



## Specificity of early movie effects on adolescent sexual behavior and alcohol use



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### ABSTRACT

Adolescents' movie sex exposure (MSE) and movie alcohol exposure (MAE) have been shown to influence later sexual behavior and drinking, respectively. No study to date, however, has tested whether these effects generalize across behaviors. This study examined the concurrent influences of early (i.e., before age 16) MSE and MAE on subsequent risky sex and alcohol use among a national sample of 1228 U.S. adolescents. Participants reported their health behaviors and movie viewing up to six times between 2003 and 2009 in telephone interviews. The Beach method was used to create a population-based estimate of each participant's MSE and MAE, which were then entered into a structural equation model (SEM) to predict lifetime risky sex and past month alcohol use at ages 18–21. For both men and women, MAE predicted alcohol use, mediated by age of initiation of heavy episodic drinking (HED) and age of sexual debut; MAE also predicted risky sex via age of sexual debut. Among men only, MSE indirectly predicted risky sex and alcohol use. Findings indicated that early exposure to risk content from movies had both specific and general effects on later risk-taking, but gender differences were evident: for men, MSE was a stronger predictor than MAE, but for women, only MAE predicted later risk behavior. These results have implications for future media research, prevention programs for adolescent sex and alcohol use, and movie ratings that can guide parents' decisions as to which movies are appropriate for their children.

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### Introduction

Parents, politicians, and psychologists have long been concerned about the effects of media exposure on adolescent risk-taking. Accumulating evidence indicates that media influence a variety of adolescent behaviors, including alcohol use (for a review, see Anderson, de Bruijn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings, 2009) and sex (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008; Brown et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2004; Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009; Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott, & Berry, 2005; O'Hara, Gibbons, Gerrard, Li, & Sargent, 2012; Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Movies, in particular, appear to have a stronger influence than other forms of media on adolescents' beliefs and perceived norms related to risk-taking (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009) and on

actual risk-taking (Pardun et al., 2005). The mechanisms underlying this influence, however, are not yet well understood. Do adolescents mimic what they see on screen (i.e., specificity), or do risk portrayals in movies promote a lifestyle characterized by risk-taking (i.e., generalization)? To determine whether these effects are specific or generalized, the current study examined the influence of early exposure to sex and alcohol use in movies on sexual behavior and drinking up to 6 years later.

### Specificity versus generalization

To the extent that movies causally influence risk-taking (for experimental results, see Engels, Hermans, van Baaren, Hollenstein, & Bot, 2009; Koordeman, Anschutz, van Baaren, & Engels, 2012), two mechanisms could potentially explain this influence: specificity and generalization. The specificity hypothesis asserts that movies influence behavior through a social learning process in which young people model the actions they see on screen (Bandura, 2001). For example, adolescents exposed to a lot of alcohol use in movies would be more likely to drink, but not necessarily more likely to have sex or smoke. Evidence for specificity comes from a

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study of adolescent drinking in six European nations: MAE, but not exposure to smoking in movies, predicted HED when modeled simultaneously (Hanewinkel et al., 2012). Multiple behavior-specific models assert that media influence behavior via specific cognitive inputs, such as sexual media facilitating the formation and activation of sexual scripts (Wright, Malamuth, & Donnerstein, 2012). These models, to some extent, assume specificity—that media primarily influence the viewer's behavior with regard to the specific behavior(s) portrayed.

An alternative explanation is generalization, the idea that watching movies with risk content promotes a “deviant” lifestyle. According to problem behavior theory, adolescent risk behaviors are attributable to a common risk-taking factor (Donovan & Jessor, 1985). For example, an adolescent who uses alcohol is more likely to have sex, and vice versa, because they exhibit a tendency toward deviance. Movies, therefore, may promote all types of risk behavior by glamorizing the risk-taking that they commonly portray (Nalkur, Jamieson, & Romer, 2010; Tickle, Beach, & Dalton, 2009). Some support for this argument comes from evidence that exposure to R-rated movies has been longitudinally associated with increased use of both alcohol and tobacco (De Leeuw et al., 2011; Jackson, Brown, & L'Engle, 2007; Stoolmiller, Gerrard, Sargent, Worth, & Gibbons, 2010).

It is also possible that both specific and general effects are at work. In other words, an adolescent exposed to risk-taking in movies would be more likely to engage in all types of risk, but the effects may be stronger for those behaviors portrayed on screen. A meta-analysis that combined experimental and non-experimental studies on different types of risk-glorifying media supported this idea (Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmüller, Vogrincic, & Sauer, 2011). Although risk-glorifying media appeared to influence all types of risk-taking, studies with better fit, defined as the degree of correspondence between measures of media exposure and behavioral outcomes, produced significantly larger effects. Despite the utility of this between-samples approach, examining specificity within the same sample is essential to determining the mechanisms through which media may influence adolescent risk behavior. The current study, therefore, is the first to address the issue of specificity by directly comparing effects of two different risk exposures on two different health behaviors over the course of adolescence and young adulthood.

### Relations between alcohol use and sexual behavior

To test specificity, we examined the influence of movies on sexual behavior and alcohol use. We selected these risk behaviors because they are interrelated, particularly for adolescents. Alcohol consumption, especially earlier in life, is associated with unintended and unsafe sex (for reviews, see Cooper, 2006; George & Stoner, 2000). For example, Dogan, Stockdale, Widaman, and Conger (2010) found that 9th grade alcohol use predicted change in annual sexual partners through age 21, controlling for related third variables such as impulsivity, excitement seeking, and conduct problems. In addition, adolescent sexual behavior has been linked to later increases in alcohol use (Stueve & O'Donnell, 2005).

When adolescents initiate these behaviors is also important for predicting later risk-taking. The age at which adolescents first engage in HED, which is more indicative of risky, non-normative development than just drinking (Miller, Naimi, Brewer, & Jones, 2007), predicts both later problematic drinking patterns (Pitkänen, Lyyra, & Pulkkinen, 2005) and increased sexual risk-taking (Miller et al., 2007; Stueve & O'Donnell, 2005). Likewise, earlier sexual debut predicts increased sexual risk (Sandfort, Orr, Hirsch, & Santelli, 2008) as well as greater alcohol use (Stueve & O'Donnell, 2005). Although multiple mechanisms have been

proposed to explain these associations (see Cooper, 2006), the current study is focused on how these relations may be influenced by movie exposure.

### Movie effects on adolescent sexual behavior and alcohol use

As previously mentioned, movies have been shown to influence both sexual behavior and alcohol use among adolescents. Research using the current data, for example, demonstrated that MSE predicted an earlier age of sexual debut and, subsequently, more risky sexual behavior by young adulthood, controlling for characteristics of both the adolescents and their families (O'Hara et al., 2012). Furthermore, adolescents from multiple samples (including the current one) who reported higher MAE initiated drinking at earlier ages (Sargent, Wills, Stoolmiller, Gibson, & Gibbons, 2006; Stoolmiller et al., 2012), showed increased use over time (Dal Cin et al., 2009; Gibbons et al., 2010; Hanewinkel et al., 2012; Stoolmiller et al., 2012), and had more alcohol problems (Wills, Sargent, Gibbons, Gerrard, & Stoolmiller, 2009).

Further complicating matters, the same movies often portray sexual behavior and alcohol use, as evidenced by how commonly both behaviors appear in popular movies. From 1950 to 2006, over 84% of the top-grossing movies contained sexual content, including 68% of G-rated, 82% of PG-rated, 85% of PG13-rated, and 88% of R-rated movies (Nalkur et al., 2010). Similarly, among the top-grossing 534 movies from 1998 to 2003, 83% portrayed alcohol use, including 57% of G/PG-rated, 88% of PG13-rated, and 90% of R-rated movies (Dal Cin, Worth, Dalton, & Sargent, 2008). The co-occurrence of drinking and sex in movies makes it challenging to disentangle their effects because different types of exposure tend to be highly correlated (Sargent, Worth, Beach, Gerrard, & Heatherton, 2008); however, for both the theoretical and applied importance of doing so, this was the main goal of the current study.

### The current study

The simultaneous effects of early MSE and early MAE on two health-risk behaviors—risky sex (i.e., multiple partners and inconsistent condom use) and alcohol use (i.e., HED, frequency, and quantity)—were examined. We focused on early exposure (occurring before age 16) as evidence suggests that media may be most impactful for children when they are younger and less knowledgeable about media influence on their behavior (Cantor, Mares, & Hyde, 2003; Primack, Gold, Land, & Fine, 2006). This analysis expands upon earlier findings by testing whether movie effects on sexual behavior (O'Hara et al., 2012) and alcohol use (e.g., Dal Cin et al., 2009; Gibbons et al., 2010) generalize across risk behaviors. These questions were addressed using data from a 6-year longitudinal survey of U.S. adolescents' media exposure and health behaviors (Sargent et al., 2005). This study employed the Beach method, a comprehensive system for media content coding and population-based estimation of youths' movie risk exposure (Sargent et al., 2008), to construct comparable estimates of MSE and MAE. The data were analyzed using SEM, which allowed for simultaneous testing of both specific and general effects of multiple types of movie risk exposure on different risk behaviors, and also accounted for independent and shared variance between MSE and MAE. The specific hypotheses were:

Hypothesis 1: Early MAE will predict risky sex and alcohol use 6 years later, mediated by age of sexual debut and age of HED initiation.

Hypothesis 2: Early MSE will also predict risky sex and alcohol use 6 years later, mediated by age of sexual debut and age of HED initiation.

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