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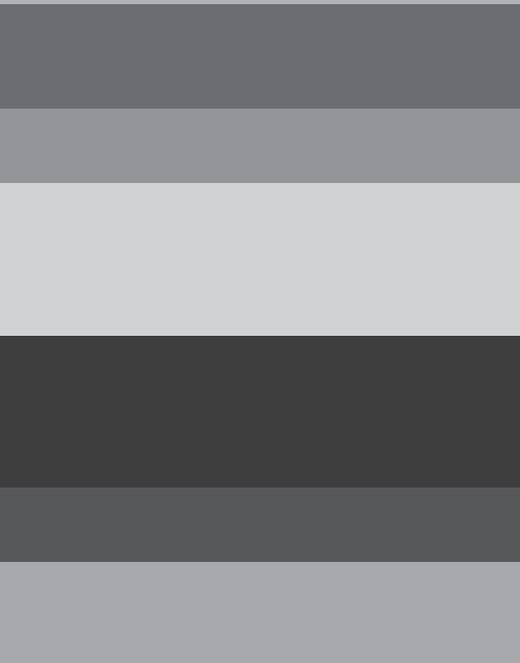
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Chapter 7
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION



Given the sexualized media environment that young people grow up in, there has been a substantial amount of research in the past decades on possible effects of sexual media content on young people (for reviews, see Brown & Bobkowsky, 2011; Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012; Shafer, Bobkowsky, & Brown, 2013). Despite the knowledge that has accumulated through this research, there are still several aspects of sexual media use and its effects on young people that remain understudied. First, previous research has predominantly focused on professionally produced sexual media content in mainstream media or sexually explicit material made by and for adults (for reviews, see Owens et al., 2012; Nikken, 2009; Peter, 2013; Shafer et al., 2013). A recent form of sexual media content that is very popular among adolescents has not yet received much attention in the literature: sexual content on social network sites as a result of young people's sexy self-presentations.

Second, even though it has been acknowledged that individual differences between media users may influence whether and what kind of effects of sexual media content occur (e.g., Steele & Brown, 1995; Steele, 1999; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), not much research has focused on identifying which groups of adolescent media users are most susceptible to effects of sexual media content (e.g., Shafer et al., 2013; Valkenburg, 2014). Such a focus is important, as public concerns about potentially harmful effects of sexual media content on young people may actually only apply to certain groups of adolescents. Moreover, knowing who is most susceptible to effects of sexual media content, and why, will help in preventing or countering possible harmful effects among young people.

With this dissertation, I aimed to improve our knowledge of young people's susceptibility to the effects of sexual media content by focusing on different types of sexual media content that are popular among adolescents (i.e., sexy self-presentations on social network sites, sexually explicit material, and sexual music videos), as well as on dispositions that may determine young people's susceptibility to the effects of such content (i.e., gender, age, hypergendered orientation, and impersonal sex orientation). In order to get a better grasp on why effects of sexual media content do or do not occur, I also investigated the role of response states that have been said to either increase the effects of sexual media use (i.e., affective engagement) or to be part of young people's resistance to the effects of sexual media use (i.e., critical responses). In addition,

in three of the five studies, I focused on outcome variables that have been understudied in relation to sexual media use (i.e., acceptance of token resistance and sexual self-concept) but that may be important given the current discussions about the effects of sexual media content (e.g., Attwood, 2009; Hillkens, 2008).

Types of Sexual Media Content

The findings in this dissertation have several implications for research on the effects of sexual media content on young people. With regard to the different types of sexual media content studied, it has become clear that young people can be influenced by different types of sexual media content, including the sexual content that they generate themselves and share with their peers. With regard to more traditional types of sexual media content, I found that stereotypical sexual music videos influenced adolescent girls' stereotypical sexual attitudes (Chapter 4). Although it was expected that adolescents' sexual attitudes would also be influenced by sexual content on newer media platforms (i.e., social network sites), I found that exposure to others' sexy self-presentations on social network sites influenced adolescents' sexual behavior, but not their sexual attitudes (Chapter 2). This shows that different types of sexual media content influence adolescents in different ways.

It thus seems that even though the sexual images on social network sites may put forward the same messages as sexual content in traditional media outlets (e.g., to sexually objectify one's body and to see sex as a game, Hirdman, 2007; Tortajada-Giménez, Araüna-Baró, & Martínez-Martínez, 2013), the impact of such images on adolescents' sexual attitudes may differ. One way of trying to understand why sexual content on social networks sites may affect attitudes differently may be to focus on what distinguishes this content from more traditional sexual media content. For instance, observing that sexual behavior is rewarded may trigger the learning and performance of this behavior (cf. Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura, 2001). However, the way in which sexual behavior is rewarded on social network sites may be particularly different from traditional media. On social network sites, sexual messages or images can be rewarded by positive feedback, but at the same time countered by negative feedback from other social network site users (e.g., Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; Ringrose, 2011). In traditional media, in contrast, adolescents are exposed to more homogenous messages about sex (e.g., Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). The

possibility of inconsistent messages on social media may encourage critical responses, thus reducing the effects of sexual content on social network sites on attitudes and beliefs.

Exposure to sexy self-presentations and adolescents' own sexy self-presentation on social network sites did influence their sexual self-concept (Chapter 3), similar to the effects of other types of sexual media content, such as sexually explicit internet material (e.g., Chapter 5; Peter & Valkenburg, 2008b, 2010). Even though stereotypical sexual messages may be refuted on social network sites, the amount of sexy self-presentations that adolescents are exposed to may still reinforce the idea that sex is one of the most important and socially demanded aspects of adolescent life (e.g., Ward, 2002, 2003). The finding that exposure to sexy self-presentations on social network sites did influence adolescents' sexual behavior and sexual self-concepts seems to support this notion. The finding of the effects of sexual media content on adolescents' sexual experience and sexual self are in line with the idea that sexual content can be used by adolescents as a tool in their sexual development (e.g., Attwood, 2009; Shafer et al., 2013; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006). Sexy self-presentation on social network sites may be particularly useful in this respect, given the ways in which social network sites are used for adolescents' identity exploration and expression (e.g., boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2008; Young, 2013). The attractiveness of social network sites for self-presentation and identity formation lie in the enhanced controllability of what an individual can portray and disclose of oneself (e.g., boyd, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Such controllability gives adolescents the feeling that they are more safe and free to explore their identities online (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Walther, 1996).

The findings on the influence of online sexy self-presentations on adolescents suggest that research needs to include online sexy self-presentations more strongly in empirical studies than it has done to date. An important extension of this research would be to further investigate whether and how the influence of sexy self-presentations on adolescents' sexual self differs from the influence of other types of sexual media content. Such research could investigate processes such as self-perception and public commitment that are unique to online communication and self-presentation (e.g., Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994). For instance, by presenting themselves in a sexy way online, adolescents can observe themselves from a third party perspective and thus internalize the

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characteristics that they present to others, which can be further enhanced by feedback that they receive on their self-presentation (Walther et al., 2011). As a result, sexy self-presentation may have a stronger influence on adolescents' sexual behavior and sexual self-concepts than watching sexual content in which others behave sexually, both on social networks sites and in other forms of sexual media content.

Future research may also focus on how the influence of exposure to others' sexy self-presentation on social network sites differs from exposure to traditional types of sexual media content. Generally, adolescents are more likely to identify with sexual content generated by peers than with more distant sexual media characters, or may find such sexual content more realistic (Collins, Martino, & Shaw, 2011; Shafer et al., 2013). As processes of identification and perceived realism are important underlying mechanisms of media-effects (e.g., Steele & Brown, 1995; Steele, 1999), a stronger identification with sexual content on social network sites, as well as a higher perceived realism of it, may in turn increase the impact of such sexual content on adolescents.

166 **Individual Susceptibility**

This dissertation shows that adolescents are influenced in different ways by sexual media content. In line with more recent theorizing in media-effects research (e.g., Kingston, Malamuth, Fedoroff, & Marshall, 2009; Malamuth, Hald, & Koss, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), adolescents thus differ in their susceptibility to sexual media content. For example, girls, but not boys, were affected in their beliefs about female token resistance by their exposure to sexual music videos (Chapter 4). Similarly, the influence of exposure to sexually explicit internet material on the stability of the sexual self-concept only occurred for girls with a low hypergendered orientation (Chapter 5).

Overall, the results show that the congruency between specific sexual content and the dispositions of adolescents plays a crucial role in determining adolescents' susceptibility to sexual media content. This importance of disposition-content congruency for people's individual susceptibility to the effects of media content has been suggested in various media-effects theories, notably the Differential Susceptibility to Media-effects Model (DSMM, Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), and is generally supported in this dissertation. Interestingly, however, two patterns of disposition-content congruency

emerged. In a first pattern, which is predicted in the DSMM, sexual media use reinforced pre-existing attitudes and behaviors that matched the sexual content, which in turn increased its effects. For instance, adolescent girls, who can be expected to think more than boys about how girls should behave when it comes to sex, were more susceptible to effects of sexual music videos on their ideas about female sexual behavior than were boys (Chapter 4). In a second pattern, in contrast, young people responded to sexual media content most strongly when such content did *not* match their pre-existing beliefs and experiences. For example, adolescent girls and young women with low levels of hypergendered orientation showed the strongest responses to (hypergendered) sexually explicit content, in the form of sexual uncertainty (Chapter 5) and critical responses (Chapter 6). The strongest effects thus occurred when sexual content was *incongruent* with pre-existing beliefs.

This second pattern seems to contradict what the DSMM and other media-effect theories and models have posited, namely that media-effects are most likely to occur when the content matches the pre-existing beliefs and experiences of media users (i.e., Confluence model, Kingston et al., 2009; Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000; Malamuth et al., 2012; Media Practice Model, Steele & Brown, 1995; DSMM, Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). At least two explanations are conceivable. First, the second pattern - stronger effects when disposition and content were incongruent - occurred only for sexually explicit material and only among females with a low hypergendered orientation. It may be that among this group of females sexually explicit material is of greater novelty and, as a result, can have a greater impact than among females high in hypergendered orientation. For the latter group, sexually explicit material may simply present more of what they already know and is thus unlikely to elicit much sexual uncertainty and critical responses. Future research should therefore consider the novelty and relevance of a message or content as a potential condition for the emergence of disposition-content congruency effects.

A second and probably most important explanation for the stronger effects when disposition and content were incongruent has to do with the character of the dependent variables investigated. Sexual uncertainty and critical responses to sexually explicit material are different variables than "classic" outcome variables, such as sexual attitudes and sexual behavior. For attitudes and behavior, it is logical to assume that disposition-content congruency enhances

the effect of a particular content on these variables, as the change in attitudes and behavior is consonant with the content. Sexual uncertainty and critical responses, in contrast, are variables that by definition imply a response “against the grain,” a response that is dissonant with the content. In this context, it is not surprising that the strongest effects of sexually explicit material occurred when females’ dispositions were incongruent with the content in such material. The findings of Chapter 5 and 6 thus do not contradict existing theorizing on disposition-content congruency effects, but suggest that the character of the outcome variable in question needs to be taken into account when trying to understand how the congruency between dispositions and content influences media effects.

Response States

This dissertation showed that response states, which have been posited as important underlying mechanisms of the effects of media use in general (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), can at least partly explain the effects of sexual media use. With regard to affective and excitative response states, Chapter 4 demonstrated that affective engagement (i.e., a combination of pleasure and arousal) partly explained the effects of stereotypical sexual music videos on adolescent girls’ beliefs about sexual behavior. In line with existing research (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2008a, 2009), these findings illustrate how a focus on affective and excitative response states can improve our understanding of how and why sexual content affects adolescents. The effects of sexual content on adolescents are rarely direct, but often mediated by affective processes. In addition, with regard to cognitive response states, Chapter 6 showed that young women’s critical responses towards a male-targeted sexually explicit story depended on their level of hypergendered orientation in combination with the way they processed the content. These findings contribute to understanding how young people’s critical responses to sexual media content come about and who is most likely to show such critical responses.

The findings of this dissertation on response states also point to the neglected role of attentional processes in research on the effects of sexual media content on adolescent sexuality. Scholars have suggested that affective engagement increases the effects of sexual media content by directing attention to the sexual content (e.g., Lang, 2009; Wright, 2011; Wright, Malamuth, & Donnerstein, 2012). The effects in Chapter 4, where affective engagement partly mediated the effects of watching video clips on sexual beliefs, may also, or perhaps

predominantly, run through attentional processes. Similarly, in Chapter 6, disposition-content congruency effects of the sexually explicit material and women's hypergendered orientation only occurred when participants had been told to pay attention towards the situational context, that is, the portrayal of gender roles in the pornographic story. Overall, attentional processes thus deserve more attention in future research than they have received to date.

A stronger focus on attentional processes is also important for practical reasons. Young people's media use is increasingly characterized by multitasking between different media platforms (i.e., computer, television, mobile phones) (Jeong, Hwang, & Fishbein, 2010; Roberts & Foehr, 2008) and thus by a division of attention over different types of media content (Lang, Bradley, Park, Shin, & Chung, 2006; Zhang, Jeong, & Fishbein, 2010). There is evidence that the use of sexual content too happens, at least partly, in a multitasking setting (e.g., Collins, 2008; Jeong et al., 2010). While this phenomenon is generally under-researched, some first studies have demonstrated that multitasking during the consumption of sexual media content makes critical users become more involved with a sexual main character, while uncritical users become less involved with a sexual main character during multitasking (Boot, Peter, & van Oosten, 2014a). Moreover, there is some preliminary evidence that whether media users focus their attention on sexual content vs. non-sexual content determines the effects of multitasking on memory of sexual media content (Boot, Peter, & van Oosten, 2014b). The effects of young people's sexual media use may thus have to be studied more in relation to such multitasking and different ways of attentional processing.

Outcomes of Sexual Media Use

This dissertation investigated several potential outcomes of sexual media use that have largely been neglected in the literature, but are relevant to young people's sexual media use as well as their sexual development. The finding that sexual music videos can impact the belief that a woman's "no" in a sexual situation means "yes" (Chapter 4) merges with public concerns about an adverse impact of sexual media content on adolescent sexuality (e.g., Hilkens, 2008). That this influence occurred mostly for girls initially supports feminist notions that girls and young women take over stereotypical and misogynistic beliefs from the media to adjust in a patriarchal system (e.g., Levy, 2005). While more research is needed to substantiate this notion, the focus on acceptance of

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female token resistance has shown potential in raising important questions about the influence of sexual media content on (female) adolescent sexuality.

The idea that sexual content can impact adolescents' sense of self is relatively new and has been introduced by only a few scholars (Collins et al., 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2008b, 2010; Shafer et al., 2013). Accordingly, research that focuses on the influence of sexual media content on adolescents' sexual selves is still in its infancy. The studies in this dissertation showed that adolescents' sexual self-concept is influenced by both sexually explicit internet material as well as sexy self-presentation on social network sites. Sexy self-presentation on social network sites made adolescents' sexual self-concept more central to their overall identity (Chapter 3), while sexually explicit internet material made the sexual self-concept more unstable (Chapter 5). The centrality and stability of adolescents' sexual self-concept are only two aspects of young people's sexual self-concepts that seem to be related to their use of sexual media content. It is also conceivable that other dimensions, such as the degree of differentiation of the sexual self-concept (Marsh & Ayotte, 2003) or the co-occurrence of positive and negative sexual self-concepts (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994), may be associated with sexual media use. Future research may find a fruitful task in disentangling this relation.

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In its focus on neglected or novel outcomes of adolescents' sexual media use, this dissertation has demonstrated that the ramifications of sexual media use may be broader than commonly theorized and researched. More than a decade ago, researchers already called for a broader orientation of research on the effects of sexual media content on adolescents (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002; Ward, 2003), as at the time empirical studies on the consequences of the use of sexual media content largely focused on a relatively limited number of sexual attitudes and sexual behavior as main outcomes (for a review, see Ward, 2003). It seems that only now we are starting to grasp that sexual media content may affect much more than "just" adolescents' attitudes and behavior. The findings on the relation between sexual media content and adolescents' sexual selves initially suggest that an important part of identity development during adolescence may be associated with adolescents' use of sexual media content. It needs to be emphasized that the effects and associations found were small from a statistical point of view and need replication in different settings and cultures. Still, the turn from attitudinal and

behavioral outcome variables toward identity-related ones may help to broaden the scope of research on the consequences of sexual media content and direct our attention into new, exciting directions.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this dissertation provides several new insights into the effects of sexual media content on adolescent sexuality, it has at least three limitations that need to be outlined to inspire future research. First, with the exception of Chapter 6 where I manipulated specific male and female-centered content, I did not distinguish between specific messages (i.e., male dominance, female subordination) in the measures of the use of sexual media content. Rather, I measured exposure to certain types of sexual media content (i.e., sexual music videos, sexually explicit internet material) that had been shown to contain gender stereotypical content in previous content analyses. As a result, I could not take into account the specific content and stereotypical messages that participants had seen. Especially with regard to sexually explicit internet material, there are many different types of content and genres available, ranging from violent pornography to female-friendly erotic content and from professionally produced material to amateur content (e.g., Hardy, 2009). These different genres likely have different effects on adolescents' sexual attitudes, behavior, and self-concepts. Future research should therefore look more closely at the specific sexual (stereotypical) messages that young people encounter, when studying the impact of sexual media use on adolescents' sexuality.

A second limitation concerns the specific population under study. The findings of this dissertation are based on samples of mostly heterosexual Dutch adolescents aged 12-17, which has several implications for the generalizability of the findings. To start with, the findings have little relevance for how gay, lesbian and bisexual youth respond to sexual media content and how they are affected by it. Moreover, the studies in this dissertation may only generalize to young people in Western countries, and even such generalizations may be difficult. Dutch youth may differ from young people in other Western countries such as the United States, given their more sexually liberal upbringing and the type of sexual education they receive in schools (Schalet, 2000, 2011). Finally, because of the rather limited age range of our sample, it is unlikely that our findings generalize to other age-groups, such as younger children or emerging adults. Future research should thus focus on media users with different sexual

orientations and take on a cross-cultural and developmental perspective to fully grasp how sexual media content affects young people's sexuality.

A third and final limitation concerns the rather one-sided perspective on the effects of sexual media content. In my studies, I mostly followed previous research on the potentially negative effects of sexual media content on adolescents' sexuality. Such research is inspired by the idea that sexual media content portrays sexual content in an unrealistic and stereotypical way (for reviews, see Brown, 2009; Ward, 2003) and that adolescents lack the emotional maturity and sexual knowledge to put such content into perspective (Attwood, 2009; Thornburg & Lin, 2002). However, some scholars have adopted a more positive perspective, in which sexual media content is not (only) seen as a collection of negative and stereotypical messages, but as a tool for adolescents' (positive) sexual development (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). For instance, the role of media as a "super peer" can also be used to educate young people about sexual issues, such as sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2010). A more complete understanding of the impact of sexual media content on adolescents' sexuality should thus imply that future research also focuses on young people's susceptibility to the beneficial effects of sexual media content.

Practical Implications

It has repeatedly been argued that parents and (other) sex educators need to teach young people how to put sexual media use in perspective (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; Hilken, 2008; Graugaard & Roien, 2007). The findings of this dissertation may help parents and sex educators in several ways. First, parents should be aware of social network sites as a source of sexual content and that their children may produce such content through sexy self-presentations. Second, it must be noted that the direct effects of sexual media use were rather small, and that effects of sexual media use often only occur for a specific group of adolescents. For parents and sex educators, it is thus important to know that sexual media content, though exerting an influence, is never the only impact on adolescent sexuality. Other factors, such as peers and the parents and sex educators themselves, are also important. Third, it is important for parents and sex educators to be able to identify and target specific groups of adolescents that are most susceptible to effects of sexual media content. This dissertation showed that attention needs to be paid to girls and more specifically to their

hypergendered orientation (i.e., the extent to which girls feel that they need to be sexy in order to attract boys, and that boys can act in dominant ways towards them).

The findings in this dissertation may also have implications for media literacy interventions. Even though there have been attempts at educating young people about sexual media content (e.g., Pinkleton, Austin, Cohen, Chen, & Fitzgerald, 2008; Reichert, Latour, Lambiase, & Adkins, 2007), such interventions are often limited by rather broad descriptions of sexual content as ‘unrealistic’ and hardly deal with the specific stereotypical gender representations in sexual content (Sørensen, 2007), a few exceptions notwithstanding (e.g., Nathanson, Wilson, McGee, & Sebastian, 2002). This dissertation has shown that a focus on such stereotypical gender representations may indeed be fruitful in media literacy programs, in addition to taking into account adolescents’ own pre-existing gender-role orientations. Moreover, the finding that response states explain the effects of sexual media content can be used in interventions to help adolescents put sexual content in perspective. The attentional processing on which these response states are based may provide especially useful information for media literacy interventions. For instance, when adolescents are encouraged to counter stereotypical content by focusing on the situational context of the material, they may be more likely to become critical towards such content and to put it in perspective.

In conclusion, as sexual content is in all media that adolescents use, parents and sex educators are indeed well-advised to try to educate young people about sexual content, as the SIRE campaign mentioned in the introduction suggests. This dissertation has shown that in order to be able to educate young people about sexual media content, we have to take different types of sexual media content into account and be aware of young people’s individual susceptibility to the effects of such content as well as how they respond to it. Moreover, we have to be aware of the full spectrum of sexual media effects, which includes effects on sexual attitudes and behaviors, but also adolescents’ identity formation.

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