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Liking a Sexual Character Affects Willingness to Have Casual Sex

The Moderating Role of Relationship Status and Status Satisfaction

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Abstract. The aim of the present study was to investigate individual differences in the influence of the likability of a sexual female main character on women's willingness to have casual sex with a stranger. Specifically, we studied the moderating role of relationship status (Experiments 1 and 2) and satisfaction with one's relationship or with being single (Experiment 2). Women (aged 18–30), who were single or in a relationship, watched an erotic scene with a likable or unlikable sexual female main character who had casual sex. In both experiments, women in a relationship were less willing to have casual sex than single women, after they had seen a likable sexual female character. However, an unpredicted effect was found in Experiment 2. After seeing an unlikable sexual female character, women who were dissatisfied with their relationship or with being single were more willing to have casual sex than their satisfied counterparts.

Keywords: sex, television, media effects, young adults, women

Casual sex – that is, sex without emotional bonding and outside a committed relationship (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006) – has become prevalent among adolescents and young adults (Feldman, Turner, & Araujo, 1999; Grello et al., 2006). Social scientists have therefore increasingly focused on the antecedents of casual sex (Grello et al., 2006; Shulman, Walsh, Weisman, & Schelyer, 2009). Psychologists have, for example, studied the influence of alcohol and drug use (Grello et al., 2006), love styles (Grello et al., 2006; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000), and impulsivity (Paul et al., 2000) on casual sex. Notably, social psychologists have successfully predicted engagement in casual sex-related behavior, by focusing on people's *willingness* to engage in casual or unprotected sex (Gerrard, Gibbons, Houlihan, Stock, & Pomery, 2008; Gibbons, Gerrard, Blanton, & Russell, 1998). Communication researchers, in turn, have dealt with characteristics of sexual media content and, notably, the characters depicted in such content (e.g., Kistler & Lee, 2010; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). One important characteristic of a character that is assumed to influence the impact of sexual media content is the likability of a sexual main character (Boot, Peter, & van Oosten, 2014; Nabi & Clark, 2008). Regarding the prediction of casual sex, Nabi and Clark (2008), for instance, have suggested that when individuals find a media main character who

engages in casual sex more likable, they are more likely to engage in casual sex themselves.

Interestingly, little research has tried to link the two lines of research. With few exceptions (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2010), research on the prototype-willingness model has ignored media-related variables as predictors of willingness. Similarly, the only two studies in communication science that have linked characteristics of the sexual media main character with sexual behavior were concerned with actual sexual behavior (Ward & Friedman, 2006) and intentions of sexual behavior (Nabi & Clark, 2008), but neglected the well-documented impact of willingness to engage in a particular sexual behavior as an important predictor in that causal chain (Gerrard et al., 2008; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995; Gibbons et al., 1998). Therefore, the general goal of this study was to relate the concept of likability of a sexual main character to the concept of willingness to engage in casual sex oneself.

The specific goal of this study was to investigate individual differences in the influence of the likability of a sexual main character on willingness to have casual sex. Scholars increasingly agree that an improved understanding of the effects of sexual media content depends on a better grasp of which individuals are more susceptible to such content and which are less susceptible (e.g., Brown & Bobkowsky, 2011; Malamuth & Huppert, 2005; Ward,

2003). An obvious, but important individual difference in people's susceptibility to an effect of sexual media content on their willingness to engage in casual sex may be whether they are in a committed relationship or single. If people's susceptibility to such an effect indeed depends on their relationship status, an additional question is whether people's satisfaction with their relationship status may present a further condition for this effect to occur. Therefore, we tested whether the effect of likability of a sexual main character on individuals' willingness to engage in casual sex themselves depends on whether people are single or in a committed relationship (Experiment 1). Additionally, we focused on the interplay of relationship status and satisfaction with relationship status in the effect of the likability of a sexual main character on willingness to engage in casual sex (Experiment 2).

In the two experiments, we centered our attention on young adult women (aged 18 to 30). We chose young women because women's reactions to sexual media content have received somewhat less attention than men's (Attwood, 2005). Moreover, there is some evidence that women may react in ambivalent ways to sexual media content (e.g., Allen et al., 2007; Laan, Everaerd, van Bellen, & Hanewald, 1994). Several studies have documented that women's physiological arousal to sexual content is not much smaller than men's physiological arousal to such content (Allen et al., 2007). However, women generally report much less psychological arousal to sexual content than men do (Allen et al., 2007). This discrepancy between women's physiological and psychological arousal indicates an ambivalence in women's reactions to sexual content that is hardly present in men. Such ambivalence makes the study of individual differences in responses to sexual media content among women an important topic for investigation. We chose young adults because this group engages relatively frequently in casual sex (e.g., Feldman et al., 1999). Moreover, among young people, willingness to engage in (risky) behavior (e.g., having casual sex) is a high predictor for actual performance of risky behavior (Gerrard et al., 2008). We do not imply that (young) women who engage in casual sex are morally or otherwise wrong.

Likability of a Sexual Main Character

One theoretical approach that may explain the impact of sexual media content on willingness to engage in casual sex is Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT, Bandura, 2001a). SCT predicts, among other things, that observers of a given behavior are more likely to learn and perform this behavior if the person who performs the behavior is perceived positively, is perceived to be attractive, and is liked (Bandura, 1977). SCT has explicitly been formulated with the influence of media characters in mind (Bandura, 2001a, 2002) and has accordingly been used to explain the impact of sexual media content on individual's sexual attitudes and behavior.

However, researchers have mostly focused on the prediction of SCT about the facilitating or inhibiting effect

of portrayed consequences (either positive or negative) of sex in the media (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008; Finnerty-Myers, 2011; Nabi & Clark, 2008). For instance, Eyal and Kunkel (2008) found that participants became less positive about premarital sex after they had watched two TV episodes showing negative consequences of premarital sex, while participants who had watched episodes showing positive consequences of premarital sex did not change their attitudes toward premarital sex. Similarly, in a panel survey study among adolescents aged 14 to 16, Gottfried et al. (2013) found that watching comedies was positively related to positive attitudes about having sex themselves, perceived normative pressure, and engaging in sex 1 year later, while watching dramas was negatively related to these variables. The authors suggested that this pattern of findings resulted from the different contexts in which the sexual content is typically portrayed. In comedies, sex is presented in the context of humor (i.e., without negative consequences), whereas in dramas, sex is presented in the context of risk and responsibility (i.e., negative consequences).

With regard to portrayals of casual sex in the media, several scholars have pointed out that positive consequences, such as happiness and excitement, do appear (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009), while negative consequences are typically absent (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Kunkel et al., 2007; Ward, 2003). As a result, factors other than the portrayed consequences of casual sex that inhibit or facilitate portrayed sexual behavior may also be relevant. Nabi and Clark (2008), for example, found that, regardless of the portrayed consequences of casual sex, viewers who had had no experience with a one-night stand reported a higher chance of having a one-night stand in the future after they had watched content with casual sex. One explanation of this finding was that all participants scored high on likability of the main character. Because the viewers liked the main character, they interpreted casual sex positively, despite the consequences portrayed. This explanation about the facilitating effect of the likability of the main character is in line with predictions of the SCT that a particular behavior is more likely to be learned and performed if the person who performs the behavior is likable. Investigating the effect of the likability of the sexual main character, thus, seems to be an important next step in research on the antecedents of casual sex.

Willingness to Engage in Casual Sex

Studies so far that have investigated the predictions of SCT on sexual media have focused not only on the effect of actual sexual behavior (e.g., Gottfried et al., 2013) but also on antecedents of the behavior, such as sexual attitudes (e.g., Eyal & Kunkel, 2008) and behavioral intentions to engage in casual sex (e.g., Nabi & Clark, 2008). The predictions of SCT may also apply with regard to another antecedent that is found to be a strong predictor for risk behavior, especially among young people (Gerrard et al., 2008; Gibbons et al., 1998) – that is, the willingness to engage in it. The willingness to engage in a particular

behavior (i.e., behavioral willingness) is defined as a predictor of behavior that is unplanned, less reasoned, and unintended but voluntary in response to a situation in which the opportunity for the behavior is highly present (e.g., Gerrard et al., 2008).¹ Young people, in particular, are often in situations where the opportunity to engage in risk behavior is high. This conceptualization of willingness from the prototype-willingness model dovetails with SCT, which posits that modeled behavior has a higher chance of being imitated when the observer is in a situation that induces the behavior (Bandura, 1977, 2001a). In sum, based on SCT it can be expected that the depiction of uncommitted sex in media content may increase people's willingness to engage in casual sex if the sexual main character who performs the act is likable.

Conditional Effects of Likability of a Sexual Main Character

Although the likability of main characters is an important predictor of behavioral modeling, SCT does not conceptualize the impact of likable characters on outcomes of interest as a deterministic influence. In more recent formulations of SCT (e.g., Bandura, 2001a, 2001b), heavy emphasis is put on self-regulatory mechanisms that may determine the effect of likability. Self-regulatory mechanisms "include moral judgment of the rightness or wrongness of conduct evaluated against personal standards and situational circumstances" (Bandura, 2001b, p. 9).

Although casual sex is less stigmatized than it used to be (England & Thomas, 2007), it still, by and large, represents transgressive behavior, particularly for women (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Paul, 2006). In the case of casual sex, the violation of norms, which characterizes transgressive behavior, may be more distinct for women who are in a committed relationship than for women who are single. In a committed relationship, the norms of sexual exclusivity and faithfulness are central (e.g., Wiederman & Hurd, 1999), and having casual sex may lead, if discovered, to social sanctions (e.g., the relationship partner may want to end the relationship) and self-sanctions (e.g., a woman may feel guilty about being unfaithful). For single women, having casual sex may also elicit social sanctions – for example, getting a negative reputation (e.g., Paul, 2006). However, compared with those for women in a committed relationship, the self-sanctions of single women are likely to be less grave.

The SCT predicts that when a behavior is transgressive – that is, behavior that violates norms and values (e.g., having casual sex when in a relationship) – people regulate their behavior to avoid social sanction (e.g., relationship partner ends relationship) or internalized sanction (e.g., feeling guilty) (Bandura, 2001a). However, some factors, such as moral justification of the behavior, can deactivate

self-regulatory processes (Bandura, 2001a). Although not explicitly mentioned in Bandura's SCT (Bandura, 2001a), it seems plausible to assume that when the transgressive behavior is not encouraged to be performed, self-regulatory processes are unlikely to emerge. For instance, when the sexual character who has casual sex is unlikable, the sexual behavior is discouraged. Regulation processes are thus unlikely to emerge. In contrast, when the sexual character who has casual sex is likable, the sexual behavior is encouraged. Regulation processes may consequently emerge among those who find the behavior transgressive.

In sum, the SCT predicts that likability of the main character encourages willingness to engage in the behavior that the character performs. At the same time, the SCT predicts that regulation processes that inhibit willingness to engage in casual sex mostly occur when the behavior is transgressive. Finally, it seems plausible that these regulation processes only occur when the transgressive behavior is encouraged (i.e., when the sexual character is likable). Therefore, women in a relationship, for whom casual sex is transgressive, can be expected to regulate their behavior (and willingness) when the sexual character is likable. In contrast, single women, for whom casual sex is not transgressive, are unlikely to engage in regulation processes when the sexual character is likable. These women will be encouraged to perform the behavior by a likable character (vs. unlikable character). Moreover, as women in a relationship are likely to use regulation processes when seeing a likable character (as opposed to single women), we expected further that women in a relationship would be less willing to have casual sex than single women, when seeing the likable character. Consequently, we abstained from predicting main effects of likability of the sexual main character and relationship status on women's willingness to engage in casual sex. Instead, we proposed a synergistic interaction effect of likability of the female sexual main character and female viewers' relationship status:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Female viewers who watch an erotic scene with a likable character will be more willing to have casual sex themselves than female viewers who watch an erotic scene with an unlikable character when they are single (a), but not when they are in a relationship (b).

Hypotheses 1a and 1b do imply a main effect of relationship status within the likable condition, which we also tested:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Compared with single women who watch an erotic scene with a likable character, women in a committed relationship who watch the same scene will be less willing to have casual sex themselves.

¹ According to the prototype-willingness model, actual behavior can be predicted by behavioral willingness and behavioral intention – that is, the intention to engage in planned and reasoned behavior (e.g., Gerrard et al., 2008).

Experiment 1

Method

Design and Procedure

We investigated the relationship between likability of a sexual main character and willingness to engage in casual sex with a factorial 2 (likability female character: likable vs. unlikable) \times 2 (relationship status: single vs. relationship) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to either of the two likability conditions. Relationship status was assessed (relationship: yes vs. no). The subject pool consisted of women between 18 and 30 years old who were studying at the University of Amsterdam. The distribution of single women and women in a relationship for Dutch women in this age group is approximately equal (CBS, Statistics Netherlands, 2009). The experiment was approved by the institutional review board of the Communication Science Department at the University of Amsterdam.

The experiment was conducted online using the survey software Qualtrics. Given the sensitive nature of many of our questions, we opted for an online experiment because it protects the crucial factors of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity more efficiently than lab experiments do (Wilt, Condon, & Revelle, 2011). Before the experiment started, participants were asked to give their informed consent. Participants were also assured that their answers would be anonymous and would be treated confidentially, and they were notified that the study contained sexual content. Participants were told that the experiment consisted of three different parts, and the task in each part was described concisely. In the first part of the experiment, participants received either a negative or positive description of the movie's female main character, to manipulate likability of the character. After that, two movie fragments were presented; one introductory fragment and one containing a sexual interaction between a man and the female main character. After participants had watched the fragments, the variables for the manipulation check were measured (i.e., likability, arousal, liking, attention). Then, participants were asked to imagine the following fictional situation:

You are single and you are at a nice location to meet a man, for instance in a bar, at a party, or in a nightclub. There, you see a man that you have never seen before or spoken to. This man is clearly interested in you. He sometimes looks at you and smiles at you. Then he walks in your direction.

All respondents were asked to imagine being single, to reduce the chance that women in a relationship would respond in a socially desirable way to the measurement of willingness to engage in casual sex. Because regulation processes are expected to take place online during watching the sexual media content (e.g., Laan & Janssen, 2007), this description was unlikely to interfere with the effect of regulation processes that had already taken place while watching the movie fragment.

Participants were subsequently presented photos of six different men. For each man, participants were asked to imagine him to be the man in the fictional situation; to report how attractive they found him; and how willing they were to have sex with him in the given situation. Finally, participants were told to fill in a questionnaire. Demographic characteristics, familiarity with the movie that the fragment belonged to, familiarity with the photos of men, and attention were measured. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to write down their thoughts about the purpose of the experiment. On the last screen, participants were debriefed about the purposes of the study and notified that the study was not meant to promote unsafe sex.

Participants

Eighty-nine female undergraduate students participated for study credit or a fee. Only women aged 18 or older were allowed to participate. Because we expected that lesbian women would respond differently to a movie fragment with a heterosexual interaction than heterosexual and bisexual women, we excluded one woman who had indicated that she was only attracted to women. Five participants who reported being familiar with the target movie were excluded from further analyses as well. Thus, 83 participants remained for analyses. Four participants were bisexual, and the rest were heterosexual (age range 18–26 years, $M = 19.66$, $SD = 1.87$).

Materials

Manipulation of Likability

Two different descriptions of the female main character were created to manipulate likability of the character. In the likable description, the female main character was described as a modest and altruistic person. In the unlikable description, the female main character was described as a narcissistic and egocentric person. Both the likable and the unlikable descriptions were pretested by two different groups of female judges (aged 23–35 years) from a different subject pool. The judges had to rate their likability of the character, perceived similarity to the character, and wishful identification with the character. In that pretest, the same measure for likability was used as in the present experiment (see below). Perceived similarity was measured with three items from Boot, Peter, and van Oosten (2014) – for instance, “In a similar situation, I would probably behave like Belle.” Wishful identification was measured with four items from Boot, Peter, and van Oosten (2014) – for instance, “I wish I could be more like Belle.” For these two measures, the same response scale was used as for likability (see below). The female character in the likable description was rated as more likable ($N = 13$, $M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.69$), more desirable, ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.61$), and more similar ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.95$) than the female character in the unlikable description ($N = 12$, $M = 1.75$, $SD = 0.51$, $M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.55$, and $M = 1.81$, $SD = 0.78$, respectively; all $ps = .000$).

Movie Fragments

The movie fragments were edited scenes from the Dutch soft erotic, female-targeted movie *Lellebelle*, which had been shown on Dutch public broadcasting television about one and a half years before the experiment and was recommended for viewers 16 years of age and older. The fragments contained two characters, the female main character, a student-aged woman named Belle and the supporting male character, a violin teacher in his mid-30s. In the two conditions, the same two movie fragments were presented. The first movie fragment lasted 20 s and showed a neutral scene between Belle and the teacher. The second movie fragment lasted 2 min and 5 s and started with an erotic scene in which Belle and the violin teacher have casual sex. The erotic scene features nudity and is suggestive of vaginal sex. Contraception is not mentioned or visible. Erotic scenes such as the one selected are common in Dutch movies. These two fragments were the same as the fragments used in the experiment of Boot, Peter, and van Oosten (2014), but put in a new experiment.

Photos

For the measurement of willingness to engage in casual sex, six public photos of white men were selected. All photos were color photos with a neutral background, and showed the men's full face and shoulders. All men on the photos were smiling, albeit to different degrees, and looking at the viewer. The photos were rated by 32 independent female judges (aged 17–29) from a different subject pool from that of the participants of this experiment. The judges were asked, "How attractive do you find this man?" and responded on a scale from 1 (= *very unattractive*) to 5 (= *very attractive*). We focused on facial attractiveness because facial attractiveness has been shown to be a good predictor for women's willingness to have casual sex (i.e., a short-term relationship; Schützwohl, Fuchs, McKibbin, & Shackelford, 2009). All six photos had a mean score of attractiveness between 3.47 and 3.94 and a standard deviation between 0.82 and 1.37.

Measures

Manipulation Checks

Although we had already pretested the likability of the female main character, we also measured likability of the female main character in the experiment as a manipulation check, with the same scale as in the pretest. Likability was measured with the three items from Boot, Peter, and van

Oosten (2014): "Belle seems sympathetic," and "Belle seems sociable." Response options ranged from 1 (= *totally disagree*) to 5 (= *totally agree*). The likability score was obtained by calculating the mean of these three items ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.715$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$).

To control for a potentially confounding variable, we additionally measured the extent to which participants liked the content they watched, found it arousing, and paid attention to it, with items from Boot, Peter, and van Oosten (2014). Liking of the media content was measured with the items "I found the movie fragment nice" and "I found the movie fragment attractive." Response options ranged from 1 (= *does not apply at all*) to 5 (= *applies completely*). The liking score was obtained by calculating the mean of these two items ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.736$, Pearson's $r = .60$, $p < .001$). Arousal was measured by using two items: "I found the movie stimulating" and "I found the movie exciting." Response options were on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (= *does not apply at all*) to 5 (= *applies completely*). The arousal score was obtained by calculating the mean of these two items ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.956$, Pearson's $r = .46$, $p < .001$). We assessed attention with the two items: "While viewing, I was totally focused on the story" and "I was so absorbed by the story that I forgot for a moment what was going on around me." Response options were on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (= *does not apply at all*) to 5 (= *applies completely*). The attention score was obtained by calculating the mean of these two items ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.991$, Pearson's $r = .31$, $p = .004$).

Willingness to Engage in Casual Sex

Following recommendations by Gerrard et al. (2008) on how to measure behavioral willingness to engage in risky behavior, a fictional situation and four items with increasing risk levels were created to measure willingness to engage in casual sex. In the fictional situation, participants had to imagine being single and meeting a man in a public place (see Design and Procedure). Next, six photos were presented sequentially, about which participants were asked: "If you met this man in the situation described before, how likely would it be that the following things would happen between you and the man?"² The graded behavioral options were "intimate touching," "receiving oral sex," "giving oral sex," and "having sex (vaginal)." Response options were on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (= *unlikely*) to 5 (= *likely*). A factor analyses over the four graded behavioral options showed that they loaded on one factor (loadings for Experiment 1 between .829 and .968 and for Experiment 2 between .852 and .969) and that the four items together had an explained variance of 82.71% for Experiment 1 and 87.45% for Experiment 2.

² The formulation of our measurement of willingness to engage in casual sex is similar to the formulation of the measurement of expectations (i.e., the expectation to perform the behavior), and is sometimes also used as a formulation of the measurement of behavioral intentions (Gerrard et al., 2008). We used this formulation, because *willing* can not be translated into Dutch without changing the meaning of the word. Therefore, we tried to formulate the question so that the meaning would be closest to the English *willing*. By using the question in the context of a presented fictional situation in which the opportunity for the behavior is highly present, as recommended by Gerrard et al. (2008), the items still measured willingness of the participant to engage in the behavior.

Subsequently, the reliability of the willingness scale for each photo was calculated. The willingness to engage in casual sex score was obtained by calculating the mean of these items. The overall mean was 1.49 (range between 1.28 and 1.64), the mean of the standard deviations was 0.69 (range between 0.50 and 0.93), and the mean Cronbach's α was .93 (range between .90 and .95).

Relationship Status

Relationship status was measured by one item: "Do you have a relationship at this moment?" with the response options of 1 = *yes*; 2 = *no, but I have been in a relationship before*; and 3 = *no, and I have never had a relationship before*. Option 1 was recoded into the category *relationship*, and Options 2 and 3 were both recoded into the category *single*.

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants in the likable condition reported higher likability of the female main character Belle ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.61$) than participants in the unlikable condition ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(81) = 3.23$, $p = .002$. The manipulation was thus successful. This is in line with the results in our pretest. Additionally, we examined whether the description of Belle influenced other variables that might confound the outcome variables. With independent sample t tests, we found that there was no difference between the conditions on arousal ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.84$), $p = .146$, liking of the content ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.76$), $p = .959$, and attention ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.80$), $p = .209$. Finally, we examined the answers of the participants to the last open-ended question and found that none of the participants had guessed the purpose of the study.

Relationship Status and the Effect of Modeling Casual Sex

Hypothesis 1 predicted that female viewers who watch an erotic scene with a likable character will be more willing to have casual sex themselves than female viewers who watch an erotic scene with an unlikable character when they are single (a), but not when they are in a relationship (b). A 2 (likability female character: likable vs. unlikable) by 2 (relationship status: single vs. relationship) univariate ANOVA elicited a significant two-way interaction between likability and relationship status on willingness to engage in casual sex, $F(1, 82) = 4.32$, $MSE = .295$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2 = .052$ (see Figure 1). In contrast to what we expected,

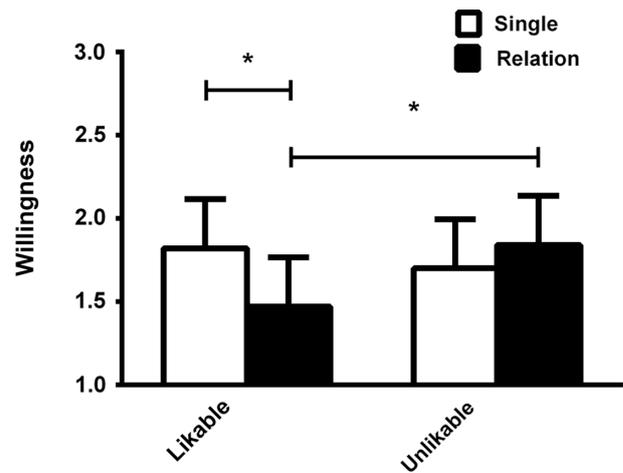


Figure 1. The mean scores on willingness to engage in casual sex in the likable and unlikable female character condition for single women and women in a relationship. The error bars present the between-subject standard error of the mean. The asterisks show significant differences for the pairwise comparison F tests.

we found no difference on willingness to have casual sex between single women who watched the likable sexual female character ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.54$) and single women who watched the unlikable sexual female character ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.61$), $F(1, 82) = 0.580$, $MSE = .295$, $p = .449$, $\eta^2 = .007$. As we expected, women in a relationship who watched the likable character were not more willing to have casual sex themselves than women in a relationship who watched the unlikable sexual character. However, instead we found that women in a relationship who watched the likable sexual female character were even less willing to have casual sex ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 0.45$) than women in a relationship who watched the unlikable sexual female character ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.54$), $F(1, 82) = 4.56$, $MSE = .295$, $p = .036$, $\eta^2 = .056$. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partly supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that compared with single women, women in a committed relationship who watched an erotic scene with a likable female character having casual sex would be less willing to have casual sex with men. As we expected, women in a relationship were less willing to have casual sex ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 0.45$) than single women ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.54$) after they had seen the likable sexual female character, $F(1, 82) = 4.20$, $MSE = .295$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = .050$. We found no difference on willingness to have casual sex between single women ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.61$) and women in a relationship ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.54$) after they had seen an unlikable sexual female character, $F(1, 82) = 0.766$, $MSE = .295$, $p = .384$, $\eta^2 = .010$.³

³ Analyses with the four casual sexual behaviors that measured willingness to engage in casual sex separately (intimate touching, receiving oral sex, giving oral sex, and having sex) are available on request.

Discussion

The pattern of results in Experiment 1 supported the predictions of SCT about women regulating their responses to a likable female character depending on their relationship status. Women in a relationship were not more willing to have casual sex after they had seen a likable female character, but instead were even less willing to have casual sex after they had seen a likable female character having casual sex compared with women in a relationship who had seen the same scene with an unlikable female character. This may indicate that the effect of the self-regulation process used by the female viewers in a relationship was stronger than the effect of the likability of the sexual character. For single women, the opposite pattern was found as predicted, although it was not statistically significant. Additionally, we also found that, compared with single women, women in a relationship were less willing to have casual sex after seeing a likable female character who had casual sex. These findings support the idea that women in a relationship use regulation strategies only when seeing a likable sexual female character and that these regulation strategies overrule, and even reverse, the influence of the likability of the sexual female character.

However, the purely casual character of the sex in the movie fragment and in the fictional situation may not have been sufficiently clear to all participants and, consequently, may have caused different interpretations. Other studies also showed that the different situations in which potential sexual partners are portrayed in media influence the effects (e.g., Taylor, 2013). Research has suggested that women, in particular, often hope that casual sex will develop into a romantic relationship (e.g., Impett & Peplau, 2003). In fact, casual sex has increasingly become the start of a romantic relationship (e.g., England & Thomas, 2007). Thus, the casual sex in both the movie fragment and the fictional encounter could have been interpreted by some participants as the start of a new relationship. Moreover, the interpretation of casual sex as a potential start of a relationship may be more likely to happen when the sexual female character is described as a likable character than when the character is described as an unlikable character, due to priming mechanisms (*halo effect*, e.g., Forgas & Laham, 2009; priming sexual scripts, e.g., Littleton, Axsom, & Yoder, 2006). This interpretation of the sex portrayed in the erotic scene, in turn, may have affected the interpretation of the sex in the fictional encounter. We could thus not preclude the possibility that the different findings in the likable and unlikable condition were due to different interpretations of casual sex.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, we disambiguated the motives of the female character depicted in the movie fragment and the male character described in the fictional encounter, to rule out different interpretations of casual sex. An additional

goal of the second experiment was to see whether single women might regulate their willingness to engage in casual sex during viewing a likable sexual female character as well. One factor that may influence this self-regulatory process is women's satisfaction with their current relationship status. According to SCT (e.g., Bandura, 2001a), the likelihood that people (are willing to) engage in a particular behavior also partly depends on the perceived benefits and costs of the behavior. This, in turn, may affect the self-regulatory processes described above. Single women who are satisfied with their being single may not be interested in a committed relationship. As a consequence, casual sex may have benefits for them. In contrast, women who are dissatisfied with their being single may be interested in a committed relationship. As a consequence, casual sex may have few benefits for them. Thus, in the context of the present study, singles' satisfaction with their being single may moderate the extent to which single women regulate their willingness to engage in casual sex during the viewing of a likable sexual female character. We therefore hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): Compared with women who are satisfied with their being single, dissatisfied single women who watch an erotic scene with a likable female character having casual sex will be less willing to have casual sex.

For women in a relationship, satisfaction with one's relationship may also affect the impact of a likable female character on the willingness to engage in casual sex. We stated above that the social and self-sanctions for engaging in casual sex, as well as the wish to protect their relationship, may increase the self-regulatory processes among women in a relationship when they watch a likable sexual female character. However, for women who are dissatisfied with their relationship, casual sex may not be associated with such high costs (e.g., the end of the relationship) as it is for women who are satisfied with their relationship. Essentially, the fact that the relationship was already problematic may reduce, for women dissatisfied with a relationship, the social sanctions and self-sanctions of engaging in casual sex and the cost incurred regarding, or threat to lose, their relationship. Along these lines, Whisman, Gordon, and Chatav (2007) found that marital dissatisfaction was related to the decision to engage in infidelity. As a result, the self-regulatory processes that reduce the impact of a likable female character on willingness to have casual sex may be weaker among women who are dissatisfied with their relationship than among women who are satisfied with their relationship. We hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Compared with women who are dissatisfied with their relationship, women who are satisfied with their relationship and who watch an erotic scene with a likable female character having casual sex will be less willing to have casual sex with men.

Because SCT does not predict that observers imitate sexual behavior of an unlikable sexual character, we abstained from formulating a hypothesis that differences in relationship status and status satisfaction would affect willingness to engage in casual sex among women who had seen an unlikable female character. Moreover, for the same reason as in Experiment 1, we did not predict a main effect for relationship status and likability.

Methods

Participants

One hundred and twenty-four participants were recruited from a large and diverse online access panel managed by the Dutch market research institute PanelClix. For the same reason as in Experiment 1, we excluded five women who indicated that they were only attracted to women. We also excluded six women who were familiar with the movie. The remaining participants consisted of 57 singles and 56 women in a relationship. Most participants were heterosexual (89.4%) and some were bisexual (10.6%). The participants were between 18 and 30 years old ($M = 23.44$, $SD = 3.48$).

Materials and Procedure

The same materials as in Experiment 1 were used. The procedure was identical with the procedure of Experiment 1 with three exceptions. First, before the second movie fragment, participants received an additional introduction stating that “Belle is not in love with the teacher but is physically attracted to him. She therefore would like to have a purely sexual relationship.” Second, to disambiguate the willingness to engage in casual sex measure, we made clear that the man in the fictional situation looked only for sexual excitement, and did not have any expectations to start a relationship. Third, we added the measurement of relationship status satisfaction.

Measurements

The same measurements were used as in Experiment 1. Additionally, we measured single women’s and women’s satisfaction with their status (i.e., being single or in a relationship). Status satisfaction for singles was measured with four items: “I do not experience deficiencies in my single life,” “I am satisfied with my single life,” “When I compare my single life with that of other singles in my environment, I think my single life is good,” and “I love being a single.” Status satisfaction for women in a relationship was measured with four similar items that were adjusted such that they referred to being in a relationship. Response options ranged from 1 (= *does not apply at all*) to 5 (= *applies completely*). The score for status satisfaction for singles as well as for women in a relationship was

obtained by calculating the mean of the four items (singles: $M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.93$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$; in relationship: $M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.82$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$).

Both status satisfaction for singles ($p = .602$ with independent sample t test) and for women in a relationship ($p = .369$ with independent sample t test) were equally distributed among the two movie conditions (likable vs. unlikable female character). The distributions in the two conditions did not significantly deviate from a normal distribution, all $ps > .05$ with a one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for the two conditions. Twenty-eight singles were classified as low in satisfaction, and 29 participants were classified as high in satisfaction with a median split ($Mdn = 3.25$). The difference between the group low in satisfaction ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.43$) and the group high in satisfaction ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.47$) was significant, $t(55) = -11.25$, $SD = 0.12$, $p < .001$. Twenty-nine participants who were in a relationship were classified as low in satisfaction, and 27 participants were classified as high in satisfaction with a median split ($Mdn = 4.50$). The difference between the women in a relationship low in satisfaction ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.77$) and high in satisfaction ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 0.08$) was significant, $t(54) = -7.83$, $SD = 0.148$, $p < .001$. Women in a relationship were more satisfied about their status ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.80$) than single women ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.81$), $t(111) = 7.24$, $SEM = .152$, $p < .001$. The median in the three-way analyses for status satisfaction was 4.00.

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants in the likable condition reported higher likability of the female main character Belle ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.65$) than participants in the unlikable condition ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.85$), although this difference was insignificant, $t(111) = 1.42$, $MS = 1.14$, $p = .159$ (two-tailed). However, the pretest and the manipulation check in Experiment 1 showed that the manipulation of likability was successful. Additionally, we checked arousal, liking, and attention. With independent sample t tests, we found that there was no difference between the conditions on arousal ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.96$), $p = .862$, liking of the content ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.94$), $p = .922$, and attention ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.84$), $p = .604$. Finally, we examined the answers of the participants to the last open-ended question and found that none of the participants had guessed the purpose of the study.

Relationship Status, Status Satisfaction, and the Effect of Modeling Casual Sex

Given the importance of the effect found in Experiment 1, we first tested whether women in a committed relationship would again be less willing to have casual sex after seeing a likable sexual female character than single women.

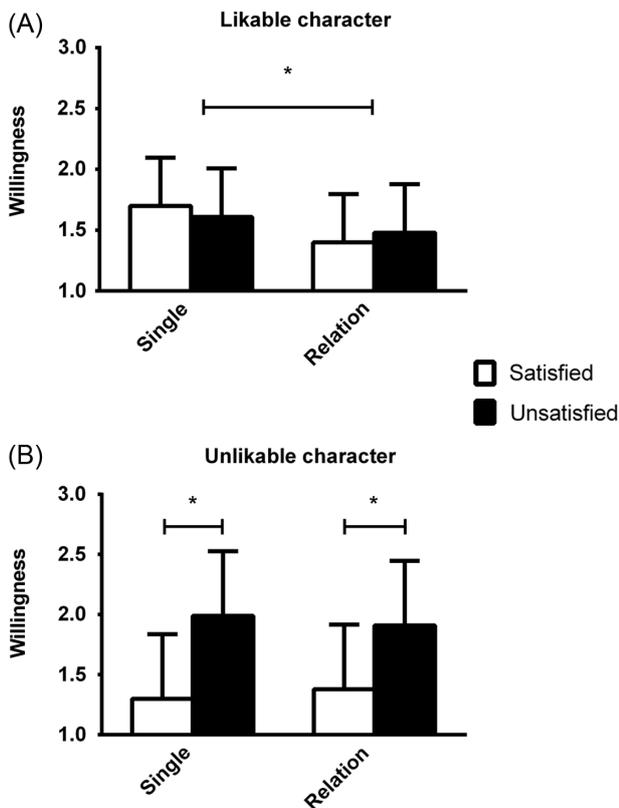


Figure 2. The means of willingness to engage in casual sex in the likable female character condition (A) and unlikable female character condition (B) for single women and women in a relationship who are satisfied and dissatisfied about their relationship status. The error bars present the between-subject standard error of the mean. The asterisks show significant differences for the pairwise comparison F tests.

We found a two-way interaction between likability of the female character and relationship status, $F(1, 112) = 6.56$, $MS = 3.01$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .059$. Among those participants who had seen a likable sexual female character, women in a relationship were less likely to have casual sex ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.65$), $F(1, 57) = 5.05$, $MS = 2.32$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = .046$, compared with single women ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 0.59$) (see Figure 2A). In the unlikable condition, there was no main effect of relationship status, $p = .174$ (see Figure 2B). These results replicated the findings from Experiment 1.

Hypothesis 3a predicted that compared with satisfied single women, dissatisfied single women who watched an erotic scene with a likable female character having casual sex would be less willing to have casual sex with men. In contrast, H3b predicted that compared with dissatisfied women in a relationship, satisfied women in a relationship who watched an erotic scene with a likable female character having casual sex would be less willing to have casual sex with men. We performed a 2 (likability female character: unlikable vs. unlikable) by 2 (relationship status: single

vs. relationship) \times 2 (status satisfaction: low vs. high) univariate ANOVA over the willingness scores. We found a three-way interaction on willingness to have casual sex, $F(1, 112) = 6.33$, $MS = 2.90$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .057$ (see Figure 2).

To further investigate this three-way interaction, we first examined the scores of the women who had seen a likable sexual female character. We did not find a two-way interaction of relationship status and status satisfaction in the likable condition, $p = .618$. Thus, H3a and H3b were not supported. However, in contrast to our predictions, we did find an effect of status satisfaction among those women who had seen an unlikable sexual female character, $F(1, 54) = 9.39$, $MS = 5.06$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .156$ (see Figure 2B). After seeing such an unlikable female character, women who were dissatisfied with their single status were more willing to have casual sex with men ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.03$) compared with women who were satisfied with their single status ($M = 1.30$, $SD = 0.38$). Similarly, women who were dissatisfied with their relationship status were more willing to have casual sex with men ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.84$) than women who were satisfied with their relationship status ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.42$).

General Discussion

The present study showed that relationship status and status satisfaction play an important moderating role in the effects of TV portrayals of casual sex on willingness to engage in casual sex. In line with SCT, we found that, after seeing a likable sexual female character, women in a relationship were less willing to have casual sex than were single women. In contrast, there was no difference in willingness between the groups after seeing an unlikable sexual female character. Additionally, we found an unexpected effect of status satisfaction. After seeing an unlikable sexual female character, women who were dissatisfied with their relationship or with being single were more willing to have casual sex than their satisfied counterparts.

These findings suggest that it is not merely likability of the main character that influences effects of modeling behavior, but that self-regulation processes play an important role when the behavior is transgressive. Compared with an unlikable main character, a likable main character can discourage willingness to perform the behavior when the behavior violates the norms and values of the viewers. The unexpected effect of status satisfaction – namely, that both women who were unsatisfied with being single and those who were unsatisfied with being in a relationship were more willing to have casual sex after seeing an unlikable character – may indicate that other factors than likability of the main character and self-regulation processes play a role in modeling behavior. To explain these results, consideration of other predictions of SCT, such as factors that may influence moral justification (Bandura, 2001a), as well as insights from studies on priming unsocial behavior (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996) may be helpful.

Implications for Research on the Antecedents of Casual Sex

This study is one of the first to link two lines of research that have recently dealt with the antecedents of casual sex. In line with the general goal of this study, we linked willingness to engage in casual sex, which has been studied as an antecedent of casual sex in psychological research on the prototype-willingness model (e.g., Gerrard et al., 2008), with likability of a sexual main character, which has been studied as an antecedent of casual sex in communication research (Boot, Peter, & van Oosten, 2014; Nabi & Clark, 2008). In line with the specific goal of our study, we tested whether relationship status, as well as the satisfaction with being in a relationship or being single, moderated the impact of the likability of a sexual main character on willingness to engage in casual sex.

Our findings have three important implications for research on the antecedents of casual sex. First, psychological research on the explanation of casual sex can be successfully combined with communication research on the issue. In psychology, hardly any research has considered media-related factors as predictors of commonly discussed antecedents of casual sex, such as individuals' willingness to engage in it. In communication research, conversely, hardly any research has taken into account that factors such as willingness to engage in casual sex may explain why and how media-related predictors, such as the likability of a sexual main character, may affect engagement in casual sex. The link between likability of a sexual female main character and women's willingness to engage in casual sex themselves that we found suggests that the models of the explanation of casual sex advanced in psychology (e.g., sociocultural theories in Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006) and in communication research (e.g., cultivation theory and viewer involvement theory in Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) may benefit from cross-fertilizing each other.

A second important implication of our findings is that we need to pay more attention to individual differences in the effects of media-related variables on (antecedents of) casual sex. In the context of SCT, our findings suggest that women do not simply imitate the behavior of a likable character. Rather, they regulate the impact of a sexual main character depending on the extent to which the behavior modeled by the character may be morally acceptable. This was most clearly suggested by our finding that women in a relationship, for whom casual sex is transgressive, were less willing to have casual sex after seeing a likable female main character. However, the additional unexpected finding that unsatisfied women were more willing to have casual sex after seeing an unlikable character, also suggests that other individual differences in viewers may play a role in regulation processes.

Third, our findings may point to an important boundary variable in research on casual sex. Most of this research is done among adolescents and young adults, preferably university students (e.g., Bogle, 2008; England & Thomas, 2007; Grello et al., 2006). These groups encompass more singles than older age groups do. Thus, many of the insights

on the antecedents of casual sex produced in studies among adolescents and young adults may only have come about because of the relatively high number of singles in these studies. Future research may therefore systematically compare singles with individuals in a relationship when investigating antecedents of casual sex and also extend its investigations to older age groups.

The Unexpected Moderating Effect of Status Satisfaction

In contrast to our predictions, status satisfaction did not further moderate the effect of relationship status for women who had seen a likable female main character. Instead, women who were dissatisfied with either their relationship or being single were more willing to engage in casual sex, compared with their satisfied counterparts, after they had seen the unlikable female main character. There is one possible explanation of this effect for women in a relationship and one for single women. For women who are dissatisfied with their relationship, casual sex may be appealing (e.g., Whisman et al., 2007), although they are probably aware that having casual sex is considered selfish or immoral when in a relationship (e.g., Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). However, Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996) found that voluntary performance of unsocial behavior of participants toward the experimenter can be primed by an unrelated task (e.g., a word task focused on the concept of rudeness). In the same way, the unlikable female character, who was described as an egocentric person, may have primed such selfish or immoral cognitions, which may have temporarily suppressed regulation processes (e.g., evaluation and self-sanction, SCT; Bandura, 2001a). By priming egocentrism through a sexual female character who is described as egocentric, women who are dissatisfied with their relationship may be persuaded to act egocentrically and choose sexual pleasure above fidelity.

Single women may be unhappy about their single life for other reasons than not being in a committed relationship. More specifically, they may be unsatisfied with their sex life and desire more sex (either committed or uncommitted). Because casual sex is considered less transgressive for singles than for individuals in a relationship (e.g., England & Thomas, 2007), the likability of the sexual female main character may actually not affect their willingness to engage in casual sex. This explanation seems supported by the equally high scores of willingness to have casual sex for unsatisfied singles in the unlikable condition and both groups of singles in the likable condition. However, this does not explain why satisfied singles in the unlikable condition were less willing to engage in casual sex. One possibility is that satisfied female singles regularly have casual sex, but are somewhat insecure about whether this is socially acceptable sexual behavior. The unlikable female character who engages in casual sex was described as an unsocial person and may therefore have sanctioned casual sex by suggesting that this behavior is socially unacceptable. This in turn may have reduced their (usually high) willingness to engage in casual sex.

Future Research

In the present study, we used predictions of the SCT and the prototype-willingness model to investigate the influence of sexual media content on women's willingness to have casual sex with a stranger. However, we did not fully investigate all facets and assumptions of these models but rather focused on small parts of these models as a first step to investigate the complex mechanism of sexual media effects. The next step in investigating sexual media effects would be to investigate the underlying mechanism of regulation processes of the SCT that we assumed to operate in the present study and to elaborate on other dimensions in the prototype-willingness model.

First, the circumstances and the core of self-regulation processes that we assumed to work when women in a relationship watched a likable female character having casual sex should be investigated in future studies. For instance, when viewers watch encouraged transgressive behavior in the media that induce regulation processes, some basic characteristics of viewers (e.g., impulsivity) may affect how much self-regulation each individual uses. Another focus for research on the mechanism of self-regulation processes would be to investigate in which stage viewers start to regulate their (willingness to engage in) behavior. For instance, it may be that willingness to imitate the behavior of a media main character is high at the beginning but decreases during watching the media when self-regulation processes step in. However, in such a study, measuring willingness to engage in behavior would again be an indirect way to measure regulation processes. Future studies should therefore also find a way to measure regulation processes directly. Thought listing during media use may be a way to measure regulation processes. Moreover, the mediating role of regulation processes, together with the moderating role of individual differences, could be investigated experimentally by manipulating regulation processes.

Second, there are other components assumed to be linked to willingness to engage in behavior in the prototype-willingness model (e.g., Gerrard et al., 2008). The role of such components in sexual media effects should be investigated to get a more complete picture of the present results. For instance, according to the prototype-willingness model, behavioral willingness is assumed to be influenced by the favorability of the prototype, a social image of a typical person of the same age, engaging in a particular behavior (e.g., Gerrard et al., 2008). The results of the present study showed that likability of the sexual main character, although moderated by relationship status, affected willingness to engage in casual sex. However, we do not know whether the effect of likability of the sexual main character on willingness to engage in casual sex was mediated by the prototype of women having casual sex. To investigate the mediating role of the prototype of women having casual sex, preferably two experiments should be performed (e.g., Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008): one in which likability of the sexual main character is manipulated and the prototype of women having casual sex measured as the outcome variable, and one in which the prototype of women

having casual sex is manipulated and willingness to engage in casual sex is measured as an outcome variable.

Limitations

Our results need to be seen in the light of at least three limitations. First, in Experiment 2, only a few women were unsatisfied with their relationship. Two thirds of the women in a relationship were at least moderately satisfied with it. It is plausible that the more women are unsatisfied with their relationship, the more willing they are to engage in casual sex after watching an unlikable sexual female character. Therefore, the effect of status satisfaction is probably stronger when the variance of relationship satisfaction is higher. Future research should therefore try to increase the variance in the relationship satisfaction variable – for instance, by sampling people from groups in which a somewhat decreased relationship satisfaction has been documented (e.g., married women with children; Belsky & Pinsky, 1988; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrère, 2000).

A second limitation of our study concerned the possibility that our measurement of women's satisfaction with their relationship or being single may not have been specific enough. Women may be (dis)satisfied with specific aspects in their relationship or single life (e.g., sex, dependency) that may influence their susceptibility to sexual media content and thus their willingness to engage in casual sex. For instance, when a single woman is dissatisfied with being single, because she wants a romantic relationship, casual sex may be less appealing than when a single woman is dissatisfied with being single, because she wants more sex. In a similar way, the factors that cause women's dissatisfaction with their relationship can be complex and varied (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998). For example, when dissatisfaction within a relationship is caused by sexual dissatisfaction within the relationship (Sprecher & Cate, 2004), women may be more susceptible to sexual media content than when dissatisfaction is caused by nonsexual factors. Moreover, a study by Roberts et al. (2013) showed that the effect of showing erotic material to men on willingness to engage in casual sex was affected by behavioral intentions to engage in casual sex. Thus, differences in behavioral intentions, together with different reasons for women's satisfaction with their relationship or being single, should be taken into account in future research.

A third limitation was that, overall, the ratings of willingness to engage in casual sex were low, and differences between the conditions small. Especially for the singles in the likable condition, we expected to find more willingness to engage in casual sex. One possible explanation may be that the movie fragment that we presented in our study was too short to have a big impact on the female viewers. In real life, it would be more common that viewers watch a whole episode or movie so that viewers can get a better impression of the personality of the character (that is now described in a text) and may see some kind of (risk) behavior of the character (i.e., casual sex) repeated in multiple scenes.

To conclude, our study sheds a first light on the connections between antecedents of casual sex among women.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that it is crucial to take into account individual differences in order to find out who is susceptible to sexual media content and who is not. Overall, our findings may present a first step toward a better understanding of the complexity of the antecedents of casual sex.

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