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Media Psychological Reflections on the Organizational Framework of Sexual Media’s

Influence on Users’ Short vs. Long-Term Sexual Quality

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Media Psychological Reflections on the Organizational Framework of Sexual Media's Influence on Users' Short vs. Long-Term Sexual Quality

The organizational framework presented in Leonhardt, Spencer, Butler, and Theobald's (2018) Target Article provides an interesting perspective on the moderators and mediators that allow us to understand the relationship between sexual media use and users' sexuality. By bridging insights from pornography research with couple studies and sexual motivation literature, the authors theorize and present a framework that is labelled in this Commentary: the Model of Mediated Script Sources. The model aims to reshape the field of sexual media effects by (a) describing a categorization of sexual media content, (b) unfolding moderators of sexual content adaption processes, (c) conceptualizing outcomes of long-term and short-term sexual quality, and (d) theorizing the interplay between the acquired mediated sexual scripts and the couple context in which the scripts are applied. By providing a new explanatory framework, the inconsistency that has been reported across sexual media studies is aimed to be addressed.

The authors describe these inconsistent research findings by referring to positive vs. negative effects of sexual media. Some studies reported positive effects of sexual media, while others seem to reveal negative effects. The framing of the problem regarding inconsistent findings by Leonhardt et al. (2018) is different than by media psychology scholars that have also (heavily) criticized the lack of agreement between studies. However, within media psychology, scholars have debated the disparities between studies by pointing at the emergence of small but negative effects in some studies, and the lack of such findings (i.e., null findings) in other studies (Brown, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). The existence of studies on positive effects of sexual media has not received much attention within this debate because of communication theory on third-person effects (Kohut, Fisher, & Campbell, 2017). More precisely, positive effects have especially been found when asking respondents

directly to report how they believe pornography use affects their sexuality (e.g., Kohut et al., 2017; Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). Accordingly, media scholars reason a third-person mechanism (i.e., others may be affected negatively but not me) and cognitive consistency processes (i.e., I like sexual media thus this media activity has a positive influence on me) account for the positive effects in these self-reported effects (Chia, 2006; Wu & Koo, 2001).

Regardless of the framing of the inconsistency debate, the attention it receives underscores a lack of understanding of sexual media effects and thus the acute need for a novel theory. By providing a theoretical framework on how studies can be designed and thus formulating the questions that sexual media effect scholars should ask themselves, a more consistent pattern of results may emerge. The issue at stake may be then how novel the theoretical propositions in the formulated model are (Lang, 2013). Against the background of the media psychological insights that currently prevail in the field of sexual media effects, several propositions clearly distinguish themselves as highly unique and thought-provoking (see the assumptions on (c) the conceptualization of novel outcomes of long-term and short-term sexual quality, and (d) theorization of the interplay between acquired mediated sexual scripts and the couple context in which the scripts are applied). As the model is rooted in prior literature, other propositions summarize the abundance of insights that have been found in prior research on sexual media effects (see the assumptions on (a) the presented categorization of sexual media content and (b) the description of moderators of sexual content adaption processes), and perhaps could have received more detail and clarification when taking into account recent trends within this literature. To further spark debate on the assumptions, the current Commentary adds several insights from media psychological literature to the propositions that, in particular, target the media effect process in the organizational framework (i.e., a and b).

Sexual Media Script Development: (a) Types of Sexual Media

The Model of Mediated Script Sources underscores the tradition of media psychological insights on content-specific effects with its categorization of different sexual media types (Wright, 2009). Paraphilic content is distinguished from sexually explicit content and sexually suggestive content, and all sexual media genres are described to relate in a similar fashion to users' sexuality, but with notable differences in the *strength* of the assumed relationships. As explained in media effects theory and decades of research on content difference effects, the type of sexual cues and the context in which they are portrayed in sexual media content are the reference points from which scholars can start to formulate hypotheses on their potential impact (Fisher & Barak, 2001; Ward, 2003; Wright, 2009). The differentiation of sexual media into sexually suggestive, sexually explicit and paraphilic sexual content seems to differ from pornographic and mainstream sexual media research on several points.

First, the categories of degrading and violent pornography are merged into one category, i.e., *paraphilic content*. From a media effects perspective, the difference between dominance-themed and violence-themed sexually explicit content is considered critical given that different outcomes are believed to be associated with the inclusion of aggression cues (Bauserman, 1998; Fisher & Barak, 2001; Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1988; Vandebosch, 2015). At the same time, it should be stated that empirical research testing this assumption has not been able to fully support such claims. For instance, the experiment of Bauserman (1998) found that exposure to dominance-themed and violence-themed sexually explicit content resulted in a similar null effect on attitudes toward gender roles and both evoked negative evaluative responses toward sexual violence among male college students. Such findings have led to a debate on the validity of researchers' forced categorizations and the potential necessity to look at users' interpretations of sexual media content and their

categorization schemes to develop a media typology that is more valid in predicting differential effects (Bauserman, 1998; Fisher & Barak, 2001; Linz et al., 1988; Vandenberg, 2015).

Second, the broad label of *sexually suggestive content* of Leonhardt et al. (2018) may be considered too general and in need of further specification given the current model's hypothesis that all types of sexually suggestive media content negatively relate to long-term sexual quality. Within entertainment media, scholars have a longstanding tradition of studying television genres, magazine outlets and music lyrics that contain sexually suggestive content (Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2014). Important within this area, is the distinct role that different entertainment media genres play in socializing users toward short-term vs. long-term sexual relationship ideals. Regarding short-term sexual relationship ideals, sitcoms, music videos, and other popular TV formats have been labelled to promote a so-called Reductionist Script of Instant Gratification in which sexuality is reduced to the instantaneous appeal of sexual satisfaction and the complexity of the emotions, feelings, and personalities associated with sexuality are ignored in favor of immediately assessable physical attributes (Vandenberg, 2013). Wright (2009) noted that it may be too simplistic to believe some of these genres only promote short-term sexual gratifications as, for instance, married couples are portrayed as happier than singles within soap operas. Research has so far neglected such complexities in media's portrayal of sexuality.

Regarding long-term sexual relationship ideals, romantic drama series and romantic movies contain sexually suggestive content in their dialogues and intimate behavior scenes, but almost exclusively model such behavior within committed relationship goals (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). The idea of finding your soulmate and having a faithful and loving relationship with this individual is highly romanticized (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Tanner et al., 2003). The effects of such romantic

media largely depend on how the user implements the romantic media message into his/her personal relationship and accordingly are sometimes positive for long-term sexual quality, but can also be negative (Driesmans, Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2016): Romantic ideals may heighten relationship disappointment, but at the same time also lead to more passionate love experiences (Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Sprecher & Metts, 1999).

Third, within media psychology, recent assessments of sexual media diets also include social media in which users present themselves with sexual selfies, use dating apps to find sexual partners, and send (private) sexual messages to their partners (i.e., sexting) (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017; Temple & Choi, 2014; van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, 2015). Considering that so-called self-effects (e.g., posting a sexy selfie on social media), exposure to online sexual behavior of peers and their complexities (e.g., complex sexual norms regarding the approval of sexy selfies), and online sexual communication dynamics (e.g., intimacy motivations for sending sexts) are not considered within the presented organizational framework, the Model of Mediated Script Sources mainly applies to traditional media formats.

Within these traditional media formats, the Model targets pornographic content and mainstream sexual media genres that exclusively promote hedonistic sexual values (e.g., video clips) and may especially help to guide future research focusing on these media.

Sexual Media Script Development: (b) Moderators

In line with the differential susceptibility hypothesis in media effects literature (P. M. Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), media effects are postulated to be moderated by socialization agents (i.e., exclusivity in the Model; Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003), developmental phase and position of media within users' rank order of valid sexual information sources (i.e., formativeness: Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011), resonance (Calzo & Ward, 2009), and reinforcement (Wright, Steffen,

& Sun, 2017). Although some of the labels used in the model differ from prior moderator conceptualizations within media psychology and, accordingly put a different emphasis, sexual media effects research seems to have supported their relevance in the past and added several complexities worthy of future considerations.

Exclusivity. Within the framework presented by Leonhardt et al. (2018), the idea is put forward that not only contemporary socialization agents, but also past influential agents, need to be considered when studying the effects of sexual media. This assumption coincides with research studying parental attachment as a general protective factor in sexual media effects (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). Maternal attachment is believed to socialize children towards healthy relationships and in particular a positive sexuality (Bowlby, 1980; Moore, Raymond, Mittelstaedt, & Tanner, 2002). Media research has added that the protective value of maternal attachment is conditional in combination with media exposure, probably because of gender socialization and sexual communication obstacles in parent-child dialogues. More precisely, the results of one study showed that maternal attachment protected girls from adopting hedonistic sexual beliefs when viewing TV, but supported boys in their positive relationship between TV viewing and hedonistic sexual beliefs. The study explained these finding by the traditional gender socialization patterns that surround parent-child dialogues on sex. Such gender biases may lead mothers to reinforce boys' adoption of sexually liberal ideas from TV, while at the same time cause them to weaken such notions among girls, i.e., see the sexual double standard (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). A recent follow-up study among tweens confirmed this reasoning (Rousseau, Rodgers, & Eggermont, 2018). Accordingly, this line of research but also other research on peers (Jochen Peter & Valkenburg, 2011a) has highlighted the potential multifaceted nature of relevant agents and the importance of taking into account individual characteristics of the person that is the targeted recipient of the sexual socialization. Socialization agents may thus operate in a

protective way against the influence of sexual media for some users while for other users, the same agents reinforce the effects of sexual media.

Formativeness. According to the assumptions of Leonhardt et al. (2018), the developmental phase in which sexual media enter users' set of primary sources for sexual information is crucial to determine media's impact. Because of the availability of pornography through the Internet, it is argued that sexual media may today be a more formative source than in the past. Age of first exposure and whether media are considered a formative source for sexual socialization should accordingly be more than ever considered in research. Three issues may further contextualize these assumptions within contemporary media psychological literature. First, a sexual media response study among preadolescent girls seems to offer a critical note to the idea that sexually explicit media will nowadays be considered more early in childhood as an important sexual information source. As noted by Brown, Halpern, and L'Engle (2005), when users are not developmentally ready to view sexually explicit media, children try to avoid such content as they experience sexual disgust reactions when being confronted with them. Accordingly, it is not the availability of sexual media, but the child's developmental status and in particular pubertal maturation progress that will determine sexual media exposure.

Second, studies on sexual information sources emphasize that media are a second-order source rather than a primary source for teens (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011). That said, the more teens label media as a primary source of sexual information, the more their sexuality was found to be affected in multiple studies (Bleakley et al., 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010; Vandenbosch, van Oosten, & Peter, 2018). As such, research has confirmed the model's assumption and also added that this relationship is, under some conditions, reciprocal (Vandenbosch et al., 2018; Vandenbosch & van Oosten, 2018).

Third, studies have examined whether developmental phase moderates the

relationship between media use and users' sexuality (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011a, 2011b). Interestingly, this research noted that risky casual sex behavior was supported by pornography use among adults, but not among adolescents. Potentially, this short-term sexual quality behavior may be affected more easily among adults who engage more in casual sex than adolescents (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Adolescents are still exploring their first sexual experiences and research has noted that such experiences largely occur within the context of committed relationships (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Together, such research suggests the developmental phase in which sexual media is used matters, but also to consider the influence of sexual media within a developmental context and thus to focus on sexual quality indicators that are central in a particular developmental phase. As different sexual behaviors (e.g., petting behavior vs sexual intercourse) are key in different developmental phases (e.g., adolescence vs adulthood), it may be methodologically challenging to understand how the relationship between media and sex develops over the course of life.

Resonance. The Model of Mediated Script Sources refers to (1) real life experiences and beliefs, and (2) reality beliefs about sexual media content (i.e., beliefs that sexual media content reflect reality) and postulates that congruence between real life experience and media depictions will strengthen sexual media effects. Relationship experiences have been a highly disregarded factor within sexual media effects literature, though some notable exceptions exist (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). The resonating role of real life experiences described in the Model seems highly needed to fuel future research. Such research may also consider literature on a competing hypothesis that suggests resonance (i.e., the world depicted in media resonates with real life beliefs and accordingly triggers a "double" dose effect) will not occur. Alternatively, the world depicted in media may conflict with real life beliefs and media may lead users to adapt their real-life views, i.e., mainstreaming. In a study by Calzo and Ward (2009), support was found for the latter mainstreaming process and even in such a

way that TV viewers with different real-world views all changed their beliefs to conform more to the world depicted on TV. Users who were typically less tolerant toward homosexuals (i.e., men and religious individuals) showed more positive attitudes toward homosexuality when watching more TV, while the reverse was true for users with more positive notions of homosexuality (i.e., women and less religious individuals). Sexual television content is known to contain only moderately positive messages regarding homosexuality (Calzo & Ward, 2009). Apparently, frequent viewers seem to transgress toward such moderate acceptance, regardless of their prior beliefs about the real world. Given that some types of sexual media have been noted to promote a rather moderate acceptance of short-term sexual relationships (Wright, 2009) and that users have individual differences in their pre-existing beliefs about short-term relationships (Heldman & Wade, 2010), mainstreaming processes may also be worthy of consideration in future research on this issue.

Apart from the convergence between the world depicted in media and real-life experiences, the authors refer to perceived realism estimations about the sexual media world and postulate that these estimations play a moderating role in sexual media effects. Peter and Valkenburg (2010) have argued that the power of biased reality beliefs lies in the subtle beliefs about the social realism value of sexual material (e.g., the depicted sex in pornography resembles real life sex). Just like other scholars, they acknowledged that it is common knowledge among (almost) all young users that media is fiction and biased because of production principles (Randall & Langlais, 2018). Accordingly, more nuanced and well-thought conceptualizations are necessary regarding the meaning of “perceived” realism beliefs regarding sexual media.

Media research on the role of perceived realism of sexual media content has further conceptualized this factor as a *predictor* of sexual beliefs (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999), a *moderator* of sexual media effects (Aubrey, Rhea, Olson, & Fine, 2013), and a *mediator* of

sexual media effects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010; Vandenberg et al., 2018). The different conceptual roles that perceived realism plays in different sexual media studies should not necessarily be considered as contradictory.

As explained in the differential susceptibility to media effects model (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), perceived realism may operate as a moderator/predictor when it is conceptualized as a stable trait and thus includes knowledge about the reality value of media content that was developed *prior* to the media usage experience (i.e., trait variable). When perceived realism is conceptualized as knowledge that is developed *during and after* the media usage experience (i.e., state variable), the concept is interpreted as volatile and depend of media usage. According to these differential meanings that the concept can have and their corresponding differential roles in the sexual media effect model, the hypothesized decrease in the differentiation between the real vs. the mediated world because of technology use in the model of Leonhardt et al. (2018) would thus be considered as a mediating process in media effect literature. Future research may thus benefit from considering the difference between state and trait perceived realism beliefs when addressing its role in the sexual media effect process.

Reinforcement. With the concept of *reinforcement*, Leonhardt et al. (2018) emphasize the moderating role of the rewards that users may receive during the sexual media use and after the sexual media use when applying the endorsed sexual scripts with their partner. The rewards received during sexual media consumption have in particular been reported for pornography use and refer in this literature to sexual arousal and masturbation. Differences in experienced sexual arousal and the related practice of masturbation during pornography consumption are well-documented (Laier, Pawlikowski, Pekal, Schulte, & Brand, 2013) with notable gender differences for self-reported arousal in particular and not so much for physically measured arousal (Allen et al., 2007). Because arousal is believed to be

evoked *during* or *after* sexual media exposure, studies have consistently regarded this rewarding factor as a mediator for sexual media effects and largely confirmed its explanatory role in links between pornography use and sexual preoccupation (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008), acceptance of rape myths (Davis, Norris, George, Martell, & Heiman, 2006) and endorsement of hostile sexist beliefs (Hald, Malamuth, & Lange, 2013).

Regarding masturbation, research has rarely addressed this factor in sexual media processes. In one rare study on this topic, Wright and colleagues (2017) warned for the possibility of a curvilinear relationship regarding the extent to which masturbation will be experienced as rewarding for users' sexuality. His research found that irregular masturbation during pornography use related positively to sexual satisfaction. However, once users started using the material more than once a month for masturbation, a negative relationship occurred (Wright et al., 2017). Accordingly, the role that rewards such as masturbation play in the sexual media effect process may necessitate a non-linear reasoning to be adequately addressed in future research.

Sexual Media Script Application and Sexuality Outcomes

The idea that pornographic media socialize adolescents to value short-term sexual gratification and dismiss long-term commitment goals has been theorized in and evidenced by a multitude of sexual media studies focusing on attitudes, norms, beliefs and behaviors regarding recreational sex, casual sex, promiscuous sex and intimacy deprivation (for some recent reviews see Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Tokunaga, Wright, & Roskos, 2018). Similar, though less consistent, results have emerged in entertainment media research focusing on sitcoms, drama series, reality shows, teen/women magazines, video clips, or movies (Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2013). What these studies miss, is highlighted by Leonhardt et al. (2018) in their emphasis on the conceptualization of short-term and long-term sexual quality and the need to include more focused and validated measures on indicators of sexual quality.

Studies have largely targeted the same concepts, e.g., arousal (Allen et al., 2007), sexual technique (see sexual performance studies; e.g., Vandenbosch et al., 2018) and sexual openness (see casual sex, recreational sex and other highly related outcomes to the concept of immediate sexual pleasure, Tokunaga et al., 2018). There seems to have been an acute lack of attention to long-term sexual quality indicators such as sexual communal strengths, sexual intimacy and sexual communication in the field. However, it should be noted that several notable exceptions exist that do provide some first insights into the links between sexual media and indicators relating to long-term sexual quality (e.g., Perry & Schleifer, 2018; Segrin & Nabi, 2002).

Moreover, the lack of attention in sexual media research to the interplay between acquired mediated sexual scripts and the couple context in which the scripts are applied is apparent and cannot be overstated. The proposed chain of events following the application of mediated scripts and in particular the attribution of a key role to the couple context in which sexual scripts are applied is intriguing. Intuitively, one would reason that the relationship between sexual media use and sexual quality can only be understood comprehensively when taking into account couple context factors. However, sexual media studies have rarely taken into account couple factors. As such, the formulated theoretical assertions in the Model of Mediated Script Sources will undoubtedly help researchers to further concretize the well-established view that sexual media effects do not occur in a vacuum, but progress in a complex environment.

Conclusion

An interesting venue for future research is established in the organizational framework by Leonhardt et al. (2018). Their comprehensive theoretical model presents myriad issues well-suited to spark a novel direction in future sexual media research, with most notably their theorization of the role of sexual media within couple dynamics. As is

common with new theories, several assumptions still need further development. In particular, to further develop the assumptions, a consideration of relevant literatures within the field of media psychology seems welcome. The current Commentary's reflections will hopefully help to fuel such further clarification of the organization framework.

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