Wright & Randall, 2014; P. J. Wright, Tokunaga, & Bae, 2014). Findings such as these make clear that the same person might identify one socializing effect of pornography as antisocial (e.g., sexual aggression) but another effect as prosocial (e.g., more positive attitudes toward gay individuals). Scientific understanding of and social discussions surrounding pornography's impact can only progress when nuances and complexities such as these are accepted and considered.

After many years of neglecting the question of process (at least analytically), pornography effect studies have started to engage in formal mediation analyses. Studies to date have primarily focused on mechanisms that may link consumption to engagement in sexual behaviors similar to those in pornography.

Sexual expectations have been the focus of several longitudinal studies. Gwinn, Lambert, Fincham, and Maner (2013) observed that the large number of sexually eager and attractive actors in pornography may lead consumers to the expectation that they too deserve alternatives to their current partner. Consistent with this premise, they found in a sample of U.S. college students in exclusive relationships that earlier pornography consumption predicted later extrarelational sexual behavior through heightened expectations of relational alternatives. D'Abreu and Krahé (2014) noted that several known risk factors for male sexual aggression have been observed in pornography (e.g., sex between strangers, that people say "no" when they really mean "yes" to sex). They theorized that pornography consumption may lead to the expectation that these are common attributes of sexual situations, which in turn may increase men's likelihood of sexual aggression. Consistent with this hypothesis, they found in a sample of male college students in Brazil that the association between earlier pornography consumption and later sexual aggression was mediated in part by expectations of participating in sexual situations with these risk factors present.

Sexual attitudes have also been studied as a mediator between pornography consumption and sexual behavior. Pornography producers generally cast the behaviors they select as pleasurable and without negative consequence. Such portrayals may produce or reinforce more positive attitudes toward those behaviors among consumers, leading to an increased likelihood of engaging in those behaviors if given the opportunity. A single-sample longitudinal study conducted with U.S. college students provided some initial evidence that associations between pornography consumption and sexual behavior may be mediated in part by sexual attitudes (Braithwaite, Aaron, Dowdle, Spjut, & Fincham, 2015). A more recent study was conducted by P. J. Wright (2018b). This multiple-sample, multiple-decade analysis of adults of varying ages across the U.S. found that associations between both pornographic movie and website consumption and premarital and extramarital sexual behavior were mediated by premarital and extramarital sexual attitudes, respectively.

Pornography researchers are also beginning to study the mechanistic role of perceived peer norms and efficacy in the pornography consumption–sexual behavior relationship. Since candid discussions with others about their actual sexual behavior can be awkward, consumers may use pornography to come to conclusions about what is sexually normative. Furthermore, observing pornographic actors efficaciously enact various sexual behaviors may encourage consumers that they can follow suit. As a norms example, P. J. Wright et al. (2016a) found in a study of mostly heterosexual U.S. college students that the association between pornography consumption and engaging in condomless sex in the prior year was mediated by lower estimates of peers' condom use. As an efficacy example, Traeen et al. (2014) found in a study of gay men in the U.S. that the association between viewing pornography that did picture condoms and reduced STI-risk behavior was mediated by condom use self-efficacy.

An additional mediating variable that is essential to consider in the context of pornography is sexual arousal. Arousal may mediate cognitive effects for three reasons. First, higher arousal should reduce the motivation and ability to engage in an effortful and deliberate search for the most applicable sexual script, increasing the likelihood that the most accessible script will be applied (P. J. Wright, 2011). Second, if arousal was present when the script was encoded, later arousal should increase the likelihood the script will be reactivated (Hald & Malamuth, 2015; P. J. Wright, 2011). Third, in order to reclaim cognitive balance during or after being aroused by a particular pornographic depiction, the consumer may adjust their attitudes to be more accepting of the type of sex depicted (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). Consistent with these ideas, experimental studies conducted in Denmark and the U.S. have found that the effect of pornography on cognitions supportive of violence against women is mediated by sexual arousal (e.g., Hald & Malamuth, 2015).

In terms of potential moderators of pornography effects, most often the focus has been on possible differences across various demographic categories. Interestingly, results for gender and ethnicity mirror in many respects those from mainstream media studies. Gender interactions are sometimes null (P. J. Wright et al., 2016a) and sometimes significant (P. J. Wright et al., 2016b) and the variability across studies is not easily explained. In studies involving different ethnic groups, pornography consumption has been associated with the outcome under study for some groups but not others (P. J. Wright & Bae, 2013). Yet, when the null group is studied in isolation, evidence of effects are found (Wingood et al., 2001). Therefore, although it is acknowledged that identifying demographic contingency is important and can shed light on probable theoretical mechanisms, the remainder of this section will focus on psychographic rather than demographic moderators.

Findings from several studies suggest that consumers who have more confidence in the veracity and utility of media generally, and pornographic media specifically, are more likely to be impacted. In national survey data of U.S. women across a range of ages, associations between internet pornography consumption and extramarital sex attitudes (P. J. Wright, 2013) and multiple sexual partnerships (P. J. Wright & Arroyo, 2013) were stronger when confidence in media institutions was higher. In a three-wave panel survey of Dutch adolescents, over-time increases in pornography consumption were accompanied by increases in sexual permissiveness only among youth who perceived pornography as more realistic at baseline (Baams et al., 2015). In a survey study of heterosexual German adults, the correlation between higher pornography consumption and less frequent condom use was largest among those who most strongly perceived pornography as a source of information about sex (P. J. Wright et al., 2018a).

In contrast, survey findings suggest that U.S. adults whose existing sexual scripts, values, and moral orientations are more incompatible with pornography's presentation of sex will be less impacted. Cross-sectionally, studies have found that associations between pornography consumption and variables such as multiple sexual partnerships and more unrestricted sexual attitudes are weaker when consumers are more politically conservative, religious, and oriented toward moral absolutes (P. J. Wright, 2018c; P. J. Wright et al., 2014). Likewise, longitudinal panel surveys have found that positive associations between earlier pornography consumption and later more sexually unrestricted attitudes are less likely when consumers are more politically conservative and more oriented toward moral uniformity (P. J. Wright, 2013; P. J. Wright & Bae, 2015).

Evidence also exists that education in general and education about pornography specifically may decrease the likelihood that consumers incorporate information from pornography into their own sexual scripts. In cross-sectional and longitudinal data gathered from adult U.S. men and women, Wright and colleagues (P. J. Wright, 2013; P. J. Wright & Randall, 2014) found that associations between pornography use and various sexual attitudes were weaker among participants with more years of education. In two-wave panel survey data gathered from Dutch adolescents and young adults, the association between pornography use and perceiving women as sexual objects was strongest among those who had not received sexuality education on pornography (Vandenbosch & van Oosten, 2017). These findings are consistent with early work on the role of educational briefings designed to mitigate harmful effects of laboratory exposure to violent pornography (Allen, D'Alessio, Emmers, & Gebhardt, 1996). The results of this meta-analysis indicated that antisocial attitudinal effects from viewing violent pornography could be reduced through either pre- or post-exposure communications noting that pornography is nothing more than fictional fantasy.

Several studies have focused on identifying moderators in the context of sexual aggression specifically. Tests guided by Malamuth's confluence model of sexual aggression (Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995) have yielded the most informative results. Across separate samples of adults in the U.S., pornography consumption has been shown to most strongly predict sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviors when men are both impersonal in their approach to sex and adhere to a style of masculinity that is hostile toward women (Malamuth, 2018). These findings are consistent with the general theoretical premise that effects are less likely when consumers' existing scripts are incompatible with how pornography presents sexual roles and relationships.

The previous discussion does not represent an exhaustive list of moderators tested to date. Many other moderators have been explored in at least one study: age of first exposure to

pornography, intoxication during sex, history of drug use, life satisfaction, sexual sensation seeking, character liking, relationship status, frequency of exposure, country of study, imagery explicitness, views on personal freedom, and perceived life dullness, to name a few. It is recommended that the analysis of moderators continue, with the stipulation that the field will be moved forward the most quickly when the moderators selected can be linked to an established theoretical model (P. J. Wright, 2018c).

A final issue that deserves mention is problematically compulsive or “addictive” use of pornography. Debate of this issue has largely taken place among clinically oriented psychologists and neuroscientists, not media and communication scholars. Key points of debate have included whether the accessibility, affordability, and anonymity of internet pornography (in comparison to offline pornography) increases the likelihood of dysregulated use, if there are reliable and sequential stages of internet pornography addiction, whether an underlying etiology and effective treatment modality can be identified, if the physiological responses of problematic pornography consumers to pornographic depictions are similar to or different from the responses of other classes of addicts to their particular addictive stimuli, and the extent to which moral incongruence between holding negative attitudes toward pornography but using it anyway may lead to the self-perception of being addicted (Grubbs, Perry, Wilt, & Reid, 2018; P. J. Wright, 2018a).

Conclusions

This chapter reviewed scientific research on the effects of mainstream, pornographic, and social media sex, with a primary emphasis on sexual socialization. The following “big picture” conclusions can be drawn from this review.

First, enough experimental and longitudinal work has been produced to conclude that sexual media causally influence the sexuality of some consumers. Second, while most research focuses on effects typically deemed problematic, an increasing number of studies are considering effects that would generally be considered prosocial. Third, effects are often indirect and contingent on a variety of factors. Fourth, there is now empirical evidence of similarity in at least some of the mechanisms and contingencies across mainstream, social, and pornographic media. Fifth, although the magnitude of media sexual socialization effect sizes is typically modest, they align with the magnitude of effect sizes in the social sciences more generally. Sixth, in ecological studies that consider a number of predictor variables, the magnitude of the media sex effect is typically within the range of other more accepted social influences. Seventh, although some differences have been found, the literature at present suggests that the effects of sexual media are more similar than disparate across cultures.

The chapter’s primary future research suggestion is that media sex scholars call on identifiable theory to guide their projects. If researchers do not overtly specify, derive predictions from, and test distinct theoretical models in a sequential, programmatic manner, the accumulation of knowledge will be disorganized and delayed. Additional, finer-grained future research suggestions—not ordered by importance—are as follows. First, the effects of sex in mainstream and social media on older adults is in need of investigation. Second, additional studies that examine a variety of mediums and genres within mediums within the same sample are needed. Third, further studies that use the same instrumentation across countries and directly compare the results would be of value. Fourth, research that has taken variables that have typically been looked at as potential confounds (e.g., religiosity, political orientation, sensation seeking) and attempted to model them as predictors, mediators, or moderators should continue. Too often,

variables are modeled as confounds that are likely part of the effects dynamic. This decreases the explanatory power of the model and increases the chance of Type II errors. Fifth, additional work is needed that clarifies when the same variable may function as a mediator or a moderator (e.g., perceived realism, sexual attitudes).

Media and sexuality research has finally captured the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural attention it clearly warrants. It is the hope of this chapter that even more researchers will take up the important and interesting questions that are still in need of address.

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