Adolescent sexual socialization & teen magazines: a cross-national study between the United States and the Netherlands
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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is commonly viewed as one of the most important periods of sexual development (e.g., Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Consequently, scientific researchers have devoted much attention to adolescent sexual socialization – that is, the process by which knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality are acquired” (Ward, 2003, p. 348). Topics that are important to adolescent sexuality which researchers have focused on include, but are not limited to, the dangers associated with sex, condom and contraceptive use, unplanned pregnancy, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), the positive aspects of sex such as desire and pleasure, and the emergence of a hook-up culture (e.g., Carpenter, 2001; Elliott, 2010; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Tolman, 2002). While some researchers have focused on the moral, physical, and psychological ramifications of these sexual topics, others have focused primarily on what and where young people learn about sexuality. Even though many adolescents learn about sex-related topics from parents, peers, and sex education programs, no source is perhaps more pervasive in educating young people about sex than the media.

The media have consistently been recognized as one of the most prominent information sources for adolescent sexual socialization (for a review, see Ward, 2003). Considering that young people (ages 8 to 18 years) spend almost 8 to 10 hours a day consuming entertainment media (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), it is no surprise that the media have been referred to as a ‘sexual super peer’ for adolescents (Brown, Halpern, & L’Engle, 2005). In fact, while parents and peers are important sources of sexual information, teenagers themselves have cited the media as one of their most vital sources for information about sex (Ward, 2003). Media such as television, movies, magazines, and the Internet offer young people a plethora of information about romantic relationships, sex, and sexual health (Brown et al., 2005).

Of the media sources available for information about sex, teen magazines have been recognized as being particularly popular among adolescents, especially for teenage girls (e.g., Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004; Roberts & Fochr, 2004). The dominant role of teen magazines as an information source for sex and romantic relationships is hardly unexpected. Teen magazines are read by millions of adolescents worldwide (Walsh-Childers, Treise, & Gotthoffer, 1997). Teen magazines also place a heavy emphasis on sex (Wright, 2009), and the focus on sex-related topics within teen magazines has only grown over the years (Carpenter, 2001; Clarke, 2009; Garner et al., 1998) Moreover, teen magazines are tailored to cover a variety of sex-related topics that are directly relevant to young people, and the coverage of these topics is notably more in-depth in teen magazines than in other media (APA, 2007; Durham, 1996, 1998; Garner et al., 1998; Walsh-Childers, Gotthoffer, & Lepre, 2002; Ward, 2003). In addition, the sexual information in teen magazines is easily available
to young people as they can be found at supermarkets, magazine stands, public libraries, or sent directly to a subscriber’s home (Ward, 2003). Due to this accessibility, many teen readers rely on magazines as a “sounding board” and “close confidant,” especially when it comes to sexual topics (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004, p. 2).

Given the importance of teen magazines in the sexual socialization of adolescents, they remain an understudied medium. Three major gaps in the literature still exist. First, although some sex-related topics in teen magazines have been studied through various content analyses (Carpenter, 2001; Clarke, 2009; Farvid & Braun, 2006), our knowledge base of these topics is on the surface level and is therefore severely limited. Second, the majority of studies on how teen magazines cover sex-related topics have been conducted from a single-country perspective (e.g., Carpenter, 1998; Clarke, 2009; Garner et al., 1998). Consequently, as of late, the need to study the cultural contingency of adolescent sexuality has been emphasized (Halpern, 2010; Tolman & McClelland, 2011), especially because it has been well-documented that the experience of sex and sexuality varies by country (e.g., Ford & Beach, 1951; Frayser, 1985; Gregersen, 1986; Hofstede, 1998). Third and lastly, no study to date has directly linked the sex-related content of teen magazines to how young people think or feel about sex. As a result, we have yet to know if and how the sex-related content from teen magazines is linked to young people’s views on sex.

In response to these three lacunae, this dissertation has three main goals. The first goal is to delve deeper into important sex-related topics by content analyzing sex-related material in teen magazines. For instance, two of the most popular themes that past studies have identified in teen and women’s magazines are sexual desire and the dangers associated with sex (e.g., Carpenter, 1998; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Schalet, 2000, 2004; Tolman, 2002), but no research to date has examined the gender- and culture-specific nature of sexual desire and danger coverage in teen magazines in one single study. Moreover, despite the important role of virginity loss and pregnancy to adolescent sexuality, our knowledge of how teen magazines cover these two topics is scarce. For instance, while the coverage of virginity loss in teen magazines has been studied (Carpenter, 2001), it remains unclear how often and with what tone virginity loss appears in teen magazines. In addition, pregnancy has never been studied in its own right but only in the broader context of the dangers associated with sex (e.g., Clarke, 2009; Garner et al., 1998; Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Furthermore, research in the last decade has suggested that young people increasingly engage in more casual forms of sex through ‘hook-ups,’ where committed relationships and love are not necessarily present (e.g., Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Stinson, 2010). Nevertheless, no study to date has investigated how teen magazines cover issues related to a hook-up culture.

The second goal of this dissertation is to investigate the teen magazine coverage of the above-mentioned topics of sexual desire, sexual danger, virginity loss, pregnancy, and a hook-up culture from a cross-national comparative perspective. The majority of content analyses of the sex-related material in magazines have been exclusively from the United States (US); however, it is commonly accepted that issues related to sex and sexuality are for
a large part dependent on culture (Ford & Beach, 1951; Gagnon & Simon, 1973). As a result, findings from research conducted in one country may not apply to another country. Cross-national research is therefore acknowledged to be an “essential antidote to naive universalism” (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990, p. 308) and a crucial “escape from ethnocentrism” (Dogan & Pelassy, 1984, p. 5). More importantly, cross-national research helps to establish differences between cultures and explain those differences through meaningful factors in which two cultures may vary (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). To initially fill the gap of cross-national comparative research in the field of adolescent sexual socialization research, this dissertation focuses on the coverage of the aforementioned topics in the most popular teen girl magazines from the US and the Netherlands. We chose the US and the Netherlands because these two countries are similar in terms of wealth, education standards, and are democratically governed, highly developed nations (Schalet, 2000); however, the US and the Netherlands differ substantially on sex-related issues (Hofstede, 1998; Schalet, 2000). Therefore, these two countries lend themselves to a meaningful cross-national comparison of sex-related content in teen girl magazines. We chose to study teen girl magazines because out of all the teen magazines available on the market, the top three in each country are teen girl magazines, which are teen magazines specifically targeted at a female readership.

The third and final goal of this dissertation is to link the sex-related content from US and Dutch teen girl magazines to the sexual attitudes of young people in the US and the Netherlands. By doing so, we are able to examine whether the reading of teen magazines is linked to young people’s sexual socialization. Moreover, this dissertation is able to indicate whether the associations found between teen magazine reading and young people’s sexual attitudes are culturally contingent. After all, we cannot fully grasp the role of teen magazines in young people’s sexual socialization of a particular country without comparing it to the role that such magazines play in the sexual socialization of youth of another country (Ford & Beach, 1951; Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

While this dissertation primarily addresses researchers of adolescent sexual socialization, it also has practical benefits for parents, health educators, government officials, and magazine editors. In terms of scientific research, the combination of content analysis and survey research allows for a more in-depth understanding of teen girl magazines and their association with the sexual attitudes of young people. Not only are we able to understand what sex-related content is present in US and Dutch teen girl magazines and how this content is culturally contingent, but we are also able to comprehend how this content is linked to the way that US and Dutch young people think and feel about sex. Practically speaking, parents, health educators, government officials, and magazine editors are better able to understand how cultural factors influence the ways in which adolescent sexuality is covered in the media, and how sex-related content for adolescents varies by country. Furthermore, parents, health educators, government officials, and magazine editors may be able to gain insight into how teen magazines are linked to the sexual attitudes of US and Dutch young people today. This can facilitate more meaningful sex
talks between parents and teens, provide valuable information for health educators and
government officials when developing sex education programs, and allow magazine editors
to create more teenager-relevant publications.

**Outline of Dissertation Chapters**

The chapters of this dissertation are written as individual studies and can also be read
in this fashion. In a consecutive manner, each chapter builds on the next and contributes to
the overall research aim of studying adolescents and sexualized media from a cross-national
comparative perspective through the medium of teen magazines. More specifically, the four
chapters of this dissertation address two important issues: (a) sex-related content within the
most popular US and Dutch teen girl magazines, and (b) how these teen magazines may be
linked to any fear of sex held by US and Dutch young people. All four chapters in this
dissertation are either published manuscripts or submitted for publication. Thus, the
content of each chapter in this dissertation is equal to the published or submitted
manuscripts.

**Chapter 1: Sexual Desire and Danger in US and Dutch Teen Girl Magazines**

The first chapter focuses on the depiction of sexual desire and danger in US and
Dutch teen girl magazines. Sexual desire and the dangers associated with sex are two of the
most popular themes identified in teen and women’s magazines (for a review, see Ward,
2003). *Sexual desire* refers to strong, embodied, passionate feelings of sexual wanting, as well
as knowing, listening to, and taking into account one’s own bodily sexual feelings through
pleasure (Tolman, 2000). *Sexual danger* is conveyed through sexual risks and the negative
physical/health consequences of sex, such as men’s aggression, women’s sexual
victimization, unwanted pregnancy, STDs, and rape (e.g., Garner et al., 1998; Johnson,
Gotthoffer, & Lauffer, 1999; Kim & Ward, 2004). While the gender-specific nature of
sexual desire and danger have been investigated (e.g., Carpenter, 1998; Farvid & Braun,
2006; Tolman, 2002), no research to date has examined the extent to which the coverage of
desire and danger in teen girl magazines is both gender- and culture-specific. This lack of
research is striking because the experience of sex and sexuality are known to vary by gender
(e.g., Schlenker, Caron, & Halteeman, 1998; Taylor, 2005; Willemesen, 1998) and by country
(e.g., Ford & Beach, 1951; Frayser, 1985; Gregersen, 1986; Hofstede, 1998).

In response to these shortcomings, the study in Chapter 1 examines, through a
cross-national comparative quantitative content analysis of US and Dutch teen girl
magazines, whether sexual desire is mentioned more for boys and sexual danger is
portrayed more for girls in the coverage. Furthermore, this study investigates whether
sexual desire is depicted more often in the Dutch teen girl magazines than in the US
magazines, and if sexual danger is mentioned more often in the US teen girl magazines than
in the Dutch magazines. Finally, this chapter probes further by investigating how
differences in sexual desire and danger vary for boys and girls by country. The study in this
chapter relies on the sexual scripts framework and Hofstede’s cultural dimension of
masculinity/femininity as theoretical bases.
Chapter 2: Virginity Loss and Pregnancy in US and Dutch Teen Girl Magazines

The second chapter of this dissertation investigates two topics which are extremely relevant to adolescent sexuality: virginity loss and unplanned pregnancy. Virginity loss is almost universally recognized as a turning point for teenagers as they enter adulthood (Carpenter, 2005) because a teenager’s first coital experience often shapes successive sexual experiences and attitudes (Billy, Landale, Grady, & Zimmerle, 1988; Carpenter, 2001). Moreover, pregnancy is often considered a negative consequence of virginity loss (Carpenter, 2001, 2005). In fact, in countries such as the US, the importance of maintaining one’s virginity is often stressed to teenagers, especially to teenage girls, in order to prevent the risk of pregnancy (Tolman, 2002). Despite the importance of these two topics to adolescent sexuality, content analyses of virginity loss and pregnancy-related coverage within teen girl magazines remain scarce. The only cross-national study to date has shown that German teen girl magazines approach virginity loss positively while US teen girl magazines often take a negative stance toward virginity loss (Carpenter, 2001). All the while, little remains known about the coverage of pregnancy in teen magazines.

To address these two important topics, this chapter delves deeper into Hofstede’s cultural dimension of masculinity/femininity by using specific factors derived by Hofstede to explain the differences between the coverage of virginity loss and pregnancy in US and Dutch teen girl magazines. Specifically, this study uses the factors of (a) sex education, (b) accessibility to contraceptives, and (c) parental attitudes about teenage sex to address questions related to the occurrence, tone, and association with negative consequences for both virginity loss and pregnancy in US and Dutch teen girl magazines.

Chapter 3: The Hook-Up Culture in US and Dutch Teen Girl Magazines

The third chapter is devoted to a topic which has recently attracted both public and scholarly attention in the US: the so-called ‘hook-up culture’ (e.g., Bogle, 2008; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Stinson, 2010). In a hook-up culture, the predominant form of engaging in sexual relations is through casual sexual encounters with ‘no strings attached’ (Stinson, 2010). Although hooking-up as a relational form of sex among young people is not something new (e.g., Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2009; Bogle, 2008), scholars tend to agree that the progressively normative character of US young people engaging in casual sex marks the trend of hooking-up as a sub-cultural practice to hooking-up as the sexual mainstream culture of today (Bogle, 2008; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Stinson, 2010).

One reason that is often cited for the advent of a hook-up culture is the way sexual relations are depicted in the media (Heldman & Wade, 2010). It is striking, then, that we have limited knowledge about the frequency with which casual sex is featured in the media. Much of the existing research focuses exclusively on the hook-up culture among college students (Bogle, 2008; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Stinson, 2010), and no studies have investigated how the hook-up culture is depicted in media that are specifically targeted at teenagers, such as teen magazines. This lack of research is surprising because casual sex not only occurs amongst college students, but also among adolescents (e.g., Levinson, Jaccard, & Beamer, 1995; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005; Manning, Giordano, &
Longmore, 2006). Moreover, existing research on the hook-up culture focuses almost exclusively on the US. Therefore, we have no way of knowing whether hooking-up is strictly a US phenomenon or one that transcends cultures.

To address these shortcomings, the first goal of this chapter is to analyze the extent to which the hook-up culture (i.e., the relational context of sex, emotional context of sex, specific sexual activities, and contraceptives) is presented within teen girl magazines. The second goal of this study is to examine the coverage from a cross-cultural comparative perspective. In order to do this, we use Hofstede’s dimension of masculinity/femininity through the two specific factors of (a) sex education and (b) the distinction between sex and love. More specifically, this study asks whether sex within a casual relational context is mentioned more often in the US teen girl magazines and if sex within a committed relational context is mentioned more often in the Dutch teen girl magazines. This study also investigates whether sex within the emotional context of love occurs more often in the Dutch teen girl magazines than in the US teen girl magazines, and how often sexual activities such as petting, oral sex, anal sex, and coital sex are mentioned. Lastly, this study investigates the occurrence and tone towards condoms and birth control pills in both the US and Dutch teen girl magazines.

Chapter 4: Teen Magazine Reading & Fear of Sex for US and Dutch Young People

The fourth and final chapter of this dissertation examines the link between reading teen magazines and fear of sex. Specifically, this study aims to find out whether fear of sex is differentially related to reading teen girl magazines in the US and the Netherlands by investigating (a) the general reading of teen magazines, (b) sexual risk and sexual pleasure content in teen magazines, and (c) young people’s religiosity. In order to do so, this study concentrates on linking the cross-national content analysis data from Chapter 1 (Joshi, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2011) to cross-national survey research data of US and Dutch young people’s teen magazine reading and fear of sex.

This chapter responds to several gaps in the field of adolescent sexual socialization research. Existing research typically focuses on cognitive aspects such as adolescents’ sexual beliefs and attitude, whereas more emotional aspects like adolescents’ fear of sex have not been investigated. Moreover, most of the current research has taken place in the US, making the existing knowledge base rather culturally biased. Various researchers have also indicated that more attention needs to be paid to individual differences (i.e., an individual’s religiosity level) in the link between media coverage and young people’s sexual socialization (Brown, 2009; Malamuth & Huppin, 2005; Ward, 2003).

Using cultivation theory, this chapter asks several important questions. Specifically, the study in Chapter 4 examines whether a cultural conditionality of cultivation is present regarding teen girl magazines and fear of sex for US and Dutch readers. Furthermore, this study examines whether specific messages about sexual risk or sexual pleasure are linked to any fear of sex that may occur for US and Dutch young people. Lastly, this study investigates whether individual differences such as religiosity play a factor in young people’s fear of sex when reading teen magazines, and if this varies by country.
References


