# Influence of Mass Media on Teenage Sexuality

I recently watched a movie entitled *Why Him?.* Though several issues of popular culture are addressed in *Why Him?,* one that stood out most was sexuality. The movie is based on a couple who have two teenage children, a college girl and a high school boy. The girl happens to have a boyfriend who is an older guy working as coder for tech-companies. The boyfriend is rich and is considered to have a “free spirit” and an annoying honest tongue without self-control. The boyfriend exerts influence not only on the girlfriend but much more on the teenage son and the mother. He influences the sexual attitude and behavior of both the mother and the son, including their speech and image. The same influence can be replicate in the viewer. In this regard, this paper finds that films, television, internet, magazines, newspapers and books have the potential to influence popular culture in today’s society. New technologies like the internet and social media have significantly changed the manner in which information is shared between users. Mass media information can either be detrimental or constructive and it is therefore necessary to assess the influence it has on teenage sexuality by mainly focusing on televised programs. According to a recent study, children and adolescents exposed to sex through media are likely to engage in sexual activity much earlier than those who are not (Ciesynki). Therefore, the production and distribution of television’s sexual content should be controlled.

## Background

In today’s culture, televised programs are convenient educators. The popularity of television makes it a convenient channel for exposure to sexual topic without embarrassment that typically arises when parents and children discuss issues related to sex. Though sexual content on television are seldom explicit, they are abundant and provide sexual information that teenagers would not get elsewhere. The storylines and characterizations presented in verbal and visual context through television deliver content with massive examples of how to approach intimacy. On the other hand, concern on televised content indicates that sexual messages are not only limited but are potentially harmful and at times stereotypical. The concern is that the prevalence of sexual content on television largely overemphasizes the role of intimacy in male-female relationships. Additionally, only one dimension to sexual relationships is depicted showing sexual encounters to be spontaneous, romantic and free of risks. Therefore, the limited yet prevalent nature of sexual content on television has sparked keen interest from researchers whether viewing such content is associated with permissive sexual attitudes, irresponsible decision-making on sexual matters, and distorted expectation of younger generations.

Multiple studies have on this subject have reported the association between the amount of television viewing and viewers’ sexual expectations, behaviors and attitudes (Ciesynki; Vandenbosch et al). Greater exposure to television viewing has been found to have greater influence on viewers’ attitude towards sex and intimate relationships. Both experimental exposure and heavy consumption of sexually oriented content like music videos and soap operas have been related to the expression of more liberal sexual attitudes, sexual improprieties, and negativity towards remaining a virgin. These findings provide evidence linking viewing of sexually-oriented content to viewers’ sexuality.

## Teenagers and Sexuality

Adolescence is experienced during teenage life. During adolescence teenagers undergo adjustments characterized by insecurities regarding self-identity, sexuality and orientations. Adolescence is an important period since teenagers experience sexual development and exploration during this period. Additionally, individuals begin to consider sexual behaviors that are moral, enjoyable and appropriate. Sexual activity is experienced by many teenagers at adolescence.

According to Barna Group, each generation of teenagers struggles with the developmental milestone of sexuality. Sexuality includes components of sexual behavior whose boundaries are increasingly permissive. While circumstances seem to change over the years, perception appears to be constant. The increasing permissiveness can be attributed to the ever increasing emphasis on individual freedoms and rights in social cultures. Several factors including the internet, mass media, electronic communication, peer influence, urbanization, and the breakdown of conventional parental and community structures also influence sexual behavior. Of importance to this paper is the mass media factor which potentially influences teenagers by exposing them to sexual content. Studies that have examined the effects of mass media on the sexuality of adolescents indicate that the average teenager spends one third of each day exposed to media contents.

## Theories on Media and Teen Sexuality

The potential influence of mass media on individual behavior is supported by several different theories, models and hypotheses. Albeit theoretical mechanisms varying considerably, most agree that consumer content with sexually related messages act to influence behavior over time by affecting behavioral stimuli. Among the theories, Cultivation Theory (CT) and Social-Learning Theory (SLT) are of importance to the topic.

The social-learning theory as presented by Bandura gives ample evidence to show that both children and adults can learn by imitation. Three main learning processes are identified by Badura: direct experience, indirect experience (modeling), and cognitive operations. According to this theory, behaviors are learned and influenced by social context. Therefore, television is important in shaping viewers’ propensity to learn through imitation.

The principal of SLT focuses on the personal connection viewers with the programs through perceived relevance to self-identification. The emphasis is on television characters portrayed as behavior models. STL hypothesizes that specific portrayal of television characters influences image-building more than the sheer frequency of television viewing. The notion here is that individual performances have the power to connect with the viewer more strongly. SLT predicts that teenagers will model after TV personalities upon seeing that they are not punished but rather rewarded, and more so, seen as being powerful and attractive. Evidence shows that indeed, the perception of television figures as sexual role models is associated with increasingly permissive sexual attitudes and extensive sexual experiences with greater dissatisfaction with individual sexual status and sexual experiences (Gottfried, Jeffrey A. et al.). This argument therefore expects the influence of televised sexual content to be stronger among teenagers who identify themselves with television personalities.

With regard to the aforementioned theory, model and hypothesis, the most typical examples of situations of social learning are TV commercials, music videos and movies. Some of the content in these programs may influence teenagers by showing them that certain sexuality may render them more admirable. Furthermore, it is evident that human sexuality is influenced more by social conditions than biological stimulations. Television programs are known to portray sexual models that teach affectionate techniques which in turn alter sexual attitudes and shape sexual behaviors by showing acceptable and inacceptable social norms.

On the other hand, the cultivation theory (CT) posits that exposure to TV is directly proportional to individual perception of the true version of reality. CT suggests that the consistency of portrayed images in televised programs leads viewers to gradual cultivation and adoption of attitudes and expectations about society that are more consistent with the portraits than with reality itself. Studies have adopted this model to explain the impact of TV on violence and successful cultivation of attitudes about relationships in marriage and family. Accordingly, if televised programs show that sex is largely recreational, relatively risk free, prevalent and glamorous, the CT model projects that teenagers who watch TV more frequently are more likely to incline and accept this perspective of sexuality than sporadic viewers.

The images and messages on mass media have the potential to influence teenage behavior over time through acquisition of new attitudes and behaviors or stimulation to perform previous and newly learned responses. However, the processes are complex and varied, and involve a number of factors al contributing at the same time. Drawing on the posits of the CT and SLT theories, it is this papers argument that teenagers are more involved in viewing TV and feel more connected to the material being aired are most likely to be influenced. As such, the influence on sexuality will be stronger among teenagers who intentionally use TV to shape their sexuality. To this effect, the dimension of active viewing is better placed to contextualize the CT.

The premise of active viewing according to Cultivation theory posit that the varying levels of teenage activity when using TV differ in terms of selectivity and attention given to content being viewed. Albeit, while it would be expected that the impact of the content will depend on the level of active involvement; the relationship of the impact in this direction is unclear. Suggestions indicate that passive viewers are most vulnerable and the level of influence on teenagers is more effective by TV messages (Gottfried, Jeffrey A. et al.). To reconcile this debate, it is argued that active involvement enhances the effect of television whereas inhibitory involvement is more deterrent. Active involvement includes selectivity and attention while inhibitory involvement includes avoidance and skepticism. Focusing on active involvement, Television’s content has a stronger effect on teenagers practicing active involvement.

## Television and Music

The influence of television is largely observed in the attitudes and behaviors of teens as well as in shaping their values. TV has become an influential source of information for the young people to the extent of serving as a teacher (Strasburger). The impact of media on the lives of teens attracts concern in several spheres of social life including sexuality, violence and image issues. A number of studies demonstrate the impact of the media on human sexuality and other social stereotypes (Zeiger). These studies persuasively demonstrate that sexual content in TV programs is pervasive. It has been reported that music videos and prime-time programs that focus more on casual sex, usually promote justifiable attitudes about premarital sex. According to two cross-sectional surveys conducted by Ward and Friedman, there is a relationship between frequent exposure to sexual content on TV and the transition to sexual intercourse. The two report that teenagers who are sexually active are more prone to view sexual content in television rather than the sexual content being aired accelerating their initiation in to sexual activity. A study conducted on this topic reported that adolescents between the age of 12 and 17 years old who watch sexual content are more advanced in sexual behavior and intercourse than those who viewed fewer shows.

Vandenbosch et al. holds the opinion that exposure to sexual portrayals affects the beliefs of teenagers about cultural norms and could create the illusion that sex is critical in daily life than it truly is. This exposure to social models may also individual beliefs on the possible outcomes of engaging in sexual activities. SLT projects that teens who see characters on televised content engaging in sexual behaviors without experiencing negative outcomes are more likely to adopt the portrayed behaviors. Even though the portrayal of the risks of engaging in sexual activities (such as STI and pregnancy) would theoretically inspire abstinence or the practice of safe sex, a negligible amount of this depiction is shown on programs with sexual content. Consequently, sexual content being aired on TV is more likely to encourage the sexuality of teenagers than discouraging it.

## The Internet

The internet is increasingly accessible to teenager making them vulnerable to exposure to explicit sexual content and sexual interactions in a less regulated environment. This exposure has been enhanced by the growing ease of accessibility of mobile phones that are able to use the internet. Therefore, children are increasingly at the risk of being exposed to sexual material at an early age. Studies in Dutch involving children at the age of 8 to 12 report that half of the study population had negative experiences with the internet; additionally, girls reported higher rates of disturbance, especially pornography, than boys. As teenagers grow older, their use of the internet becomes less regulated by their parents, but many are still unsafe. The level of safety while using the internet is influenced by other internet users considered to be strangers or acquaintances who connect with the teenagers in manners considered sexual.

Teenage users with extensive access to the internet especially for romantic or sexual reasons are particularly at greater risks of exposure to sexual content or even solicitation. Moreover, the internet is made more attractive by the fact that it provides a variety of connection models that are easily accessible, affordable and offer perceived anonymity. However, problems arise when teenagers try to transform online conversation in to face-to-face interactions. Though interactions are largely via instant messaging, a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted that a large number of teenagers portrayed themselves as being older and more experienced in sexual matters than they actually were. Additionally, the expansive growth of social media outlets has made it typical for teenagers to have a social media account with which they present themselves to the world. It is therefore empirical that the internet is pervasive.

For many teenagers using the internet, online interactions are not only familiar but a comfortable place meet new people, make friends and nurture relationships. And because the internet is virtually ubiquitous, easy to use and illusively private, many use it as an environment for meeting sexual partners. Chatting avenues provided for by the internet have taken the place of bars and bathhouses where arrangements are made for anonymous sexual encounters.

Research reveals that human sexuality is consistently associated with exposure to sexual material in the media. Early exposure to sexual material causes greater risk of earlier initiation into sexual activity, and other risky behaviors like multiple sex partners, and the contraction of STIs or pregnancy. The ubiquity of the media has made it a super-peer through which teenagers can learn what is expected and what to expect. The media has therefore become a powerful tool of universal influence on teenage sexuality even surpassing parental advisory and approval.

**Implications of Media on Teenage Sexuality**

The time spent by teens using media is higher than the time being spent on other activities. The media provides a platform for acquisition of information about self and the nature of intimate relationships than parents, schools and any other sources do, especially in settings where people shy away from sex education. The prevalence of sexual material varies across media platforms, including TV and Internet, which are easily accessible to people of all ages. In this current age of the media, teenagers can easily access sexual material than before. Additionally, the need to reach a large audience has made sexual images more explicit and frequent as what could be seen as captivating today could be seen as old-news a few days later.

Since young people spend much of their time on mass media, it becomes critical to their sexual development shaping their attitudes, behaviors and expectations. It is clear that the internet is primarily developed for purposes of commerce. Sex is traded as a commodity and young people explore this marketplace before they can understand the concept of romance and responsible sex, and how to nurture healthy relationships. In light of this argument, the phenomenon of “friends with benefit” in which young people engage in casual sex for “recreation” is indeed surprising.

Other than initiating youths into sexual content, the media portrays sexual activity as something being done by everyone. It influences how teenagers view sexual activity and their degree of resistance against initiating sex. Though evidence is limited, it is significant in showing that teenagers exposed to sexual content on mass media experience changes in their sexuality that are risky in nature. Thus, it is critical for parents and other stakeholders to understand and respond to the power of mass media as an influencer of the health and well-being of teens.

## Regulatory Systems

Media content is regulated by the communication industry through indication of age-appropriateness. Though parents are encouraged to use these ratings, most of them still distrust their accuracy and effectiveness. A study that required parents to independently rate media content for teenagers in terms of appropriateness found that there was a variation of 50% between the current system of rating and the perspective of the parents on what was right for their kids. Part of the distrust in the rating system is driven by the fact that the ratings on entertainment media largely focus on social values rather than objective health. Therefore, ratings keep shifting inconsistently with the change in social norms. Parents feel that the rating board does not understand what is important to them because the measures taken seem to be directing kids in the wrong direction as they make independent choices that are against parental will.

Within the internet safety measures are fixed through technologies that allow adults to filter or block adult content from access although filters may also prevent teenagers form accessing important information. Adult supervision and restrictions has been found to reduce exposure to media content. Additionally, filtering software and education are critical in reducing exposure to sexual content in the media.

Critical assessment of findings have concluded that systems of rating and restriction totally effective in protecting teenagers from the negative effects of mass media. The American Psychological Association  and the American Academy of Pediatrics both agree that adults should help teenagers limit their exposure to sexual content on mass media, and teach them to decipher messages received through mass media and popular culture. Moreover, producers of media content need to balance the information about sex and the truth concerning the risks involved.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, it is indeed clear that whatever content is portrayed by the media has the potential to influence teenage life of many children who take media messages to be a true reflection of reality. This attraction that the media has on teenagers is quite worrying because it seems to be increasingly developing especially now that technology is continuously developing and parents are less observant of their teenagers. In any case, the stakeholders who are responsible for the regulation of media messages and their use should formulate regulations that will mitigate sexual information especially in entertainment media so that the problem being experienced by teenagers can be controlled with finality. This menace was not developed by teens, and even though it may seem endless, strict measures must be employed in the near future. There is need for the development of control on the kind of information being accessed by teenagers. The types of media that are mostly exploited by the youth are those that provide entertainment including television, internet and mobile phones.

**Annotated Bibliography**

Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

The book discusses in broad, the social learning theory and informs this paper about one of the important theories of mass communication. The social-learning theory as presented by Bandura gives evidence showing that people can learn by imitation.

Ciesynki, M. (2013). The Impact Of Media On Teen Sexual Health. Gonzaga University.retrieved from http://web02.gonzaga.edu/comltheses/proquestftp/Ciesynski\_gonzaga\_0736M\_10273.pdf

The research paper presents an analysis of the impact of media on how teenagers view sexual help. The findings of the paper informed our argument about the prevalence of sexual content on TV and the implications it has on teenage sexuality.

Gottfried, Jeffrey A. et al. "Does The Effect Of Exposure To TV Sex On Adolescent Sexual Behavior Vary By Genre?." Communication Research, vol 40, no. 1, 2011, pp. 73-95. SAGE Publications, doi:10.1177/0093650211415399.

The research article uses the Integrated Model of Behaviovioral Prediction to examine the effect of exposure to sexual content on TV by genre, on the sexual cognition and behavior of adolescents. The article informed the discussion on the topic of argument concerning the implication of TV sexual content on teenage perception of sex.

Strasburger, V. C. "Sexuality, Contraception, and the Media." Pediatrics, vol 126, no. 3, 2010, pp. 576-582. American Academy Of Pediatrics (AAP), doi:10.1542/peds.2010-1544.

The study discusses the effects of sexual content in mass media on teenage sexuality from a health perspective. The points indicated in the paper informed the conclusion and recommendations on this paper’s argument.

Vandenbosch, Laura et al. "The Relationship Between Sexual Content On Mass Media And Social Media: A Longitudinal Study." Cyberpsychology, Behavior, And Social Networking, vol 18, no. 12, 2015, pp. 697-703. Mary Ann Liebert Inc, doi:10.1089/cyber.2015.0197.

The study investigated the relationship between exposure to sexual television and internet content among adolescent boys and girls. It reports that watching sexual content leads adolescents to post sexual images of themselves on social media. The study makes important contribution to this paper’s argument as gives evidence of how mass media influences teenage attitude towards sexual behavior, attitude and image.

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