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

Teen magazines are a popular past time for many adolescents. Moreover, teen magazines are an important source of information for a variety of topics which are tailored specifically to teen readers. This holds especially true for topics related to sex and romantic relationships. Given the importance of teen magazines for the sexual socialization of adolescents and especially teenage girls, the coverage of sex-related topics in teen girl magazines has received considerable research attention in the past. However, existing research has predominantly been conducted from a single-country perspective, and most frequently from the United States (US). In addition, no research to date has analyzed the sexual content of teen magazines and linked it to young people’s magazine reading to uncover emotional reactions. This dissertation therefore fills these gaps by analyzing important topics related to adolescents’ sexual socialization in US and Dutch teen girl magazines. Results of this analysis are subsequently used to investigate whether US and Dutch young people’s magazine reading is related to fear of sex, and if this varies by an individual’s level of religiosity.

Theoretical Framework

Within Hofstede’s (2001) dimensions of national culture, the US and the Netherlands are two countries whose teen girl magazine coverage of sex-related topics is meaningful to compare. According to Hofstede’s research (2001), the US and the Netherlands are similar on four of the five dimensions of national culture but differ greatly on the masculinity/femininity dimension, with the US being a masculine society and the Netherlands being a feminine society. The masculinity/femininity dimension focuses on the extent to which a society interprets sex as an achievement (i.e., masculine society) or a relationship (i.e., feminine society). Masculine cultures are also identified as being less open about sexual issues than feminine cultures (Hofstede, 1998). The dissimilarity in only this one dimension could therefore serve as an explanation for potential differences in the coverage of sex and sex-related topics in US and Dutch teen girl magazines.

Cultivation theory offers a framework to explain potential differences between US and Dutch young people’s reading of teen magazines and fear of sex. According to cultivation theory, people who use media more often are more likely to accept that the real world is similar to the most common messages portrayed in the media than people who use media less often (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009). While cultivation theory has been used to explain the link between sexual media content and adolescents’ sexual socialization (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002), it has traditionally been used to study the effects of television content and fear of crime (Morgan et al., 2009). It has also been noted that cultivation theory is well suited to cross-national comparative studies (Gerbner, 1977;
Morgan, 1990), but few studies have tested the theory across national boundaries. In response to these shortcomings, this dissertation expands the application of cultivation theory to the cross-national study of US and Dutch teen girl magazines and fear of sex.

**Methods**

For the first three studies of this dissertation, a quantitative content analysis was conducted of the most popular US and Dutch teen girl magazines. These included *Seventeen*, *CosmoGirl!* United States edition, and *Teen* for the US magazines, and *Fancy, CosmoGirl!* Netherlands edition, and *Girlz!* for the Dutch magazines. All issues from the years 2006, 2007, and 2008 were included in the content analysis to obtain a comprehensive picture of the most up-to-date sex-related coverage in each of the magazines. These three years were chosen because 2008 was the last full-year publication available at the time of data collection. A total of 2496 feature stories were included in the sample. Seven hundred and fifty-three feature stories were from the US magazines and 1743 feature stories came from the Dutch magazines. The number of feature stories differed between the magazines of the two countries because of different publication schemes. Of the 753 US feature stories, 162 (21.5%) stories were sex-related. Of the 1743 Dutch feature stories, 465 (26.7%) stories were sex-related. The greater absolute number of sex-related stories in the Dutch coverage versus the US coverage resulted from more feature stories being present in the Dutch magazines.

The fourth study of this dissertation linked findings from the content analysis to a survey of 175 US and 315 Dutch female college students’ magazine reading to reveal fear of sex, and whether it varied by an individual’s level of religiosity. Response rates were 100% in the US and 95.2% in the Netherlands, resulting in 175 US participants and 300 Dutch participants. Participants were recruited from large public universities in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, US and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. An all-female sample was used because females constitute the main readership of teen girl magazines. We chose a sample of US and Dutch college students because the public school system we contacted in the US did not grant permission to collect data related to sexual topics from minors (i.e., people under the age of 18 years). College students were the closest age group to adolescents and could be assumed to read teen magazines.

**Main Results**

**Chapter 1.** While the gender-specific nature of sexual desire and danger has been investigated in the past (e.g., Farvid & Braun, 2006; Tolman, 2002), no research to date has examined the extent to which the coverage of sexual desire and danger in teen girl magazines is both gender- and culture-specific. This is striking because the experience of sex and sexuality is known to vary by gender (e.g., Willemsen, 1998) and by country (e.g., Ford & Beach, 1951; Frayser, 1985). A comparison of US and Dutch teen girl magazines in the first study revealed that sexual wanting occurred more frequently in the US magazines than in the Dutch magazines. In the US coverage, boys’ sexual wanting received more attention than girls’ sexual wanting, while sexual wanting was depicted equally often for
boys and girls in the Dutch coverage. The depiction of sexual pleasure did not vary by gender in either country, but was generally more visible in the Dutch teen girl magazines than in the US teen girl magazines. Sexual risks and the negative consequences of sex were associated with girls more than with boys in the coverage, and were primarily depicted in the US magazines rather than the Dutch magazines.

Chapter 2. While the topics of virginity loss and pregnancy are highly important to adolescent sexuality, very few studies to date have analyzed content related to virginity loss and pregnancy within teen magazines. This study used specific factors derived by Hofstede to explain potential differences between the coverage of virginity loss and pregnancy in US and Dutch teen girl magazines. Stories about virginity loss and pregnancy occurred equally often in the US and Dutch teen girl magazines. While pregnancy was attached with a negative tone in both the US and Dutch coverage, virginity loss was mentioned with a positive tone more often in the Dutch coverage than in the US coverage. In addition, pregnancy was depicted as a negative consequence of sex more often in the US coverage than in the Dutch coverage.

Chapter 3. The hook-up culture (i.e., the relational context of sex, emotional context of sex, specific sexual activities, and contraceptives) was the focus of the third study. Currently, we have limited up-to-date knowledge about the frequency with which casual sex is featured in the media and how it is portrayed to adolescents. Moreover, existing research on the hook-up culture has focused almost exclusively on the US. In response to these shortcomings, the goals of this study were to analyze the extent to which the hook-up culture is presented in teen girl magazines, and to examine the coverage from a cross-cultural perspective. Casual sex-related stories occurred more often in the US magazines. The Dutch magazines focused more on committed sex and emphasized love with regards to sex. In terms of specific sexual activities, petting or intimate touching was mentioned more frequently in the Dutch coverage, while coital sex was mentioned more often in the US coverage. While condoms and birth control pills occurred equally often in the US and Dutch teen girl magazines, condoms were covered more positively in the US magazines. Thus, the hook-up culture was more visible in the US magazines for the occurrence of casual sex and lack of love in sexual relations. In the Dutch magazines, it was largely absent.

Chapter 4. Existing research has typically focused on adolescents’ sexual beliefs and attitudes; however, more emotional aspects such as adolescents’ fear of sex have not been investigated. Moreover, most of the current research has taken place in the US. Finally, various researchers have indicated that more attention be paid to individual differences in the link between media coverage and adolescents’ sexual socialization (Brown, 2009; Malamuth & Huppin, 2005; Ward, 2003). Therefore, this study investigated magazine reading and fear of sex among young people 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 by linking the data from Chapter 1 to survey data. Frequent reading of teen girl magazines was associated with a fear of sex for US readers but not for Dutch readers. Exposure to specific messages about sexual risk and
sexual pleasure was not associated with fear of sex for the US or Dutch respondents. However, US readers with lower levels of religiosity showed a positive association between exposure to messages about sexual risk and fear of sex, while this association was not present for highly religious US or Dutch respondents irrespective of religiosity levels. Moreover, religiosity did not change the association of exposure to messages about sexual pleasure to fear of sex for US and Dutch readers.

**Theoretical implications**

This dissertation is one of the first to systematically compare the coverage of teen girl magazines from a cross-national comparative perspective. Thus, the most important contributions of this dissertation arise from its cross-national nature. The applicability of Hofstede’s cultural dimension of masculinity/femininity to teen girl magazines is at the forefront of this dissertation. While Hofstede uses specific factors to outline differences between sex and sexual attitudes in the US and the Netherlands, no research to date had applied these factors to an investigation of teen magazines from these two countries. This dissertation is the first to provide evidence that the masculinity/femininity dimension is also apparent in the coverage of US and Dutch teen girl magazines, and therefore suggests that broader cultural factors hold potential for explaining national differences in the media coverage of adolescent sexuality.

The finding that an association between magazine reading and fear of sex exists in the US but not in the Netherlands contributes to cultivation research in two ways. First, this finding shows that cultivation theory can be successfully applied to the study of teen magazines and fear of sex. Second, the culturally specific nature of the association between magazine reading and fear of sex is revealed. Thus, findings from one country cannot be generalized to another country, even if they are obtained within an established theoretical framework such as cultivation theory.

The findings from this dissertation also shed some new light on the Heterosexual Script, which outlines romantic encounters and sexual interactions for boys and girls by placing an emphasis on men’s sexual ability and drive while portraying women as passive. The coverage in US teen girl magazines is in line with the Heterosexual Script, while the coverage in Dutch teen girl magazines partly goes beyond this Script. By and large, this suggests a cultural specificity of the Heterosexual Script.

The comparative analysis of sexual desire and danger in Chapter 1 extends existing research on ambivalence in US adolescent girls’ sexuality. Tolman (2002) found that the media often encourage teenage girls to look sexy even though these girls usually know very little about what it means to be sexual, have sexual desires, and make responsible decisions regarding intimacy in relationships. This scenario implies that girls are often represented as the object of someone else’s desire but are rarely considered sexual subjects who have desires of their own (Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998; Tolman, 1994). Overall, the content analytical chapters of this dissertation suggest that compared to the Dutch magazines, the US magazines seem to contain more sexually ambivalent messages – that is, mixed messages about sex and sexuality (Joshi, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2010). For instance, the
coverage of sexual wanting and of sexual risk and the negative consequences of sex occurred more often in the US magazines than the Dutch magazines. Similarly, the US magazines focused more often on casual sex while simultaneously being more negative about virginity loss than the Dutch magazines. Thus, these findings strongly suggest that the ambivalence concept may be culturally specific to the US.

Finally, this dissertation refines previous cross-national comparative research, notably Schalet’s (2000) work, on differences in adolescent sexuality between the US and the Netherlands. Schalet concluded that adolescent sexuality in the US is marked by dramatization, defined as “the interplay of internal urges, external pressures and a self unable yet to direct or protect itself” (Schalet, 2000, p. 84). We find that the dramatization of sex does occur in US teen girl magazines to a certain extent; however, dramatization is not the only characterization for US teen girl magazines. US teen magazines also follow the Heterosexual Script and involve a danger discourse, where a strong emphasis is placed on the sexual wishes of boys and the risks and negative consequences of sex are stressed for girls. Schalet also emphasized that adolescent sexuality in the Netherlands is characterized by normalization (2000). This dissertation found that the normalization of adolescent sex is also mirrored in Dutch teen girl magazines: there is less focus on the dangers of sex, and more emphasis on the pleasures of sex and committed sexual relations with love.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from this dissertation – that more casual sex occurred in the US teen girl magazines than committed sex, and this being reversed in the Netherlands – also extends Schalet’s (2000) work. Schalet found that US parents, when interviewed, did not usually refer to a relational or emotional context when talking about teenage sex. According to Schalet, one reason for why US parents may not associate teenage sexuality with love or meaningful relationships is “a widespread belief that 16-year-olds are unable to form deep or steady romantic attachments” because “they’re not mature enough to handle a serious relationship” (Schalet, 2000, p. 82). Schalet points to a clear dissociation of teenage sexuality from love and commitment as expressed by US parents, while Dutch parents think about teenage sexuality in the context of a relationship and emotions of being ‘verliefd’ (in love or infatuated [2000], p. 84). These same ideologies are reflected in our findings.

Practical implications

This dissertation has various implications for parents, health educators, government officials, and magazine editors. First, US parents may be interested to know that a substantial amount of the sex-related coverage within US teen girl magazines is devoted to the sexual wants of boys, the dangers associated with sex are covered more often for girls than for boys, reading teen magazines was associated with a fear of sex for US readers, and stories about casual sex occur more often than stories about sex within the context of love and commitment. Consequently, some US parents may choose to explain to their teens that love and commitment are important components to a healthy sexual relationship, and that the sexual wishes of both partners are important. US parents may also choose to explain to their teens that while there are certain risks and consequences to engaging in sex, sex is not
necessarily something to be feared and can be experienced in a safe manner when the time is right. Essentially, the findings from this dissertation can serve as a springboard for open sex talks between parents and teenagers, notably in the US.

Health educators and government officials may also benefit from the findings of this dissertation. When placing the US findings mentioned above into context with the type of sex education that is offered to the majority of young people in the US, government officials and health educators in the US may choose to re-evaluate their current approach. Given the success of the Dutch approach to adolescent sexuality, with teenage pregnancy rates being some of the lowest in the Western world, US government officials and health educators may consider offering comprehensive sex education programs which include more discussion of safer sex practices and contraceptives. Dutch government officials and health educators, on the other hand, may be pleased to know that the sex-related content in Dutch teen girl magazines coincides with what young people in the Netherlands are learning in sex education programs: Dutch sex education programs are more comprehensive in nature and stress the importance of love and commitment when having sex (Schalet, 2000). Adolescent sex is approached in a pragmatic manner and is neither celebrated nor feared; teens are taught that it is merely a normal part of life.

Lastly, magazine editors can use insights from this dissertation to create more teenager-relevant publications. US magazine editors may choose to re-evaluate the content of their publications to provide teenage girls with a more balanced view of their sexuality, by exploring topics related to girls’ sexual wishes and pleasures without focusing primarily on the sexual wanting of boys. Moreover, both Dutch and US teen magazines may benefit their readers by including more content related to the topic of virginity loss. This dissertation may also motivate magazine editors to reconsider the role of teen magazines in today’s sexualized media environment. Teen magazines are in a privileged position to explain and explore a variety of sex-related topics in more depth than some other media. For instance, television shows often include sexual content for entertainment purposes rather than educational purposes and are limited in the amount of depth they can go into due to time restrictions on programming.

**Consequences for Research on Adolescent Sexual Socialization**

All of the studies in this dissertation reveal the cultural contingency of teen girl magazines and potential differences in US and Dutch adolescent sexual socialization. This dissertation is thus a promising starting point for more cross-national comparative research on teen magazines in particular, and sexual media content in general. One important line of study which can be inspired from this dissertation is an investigation into the production process of teen magazines in different countries. Examining how editors in different countries choose the sex-related content which they publish would provide valuable insight into how the production process of sex-related issues may differ by culture.

Moreover, many teenage girls may have access to women’s magazines; for instance, at doctor’s offices or because their mother’s subscribe to them at home. Magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle*, which are targeted at older female readers, may publish sexual content
more frequently and more in-depth than teen girl magazines. If teenage girls are reading these women’s publications, the sex-related content within these magazines may also play a role in shaping ideas and attitudes about sex and sexuality. Future research should consider analyzing the most popular women’s magazines for sex-related content, exploring whether reading these magazines is linked to certain sexual attitudes, and investigating whether the sexual content and the attitudes of readers vary between different countries. The results can then be compared to the findings from this dissertation to find out if more or less sex-related coverage occurs in women’s magazines or teen girl magazines. We would also be able to find out if fear of sex is exclusively associated with reading teen magazines or if it is also linked to reading women’s magazines.

In conclusion, this dissertation has added to existing research on media and adolescent sexual socialization by investigating the understudied medium of teen girl magazines from a cross-national comparative perspective. The findings from this dissertation therefore put previous single-country research on teen magazines into perspective by showing that one country’s findings can only be better understood when having something to compare it to. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, this dissertation reveals that marked differences exist in the teen magazine coverage of sex in different countries, as well as the emotions elicited about sex within the readers of these magazines – thereby revealing that adolescent sex as a ‘forbidden fruit’ is a relative term.
References


