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Media use and the sexual propensities of emerging adults

Lelia Samson and Maria Elizabeth Grabe

This paper reports the findings of an online survey (N=707) that assessed the predictive power of media use on sexual excitation and inhibition, as conceived by the dual control model (Janssen, Vorst, Finn & Bancroft, 2002). Media use explained more variance in sexual excitation than inhibition. Moreover, excitation was statistically associated with several media variables (music, network programming, films, websites) while inhibition had a statistically robust relationship with music consumption only. In fact, exposure to religious/devotional music was positively and rap/hip-hop was negatively related to sexual inhibition. Advantages of employing the dual control model to media sex research are discussed.

The ubiquitous consumption of mediated sex by young adults has fueled moral vexation among parents, policy makers, and academics (Clinton, 2005; Gunter, 2002; Strasburger, 2006). Two pornographic websites count among the world's top 50 most visited websites (alexa.com). About 75% of music videos feature sex, and nearly every feature film, cable, and TV movie portrays sexual behavior (Fisher, Hill, Grube & Gruber, 2004; Sherman & Dominick, 1986). Alongside these factoids about the prevalence of sexual titillation, there is mounting evidence that media are a prime source of information about sex and a critical agent in human socialization on matters related to sexuality (Brown, et al. 2006; Collins, et al., 2004; Pardun, L'Engle & Brown, 2005; Strasburger, 2006; Ward, 2003). Such media sex research offers insight into how sexual responses and attitudes might be influenced by (1) different media channels (e.g., cable, network TV, internet), (2) separate genres (music videos, film, primetime programming), and (3) content that varies in levels of explicitness. At this point, a

comprehensive study should be undertaken to assess the combined and comparative influences of media channels, genres, and types of content on the constitution of human sexual propensities, as some scholars have suggested (Ward, 2003; Wright, 2009). To this end, the present study attempts an expansive—but disentangled (by media genre, channel, and content)—account of how sexuality relates to media use. The multifarious concept of human sexuality is approached here along the dimensions of excitation and inhibition, as proposed by the dual control model developed by Janssen and colleagues (2002).

The Dual Control Model of Human Sexuality

The dual control model (Janssen et al., 2002) differentiates between human propensities for sexual inhibition and excitation as psychosexual mechanisms guiding behavior. They are seen as functioning at both state and trait levels. As states, inhibition and excitation are treated as two complementary mechanisms of the central nervous system that guide sexual responses. At the trait level they are regarded as independent dimensions of human sexuality, prone to individual variance and socialization (including media) influences. This trait conceptualization offers theoretical grounding for the study reported here.

Regardless of state or trait level operations, the two mechanisms are seen as independent yet interrelated in guiding sexual behavior (Janssen et al., 2002). Often described as a bottom-up or impulsive drive (Toates, 2009), *sexual excitation* triggers appetitive sexual responses shaped by a host of biological (e.g., hormones), psychological (e.g., cognition, affect), and cultural (socialization) factors. *Sexual inhibition* is viewed as a predisposition for aversive responses during unwanted sexual encounters or performance failures. While primarily seen as a top-down or higher-cognitive process, inhibition is not void of bottom-up aversive responses, nor immune to biological, psychological, or cultural influences (Toates, 2009).

To assess the influence of each mechanism, self-report questionnaires that correspond with physiological measures of inhibition and excitation have been developed. A 45-question instrument (Janssen et al., 2002) and shorter 14-item version (Carpenter, Janssen, Graham, Vorst, & Wicherts, 2010) have been validated.

Although the dual control model makes provisions for cultural influences on sexual propensities, it was certainly not primarily designed to test such processes. Assessing whether exposure to mediated sex is related to excitation and inhibition seems overdue, given that contemporary *Homo sapiens* spends around 11 hours per day in the mediated world (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005; 2010). As starting point to the present study, the interrelatedness/independence of sexual inhibition and excitation will be tested in the context of media use, prompting the first research question.

RQ₁: Are sexual excitation and inhibition independently related to media exposure? To explore the possible cultural influences that might affect excitation and inhibition at the trait level, theories of media as socialization agents are consulted next.

Media and the Social Construction of Sexuality

Simon and Gagnon (1984) argue that human sexuality is socially constructed. Through pervasive public displays of what is acceptable and derogation of what is discordant, the particulars of socially endorsed sexual behavior are perpetuated. These normative scripts and schemas are internalized as beliefs that shape behavior in everyday life (Brown et al., 2006; Ward, 2003).

At least two dominant streams of research have systematically investigated media's maintenance of beliefs that guide behavior. Cultivation research (Gerbner, 1998; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999), despite much controversy, demonstrated that media exposure shapes perceptions

of reality and acquisition of beliefs and values that are emulated in behavior. The cultivation effect is partially explained by the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002) which proposes that, through observing others in the mediated world, members of society adopt socially appropriate behaviors. Together, these two theories suggest that mediated depictions of sex may serve as potential models of behavior for users.

Because of their “inexperience, vulnerability, and malleable values” (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994, p. 185) adolescents are often seen as susceptible to sex-related media influences (Brown et al., 2006; L’Engle, Brown & Kenneavy, 2006; Ward, 2003). Some researchers go so far as to refer to teenage “pseudostupidity” (Elkind, 1984, p. 384).

Set by the release of steroid hormones, puberty changes bodies and neurological structures which might explain some of the tumultuousness of this life-stage. Research (Casey, Tottenham, Liston & Durston, 2005; Sisk, 2006; Tau & Peterson, 2010; Toga, Thompson, & Sowell, 2006) has documented significant brain remodeling—perhaps most critical is the transformation of the prefrontal cortex, the site of higher cognition and executive control. These structural changes impact emotions, cognition and decision-making (Petersen, Silbereisen, & Sorenson, 1996) at a time when teenagers come to terms with their “sexual self” (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996, p. 490) and strive for independence from family.

At this critical point in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Shiner, Masten & Tellegen, 2002), media might displace the family as central socialization agent in establishing sexual norms. Adolescents indeed report that media are their leading source of information about sex in national (U.S.) studies (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000; 2004). Not surprisingly, parents, legislators, and researchers problematize media’s role as ‘super-peer’ to teenagers (Brown et al., 2006; Clinton, 2005; L’Engle et al., 2006).

There is strong consensus among scholars that media are a main source of sex information (Strasburger, 2005, 2006; Ward, 2003), that exposure to sexual content mediates moral judgments related to sex (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994; Eyal & Kunkel, 2008), as well as sex-related attitudes and behaviors (Brown et al., 2006; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005; L'Engle et al., 2006; Wingood et al., 2001). For example, early initiation of sexual intercourse is associated with frequent exposure to the so-called Sexual Media Diet or SMD (Brown et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2004; L'Engle et al., 2006).¹

The possibility that mediated sex could positively influence the sexual socialization of emerging adults is rarely entertained. One such study (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008) reported that media *can* cultivate responsible sexual behavior in emerging adults. In fact, strong attitudinal changes (less approval of premarital sex and more negative judgments of sexual promiscuity) were found immediately after exposure to mediated negative consequences of sex, with effects enduring for two weeks.

Sexual Media Diet Variation across Media Platforms and Genres

By identifying patterns of sexual norms embedded in media, the normative map for human sexuality becomes transparent. Researchers often conclude that this media map of human sexuality is highly suggestive, unrealistic, and even unhealthy (Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991; Strasburger, 2005). Research has also produced indicators that there might be differences as well as similarities in the finer nuances of how different genres and channels present human sexuality (for a review see Wright, 2009). These differences and the emphases they enjoy in the adolescent SMD might influence their sexual propensities. As a point of departure for this line of inquiry, two research questions prompt assessment of media channels and genres in making unique

contributions to explaining variance in the two dual control model mechanisms, sexual excitation and inhibition:

RQ₂: Does exposure to mediated sexual content featured in music, network TV, cable TV, films, and websites account for unique portions of variance in sexual excitation?

RQ₃: Does exposure to mediated sexual content featured in music, network TV, cable TV, films, and websites account for unique portions of variance in sexual inhibition?

Known differences and similarities in content across media platforms and genres are considered next and inform the final pair of research questions.

Music Videos

Music is a popular genre with adolescents (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005, 2010). Teens spend more than 10 hours per week consuming music (Arnett, 2002; Roberts & Foehr, 2004). With the arrival of iPods, MP3 formats, and YouTube music videos, music use is growing exponentially and might soon reach exposure levels similar to (or surpassing) television (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005, 2010).

Music videos feature higher levels of eroticism than network TV, but both platforms avoid graphic depictions (Fisher et al., 2004; Sherman & Dominick, 1986; Ward, 2003). In music videos, sex is suggested through flirting (52%), provocative dress (35.5%), and discreet nudity (7.9%, see Fisher et al., 2004). Yet, this sexual “titillation and physical activity” (Sherman & Dominick, 1986, p. 91) is rarely tied to consequences or responsibilities.

Viewing music videos has been linked to overestimating the prevalence of sex in the physical world (Strouse, Goodwin & Roscoe, 1994) and to permissive attitudes about premarital and recreational sex (Pardun et al., 2005; Strouse et al., 1994; Zhang, Miller & Harrison, 2008). It has also been associated with greater acceptance of traditional gender-specific sexual

behavior/attitudes (i.e., promiscuous male, coy female) leading to what researchers call the sexual double standard (Ward, 1995; Zhang et al., 2008). Exposure to hip-hop, rap, and rock music is related to increases in sexual behavior (Peterson, Moore & Furstenberg, 1991; Wingood et al., 2001). It is therefore reasonable to expect that high levels of exposure to music videos might lower sexual inhibition and positively contribute to excitation.

Network TV

Based on the definition of sexual content as, “any depiction of sexual activity, sexual suggestive behavior, or talk about sexuality or sexual activity” Kunkel and colleagues (2005, p. 14) have demonstrated that while mediated sex is ubiquitous on network TV, it is more suggestive than explicit. Hetsroni (2007) similarly concluded that most sexual content consists of sex talk and implied intercourse. Indeed, regulatory forces ensure that explicit sexual depictions are rare on network TV (Jordan, 2008).

Three extensive content analyses (Fisher et al., 2004; Kunkel et al., 2005; Pardun et al., 2005) consistently report that more than two thirds of TV shows contains sexual talk while only 10% depict sexual behavior (see also Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). Hetsroni’s (2007) meta-analysis showed slight decreases in the sexual content aired over the past three decades while Kunkel and colleagues (2005) report increases from 1997 to 2005. For example, in 1998, 56% of programs contained some sort of sexual content, by 2005 that number grew to 70%. Portrayed intercourse doubled from 1997 (7%) to 2002 (14%). Sexual risks and responsibilities (references to STDs, pregnancy, contraception, safe-sex) are infrequently depicted (Hetsroni, 2007; Kunkel et al., 2005; Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991). Yet, when addressed, negative consequences are emphasized in portrayals (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009).

The question remains if frequent exposure to sexually non-explicit network messages might influence sexual excitation. Moreover, the depictions of sexual risks prompt an assessment of associations between exposure to network TV and individual propensities for sexual inhibition.

Cable TV

Sexual explicitness as defined by Gunter (2002, p. 10), "...real sexual behavior, including explicit petting, oral sex, and full sexual intercourse," is far more commonly seen on cable than network TV. These depictions include nudity, casual and unprotected sex (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Fisher et al., 2004; Greenberg, Siemicki & Dorfman, 1993). Full nudity appears in 8.3% of premium cable content, compared to 0.3% of network programming, while intercourse is visually portrayed in 20.5% of cable movie content compared to 0.9% of network programming (Fisher et al., 2004). Fisher and colleagues (2004) reported that 89.7% of cable shows feature sexual behavior, while network TV depicts it in 62.4% of programming.

The high level of sexual explicitness on cable, compared to network TV and music videos, might make for a stronger positive predictor of sexual excitation. Moreover, because this platform virtually ignores negative consequences of sex (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009), one can expect cable TV exposure to lower sexual inhibition.

Film

Movies feature seven times more sex acts and references to them than TV. The approximate 15 depicted sexual acts per film are gradually becoming more graphic over time (Greenberg et al., 1993; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005). Hollywood has been accused of adolescent 'sexploitation' (see Greenberg et al., 1993; Gunasekera, Chapman & Campbell, 2005; Kunkel et al., 2005) with a steady flow of R-rated movies about sexual coming of age (e.g., *Porky's*,

Bachelor Party, *The Last American Virgin*). In light of these findings, viewing movies might be positively associated with sexual excitation – perhaps more strongly so than exposure to music, network, and cable TV. Higher movie consumption might also have the potential to cultivate lower inhibition levels. Promiscuity is glorified in movies (Gunasekera et al., 2005), with rare references to safe sex practices or any negative consequences of such extravagance (Gunasekera et al., 2005).

The X-rated movie genre showcases human sexuality in graphic audiovisual terms, utterly void of any risks and responsibilities such as consequences of intercourse or contraception. Exposure to this genre has been associated with sexually promiscuous behavior (Brown & L'Engle, 2009) and negative attitudes about safe-sex (Wingood et al., 2001). Prolonged exposure to erotica has been connected to overestimation of sexual activity and permissiveness among peers (Zillmann, 2000). It is therefore expected that exposure to highly explicit content will be negatively related to sexual inhibition.

The internet

Ninety-three percent of adolescents report that they have reliable access to the online environment (Lenhart & Madden, 2007) which is uniquely positioned for free and anonymous delivery of sexual content, 24/7. “Sex” is the most frequently searched online term (Cooper, Scherer, Boies & Gordon, 2000) and sexually explicit websites such as *YouPorn* and *PornHub* are among the top 50 most popular websites worldwide (alexa.com). These three characteristics of online erotica – accessibility, anonymity, and affordability – known as the Triple A-engine (Cooper, 1998), have sparked public concern (Paul, 2004; Runkel, 2005).

Content analyses show that online erotic videos portray sex as a physical act (Sanders, Deal, & Myers-Bowman, 1999) without any depicted sexual risk and responsibilities (Mehta,

2001) – the prototype of what has been shown to generate sexual arousal in viewers (Allen et al., 2007). Thus, consumption of sexually explicit online materials (SEOM) is expected to elevate sexual excitation to levels higher than what is observed for music, network, cable, and film use. Moreover, reported associations between SEOM exposure and permissive sexual attitudes (Lo & Wei, 2005; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006), recreational attitudes about sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006), negative attitudes towards marriage, commitment and monogamy (Lo & Wei, 2005) prompt a forecast for diminished sexual inhibition.

From the preceding summary of what is known about the SMD across media platforms and genres, two central ideas emerged. First, the SMD (especially for music, cable TV, film and websites) is sparse on featuring negative social, psychological, or health-related consequences of sexual behavior. It is therefore not unreasonable to expect that consumption of mediated sex through these platforms will be associated with lower trait values for sexual inhibition. It is also expected that consumption of sexual content that depicts the negative consequences of sexual permissiveness, risk-taking and irresponsibility – as on network TV – will be associated with higher levels of sexual inhibition. These expectations instigate the following research question:

RQ4: Does exposure to mediated sex with no mentions of risks and responsibilities such as occurs in promiscuous music, cable shows, films and websites negatively predict sexual inhibition while exposure to mediated sex with mentions of risks and responsibilities as occurs in network programming positively predict sexual inhibition?

The second central idea that emerged from content analyses of SMD is that broadcast TV and music-video content is highly suggestive but mostly non-explicit in depictions of sex. By comparison, cable TV, film, and the internet feature more explicit sexual material. More explicit content has higher sexual excitation potential (Allen et al., 2007; Janssen et al., 2002). Yet, the

degree of excitation does not always correlate with the level of sexual explicitness (Bancroft & Mathews, 1971), suggesting that imagination might trump depiction explicitness. To examine whether explicitness in media content might affect the excitation trait mechanism, the final research question was formulated:

RQ₅: Does exposure to sexually explicit versus implicit mediated content vary in accounting for variance in sexual excitation?

Method

An online survey was conducted among 725 college students of the emerging adulthood age of 17 to 25. The volunteers were enrolled at a large Midwestern state university and recruited from introductory-level classes by offering extra credit for participation. About 20% of students enrolled at this university are from outside the state, offering some reason to assume similarity between this convenience sample and the larger U.S. population of young, college-going adults. Because conceptual generalizability and theoretical exploration are the primary goals of this study, random sampling is not required (Shapiro, 2002). Perhaps more important, generalization based on probability theory is a premature goal at this point in the pursuit of knowledge about the dual control model's association with media use.

Eighteen respondents were excluded from data analysis for the following reasons: seven had missing data, another seven were older than 25, and four did not use media at all. Data analysis was performed on 707 participants, 421 men (59.5%) and 286 women (40.5%). Their reported mean age was 19.41 ($SD = 1.27$) with a minimum of 17 (2.4%) and a maximum of 25 (1%).

Data were collected over the course of two semesters using the SurveyMonkey online procedure. It is a low cost, high response rate, and privacy protective method (Tourangeau,

2004). Particularly important for this study, it lowers social desirability responses (Tourangeau, Rips & Rasinski, 2000; Tourangeau, 2004) likely to surface in investigations of sexuality.

Questionnaires were completed during two separate online sessions—10 to 14 days apart—to minimize potential sensitization of participants to the research topic. During the first survey participants self-reported media use and demographic information. The second questionnaire contained sexual inhibition and excitation scales (SIS/SES) as well as masking questions.

Independent Variables

Media use. Media content low and high in sexual explicitness was identified for each of the media outlets (music, network TV, cable TV, film and specific websites) under investigation. To this end, a list with more than 40 programs, websites, and movies, was generated based on publicity materials (e.g., advertisements, program schedule summaries, etc.) and content analyses that identified specific media fare as either high or low in sexual explicitness. The next step involved focus group discussions (combined, $N=30$) of the identified media content in terms of explicitness. Participants were demographically similar to the study's sample. At the end of each focus group session, participants rated the explicitness of the films, websites, and TV shows on nine-point Likert scales. Based on these focus group activities, specific media fare low ($M<4$) and high ($M>6$) in sexual explicitness was selected as exemplars for inclusion in media use questions. A total of fourteen questions assessed media consumption across channels and genres. Questions were worded similarly to those often used in studies: "How many times during an average week do you watch/listen/surf...?"

Demographics. Three demographic items (age, gender and socioeconomic status) were included with the media use questions in first survey.

Masking questions. Sixteen distractor questions assessed attitudes towards sports, studying, general lifestyle/activities. They were designed for the second survey to minimize social desirability responses, and potential sensitization to the research topic—as it is done in studies measuring self-reports on sensitive issues (Hoover & Fishbein, 1999).

Dependent Variables

Inhibition and excitation. The two propensities were measured through SIS/SES, instruments developed and validated by Janssen and colleagues (2002). Participants used four-point Likert scales, with options ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree) to respond to the fourteen questions in the short, unisex version of SIS/SES—SF (Carpenter et al., 2010).

Excitation items presented *if*-statements describing potentially arousing scenarios and *then*-statements describing sexual responses. For example: “When a sexually attractive stranger accidentally touches me, I easily become aroused.” Sexual inhibition was measured along two dimensions: performance failure² and consequences. Because this study is interested in media influences on inhibition, consequence factors were measured using the SIS2 questionnaire that focuses on social and psychological dimensions of sexual responses, for both genders (Janssen et al., 2002). Items described hypothetical negative situations followed by *then*-statements describing sexual responses. For example: “If I realize there is a risk of catching a sexually transmitted disease, I am unlikely to stay sexually aroused.”

Scores were computed for both sexual propensities and their reliability was validated by conventional standards (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994): SES (Cronbach’s Alpha= .776) and SIS2 (Cronbach’s Alpha= .702). Moreover, means for both SES ($M=14.88$) and SIS2 ($M=11.07$) were within the range reported in other studies (Carpenter et al., 2010; Janssen et al., 2002).

Results

In line with existing research, the emerging adults of this study were avid media consumers. Music videos (viewed via MTV or websites) were at the top – 91.8% of participants reported exposure to it. Other website use ranked second, with 90.8% of participants stating they surf at least once a week. Film (87.7%), network TV (81.8%), and cable shows (69.3%) were also consumed by large portions of participants.

To test for associations between media exposure and human propensities for sexual excitation and inhibition, a series of hierarchical regression analyses were performed. Gender, a known source of variance in human sexuality, and one dual control model variable (to examine inter-relatedness to the other) were entered as independent variables in the first two layers. Media use variables were entered last, assuring a conservative assessment of their influence on each of the dual control model variables.

The Relationship between Sexual Excitation and Inhibition

RQ₁ prompted an assessment of the relationship between the two psychosexual mechanisms in association with media exposure. The regression models displayed in Tables 1 and 3 reveal that sexual excitation and inhibition were not interrelated. Neither significantly predicted variance in the other, and beta values reported in Tables 2 and 4 show nonsignificant correlations between them.

As conceptualized and measured here, sexual inhibition and excitation were treated as traits and the regression results suggest that they might (1) be relatively independent of each other at this level which is congruent with exiting evidence (Janssen et al., 2002), and (2) have independent relationships with media exposure.

--Insert Table 1 here--

Media Platforms and Genres in Association with Sexual Excitation

RQ₂ asked whether exposure to mediated sexual content featured in music videos, network TV, cable TV, films, and websites account for unique portions of variance in sexual excitation. The answer to this research question is that media use made a significant contribution explaining variance in sexual excitation. Regression model 7, (see Table 1), accounted for 13% of the variance in sexual excitation with media use variables featured as significant contributors to explained variance. Seven groups of variables were entered in this model. Gender alone accounted for about 8% of the explained variance in excitation while inhibition did not produce a significant *R-square* change. Three of the five subsequent layers of media use variables (music, films and websites) were associated with significant *R-square* changes. In addition, the entry of network TV variables produced an *R-square* change that approached statistical significance ($p=.06$) whereas cable TV variables did not make a significant *R-square* contribution.

--Insert Table 2 here--

A closer look at the standardized beta values (see Table 2) offers more detailed information about the correlations between the independent and dependent variables of model seven. Sexual excitation was significantly related to gender. Men had higher propensities for sexual excitation ($M=15.84$) than women ($M=13.86$). Examining the associations between media use variables and excitation revealed a fairly consistent pattern. Most media genres/channels were positively related to excitation, except some music genres (religious/devotional, pop/electronic, country/bluegrass) and more explicit network programming. These were negatively related to sexual excitation, but not at statistically significant levels. A statistically robust positive relationship between excitation and rock/punk-rock music surfaced. Moreover, within the network TV platform, more implicit content had a significant positive association with

sexual excitation. In the film category, more explicit as well as more implicit content was positively and significantly correlated with sexual excitation. Moreover, more explicit website use (e.g., YouPorn, XTube, RedTube) was linked to an increase in sexual excitation – at a statistically significant level.

--Insert Table 3 here--

Media Platforms and Genres in Association with Sexual Inhibition

Tables 3 and 4 summarize findings related to RQ₃ that asked whether sexual excitation and media use were significant predictors of sexual inhibition. Model 7, the strongest one to emerge from the regression analyses accounted for less than 5% of the variance. Nonetheless, it is a statistically significant predictive model for sexual inhibition. Although all seven layers produced significant models, only gender and music were associated with significant *R-square* changes, while film exposure made a close to significant addition to the model. The short answer to RQ₃ is that one of five media platforms (music use) explained a unique portion of variance in sexual inhibitory traits.

--Insert Table 4 here--

RQ₄ prompted a closer look at the beta values of the predictive model for sexual inhibition to assess if exposure to media known for rare references to sexual risks and responsibilities (e.g., cable TV, films, websites, hip-hop and rock music) would be negatively associated with sexual inhibition. Similarly, would exposure to media content that features more frequent mentions of risks (e.g., network programming) be a positive predictor of sexual inhibition? Weak evidence for affirmative answers came from examining the beta values from regression model 7 that predicted sexual inhibition (see Table 4).

First, gender was a significant predictor of sexual inhibition, with women ($M=11.93$) disclosing higher inhibition levels than men ($M=11.10$). Second, as reported earlier, sexual excitation was unrelated to inhibition. Third, the examination of media use variables revealed a statistically weak but consistent pattern. Put simply, media use was generally associated with lower levels of sexual inhibition. The exception to this pattern was consumption of religious/devotional music and network TV—which were positively related to inhibition.

Music genres delivered interesting relationships with inhibition. As a group, this media platform was strongly associated with sexual inhibition (see Table 3). Individual beta values show that inhibition was negatively related to rap and hip-hop and positively linked to religious/devotional music. In other words, increased exposure to religious/devotional messages corresponded with higher levels of sexual inhibition, while increased exposure to rap and hip-hop music were associated with lower inhibition.

All other media variables were negatively (although not significantly) correlated with sexual inhibition. It is also worth mentioning that explicit films and websites were negatively related to sexual inhibition at close to significant levels.

More Explicit, Higher Excitation?

RQ₅ asked whether levels of sexual explicitness in media content account for variance in sexual excitation. As shown in see Table 1, the most explicit platforms (films and websites) were significantly related to sexual excitation trait propensities. Notably, film and website exposure drove significant *R-square* changes — even as the last two layers entered into the regression model.

The exploration of correlations between excitation and media use provided evidence that explicit as well as implicit content was significantly associated with sexual excitation (see Table

2). Exposure to more implicit Blockbuster films and network programming was positively and significantly related to sexual excitation. It is also noteworthy that three explicit content areas produced statistically sound positive relationships with sexual excitation. These were rock/punk-rock music, erotic films, and sexually explicit websites. These significant correlations do not offer enough evidence of a pattern. Therefore, the answer to RQ₅ is that this data set did not offer conclusive evidence of how sexually explicit versus implicit content might relate to sexual excitation.

Discussion

Media researchers have compiled a voluminous body of literature on human sexuality, with particular focus on the sexuality of young adults. Despite the vibrancy of this media research area, human sexuality has not been treated with the level of nuance and complexity that colleagues from related disciplines suggest it deserves. Moreover, the assemblage of media sex studies lacks synthesis and comprehensiveness. Many individual studies have been conducted with focus on a single media platform (e.g., music) or genre (hip hop) without considering the wider media landscape with its vast assortment of content. These shortcomings inspired the study reported here to pursue a more nuanced and comprehensive account of media's role in shaping human sexuality.

Borrowing the dual control model from a related discipline allowed for a theoretically sophisticated examination of how media use might interact with the two psychosexual drives of human sexuality. This was the first application of the dual control model of sexual inhibition and excitation in the media use realm. This model was designed to explain individual state- and trait-level sexual mechanisms, but left open the possibility that excitation and inhibition might be influenced by trait-shaping socialization forces such as media use.

Results point to media as a significant sexual socialization agent in shaping human psychosexual propensities. In fact, this study showed that media use has independent statistical associations with sexual excitation and inhibition mechanisms. Demonstrating that sexual propensities function at trait levels brought the dual control model into the social realm and revealed its utility for future media research in this area. Moreover, findings specific to the relationship between sexual excitation and inhibition confirmed existing conceptualizations of the model. Sexual inhibition and excitation have been defined as interrelated when it comes to *state*-related sexual responses and independent at *trait*-level. In line with this conceptualization, results reported here show no relation between the two propensities as traits.

The dual control model also served as a tool to triangulate existing media sex research. Sexual scripts theory is corroborated in findings that mediated sexual portrayals matter in shaping the sexual propensities of emerging adults. Media use variables emerged as potent accountants of variance in the two mechanisms, suggesting that they indeed serve as normative models for viewers' behavior and attitudes. Consistent with cultivation and social cognitive theory, these findings advance the idea that adolescents internalize mediated representations of sex as scripts for sexual attitudes and responses. Evidence of media's influence as a 'super-peer' that shapes teen propensities for sexual excitation and inhibition is growing. Overall, this study offers more support for influences on sexual excitation than inhibition. Exposure to mediated sex seems to amplify sexual excitation propensities. Mediated sexual content featured in music, network TV, films, and websites all explained unique portions of variance in sexual excitation.

Media use variables were also statistically linked to sexual inhibition propensities, suggesting media's potential for deterring inclinations to become sexually active. The hierarchical regression models were strikingly clear in the case of music use. Rap and hip-hop

fans bear lower trait levels of sexual inhibition while religious/devotional music consumers lean the opposite direction – they report higher inhibitory trait levels. These findings are in line with previous research pointing to religiosity as mitigating adolescent consumption of mediated sexual materials (Collins et al., 2004; Greenberg et al., 1993).

The limitations of the present study should be noted. In exploring potential influences of media channels, genres, and types of content on the constitution of human sexual propensities, this study aimed for conceptual rather than population generalizability. The convenience sample of college students makes claims about the general population tentative, at best. In order to move beyond conceptual generalizability, further investigations using large random samples and more diverse populations are called for. Moreover, other sources of potential variance, such as sexual history, should also be included in future studies.

Despite the shortcomings of an exploratory endeavor, this cross-sectional study complements and extends media sex research in offering more comprehensive and comparative accounts of the role that media genres, channels, and content type might play in the development of human propensities for sexual excitation and inhibition. If there were doubts that media platforms and genres vary in how they influence human sexuality—this data set offers evidence that they have different relationships with the sexual propensities of the emerging adults. It is perhaps premature to invoke the McLuhanism that the medium is the message. At the same time, contemporary media diets are shaped by niche catering in a media supermarket with unlimited shelf space and seamless consumer access. In such an environment, it seems urgently necessary to understand the influence of the sexual media diet across media platforms and genres.

Notes

¹ Effects have been found mainly for Caucasian viewers, not for African Americans and Hispanics (Martino, Collins, Elliot, Strachman, Kanouse & Berry, 2005).

¹ This subcomponent of sexual inhibition was measured with the SIS1 questionnaire and conceptualized as “due to the threat of performance failure” (Janssen et al., 2002). *If-then* statements target situations where concern about sexual performance might arise. It is measured through questions such as: “Once I am sexually aroused, I want to start intercourse right away before I lose my arousal/ erection.”

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Table 1

Regression Analyses Predicting Sexual Excitation through Gender, Sexual Inhibition and Media Use

Models	Adjusted	R^2	df	F	p
	R^2	Change significance			
1 Gender	.082	.001	1	64.313	.001
2 Sexual inhibition	.081	.958	1	32.113	.001
3 Music	.094	.013	6	10.193	.001
4 Network TV	.099	.067	2	8.735	.001
5 Cable TV	.098	.556	2	7.369	.001
6 Films	.112	.001	2	7.357	.001
7 Websites	.130	.001	2	7.567	.001

Table 2

Beta Values for Variables Predicting Sexual Excitation through Gender, Sexual Inhibition and Media Use

Variables	Standardized β	t	p
Gender	-.289	-8.020	.001
Sexual inhibition	-.002	-.053	.958
Rap, Hip-hop Music	.062	1.587	.113
Rock, Punk-rock Music	.126	3.307	.001
Pop, Electronic Music	-.023	-.547	.584
Religious/Devotional Music	-.023	-.642	.521
Jazz, Blues Music	.006	.161	.872
Country, Bluegrass Music	-.036	-.989	.323
Implicit Network TV	.085	2.324	.020
Explicit Network TV	-.016	-.423	.673
Implicit Cable TV	.030	.622	.534
Explicit Cable TV	.045	.666	.505
Blockbusters' movies	.076	2.019	.044
Erotic films	.101	2.766	.006
Implicit Websites	.018	.470	.639
Explicit Websites	.169	3.903	.001

Table 3

Regression Analyses Predicting Sexual Inhibition through Gender, Sexual Excitation and Media Use

Models	Adjusted	R^2	df	F	p
	R^2	Change significance			
1 Gender	.028	.001	1	21.213	.001
2 Sexual excitation	.026	.958	1	10.593	.001
3 Music	.040	.015	6	4.669	.001
4 Network TV	.039	.455	2	3.891	.001
5 Cable TV	.038	.626	2	3.315	.001
6 Films	.042	.096	2	3.188	.001
7 Websites	.044	.174	2	3.015	.001

Table 4

Beta Values for Variables Predicting Sexual Inhibition through Gender, Sexual Excitation and Media Use

Variables	Standardized β	t	p
Gender	.171	4.606	.001
Sexual excitation	-.002	-.053	.958
Rap, Hip-hop Music	-.106	-2.639	.008
Rock, Punk-rock Music	-.050	-1.260	.208
Pop, Electronic Music	.062	1.428	.154
Religious/Devotional Music	.084	2.233	.026
Jazz, Blues Music	-.020	-.504	.614
Country, Bluegrass Music	-.061	-1.605	.109
Implicit Network TV	.036	.945	.345
Explicit Network TV	-.036	-.947	.344
Implicit Cable TV	-.008	-.163	.870
Explicit Cable TV	-.061	-.865	.387
Blockbusters' movies	-.039	-.991	.322
Erotic films	-.069	-1.810	.071
Implicit Websites	-.019	-.461	.645
Explicit Websites	-.080	-1.760	.079

¹ Effects have been found mainly for Caucasian viewers, not for African Americans and Hispanics (Martino, Collins, Elliot, Strachman, Kanouse & Berry, 2005).

² This subcomponent of sexual inhibition was measured with the SIS1 questionnaire and conceptualized as “due to the threat of performance failure” (Janssen et al., 2002). *If-then* statements target situations where concern about sexual performance might arise. It is measured through questions such as: “Once I am sexually aroused, I want to start intercourse right away before I lose my arousal/ erection.”