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Understanding the role of entertainment media in the sexual socialization of American youth: A review of empirical research

L.Monique Ward

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Abstract

Whereas it is often suggested that the media have assumed a prominent role in the sexual socialization of American youth, empirical evidence supporting this premise has been slow to accumulate. To provide both the fuel and motivation for future research in this area, this review presents a comprehensive overview of the existing state of the field, covering research on both magazine and television content, and on both high school and college student samples. In addressing the three central issues of what, how, and where/to what extent, this review first examines the nature and prevalence of sexual content both on TV and in magazines. It then describes several theoretical mechanisms outlining how potential influence might occur, and then presents findings examining such influences. Overall, evidence indicates that frequent and involved exposure to sexually oriented genres such as soap operas and music videos is associated with greater

acceptance of stereotypical and casual attitudes about sex, with higher expectations about the prevalence of sexual activity and of certain sexual outcomes, and, even occasionally, with greater levels of sexual experience. In light of these findings, I offer a working conceptual model of the media's role as a sexual socialization agent, and conclude by outlining 14 specific suggestions for future research.



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