

## ***Sex and the City: Does Viewing Cause Desensitization and Increased Engagement in Sexual Behavior?***

This study will examine the effect that television viewing has on sexual behavior. In particular, I will investigate if increased viewing of the television show *Sex and the City* causes a more liberal opinion on sexual behavior and a higher amount of sexual behavior. In a random sample of 244 high school students, Ward and Friedman (2006, pp. 133) found that “more frequent viewing and stronger identification with popular TV characters were associated with greater levels of sexual experience,” a concept explained by the cultivation theory. For my present study, a random sample of male and females ages 14-20 will complete a survey. The survey will ask the participants how much time they spend watching *Sex and the City* on average per week. It will also ask what their thoughts are on participating in sexual behaviors (i.e. if it is appropriate), and what their personal experience in sexual behavior has been (i.e. how many sexual partners they have had). I expect to find that participants who spend more time on average watching *Sex and the City* will be more desensitized to sex in the real world, and will engage in more sexual behaviors. I predict this relationship will be stronger for females. The results of this study will measure how television affects viewers’ thoughts and acts of sexual behavior. Findings may encourage parents to control what shows their children watch in order to protect them.

Many people consider the HBO series *Sex and the City* a phenomenon, but some viewers call the show controversial, mostly because of its frank discussion and depiction of sex. An example of the openness of sex is found in an episode titled “The Chicken Dance” which aired during the second season of the show. Charlotte asks her friend Samantha, “How can you forget a guy you slept with?” Another friend Carrie responds, “Toto, I don’t think we’re in single digits anymore” (Chupack & Hochberg, 1999).

It was derogatory moments such as this that concerned parents about the negative effects watching *Sex and the City* could have on their children, like an increased likelihood to engage in sexual behaviors. When my friend Haley was fourteen years old, her mother requested that she stop watching the show. When asked for a reason, her mother said she did not want Haley to get any ideas, the “ideas” referring to thoughts about having sex. *Sex and the City* still has a significant presence in today’s media and has a high amount of sexual content embedded within

a larger context that includes considerable non-sexual content (Malamuth & Impett, 2001).

Primarily for these reasons, I believe it is important to examine the potential effects of viewing *Sex and the City*, particularly to determine whether or not watching the show will cause viewers to engage more in sexual behaviors. Such results could be generalized to other television shows containing sexual content, and may influence people to monitor how much of a sexual television show they (or their children) are exposed to.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Sex in the Media**

A number of films and television shows released today, in addition to *Sex and the City*, depict sex in a trivial manner. Shows like *90210*, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and *Gossip Girl* and it have parents (like my friend Haley's mother) worried about the potential negative effects the shows could have on their children. A national Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that a 60% of parents are very concerned about the amount of sex their children are exposed to on television (Kunkel, Cope, Culvin, 1996). In June 2010, that concern was voiced when the Parents Television Council- an organization which campaigns against television series they deem harmful to child development- asked the CW network to take down an episode of *Gossip Girl* that portrayed a threesome.

#### **Cultivation Theory**

While this may seem extreme, people may have a legitimate reason to worry about over-exposure to sex in the media. A process known as the "cultivation theory" suggests that "high exposure to televised sexual behaviors is associated with an increased perception of the frequency of sexual activity in the real world" (Kunkel et al, 1996). In their article, it was hypothesized that as a result of the cultivation theory, people who watch high amounts of

television with sexual content may subsequently be more likely to “promote sexual initiation” (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, Kunkel, Hunter, & Miu, 2004). In support of their hypothesis, the study found that “youths in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of television sex viewing had a predicted probability of intercourse initiation nearly double that of youths in the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile” (Collins et al, 2004).

In 2009, a very similar discovery was made regarding teenagers. A study in “Effects of Sex in the Media” found that those who watched a high amount television with sexual content were twice as likely have sex over the next year as teens who watched a light amount of sexual content (Harris & Barlett, 2009). Harris and Barlett obtained practically the same results five years after Collins et al.

### **Desensitization**

A reason that individuals may be prone to promote sexual initiation after viewing sexual content is because of “desensitization.” In short, desensitization occurs when an individual becomes indifferent towards a certain stimulus after being repeatedly exposed to it. Most research looking at desensitization is concerned with media violence; for example, how playing video games leads to decreased empathy and increased pro-violence attitudes (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner; 2004). However, many studies regarding sex in the media have not considered desensitization in their research.

### **Viewer Identification**

Another theory that has been examined in relation to sex in media is the “Social Learning Theory.” According to Kunkel et al. (1996), people learn by observing and imitating other peoples’ actions, and “actions depicted as rewarding hold increased potential for modeling of similar actions by the audience.” It is believed, then, that teenagers who view television

characters having casual sex without experiencing any harmful effects are more likely to engage in casual sex themselves (Collins et al, 2004). Kunkel et al. (1996) ran a content analysis of the first hour of Prime Time television (which is viewed most widely by children and teenagers) and found that positive consequences (such as gaining popularity or self-esteem) were illustrated significantly more often than negative ones (such as internal guilt). Therefore, children and teens who watch sexual content during the first hour of Prime Time are likely to imitate the characters by engaging in sexual behavior because they are more likely to believe that positive consequences will follow.

Viewer identification may also cause television viewers to engage in sexual behaviors. Greenberg's drench hypothesis argues that "media portrayals with which viewers connect and identify will exert the most influence" (Ward & Friedman, 2006). Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory explains viewer identification in a similar way, claiming that after observing models in media, "individuals can expand their...behavioral repertoires" (136). This is most likely to occur when the individual views a good-looking model that they perceive to be similar to themselves. So according to Ward and Friedman, if an individual sees an attractive character enjoying sex on television, he or she could "perceive these behaviors as appropriate and to store this information for later use" (136).

### **Gender**

Another previous study conducted by Ward (2002) discovered that females watched significantly more Sexy Prime-Time television than males, and females "reported stronger levels of identification with popular, same-sex TV characters." In 2006, Ward and Friedman found that stronger identification with popular same-sex characters was associated with more advanced levels of Dating/Sexual Experience. Aside from Ward's 2002 study, none of the previous

research I looked at considered gender as a potential variable in the relationship between viewing sexual content and engaging in sexual behaviors. But when the data from Ward's two studies are looked at together, it can be suggested that gender does play a role in the relationship. Jointly, the studies imply that females are more likely to identify with same-sex characters, and are therefore more likely to engage in sexual behaviors as a result of viewing such characters in sexual content.

After discovering this from reading the articles by Ward (2002) and Ward et al. (2006), I deemed it necessary to include gender as a variable in my own study. Of the previous research I examined for my study, none used gender as a variable in their studies, so my research will explore the possibility that females are more likely than males to engage in sexual behavior as a result of viewing sexual content in television, specifically *Sex and the City*, which contains a high amount of embedded sexual content.

Additionally, none of the studies I examined included desensitization as a variable. I think the possibility that individuals become less sensitive to stimulus and ideas after repeated exposure to them is not only relevant to violent media content, but to sexual media may help explain why individuals promote sexual initiation after viewing sexual content (if the results show this to be true).

Another limitation of the previous studies was that most were unable to establish causality. For example, Collins et al. did not establish temporal order between average hours watching television and sexual behaviors (2004). Additionally, the study was conducted over the span of a year, which threatens its internal validity. The participants likely developed emotionally over the course of a year, potentially causing their opinions about sex to change, so the threat of maturation is especially probable.

### **Present Study**

With these limitations in mind, I created my original hypothesis: watching more sexual content in television (independent variable) will cause viewers to become desensitized about sex in the real world (mediating variable), which will thus affect viewers' own engagement in sexual behaviors (dependent variable). I predict that this relationship will be stronger for females.

Viewing *Sex and the City* →→→ Desensitization to sex in the real world →→→ Engagement in sexual behavior



If my hypothesis is proved correct, it can be suggested that- according to previous research, as well- young people who watch high amounts of *Sex and the City* are more likely to engage in sexual behavior earlier, and are thus more susceptible to acquiring STDs and getting pregnant at an early age. Such results could especially encourage parents of those who watch *Sex and the City* to decrease the amount of the show their children are exposed to.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The participants for my study will be males and females aged 14-20 from across the state of Michigan. To obtain my sample, I will first look through the most recent state census to determine which homes in Michigan contain an individual (or individuals) aged 14 to 20 years. I will call each of the homes from this sample and ask to conduct a brief pre-survey over the phone. If the person (who must be at least 18 years old) complies, I will ask whether or not the members of the house have access to a television. The homes that do have access to a television

will be included in my study. The participants will be those who live in such houses, and are between 14 and 20 years old.

### **Procedure**

I hypothesize that people will engage in more sexual behaviors as a result of watching an increased amount of *Sex and the City*. So, performing my study as an experiment could potentially affect the amount of sexual behaviors the participants engage in. This is not considered ethical, so I will conduct a survey to test my hypothesis. Participants will come into a lab and be escorted into an individual lab room. Subjects 18 and older will be responsible for signing their own consent form, which provides a quick synopsis of the study's purpose. Subjects under 18 years old will require signed consent from an adult (either their parent or guardian) in order to participate in the study. Upon giving consent, participants will be presented with two items: a questionnaire, Scantron sheet, number 2 pencil, and ending question sheet. After responding to the questionnaire items on the Scantron with the provided number 2 pencil, participants will give an account of some demographic and physical traits (like age and ethnicity) on the ending question sheet. Once finished, participants will be thanked and escorted out of the lab.

### **Measurements**

*Viewing of 'Sex and the City.'* To measure my independent variable, participants will be asked the questions regarding how much time they spend on average watching the television show. One question asks, 1) On average, how much time do you spend watching *Sex and the City* per week? Possible answers range on a scale from 0 to 5, '0' indicating no average hours spent watching *Sex and the City* per week and '5' indicating 10 average hours or more. I will also measure a person's viewing of *Sex and the City* by how much attention they pay to the

show's content when watching it. 2) On average, when you watch *Sex and the City*, how many other tasks require your attention? Possible answers are 0=no other tasks, 1=1 other task, 2=2 other tasks, and 3=3 or more other tasks. Participants who engage in no other tasks while watching *Sex and the City* will be weighted as viewing the show more than participants who engage in several tasks while watching.

*Desensitization to sex in the real world.* To measure the mediating variable, I will use 32 questions from the Rouse-Pattison Sexual Behavior Survey that measure participants' 'perception of the general acceptance' of certain sexual behaviors. Some of the sexual behaviors referenced in the survey include: "manual stimulation given to another person" and "manual stimulation received from another person," "group sex," "under the clothes fondling below the waist," and "vaginal intercourse without pregnancy prevention." For each sexual behavior, participants report their acceptance of the behavior when performed in the media, past sexual education classes, by their parents, and by peers. Their rate of acceptance is measured on an ordinal scale from "No acceptance at all" to "Complete acceptance."

*Gender.* I will also use the Rouse-Pattison Sexual Behavior Survey to measure my moderating variable on a nominal scale. The survey asks, "Are you male or female?" Subjects may only choose to respond "Male" or "Female." This section of the Rouse-Pattison Sexual Behavior Survey tests for other basic demographic information, too. For example, participants will be asked, "What is your age?" and "What is your ethnicity?" The final results of my study might show patterns regarding some demographic features that were not included in my hypothesis, so it is useful to measure these just in case.

*Engagement in Sexual Behavior.* The Rouse-Pattison Sexual Behavior Survey will also be used to measure my dependent variable. The survey contains 32 questions that gauge



participants' frequency of overall sexual behavior. For all 32 questions, participants report how often he or she engages in each sexual behavior. The possible answers range from "Never" to "More than once per day." Additionally, on questions 4-25, participants must indicate the estimated number of partners that he or she has engaged in each behavior with. Such behaviors include "manual stimulation given to another person" and "manual stimulation received from another person," "group sex," "under the clothes fondling below the waist," and "mutual masturbation." Questions 26-32 require participants to report the estimated number of times he or she has engaged in various sexual behaviors, including "viewing pornography," "group sex," "cyber sex (talking dirty to someone online)," and "phone sex (talking dirty to someone over the phone)."

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Findings**

I discovered that participants who watched a higher average of *Sex and the City* were more desensitized to sex in the real world, and engaged in more sexual behavior. Of the participants, females who watch a high average of *Sex and the City* were more desensitized and engaged in more sexual behavior than males.

### **Contributions**

Harris and Barlett's study on effects of sex in the media (2009) found that teens who watch a high amount television with sexual content were more likely to have sex over the next year than teens who watched a light amount of sexual content. My study supports this in its finding that participants who watched more *Sex and the City*, a television show with embedded sexual content, engaged in more sexual behavior.

My study is also consistent with Ward (2002) and Ward & Friedman's (2006) studies that, jointly, imply that females are more likely to identify with same-sex characters, and are therefore more likely to engage in sexual behaviors as a result of viewing such characters in sexual content.

However, my study is different from the previous research I examined because it uses desensitization as a variable. Most prior research accounts viewer identification or parasocial interaction as the cause of participants' increased engagement in sexual behavior. My research, on the other hand, suggests that engagement in sexual behavior is a result of desensitization to sex in the real world after watching a show with sexual content. The idea that individuals can become desensitized to stimuli after repeated exposure could have major implications, and it can be generalized to other things beside sex in the media. For example, it could be implied that repeated exposure to thievery in movies causes individuals to think indifferently about stealing, and the individual risks engaging in thievery themselves.

In addition, the results of my study may encourage parents to regulate the amount of sexual content their child is exposed to. Teenagers and youth who watch sex in the media may engage in more sexual behavior, and thus are at a higher risk of getting pregnant or contracting a Sexually Transmitted Disease.

### **Limitations**

Although there are valuable implications of my study, there are limitations, too. My study is subject to participation bias, in which the findings become non-representative because the participants each have certain unique characteristics (that I did not measure) that may affect the results. For instance, I did not measure "religious affiliation" in my survey, but certain religions (like Catholicism) encourage followers to abstain from sex until marriage. Therefore,

participants who are not Catholic will likely respond as having more sex than those who are Catholic, whether or not they watch *Sex and the City*. It is also at risk of reporting and recall bias. Participants may purposefully not answer a question truthfully, which is always a risk of using self-report. For example, subjects may report what they think is the “acceptable” response instead of the honest one. Other times, participants are not able to recall an answer correctly. For instance, a subject may have been intoxicated and not remember a time or with whom he or she engaged in a sexual behavior.

There is no manipulation of variables in my study, and it is unable to establish causality. It’s possible that watching *Sex and the City* causes desensitization, and it’s possible that desensitization leads to increased sexual behavior. But there is no way to determine the temporal order between the variables in a survey.

Neither does the survey eliminate rival hypotheses. The study examines effects of watching *Sex and the City* on desensitization and sexual behavior. Because I only look at one television show, it cannot be determined whether or not exposure to other types of media is the cause of the results, and not just viewing *Sex and the City*.

### **Future Directions**

It may be considered unethical to conduct an experiment on sexual behavior of individuals aged 14-20, so it should remain a survey in future replications. To decrease participation bias, the survey should include more demographic questions to determine if and how certain demographic characteristics affect the results. To make the results more generalizable, I would measure participants’ viewing frequency of more than one television show with sexual content. For instance, I would measure shows like *Sex and the City*, *Gossip Girl*, *Skins*, and other shows with embedded sexual content. Although report and recall bias may

still be an issue, these changes will help reduce participation bias and rival hypotheses, making the overall results more generalizable and reliable.

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