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This chapter discusses several ways in which the media may serve as a positive force in young women's sexual health and development through the information and models they provide and the opportunities they offer for validation and self-expression.

Uncommonly Good: Exploring How Mass Media May Be a Positive Influence on Young Women's Sexual Health and Development

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By most accounts, popular media are perceived to play a critical role in the sexual socialization of American youth. Children aged eight to eighteen are reported to use the media nearly eight hours each day, devoting three to four hours to TV viewing alone (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). These numbers are even higher for Black and Latino youth and for younger teens than for older teens. At the same time, analyses indicate that popular media are saturated with sexual content and imagery, which appear in 83 percent of programs popular among adolescents (Kunkel et al., 2003), 44 to 76 percent of music videos (Ward, 2003), and 29 percent of the interactions of TV characters (Ward, 1995).

The messages conveyed about sexuality are not always ideal, however, and they are often limited, unrealistic, and stereotypical. Dominating is a recreational orientation to sexuality in which courtship is treated as a competition, a battle of the sexes, characterized by dishonesty, game playing, and manipulation (Ward, 1995). Also prominent are stereotypical sexual roles featuring women as sexual objects, whose value is based solely on their physical appearance, and men as sex-driven players looking to "score" at all costs (Arnett, 2002; Gow, 1995; Grauerholz & King, 1997; Ward, 1995). Given that cultivation theorists argue that the more time we spend

consuming media, the more likely we are to accept its fictional images as reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994), it is likely that teens who frequently view TV's repeated portrayals of glamorous, casual, risk-free sex and of objectified women and irresponsible men will gradually come to adopt similar beliefs about sex in the real world.

Evidence accumulated from multiple fields indicates that such speculations may be valid. Across several studies, frequent viewing of sexually oriented genres, such as soap operas and music videos, has been associated with a greater acceptance of common sexual stereotypes (for example, that women are sexual objects) and with dysfunctional beliefs about relationships (Haferkamp, 1999; Walsh-Childers & Brown, 1993; Ward, 2002). Experimental results support these findings, showing that women exposed to sexual and sexist media content offer stronger endorsement than do women exposed to nonsexual content of casual and stereotypical attitudes about sex (Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995; Ward, 2002; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). Links have also been found to viewers' beliefs about sexual norms. More specifically, frequent exposure to sexually oriented genres leads younger viewers to overestimate the prevalence of divorce, extramarital affairs, and sexually active youth, creating the notion that "everyone is doing it" (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993; Davis & Mares, 1998; Ward, 2002). Such findings demonstrate the likely problematic influences of media exposure on emergent beliefs about sexuality.

But we also know that the picture is not this clear-cut. There are several indications that such negative outcomes are neither guaranteed nor universal. First, findings indicate that media content is not uniformly negative. Information about sexual health, risks, and thoughtful decision making is sometimes present. Indeed, 60 percent of teens surveyed said that they learned how to say no to a sexual situation by watching television, and 43 percent said they learned something about how to talk to a partner about safer sex (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003). Second, despite evidence that a majority of portrayals are one-dimensional sexual stereotypes, some characters are not and instead provide realistic characterizations with which viewers can connect. For example, undergraduates still speak of the relevance of fifteen-year-old Angela Chase (from *My So-Called Life*), some ten years after the series was initially cancelled. Third, evidence suggests that media content may offer youth opportunities to set relationship ideals and practice relationship dynamics vicariously, through celebrity crushes and teen idols. Indeed, some consider media use and selection to be a key component of adolescent identity work (Arnett, 1995). Finally, new media genres such as zines offer young women the opportunity to express themselves sexually by reporting on their own perspectives and resisting societal constraints.

Our goal is to broaden perspectives on media effects to consider their potential positive contributions to female sexual health and development. Drawing from criteria developed by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), we conceptualize positive sex-

ual health and development as sexuality that is consensual, honest, mutually pleasurable, nonexploitative, and protected against unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). We also view sexuality and sexual pleasure as natural parts of women's lives and seek as ideals greater sexual agency, body comfort, openness to sexual-minority women, accurate exchanges of sexual information, and acceptance of both coital and noncoital practices. We discuss here ways in which the media may help meet these ideals and define the mass media to include television programming, movies, magazines, the Internet, video games, and music. We first present four positive media contributions and then close with suggestions for additional modifications.

Positive Contribution 1: Media Can Offer Sexual Information

Learning about sexuality is a complex, multidimensional process that involves incorporating diverse information from multiple sources. The input received takes many forms, including facts, values, norms, opinions, and personal experiences. Compelling examples of each form can be found in media outlets.

Sexual Health Content in Popular, Mainstream Magazines. One way in which media content may serve as a positive influence on sexual health and development is in the sharing of information about sexual health issues. Magazines in particular are often sought out for this reason. Adolescent and young adult readers indicate that they turn to magazines as a valued source of advice about their personal lives (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004) and for information about reproductive health when confidentiality is an issue (Treise & Gotthoffer, 2002). Indeed, 51 percent of readers aged twelve to eighteen surveyed in one study identified magazines as an important source of information on reproductive and sexual health (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1996). Magazines are likely to be an ideal source in this domain for several reasons. First, they can be consumed relatively privately and anonymously. Young women can examine these media in the privacy of their own rooms without having to ask personal questions directly and risk embarrassment. Also, because reading magazines is a normative action, purchasing them is guilt and taboo free. Second, magazines are portable and highly accessible, available for multiple reviews and continued referencing. Third, magazines address their readers directly and intimately, often using *you*. By striking a more intimate and familiar tone, magazines connect with adolescent women who may be feeling particularly self-conscious or disconnected at this developmental stage. In these ways, magazines provide opportunities for young women to learn about serious issues without serious consequences.

Although not the dominant sexual content carried, analyses indicate that magazine coverage of sexual health issues does occur and has increased in some respects over the past decades. In her 1997 analysis of four leading teen magazines (*Seventeen, YM, Sassy,* and *Teen*), Signorielli reported that

3 percent of all articles focused on STDs, 2 percent on pregnancy, and 2 percent on contraception. In their study of thirty-two magazines popular with twelve to fourteen year olds, Pardun, L'Engle, and Brown (2005) found that 8 percent of all magazine units (paragraphs and headlines) included sexual content and that 4 percent of such content contained information about sexual health, defined as references to physical/sexual development, refusal of advances/abstinence, masturbation, STDs, negative emotional consequences, condoms, and contraception. Whereas it is true that such content focuses more on the risks of sex than on its pleasures, thereby supporting traditional gender discourses (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1999), magazines do offer young women information (for example, how to identify an STD) they may be reluctant to seek elsewhere.

Others have compared magazines' coverage of sexual health content to their coverage of information about sexual behavior and activities. In an analysis of the features and columns in women's, men's, and teen magazines from 1995 to 1996, Walsh-Childers, Treise, and Gotthoffer (1997) found that 34 percent of all articles on a sexual issue focused on sexual health; this was the case for 28 percent of the articles in men's magazines and 42 percent in teen magazines. Sexual health topics were defined here as those related to contraception, pregnancy (both planned and unintended), abortion, emergency contraception, STDs, and HIV/AIDS. In their study of four popular teen magazines and twelve popular women's magazines published between 1986 and 1996, Walsh-Childers, Gotthoffer, and Lepre (2002) found that overall, 48.4 percent of the sex-related items in teen magazines and 47.2 percent in women's magazines focused on sexual health and reproductive care issues. Dominant among the issues discussed were pregnancy and contraception. Similar analyses of five African American and sixteen Latino magazines indicated that 30 percent of the sex- or health-related articles in African American magazines covered sexual and reproductive health topics, as did 45 percent of the 324 articles coded from the Latino magazines (Johnson, Gotthoffer, & Lauffer, 1999). Thus, although further study is needed concerning the impact of this content on women's health knowledge and behavior, evidence does indicate that young women can get information about a range of sexual health topics from magazines.

Entertainment-Education. A second pathway through which media content may pass on information about sexual health issues is through entertainment-education. As defined by Singhal and Rogers (1999), entertainment-education is "the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior" (p. 9). The goal is to capitalize on the appeal of popular media, such as soap operas and radio dramas, in order to show individuals how they can live safer, healthier, and happier lives. Through exposure to positive, negative, and transitional characters (those in the process of changing their errant ways), audience members can acquire information

about health issues and model characters who are similar to themselves. This strategy has been enacted successfully in television since 1951 in several countries worldwide. Common goals have been the promotion of family planning, equality for women, literacy, and HIV prevention.

Evidence from entertainment-education programs conducted around the globe indicates that carefully designed entertainment media can help educate audiences about sexual health issues, promote prosocial behavior, and be economically profitable. For example, a radio drama entitled *Twende na Wakati* (*Let's Go with the Times*), which aired from 1993 to 1998 in Tanzania, was found to have strong effects on family planning and HIV prevention attitudes and behavior (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Compared with those who did not receive this radio broadcast, residents in the treatment areas increased their sense of self-efficacy with respect to family size determination, increased approval for contraceptive use, increased interspousal communication about family planning, and increased current practice of family planning. Later programming that focused on HIV prevention was found to reduce the number of sexual partners of both women and men and to increase condom adoption (Vaughan, Rogers, Singhal, & Swalehe, 2000). Similar increases in knowledge, positive attitudes, and use of family planning methods have been reported in at least twelve studies (as summarized by Singhal & Rogers, 1999), as a consequence of exposure to programming such as the radio drama series *Fakube Jarra* (Wise Man) in the Gambia (Valente, Kim, Lettenmaier, Glass, & Dibba, 1994), the radio soap *Apwe Plezi* (connotes the notion "After the pleasure comes the pain") in St. Lucia (Vaughan, Regis, & St. Catherine, 2000), and the TV drama *In a Lighter Mood* in Nigeria (Piotrow et al., 1990).

Could something like this work in the United States? Skepticism is typically the first response to this question due to the expansiveness of American media outlets, their commercial rather than government ownership, and the abundance of competing messages and sources of entertainment. However, efforts addressing a number of sexual health issues have in fact been implemented in this country (outside PBS). Most notable are collaborative efforts among the Kaiser Family Foundation, the Centers for Disease Control, and television writers that have proven successful in promoting sexual health. For example, mention of the sexually transmitted disease human papillomavirus or HPV and its link to cervical cancer in one *ER* episode produced a significantly greater awareness of this condition among viewers surveyed both the following day and six weeks later (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000). In August 2001, the National STD and AIDS Hotline numbers were displayed at the end of two episodes of a popular soap opera (*The Bold and the Beautiful*) that had just included an HIV-prevention storyline. Findings indicate that call volumes rose dramatically in the hour following the broadcast, increasing from 88 calls the day before to 1,426 the day of the broadcast (Kennedy, O'Leary, Beck, Pollard, & Simpson, 2004). When information about emergency contraception was included in one episode of *ER*, telephone surveys revealed a substantial increase in the number of

regular *ER* viewers who could accurately define this method and explain how to access it (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000). Similarly, when information about condom effectiveness rates was incorporated into an episode of *Friends,* confirmed teen viewers were more likely than nonviewers to later provide accurate information about this statistic (Collins et al., 2003). Thus, whereas entertainment-education programming and research are not without their limitations (for a review, see Sherry, 1997), with appropriate efforts by appropriate parties, important sexual health information can be inserted in U.S. media, with beneficial consequences.

Positive Contribution 2: Media Can Offer Diverse Sexual Models

Although most assessments of the impact of media use have focused on the role of exposure levels, based on premises of the cultivation model, exposure is only one dimension of media use and therefore only one pathway of potential influence. Indeed, media use is not a passive experience. Media users select particular content from a growing array of options and construct media diets that speak to their individual needs, identities, and experiences (Steele, 1999). Accordingly, some theoretical approaches, including Greenberg's drench hypothesis (Greenberg, 1988), underscore the role of viewer identification, arguing that media portrayals with which viewers connect and identify will exert the most influence. Here, it is argued that specific critical portrayals may exert a stronger force on impression formation and image building than might the sheer frequency of television viewed. This notion emphasizes the power of individual performances to affect viewers, acknowledging that media portrayals differ in their depth, strength, and authenticity. In this way, rare but positive portrayals of female sexuality could have a deep effect on the viewer and could overwhelm, or "drench," the contributions of more everyday or stereotyped roles (Graves, 1999). It is therefore critical that we examine not only students' media exposure levels, but also the extent to which they identify and connect with specific characters.

Criticisms of viewer selection and identification mechanisms typically center on the limited nature of media content, offering skepticism, for example, that portrayals are actually diverse enough to provide anything but mainstream options and messages to young viewers. Are portrayals of female sexuality diverse enough to provide varied role models? Focus group and interview data suggest that viewers seem to manage quite well, selecting particular models that match their personalities and interests and viewing the same models differently based on their own preexisting perspectives. For example, in one interview study exploring forces shaping adult women's sexual development (Ward & Wyatt, 1994), many participants cited the influence of Lucy from *I Love Lucy.* Some women saw her as smart, resourceful, and determined and aspired to be like her. Others saw Lucy as ditzy and sub-

servient and made efforts *not* to be like her. Either way, Lucy served as an anchor point for women's reflections on their own sexual development.

Similar diverse models and perspectives appear in our current research. Over the past several years, we have included the following question on our surveys to undergraduates: "What character on TV do you most identify with?" The responses accumulated thus far from 1,761 students speak to the diversity of portrayals available (Ward, Smiler, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2006). Table 5.1 presents the top twelve favorites offered by the women surveyed. From this table, we see that young women select a range of characters who speak to them, from the young and virginal, such as Angela Chase on *My So-Called Life* or Lisa Simpson from *The Simpsons,* to the more sexually free and outspoken, such as Ally McBeal or Carrie on *Sex and the City*— and these are only the characters who received at least ten mentions. In addition to these top twelve nominees, 149 other characters, ranging from Claire Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* to Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, each received between one and ten mentions. These data demonstrate some diversity in the representations of femininity and female sexuality provided by mainstream media. Young women do select and connect with particular portrayals, who likely serve as role models and guideposts of relationship dynamics.

Is there any evidence that viewers use media characters as models of sexual behavior? Findings from survey data indicate that identifying with popular characters and perceiving media figures as role models is indeed associated with students' sexual attitudes and behavior. For example, Fabes and Strouse (1987) found that undergraduates choosing a media figure or peer as a model of sexual behavior reported more frequent intercourse than those selecting parent or educator models. Similarly, Ward and Friedman (2006) report that stronger identification with popular TV characters is

Table 5.1. Top Twelve Favorite TV Characters of Undergraduate Women Surveyed

Female Character	Number of Nominations
1. Felicity on *Felicity*	107
2. Joey on *Dawson's Creek*	95
3. Rachel on *Friends*	63
4. Angela on *My So-Called Life*	52
5. Ally on *Ally McBeal*	48
6. Monica on *Friends*	46
7. Phoebe on *Friends*	21
8. Daria on *Daria*	19
9. Lisa Simpson on *The Simpsons*	18
10. Kelly Taylor on *Beverly Hills 90210*	16
11. Grace on *Will and Grace*	14
12. Carrie on *Sex and the City*	11

associated with higher levels of sexual experience among high school students. Findings indicate that connections also exist to students' sexual attitudes and expectations. Among undergraduate women, for example, stronger identification with popular media portrayals is associated with higher expectations of the level of sexual activity of one's peers (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). And among high school girls, stronger identification with more objectifying music artists is associated with greater support of sexually objectifying attitudes toward women, and stronger identification with less objectifying music artists is associated with less support of these attitudes (Gordon, 2004). Evidence therefore indicates that young women's sexual attitudes and behavior do parallel the particular characters with whom they most connect. Whether they identify with a particular character and seek to behave accordingly or are drawn to media figures who match their existing ideals and behaviors, having a diverse selection of models provides space for young women to draw validation of their differing sensibilities, fears, and aspirations.

Positive Contribution 3: Media Offer Vicarious Practice of Dating Norms and Ideals

In considering possible positive influences of media use, it is important to consider not only that certain content may be more beneficial than other content, but also that certain audiences may be more open to influence than others. Media constructionists and media use models (Steele, 1999) acknowledge that a viewer's starting point and particular needs play an important role in shaping how she perceives and makes use of media content. In terms of sexual content, it is therefore likely that adolescent women at different stages of pubertal and sexual development bring different needs to the media and may draw different interpretations of the content.

In early adolescence and in the early stages of pubertal development, girls are beginning to explore what it means to be female and what it means to be sexual. One benefit of media content at this time is that it provides a means for young women to try out romantic scripts in their imagination, allowing them to conceptualize themselves enacting the script (Arnett, 1995). For example, fantasizing about media characters (idols) allows girls to experience a fantasy relationship with idols on television without concerns that they will be rejected or will have to engage in activities for which they are not ready (Karniol, 2001). Evidence suggests that these fantasy crushes may serve as a placeholder for actual same-age boys (or girls), in that girls who are interested in media idols prefer idols who are in a somewhat attainable age range (Brown, White, & Nikopoulou, 1993). These girls are not delusional, however, and are aware of differences between media and reality and between the idol and real-life crushes. For these girls, the idols are not perceived as real, and the girls are not using the media as an exact guide, but perhaps as a way in which to fantasize about, conceptualize, and

practice behavior that would not yet be possible in their real lives. Thus, media idols allow girls to fantasize about a person without real-life concerns or consequences, such as rejection or coercion.

On the other end of the spectrum, sexual content in the media may serve a useful function for early-maturing girls whose peers have not yet reached this point in their pubertal development. Emerging findings indicate that such girls are drawn to sexual media content. For example, in their ethnographic study of twenty girls aged eleven to fifteen, Brown et al. (1993) found that girls who were more biologically developed than their peers were more likely to seek out sexual images and information in the media. Testing this issue with survey data, Brown, Halpern, and L'Engle (2005) discovered that regardless of age or race, earlier-maturing girls expressed more interest than later-maturing girls in seeing sexual content in TV, movies, and magazines and in listening to sexual content in music. These girls were also more likely to be consuming media with sexual content. The authors speculate that for these girls, the media may serve as a kind of "super-peer" because early-maturing girls are not able to turn to their actual peers for information or norm setting. They may be looking for information in the media because their real-life peers are not yet as interested in sexual issues as they are. In these ways, media figures may allow young girls to practice crushes and allow early-maturing girls possible sexual examples, norms, and information as they wait for their peers to catch up.

We acknowledge that these practices may not always be ideal, especially, for example, if idolization sets up unrealistic expectations that cause later disappointment. In addition, using media models for romantic role playing or as super-peers may also reinforce traditional gender scripts that place heterosexual success at the center of the feminine ideal and overemphasize its importance in women's lives. Together, these issues highlight the diverse and important implications of media use by female adolescents.

Positive Contribution 4: Resisting Through Self-Expression

A fourth pathway through which media use may contribute to positive sexual development among women is through the creation and consumption of girl-zines. Girl-zines (or grrrl zines) are self-published, small-circulation publications created by girls and young women to connect with each other, share personal experiences, and raise their voices in resistance to mainstream media. Zines were originally a product of the underground punk movement in the 1970s, with grrrl zines tracing their roots to a movement called Riot Grrrls started in 1991 by young women who felt underrepresented in the punk scene (Duncombe, 1997; Ferris, 2001). Today girl-zines retain their underground nature—they are published in small numbers and are traded or left anonymously in coffee shops and bookstores—and are at once public and private publications. Zines offer a safe format to engage in

"a sort of c/overt resistance that allows girls to overtly express their anger, confusion, and frustration publicly to like-minded peers, but still remain covert and anonymous to authority figures" (Schilt, 2003, p. 81).

Authors of girl-zines address many of the same topics that are seen in academic research on girls, including sexuality, feminism, gender, relationships, and puberty (Ferris, 2001; Schilt, 2003). However, zines address these topics in a "confrontational, honest, and frank manner" (Ferris, 2001, p. 52) and offer alternative perspectives of girls' lives, femininity, and female sexuality that move beyond the beauty-centered, heteronormative content of mainstream magazines.

In an in-depth study of more than thirty zines and their writers, Wray and Steele (2002) argue that this personal nature of zines and the more realistic representation of the lives of teenage girls is the zines' greatest achievement. Although zines are primarily produced by White, middle-class teens, they do provide more diversity in representing what it means to be a woman than do traditional media. One young woman referred to the zine culture as "a place to vent, to be accepted, not a place to be ashamed and boy-obsessed" (p. 207).

This girl-driven approach is what makes the zine network especially beneficial for girls and provides an alternative to the "girl-based and consumer-market-driven strategies of girl empowerment" (Schilt, 2003, p. 73). In her study of zines as a form of resistance, Schilt argues that the do-it-yourself framework of zines encourages girls to create their own medium if the one provided to them by the market does not meet their needs. In addition, participating in the zine culture, which is not driven by profit, encourages girls to be more critical consumers of cultural products and provides empowerment for their own ideas. Finally, girl-zines both encourage participation in other political, feminist, and antiracist action and provide information for how to become involved.

Is That Enough? Untapped Potential and a Wish List for Further Positive Portrayals

We see many ways in which media content may be a positive force in young women's sexual health and development by providing information on sexual health issues; offering a diverse array of portrayals to serve as validation, models, and guides; or allowing outlets for resistance and self-expression. At this point, our arguments are mostly speculative, since little empirical evidence demonstrates that these practices are in fact beneficial in the ways presumed. In additional, our analysis focuses on content at the margins and does not directly confront concerns raised about the many existing limited, stereotypical, and objectifying portrayals of female sexuality. We conclude with a wish list of ten changes that mainstream media could make in order to be more beneficial for girls' sexual health and development.

We would like for mainstream media content to include

1. *More three-dimensional characters.* Typically female characters are one-dimensional stereotypes or caricatures (the virgin, the ditz, the slut). We would like to see complex characters who defy labels.
2. *A broader range of physical appearance types and less focus on this as the center of women's worth.* We would like to see women who are comfortable with their bodies. Women's bodies are powerful and can do many things (for example, build, fight, climb, nurture, procreate) and are not just something to look at.
3. *A diminished heteronormative perspective.* We would like to see more three-dimensional portrayals of lesbians, bisexuals, and women questioning their sexuality.
4. *An acknowledgment of gender roles and their constraints on sexuality.* Many portrayals, especially in music videos, treat the sexual double standard as natural and accepted. But traditional gender roles are often quite restrictive. We would like to see portrayals of women and men grappling with these constraints, and perhaps defying them.
5. *More portrayals of "outercourse."* Many movie portrayals go from kissing to intercourse with little in between. There needs to be an acknowledgment of diverse forms of sexual pleasure, including masturbation and manual stimulation.
6. *More agentic portrayals of female sexuality.* Frequently female characters are depicted as waiting for a partner and as accepting whomever comes their way. We would like to see women who have and express their desires, look for respect, and reject partners who are disrespectful.
7. *Portrayals of parents and older adults working to instill sexual agency and sexual self-acceptance within their daughters.*
8. *Women communicating with their partners about sex.* Media portrayals commonly depict women discussing their sexual feelings and exploits with their female friends. We would like these portrayals to expand to include women discussing these issues with their sexual partners.
9. *Portrayals of the ambiguities and negotiations that are involved in navigating sexual relationships.* Sexuality is a journey. Each woman needs to negotiate and discover what works for her, and this answer may vary from partner to partner. We would like to see women (and men) grappling with these ambiguities.
10. *A focus on sexuality not just as a risk for women but also as a site of pleasure.* Young women are typically not taught to develop sexual feelings and to discover their body and its pleasures. It would be beneficial on many levels to show women learning and taking these steps.

We acknowledge that media content is only one of many sources contributing to young women's sexual health and development. We also know

that its effects are not wholly under personal control. However, we hope that the analyses and suggestions provided here will provoke both researchers and media makers to think more broadly about the choices that they make and to continue to fight for content that will broaden women's perspectives instead of constrain them.

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