

Media Effects from Sexual Content

Listen, I'm no social scientist and I haven't done a survey. I don't pretend to know what John Q. Citizen knows about this. But I've lived in prison for a long time now and I've met a lot of men who were motivated to commit violence just like me. And without exception, every one of them was deeply involved in pornography; without question, without exception, deeply influenced and consumed by an addiction to pornography. There's no question about it—the FBI's own study on serial homicide shows that the most common interest among serial killers is pornography.

—Ted Bundy, serial killer, January 23, 1989, Interview

Whatever the medium—television, movies, magazines, music videos, the Internet—media users, including children, are inundated daily with sexually oriented messages and images. These messages range from the mildly suggestive to various levels of the **sexually explicit**, a term used to describe media depictions of individuals engaging in various kinds of sexual activities.

In Chapter 11, we explored the issue of media violence and discovered that significant links exist between the viewing of violence and subsequent acts of aggression. Sexual content in electronic and print media also has important implications because of its perceived connection with serious social concerns, such as teenage pregnancy and the numbers of people contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS.

In the early 1990s, researchers determined that 7 of 10 girls and 8 of 10 boys in the United States engaged in sexual intercourse by the time they had reached the age of 20, and one-fourth of all pregnant women were teenagers (Greenberg, Brown, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1993). Almost 20 years later, a government study indicated that the number of teens engaging in sexual intercourse

was down slightly (from 78 percent in 2001 to 72 percent in 2011). The report also said that vaginal intercourse has been on the decline among teens and young adults since the late 1980s (Stobbe & Johnson, 2011). Interestingly enough, a recent longitudinal meta-analytic review revealed that sexual content on network television declined from 1975 to 2004 (Hestroni, 2007). The same meta-analysis showed that the exception to the sexual content decline was homosexuality, which “considerably” increased from the 1980s to the present. A 2010 study on homosexual activity among teens showed that 9.3 percent of teenagers—nearly one in 10—reported having sex with someone of the same gender, double the number reported in 2002 (Donaldson-Evans, 2010; see also Pathela & Schillinger, 2010).

Juxtaposing studies such as these amounts to “anecdotal” evidence in the eyes of scholars and other critics, simply because no causal relationship can be established. Yet plenty of studies on sexually explicit content have been documented that do show causal evidence for harmful effects.

This chapter examines the media effects from sexual content. It reveals the nature and extent of sexual content in mass media. We review results from studies that examine exposure to highly explicit sexual content, and we point out the importance of context. We also look at recent research that reveals the harmful effects of sexual content on the Internet. We then examine the evidence for effects from sexually violent media fare with respect to sex offenders.

The Nature of Sexual Content

Whenever you use the word “sexual” to describe media content, you must clearly define what it means, as it occurs at many levels of intensity. In its broadest sense, it includes *all* types of media products that either show or imply sexual acts or make sexual references or innuendoes, whether in humorous or dramatic context, from X-rated materials to general-audience sitcoms. Sexual content may range from rather mild sexual comments on network television to unabashedly blatant XXX videos with themes of sadomasochism, bondage, or bestiality.

The degree of sexual explicitness in media content usually depends upon how much is left to the imagination. Highly explicit materials such as X-rated¹ movies or XXX videos leave nothing to the viewer’s imagination. R-rated movies contain nudity and a moderate degree of explicitness, but sexual activities are less explicit than those depicted in X-rated films. Frontal nudity does not appear on broadcast network television in the United States; therefore, the sexual explicitness of network programs is rather tame when compared to R- and X-rated movies; however, the sizzling sex scenes on daytime soap operas or prime-time serial programming or “reality fare” should leave no doubt in anyone’s mind that television contains much sexual content. Moreover, premium cable series (e.g., Starz’s *Spartacus*, HBO’s *Game of Thrones* or *True Blood*) often contain graphic sex scenes, often with full frontal nudity of both male and female characters.

Surveys and studies reveal the pervasiveness of mass media as a source of sexual information, especially for adolescents and teenagers. A Time/CNN poll

(Stodghill, 1998) reported that almost 30 percent of teenagers in the United States said they get most of their information about sex from watching television. In contrast, 45 percent said “friends” served as their source for learning about sex, but only 7 percent identified “parents” and only 3 percent identified sex education as a source of information. A 1992 study in Toronto (Russell, 1998) revealed that 9 out of 10 adolescent boys and 6 out of 10 adolescent girls had viewed at least one pornographic movie in their lives. Another study showed that almost 30 percent of adolescent boys listed pornography as their most significant source of information on sex, and pornography rated higher than schools, parents, peers, books, and magazines (Check, 1995; Harris & Scott, 2002).

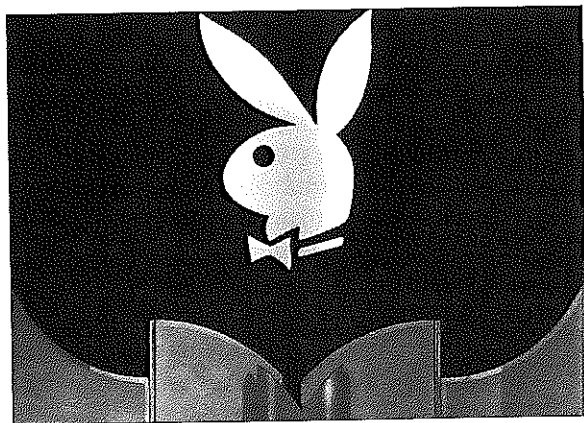
The pervasiveness of pornography is indisputable. According to an Internet Filter Software Review (Ropelato, 2011; see also DeAngelis, 2007), a pornographic video is created in the U.S. every 39 minutes. Pornographic websites account for about 12 percent of all websites. About 40 percent of teens or younger children view sexually explicit websites either on purpose or accidentally each year. In 2006, revenues from pornography worldwide hit \$97 billion, nearly double the amount from 1999 (Morais, 1999).

Even though most programs on television leave much more to the imagination than do these more explicit materials, their potential for negative effects is not necessarily diminished. The availability of television to all ages makes that medium a particularly dangerous one when considering the damaging social effects that result from the consumption of sexual content.

In any discussion of sexual content in mass media, particular terms appear from time to time and therefore need explication. *Pornography* and *obscenity* are two such terms.

Pornography

The extreme class of sexually explicit materials is commonly referred to as erotica or **pornography**, which is defined as “the graphic and explicit depictions of sexual activity” (Cline, 1994). X-rated movies or videos, certain sex magazines, sexually explicit computer and video games, and so forth belong to this class. Such materials are supposedly restricted to adult audiences only and are produced for the express purpose of pandering sexual content. They are usually considered devoid of literary merit or artistic value. Exceptions often include the magazine *Playboy*, which is also known for respectable reading content and educational materials such as sex manuals.



Playboy brought pornography into mainstream America in the 1950s. AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File

In 1986, the Meese Commission classified five types of materials as pornography. These included (1) materials that depict sexual violence such as rape or other violent sex crimes, (2) nonviolent sexual materials that depict instances of degrading or humiliating activities, or scenes of domination and subordination, (3) nonviolent sexual materials without degrading activities (usually portraying a couple having consensual and nonviolent intercourse), (4) materials that depict nudity, and (5) child pornography (the sexual exploitation of children in media content) (*Final Report*, 1986).

The Meese classifications are not without controversy, because the term “pornography” is difficult to define in a standard way. Each person’s definition may be different, depending upon his or her values. For example, some people do not consider nudity to be pornographic. Others may not consider consensual and nonviolent intercourse to be pornographic.

Obscenity

Pornographic material is not always considered to be obscene. The term **obscenity** is a legal one that has been defined by the United States Supreme Court. The *Miller v. California* case in 1973 set the criteria for proclaiming material legally “obscene.” Three criteria, as judged by a jury representative of the community, must be present. These include (1) the material appeals to a prurient (shameful, sick, morbid, or lustful) interest in sex, (2) the material is patently offensive or beyond the contemporary community standards regarding depictions of sexual content or activity, and (3) the material as a whole lacks “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” (Cline, 1994, p. 230).

The Extent of Sexual Content in the Media

In recent decades, researchers have studied the extent and the explicitness of sexual content in mass media. Many of these studies have been content analyses that focus on various types of sexual media fare that children and teens are likely to see, such as Internet sites, R-rated movies, sex magazines, and, especially, network television programming.

Harris and Bartlett (2009) observed that although sex magazines have been declining in circulation since the 1990s, other media have stepped up to make sexual content even more pervasive in our society. The sale and rental of videos, whether X-rated or R-rated or highly suggestive music videos, the proliferation of cable and pay-per-view TV, the explosion of Internet pornography, and “sex-ting” (texting or sending sexual messages and photos via cell phones and social media)—all have contributed to a sexually charged media environment.

Sex in media is not limited to explicit portrayals of intercourse or nudity, however, but may include any representation that portrays or implies sexual behavior, interest, or motivation. Sex also occurs in many other places besides explicitly sexual materials. Many news stories, including reports of sex crimes, sex scandals, celebrity starlet social gossip, or tragic excesses like the

Abu Ghraib prison abuses, involve sexual content. Sex is rampant in advertising, particularly for products like perfume, cologne, and aftershave, but also for tires, automobiles, and kitchen sinks. (Harris & Bartlett, 2009, p. 305)

A number of content analyses have identified that, aside from explicit sexual portrayals, *talk about sex* has been on the increase, especially on network television, and the effects of this can be equally as harmful (Kunkel et al., 2003; Hestroni, 2007).

Greenberg (1994) examined the sexual content trends in several types of media, including music videos, X-rated videos, and television. He found that the amount of sexual content and the degree of explicitness varied considerably among the media.

Music Videos

Several content analyses have measured the amount of sexual content contained in music videos. Two major studies in the 1980s examined MTV and other televised music programs during 1984. The first study (Baxter et al., 1985) found that well over half of the 62 videos analyzed contained sexual content. Sexually suggestive actions such as embraces, provocative dancing, kisses, and the wearing of sexy clothing occurred frequently. The researchers concluded that "sexually oriented suggestive behavior is portrayed frequently in music videos" (p. 336).

In another study that involved content analysis, Sherman and Dominick (1986) examined the visual aspects of 166 videos that featured a "concept," such as a story line, drama, or narrative (for at least half the video), rather than a studio performance alone. The videos were taken from MTV and the programs *Night Tracks* and *Friday Night Videos*. The researchers found that three of every four videos contained sexual content, and that the average number of sexual acts in each video was almost five. In terms of sex and violence, the study revealed that 80 percent of the videos that contained violence also contained sexual content.

X-Rated Videos

In a content analysis of sexual activities in X-rated videos, researchers found that almost 450 sexually explicit scenes appeared in the 45 videos analyzed in the study (Cowan, Lee, Levy, & Snyder, 1988). Overall, the scenes depicted one of four major themes: domination, reciprocity, exploitation, or autoeroticism. Scenes featuring satisfying and consensual sex (*reciprocity*) were the most numerous of the four types, occurring in 37 percent of the 450 scenes; however, the themes of either domination or exploitation (mostly men over women) accounted for more than 50 percent of the scenes. *Domination*, or sexual control by one person over another, occurred in 28 percent of the scenes. *Exploitation*, where one coerced another or used status to get what was wanted, was present in 26 percent of the scenes. *Autoeroticism*, which means some form of self-stimulation such as masturbation, was the least frequent theme, occurring in 9 percent of the scenes studied.

Another study compared the differences in content of X-rated videos to triple-X titles. Palys (1986) found that the XXX videos contained a much larger

X-Rated Videos

The Four Major Themes

- Domination—sexual control of one person over another
- Reciprocity—consensual sex, satisfying to both individuals
- Exploitation—coercion of one over another, or use of status to make another perform as desired sexually
- Autoeroticism—self-stimulation such as masturbation

More than half of all scenes in X-rated films feature themes of domination or exploitation, usually men over women.

number of scenes depicting oral-genital sex, the touching and fondling of breasts or genitals, genital-genital sex, masturbation, and anal sex. Surprisingly, the XXX videos contained less violence and less sexual violence than the X titles.

More recent content analyses have confirmed the earlier findings. Bridges and her associates (2010) found high levels of aggression, both verbal and physical, in their study of popular pornographic videos. They analyzed 304 scenes and found that 88.2 percent featured spanking, gagging, slapping, and other acts of physical aggression, and 48.7 percent of scenes contained name-calling and other acts of verbal aggression. The perpetrators of aggressiveness were usually male and their targets were overwhelmingly female.

In another recent content analysis, Cowan and Campbell (1994) examined interracial X-rated pornography videocassettes and coded 476 characters in sexually explicit scenes in 54 videos. Black women were the targets of more acts of aggression than White women, and Black men showed fewer intimate behaviors than White men. Further, cross-race sexual interactions contained more aggression than same-race sexual interactions. "These findings suggest that pornography is racist as well as sexist," the authors wrote (p. 323).

The areas of gay porn (and child porn, for obvious ethical reasons) have been virtually ignored by researchers. An article in the *British Medical Journal* in 2009 did point out that condoms were not used in gay pornographic videos (Hurley, 2009).

Television

R-rated movies, sex magazines, and the Internet have been found to contain far more explicit sexual content than network television, but sexual comments and overtures are numerous and frequent on network programming (Greenberg et al., 1993a; Greenberg & Hofschire, 2000; Kunkel et al., 1999). Most of the sexual innuendoes on TV occur in humorous scenes. One content analysis of network and cable television programs during the 1997–1998 season revealed that 56 percent of the shows included sexual content, with 23 percent depicting sexual behaviors (Kunkel et al., 1999). Another content analysis showed that 68

percent of network and cable programs in 1999–2000 contained sexual content. Of that content, 65 percent included talk about sex and 27 percent of it showed actual sexual behaviors (Kunkel et al., 2003). References to sex between the unmarried outnumber references to sex between the married by a ratio of 6 to 1 on television programs (Greenberg & Hofschire, 2000), 24 to 1 on television soap operas (Lowry & Towles, 1989), and 32 to 1 in R-rated movies (Greenberg, Brown, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1993).

A more recent meta-analysis of sexual content on television showed that the amount of sex talk on prime-time network programming increased steadily from 1999 to 2004, and the amount of unmarried intercourse and prostitution portrayed increased from 2000 to 2004 (Hestroni, 2007).

Another study published in 2004 found that the amount of sexual content that children watch on television (whether viewing physically sexual scenes or hearing talk about sex) actually may cause adolescents to begin engaging in sex sooner. The study also found that the negative consequences could be mitigated by reducing the amount of sexual content in entertainment programs or by parents watching with their teenaged children and discussing their beliefs about sex and what is being portrayed (Collins et al., 2004; see also Kim et al., 2006).

Other studies have confirmed that the more sexual content exposure among adolescents, the more likely the adolescents are to experiment with sexual activity (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008; Fisher et al., 2009; Collins et al., 2004; Bryant & Rockwell, 1994).

The Internet

Researchers are only beginning to explore the consequences of exposure to sexually explicit material on the Internet and forms of social media. The findings so far are alarming. The studies show that adolescent males are more likely to seek out sexually explicit Internet material, and their exposure to this material has a direct effect on males' tendency to view women as sex objects. Viewing highly realistic portrayals of online sexual material is also associated with more recreational attitudes toward sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2009).

A study published in *Pediatrics* in 2007 found that in a nationally representative sample of young Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17, 42 percent had been exposed to Internet pornography in the past year, and of those, 66 percent said the exposure was unwanted or accidental. Moreover, those exposed were likely to be vulnerable individuals, either suffering from depression, sexual victimization, or having tendencies toward delinquency (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). The authors concluded:

More research concerning the potential impact of Internet pornography on youth is warranted, given the high rate of exposure, the fact that much exposure is unwanted, and the fact that youth with certain vulnerabilities, such as depression, interpersonal victimization, and delinquent tendencies, have more exposure. (p. 247)

Effects of Exposure to Highly Explicit Sexual Content

When a person thumbs through the pages of *Playboy*, calls up a website that features child pornography, or watches an X-rated video that depicts a sexually violent crime such as rape, how does it affect that person? How is the person changed by the exposure to highly explicit sexual content? More importantly, is it possible to mitigate or lessen any negative effects of viewing such material?

Researchers have found that highly explicit sexual content may affect media users in one or more of several ways. One type of effect, of course, is sexual arousal. Other effects include changes in attitudes, values, and behaviors. Each of these areas has been studied extensively, especially the behavioral changes that result from viewing pornography (Gunter, 2002; Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998; Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Malamuth, 1993; Malamuth & Impett, 2001; Mundorf, D'Alessio, Allen, & Emmers-Sommer, 2007; Oddone-Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2000; Pollard, 1995).

Sexual Arousal

A number of studies have demonstrated that sexually oriented media content does tend to sexually arouse the viewer or user (Abramson et al., 1981, Eccles, Marshall, & Barbaree, 1988; Malamuth & Check, 1980a; Schaefer & Colgan, 1977; Sintchak & Geer, 1975). These studies have used different types of measures. In some cases, viewers were asked to rate their level of sexual arousal after seeing sexually explicit material. In other instances, researchers used physiological measures to determine arousal, such as the measurement of penile tumescence or vaginal changes. Thermography has also been used.

Gender differences usually show up in terms of usage of sexually explicit materials and whenever arousal measures are recorded. Estimates reveal that more than 70 percent of sexually explicit videos are viewed by men rather than women (Gettleman, 1999). The industry caters to male consumers, but evidence shows that women react more positively to sexually explicit material written and directed by women, especially when themes are romantic (Mosher & Maclan, 1994; Quackenbush, Strassberg, & Turner, 1995). Regardless of content, however, evidence suggests that men are more purposive seekers of sexually explicit fare, and they tend to be more aroused by it (Malamuth, 1996), especially depictions of sexual violence or dehumanization (Murnen & Stockton, 1997).

Researchers have also studied the relationship between the explicitness of sexual content and the extent of sexual arousal. These studies have shown that less explicit materials are sometimes *more* arousing than the highly explicit ones (Bancroft & Mathews, 1971). Scenes that leave much to the viewer's imagination may arouse the viewer more than those that leave no questions unanswered.

Different individuals are "turned on" by different sexual stimuli. Classic conditioning studies have shown that sexual arousal can sometimes be *learned*. This may explain the many individual differences in sexual orientation and arousal. In the 1960s researchers showed heterosexual men photos of nude women



Some movie stars are glamorized for their sexual appeal, such as Marilyn Monroe and her iconic image from the film *The Seven Year Itch*. AP Photo/Matty Zimmerman

paired with boots and actually taught the men to be aroused by only the sight of women's boots (Rachman, 1966; Rachman & Hodgson, 1968).

Studies have also revealed that over time, viewers of common pornography (nonviolent sex between a man and woman) become habituated and tend to seek more uncommon porn (e.g., bondage, sadomasochism, bestiality) in order to find stimulation (Zillmann & Bryant, 1986). Also over time, heavy consumption of pornography causes viewers to report less sexual satisfaction with their intimate partners and to assign increased importance to sex without emotional involvement (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988b).

Changes in Values and Attitudes

Repeated exposure to explicit sexual materials usually results in *desensitization* of a person's attitudes and values. Desensitization is a change in values or

attitudes that occurs over time as a previously taboo behavior is gradually accepted because of repeated exposure to mass media. For example, if a man watches a number of X-rated movies that depict women enjoying being raped, he may soon change his perceptions about the frequency of the occurrence of that behavior in the real world as well as his attitude about the amount of social and psychological harm rape causes, and even his beliefs about the likelihood that he would commit such a crime.

Research has revealed that exposure to sexually explicit materials produces significant changes in attitudes. For six weeks, Zillmann and Bryant (1982, 1984) showed sexually explicit films to one group and nonexplicit films to a second group. When they tested the groups, they found that the first group overestimated the popularity of the sexual activities they had viewed in the movies (e.g., fellatio, cunnilingus, anal intercourse, sadomasochism, and bestiality). The estimates of the second group were much more conservative. Later, the same researchers (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988b) used similar methods to determine if the viewing of such films caused changes in attitudes toward their sexual partners, or changes in basic values such as a desire for marriage, monogamy, children, and so forth. They found that changes did occur. Those who saw the explicit films reported less satisfaction with their real-life partners than those in the control group. In addition to rating their partners lower in terms of physical appearance and sexual performance, the group shown explicit films was more accepting of premarital sex and extramarital sex. They reported less of a desire for marriage, monogamy, and children than the control group. The researchers explained these findings in this way:

Only pornography shows men and women to experience the greatest sexual pleasures from coition with many partners, one after the other, or from sexual activities with several partners at the same time. . . . And only this genre provides specifics such as fellatio in which women make entire male organs vanish or coition in which penises of extreme proportion cause women to scream in apparent painful ecstasy. The sexual experience of normals must pale by comparison. Partners must seem prudish, insensitive, inhibited, frigid . . . and deficient in endowment and skill. And who, confronted with the bounty of readily attainable sexual joys that are continually presented in pornography and nowhere else, could consider his or her sexual life fulfilled? (p. 452)

Research has also provided evidence that sexual content need not be overtly explicit or pornographic to have detrimental psychological effects. For example, in three studies of 13- and 14-year-old boys and girls, Bryant and Rockwell (1994) found that under certain circumstances, massive exposure to sexual content on prime-time television (in particular, intimate sexual relations between unmarried couples) caused significant shifts in the teens' moral judgment. The studies also showed that three mitigating factors could serve to diminish or eliminate the harmful effects. In the words of the researchers:

First, having a clear and well-defined family value system—a value system that teenagers can know and use—mediates potentially harmful media

Research Spotlight

It Works Both Ways: The Relationship between Exposure to Sexual Content in the Media and Adolescent Sexual Behavior

Amy Bleakley, Michael Hennessy, Martin Fishbein, and Amy Jordan (2008)

Media Psychology, 11, 443–461

This study, published in 2008, made use of a longitudinal Web-based survey of 14- to 16-year-olds and regression models to determine that sexually active adolescents are more likely to expose themselves to mediated sexual content, and those exposed to sexual content in media are more likely to progress in sexual activity.

Participants

The Web-based survey was conducted with a quota sample of adolescents from the greater Philadelphia area. Data collection for the first wave was in the spring and summer of 2005; wave two data were collected one year later in the spring and summer of 2006. The researchers recruited participants through print and radio ads, direct mail, and word of mouth. Written parental consent and teen assent were collected for all participants.

Design

The survey took about an hour to complete and participants were compensated with \$25 each. For the first wave, 547 adolescents (40.4 percent male and 42.7 percent African American, 41.2 percent White, 13.4 percent Hispanic, and 2.8 percent other) completed the survey. Of the 547 participants in wave one, 501 were retained for wave two. These 501 consisted of 38.3 percent males, 33.1 percent age 15, 34.7 percent age 16, and 32.1 percent age 17.

Measures

Respondents were asked to indicate how often (during lifetime, more than a year ago, or within the past year) they engaged in the following sexual behaviors: deep kissing, touching breasts, breasts touched, genital touching, oral sex (receive), vaginal sex, oral sex (give), anal sex (receive), and anal sex (give).

Respondents were also asked about exposure to selected media titles in four media (television, music, magazines, and video games). Respondents also rated sexual content exposure to each of the media titles (never, rarely, sometimes, often) indicating how frequently within the last year they watched each show, listened to each artist, read each magazine, or played each video game.

Results

Sexual activity successfully predicted exposure to sexual content in the media and sexual content exposure predicted a progression of sexual activity. Increased sexual activity was also found to be related to a mature physical development, having ever had a boyfriend or girlfriend, and friends' approval of sex. Parental disapproval was associated with increased exposure to sexual content: the more the parent disapproves of sex, the higher adolescents' exposure to sexual content. Other variables associated with higher exposure to sexual content include having a television in the bedroom, and total time spent with television, music, video games, and magazines.

The results showed that adolescents who engage in sexual activity seek out media with sexual content and those who are exposed to more sexual content are more likely to engage in sexual behaviors.

effects; the second mitigating factor we found is coming from a family in which free and open discussion of issues is encouraged and practiced . . . third, active critical viewing, or the active viewing and analysis of program content, is a most desirable trait for teenagers to have and is to be encouraged. Again, it can make a big difference in mediating the cognitive effects of mass media consumption as far as moral judgment is concerned. (p. 194)

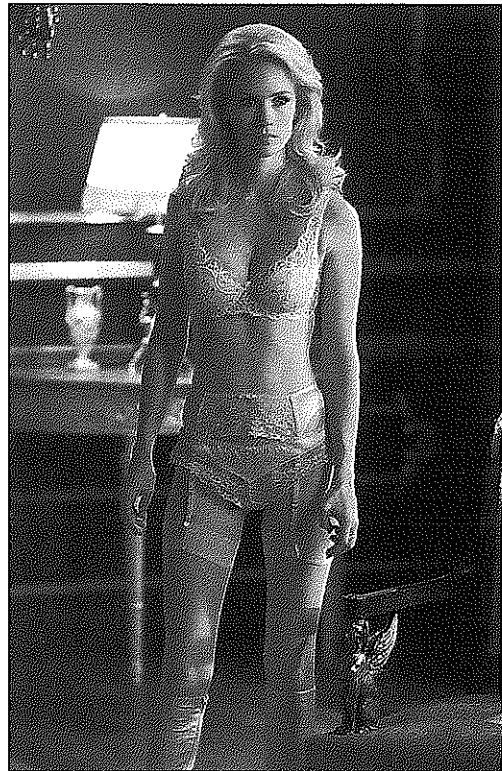
Other studies also support the evidence for attitudinal changes related to consumption of sexually explicit material. As some have pointed out, most pornography conveys an ideological message that degrades or dehumanizes women as victims or playthings (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993; Russell, 1998).

Changes in Behavior

Behavioral effects from the consumption of sexually explicit media content may occur at several levels. For better or worse, people often *learn* when they consume sexual content. The learning may be highly constructive, as in a couple undergoing sexual therapy, or it may be extremely destructive, as in copycat sexual offenses that involve violence.

Disinhibition causes changes in behavior in much the same way that desensitization causes changes in attitudes and values. After seeing an R-rated movie or an X-rated video, a person becomes less inhibited about performing the sexual behaviors witnessed—behaviors that were previously taboo. Again, when taken to an extreme, disinhibition may reduce moral judgment constraints that result in an individual committing some type of violent sex crime.

The relationship between the viewing of sexually explicit materials and the occurrence of sex crimes has received much attention through the years. Many studies have examined the numbers of rape and child molestation cases in a particular locale in relation to the amount of sexually explicit ma-



Sexual content is found in all types of media, including action films targeted at boys and teenagers. In *X-Men: First Class*, January Jones's character is often seen scantily dressed and using her sexuality to manipulate male characters. Murray Close/Getty Images

materials available there. After reviewing these studies, Court (1984) found a statistically significant correlation between the availability of explicit materials and the occurrence of violent sexual crimes.

The relationship between sexually explicit materials and the occurrence of rape in particular has been difficult to prove, however, because of several confounding variables: the variety of sexual materials, changing social norms, and the increasing number of such assaults actually being reported. Several studies have found a relationship between the crime of rape and the availability of one particular medium—sex magazines. In one study, researchers found a high correlation in all 50 states between the number of rapes and the circulation numbers for eight sex magazines (Baron & Straus, 1987). The correlations were particularly high for magazines that contained sexual violence.

Effects of Erotica on Aggression

A number of studies have shown that when individuals who had been provoked as part of the experimental protocol were exposed to sexually explicit materials, they were more likely to retaliate against or “get back at” the person who provoked them (Baron, 1979; Cantor, Zillmann, & Einsiedel, 1978; Donnerstein & Hallam, 1978; Meyer, 1972; Zillmann, 1971). In other words, viewing arousing erotic material tended to enhance aggressive tendencies in individuals. The process by which the effect occurs is known as *excitation transfer* (Zillmann, 1978, 1979, 1982b). Zillmann and Bryant (1984) explained the role of excitation transfer from erotica on aggression in this way:

Exposure to erotica fosters increased sympathetic activity as an accompaniment to more specific genital responses . . . and that, after sexual stimulation, residues of the slowly dissipating nonspecific sympathetic activity enter into unrelated affective states and potentially intensify them. If the subsequent state is one of annoyance and anger, residual sympathetic excitation from sexual arousal thus is likely to intensify these experiences and to energize the hostile and aggressive actions incited by them. (p. 116)

When the erotic material was pleasing and nonarousing (e.g., photographs of nudes), the aggressive tendencies of provoked individuals were actually *calmed* (Baron, 1974a, 1974b; Baron & Bell, 1973; Donnerstein, Donnerstein, & Evans, 1975; White, 1979). Based on these findings and others, Zillmann and Bryant (1984) developed a model called the *excitation-and-valence model* of the effects of erotica on motivated aggression. The model makes the following four predictions: (1) pleasing and nonarousing erotica reduces aggressiveness because it counteracts the provoked person’s feelings of anger; (2) displeasing and nonarousing erotica increases aggressiveness because it adds to the provoked person’s feelings of annoyance; (3) displeasing and nonarousing erotica increases aggressiveness because the enhanced feelings of annoyance are retained by the person and transferred to situations afterward; and (4) pleasing and arousing erotica create a situation in which calmness rather than excitation is transferred, therefore canceling out negative effects such as aggressiveness.

Importance of the Prevailing Tone

The effects of viewing sexual content in the media are also determined by context—both the context of the material and the context in which the person is exposed to it. These contextual variables, when considered as a whole, constitute what is known as a **prevailing tone**. Harris (1994) listed the following contextual variables that contribute to the prevailing tone of sexual content.

The *seriousness or triviality of the treatment* is one major aspect of the prevailing tone. Controversial topics such as rape or incest are acceptable when given serious treatment (as in a documentary) but become offensive if treated flippantly (e.g., in a comedy).

Another aspect, *artistic value and intent*, also contributes to the prevailing tone. The Bible's Song of Solomon contains many references to sexual activities, but these are a vital part of a beautiful work that carries the theme of love as shared by a married couple. The same holds true for certain works by Chaucer and Shakespeare. At the other end of the spectrum are XXX videos or films such as *Debbie Does Dallas*, which are largely devoid of artistic merit.

The prevailing tone is also affected by whether or not a sex scene is *necessary to the plot*, and by the *degree of explicitness* of the sex. Scenes of explicit sex become more acceptable to a viewer if they are important in the development of the plot.

Another aspect of the prevailing tone lies within the *context of viewing*. A man's reactions when thumbing through the pages of *Hustler* are likely to be very different if (1) he is alone, or he is sitting beside (2) his wife, (3) a male friend, (4) his grandmother, or (5) his preacher. The man may view the material as highly offensive or highly exciting, depending upon his context of viewing.

Cultural context also affects the prevailing tone. What may be considered inappropriate in one culture may be commonplace in another. Many men and women in primitive tribes throughout the world walk about scantily dressed or completely naked, and the behavior is entirely appropriate for that culture. In marked contrast, in certain Islamic cultures women must cover themselves from head to toe before appearing in public.

Impact of Exposure to Sexually Violent Material

In recent years much more than in years past, the media have begun to portray sex in combination with violent acts. Magazines that portray sexual violence have appeared and joined old standards like *Penthouse* and *Playboy* in depicting more images of domination and bondage (Malamuth & Spinner, 1980). Also, the horror movies of old have evolved into a new genre called *slasher films* (very popular among teenagers despite their R ratings), which depict much brute violence against women in combination with sexual acts or in a sexual context (Yang & Linz, 1990).

Should we be concerned about this tendency to mix sex with violence? Judging from the research findings, the answer is indisputably yes.

Studies using both normal populations or convicted sex offenders have shown that the mixture of sex and violence has potentially harmful effects. In one of these studies, researchers found that convicted rapists were aroused by viewing both rape and consenting sex, whereas normal participants were aroused only by depictions of consenting sex (Abel, Barlow, Blanchard, & Guild, 1977; Barbaree, Marshall, & Lanthier, 1979). A later study revealed that normal males could be aroused by depictions of rape if the victim appeared to enjoy it and experienced an orgasm (Malamuth, Heim, & Feshbach, 1980). The arousal of the males was equal to or exceeded what they experienced while viewing a film of consensual sex; however, females in the study were not aroused by the rape film.

Importance of Individual Differences

Individual differences account for great variances in the effects of sexually explicit material. A person who is more likely to use force in situations of conflict is more likely to experience the harmful effects from viewing sexually explicit material. In a study of college males, Malamuth (1981) separated force-oriented men (those who reported they would be likely to use force in their lives) from nonforce-oriented men in order to determine if sexually violent media fare affected them similarly or differently. The force-oriented men were more aroused by a rape scene in which a woman was depicted as finally enjoying the assault, whereas a film of consensual sex proved to be more arousing for the nonforce-oriented men.

In another study of force-oriented and nonforce-oriented males by Malamuth and Check (1983), participants listened to tapes of either consenting sex, rape with the woman eventually becoming aroused (rape-arousal), or rape with the woman being disgusted during the assault rather than aroused (rape-disgust). Arousal for both groups of men, measured by self-reports and penile tumescence, was greater for the consenting sex version than for the rape-disgust version; however, the rape-arousal version proved to be a "turn on" for both groups. The nonforce-oriented group became as aroused with the rape-arousal tape as with the consensual sex tape, while the force-oriented group was even more aroused by the rape-arousal tape than by the consenting sex version.

Other studies (Donnerstein, 1980; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981) have involved the viewing of sexual violence and the subsequent administration of electric shock by the viewer on a confederate. These studies have concluded that a link exists between the viewing of sexual violence (especially a rape in which the woman is depicted as becoming aroused) and a propensity to inflict pain upon females.

In summary, the research findings show that harmful effects occur whenever sexually violent materials depict a woman who becomes aroused by an assault. Also, individual differences in disposition (e.g., being force-oriented or nonforce-oriented) cause different people to react differently when viewing sexually violent media fare. As discussed earlier, the prevailing tone of the material is always an important consideration.

Sexual Violence in Slasher Films

The studies cited above made use of pornographic material; however, sexual violence is not limited to films exclusively for adult audiences. The highly popular, R-rated slasher movies contain a great deal of violence, usually in a sexual context (Weaver & Tamborini, 1996). According to Harris (1994):

The main concern with such films is the juxtaposition of erotic sex and violence. For example, one scene from *Toolbox Murders* opens with a beautiful woman disrobing and getting into her bath, with the very romantic music "Pretty Baby" playing in the background. For several minutes she is shown fondling herself and masturbating in a very erotic manner. Suddenly the camera cuts to the scene of an intruder breaking into her apartment, with loud, fast-paced suspenseful music in the background. The camera and sound track cut back and forth several times between these two characters until he finally encounters the woman. He attacks her with electric tools, chasing her around the apartment, finally shooting her several times in the head with a nail gun. The scene closes after seeing her bleed profusely, finally lying on the bed to die with the sound track again playing the erotic "Pretty Baby." (pp. 261-262)

One of the main concerns regarding slasher films is their ready availability to teens. Many of these films are not rated and therefore not restricted to adult audiences; those that do receive the R rating are available to youngsters in video stores where restrictions often are not applied, as well as on cable and satellite television.

Teens take full advantage of the availability of slasher movies. A survey of 4,500 children in the United Kingdom in the 1980s found that about one in five young teenage boys (aged 13-14) had seen an illegal and sexually violent film called *I Spit on Your Grave* (Hill, Davis, Holman, & Nelson, 1984). In another study of American college students, Greenberg and associates found that two of three watched slasher movies on a regular basis (1993b).

Researchers have also studied slasher movies for the effects of the sexual violence on young audiences. Findings suggest that men become desensitized when they repeatedly watch slasher films (Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1984), but women do not (Krafka, 1985). Over time, the men found the slasher movies to be less degrading to women, more enjoyable, less offensive, and less violent.

Reducing the Negative Effects

The negative effects of viewing sexual violence can be mitigated or lessened. In several studies, participants were trained prior to viewing in an effort to reduce desensitization effects (Intons-Peterson & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1989; Intons-Peterson et al., 1989; Linz, Donnerstein, Bross, & Chapin, 1986; Linz, Fuson, & Donnerstein, 1990). Some procedures have proven more successful than others; for example, men were found to be most affected by learning that women are not responsible for sexual assaults against them.

Other researchers have given extensive debriefings to participants to make them aware of the horrors of rape and the absolute inability of a woman to be

able to enjoy it (Malamuth et al., 1980; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1980b). Evaluations have revealed that these debriefings make participants less susceptible to rape myths (e.g., a woman's enjoyment of rape).

Allen and his associates (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of 10 studies that had used educational briefings to mitigate the harmful effects of sexually explicit material. Their analysis found overwhelming support for the effectiveness of debriefings in lessening harmful effects.

More on Behavioral Effects of Pornography: The Study of Sex Offenders

The link between exposure to pornography and the commission of sex crimes is a controversial one. In 1996 one researcher reviewed the many correlational studies that attempted to link sexual aggression with use of pornography and concluded that statistically significant correlations between the two do not exist, although particular subsets of sex offenders may use pornography in significant ways (Bauserman, 1996). Other scholars and clinicians have studied the issue and found positive correlational links between the consumption of pornography and criminal sexual aggression (Marshall, 1989; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1984).

In 1994 Cline examined data from experimental laboratory studies, field studies, and clinical case histories and found four major behavioral effects that result from the consumption of pornography. As a clinical psychologist, Cline had treated hundreds of people (mostly men) who suffered from serious sexual disorders and many who had committed sex crimes such as child molestation, rape, exhibitionism, and so forth. "With only several exceptions," Cline wrote, "pornography has been a major or minor contributor or facilitator in the acquisition of their deviation or sexual addiction" (p. 233).

The Four-Factor Syndrome

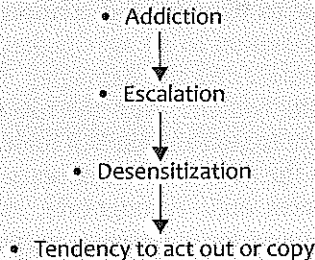
The four major effects of consuming pornography are *addiction*, *escalation*, *desensitization*, and the *tendency to act out or copy* what had been viewed. Cline (1994) called these four effects the **four-factor syndrome**, because the effects occurred in the same sequence over time. Almost all his clients had experienced the four-factor syndrome.

Addiction to pornography was the first effect that Cline (1994) noticed. Once his clients began viewing pornography, they soon found themselves wanting more of it. Most of them experienced sexual stimulation followed by sexual release from masturbation.

Once addicted, an *escalation* effect occurred as time passed. As with a drug addict, the pornography addict began craving stronger (i.e., more explicit or more deviant) sexual materials to achieve the same stimulation as the initial experience. Cline (1994) found that over time, most of his clients preferred masturbating while viewing pornography to sexual intercourse and intimacy with a partner.

Four-Factor Syndrome

In a study of convicted sex offenders, consumption of pornography was found to cause four major effects, which always occurred in the same order.



Desensitization was the third effect. Over time, shocking, antisocial, illegal, immoral, and deviant sexual behavior came to be viewed as acceptable and legitimate. The morals and standards of pornography addicts tended to sink lower and lower as more and more material was consumed. The addicts began to believe that deviant sexual behaviors were more commonplace than they had originally thought.

The final effect was the tendency to *act out sexually* or copy the sexual acts they had seen in pornographic materials. These activities included deviant and illegal behaviors such as sex with children, rape, sadomasochism, exhibitionism, and so forth. According to Cline (1994), these deviant behaviors “frequently grew into a sexual addiction that they found themselves locked into and unable to change or reverse—no matter what the negative consequences in their life” (p. 234).

Correlation between Sex Crimes and Sexually Explicit Materials

More recent research has also suggested a connection between sex crimes and the use of sexually explicit materials. Zgourides, Monto, and Harris (1997) conducted a study of 176 males from the ages of 13 to 19. Of the 176 males, 80 were convicted sex offenders and 96 were not. The study found a significant positive correlation between the use of sexually explicit materials and the commission of sex crimes. In other words, far more sex offenders than nonoffenders reported using sexually explicit materials. Another study (Allen, D’Alessio, & Emmers-Sommer, 1999) did not find significantly different results in a comparison of pornographic consumption among sex offenders and nonoffenders, but it did find significant differences in terms of arousal and behavioral consequences. Sex offenders were more likely to become aroused and more likely to perform some sort of sexual act (whether masturbation, consensual sex, or coercive sex) after consuming sexually explicit material.

Summary

Sexual content in media ranges from the mildly suggestive to various levels of the sexually explicit. Sexual content in electronic and print media has important implications due to its perceived connection with serious social concerns. The availability of television to all ages makes that medium a particularly dangerous one when considering the damaging social effects that result from the consumption of sexual content. With the rise of the Internet and social media, the effects of exposure to sexually explicit material are only beginning to be realized. Pornography is the extreme class of sexually explicit materials that is available to adult audiences only. Pornography, largely devoid of literary merit or artistic value, is produced for the express purpose of pandering sexual content.

Obscenity is a legal term that describes certain pornographic material that must meet three criteria as judged by a jury representative of the community: (1) the material appeals to a prurient (shameful, sick, morbid, or lustful) interest in sex; (2) the material is patently offensive or beyond the contemporary community standards regarding depictions of sexual content or activity; (3) the material as a whole must lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

Many studies have examined the extent and explicitness of sexual content in mass media. These studies have found that music videos, X-rated videos, television, R-rated movies, and the Internet contain varying amounts and types of sexual content.

Exposure to highly explicit sexual content may affect media users in one or more of several ways. These include sexual arousal and changes in attitudes, values, and behaviors.

When provoked individuals are exposed to sexually explicit materials, they are more likely to engage in retaliatory behavior. In other words, viewing arousing erotic material tends to enhance aggressive tendencies in individuals. This effect is known as excitation transfer.

The effects of viewing sexual content in the media are altered by the context of the material and the context in which a person is exposed to it. The seriousness or triviality of the material, the artistic value and intent of the material, the degree of explicitness and the necessity of the sex scene to the development of the plot, the cultural context, and the context of viewing are contextual variables that constitute the prevailing tone.

Harmful effects occur whenever sexually violent materials depict a woman who becomes aroused by an assault. Individual differences in disposition (e.g., being force-oriented or nonforce-oriented) cause people to react differently when viewing sexually violent media fare.

R-rated slasher movies, highly popular among teenagers, contain much violence, usually in a sexual context. Men become desensitized when they watch slasher films repeatedly.

The negative effects of viewing sexual violence can be mitigated. Training sessions prior to viewing or extensive debriefing sessions proved successful in lessening negative effects.

In a study of convicted sex offenders, a clinical psychologist found that use of pornography produced four major behavioral effects that occurred in the same sequence over time. These effects, known as the four-factor syndrome, included addiction, escalation, desensitization, and the tendency to act out or copy what had been viewed.

■ **NOTE**

¹ Technically, the X-rating has not been used since 1990, when the Motion Picture Association of America began exploring less sensational NC-17 and NC-18 ratings.