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The impact of men's magazines on adolescent boys' objectification and courtship beliefs

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ABSTRACT

Although much attention concerning the potential impact of sexualized media has focused on girls and women, less is known about how this content effects boys' perceptions of women and courtship. Accordingly, the current three-wave panel study investigated whether exposure to sexualizing magazines predicts adolescent boys' ($N = 592$) sexually objectifying notions of women and their beliefs about feminine courtship strategies. The results indicated that when boys consumed sexualizing magazines more often, they expressed more gender-stereotypical beliefs about feminine courtship strategies over time. This association was mediated by boys' objectification of women. The possibility of a reciprocal relation whereby beliefs about courtship strategies predict future consumption of sexualizing magazines was also explored but received no support. Discussion focuses on effects of sexualizing media on boys, and supports future research to build on multidisciplinary knowledge.

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During adolescence, many heterosexual youth transition from same-sex peer groups to developing friendships, romantic ties, and sexual relationships with the other sex (Shulman, Connolly, & McIsaac, 2011). Guiding these initial efforts are the sexual scripts acquired from socialization agents, such as parents and peers, whose messages teach youth how to select and court partners, and define which partners and behaviors are ideal and appropriate. One notable feature of these sexual scripts is that they are highly gendered, emphasizing certain behaviors as expected for men and others for women. These gender-specific norms have been labeled "The Heterosexual Script," which defines the courtship strategies, commitment orientations, and sexual goals considered appropriate for each sex (Kim et al., 2007). Men are expected to enact the script by actively pursuing sexual relationships, treating women as sexual objects, and avoiding commitment and emotional attachment. Women enact the script by setting sexual limits, using their looks to attract men, prioritizing emotional connections, and acting sexually passive. Although individuals differ in their acceptance of these norms, they are nonetheless aware that their behavior may be judged according to them, and may act in ways fitting the script to minimize censure (Smiler, 2013; Tolman, 2002).

In addition to acquiring these gendered sexual scripts from their parents and peers, youth in the industrialized world also have access to mainstream media that feature abundant examples. Analyses indicate that references to The Heterosexual Script appear 15.5 times per hour in primetime American television programming (Kim et al., 2007). Most frequent are

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references framing men as sex driven and women as passive, sexual objects. For example, Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, and Smith (2007) found that depictions of women as sexual objects occurred 5.9 times per hour on reality dating programs, and depictions of men as sex driven appeared 3.6 times per hour. Moreover, this content has been found to shape youths' sexual beliefs, with survey and experimental data linking exposure to sexual content on television to stronger support of themes featured in the Heterosexual Script, such as notions of women as sexual objects (Ferris et al., 2007; Ward, 2002; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

Expanding analyses to sexualizing magazines and adolescent boys

Despite evidence linking television use to greater endorsement of specific components of the Heterosexual Script, questions remain about media contributions here. First, because most research has focused on television, less is known about other media, such as magazines, which are often more sexually explicit than TV (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005), and may therefore be a richer source of sexual scripts. Indeed, in a recent study that investigated contributions of multiple media to young men's sexual cognitions, magazine use emerged as the most influential media contributor (Ward, Epstein, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2011). A second limitation is the homogeneity of the samples, with much of the work testing North American college students, often via predominantly female samples. Few analyses have tested younger adolescents, who may be more open to accepting media models because of their minimal real-world experience (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Ward, 2003). Few have focused on adolescent boys, who often consume sexual media at greater rates than adolescent girls (Bleakley, Hennessy, & Fishbein, 2011). What can adolescent boys learn about women and courtship from magazines?

Although the Heterosexual Script details several roles for women, analyses indicate that the role most prominently featured in magazines is the role of beautiful, sexual object (Ezzell, 2009; Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010). Sexually objectifying portrayals of women have been found to be highly prevalent in men's magazines, including general interest (e.g., *GQ*) and lad magazines (e.g., *Maxim*), as well as pornographic magazines (e.g., *Playboy*). In their analysis of editorial photographs in lad magazines *Maxim* and *Stuff*, Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink (2003) found that the dominant role for women was generic sexual object (80.5%), with less frequent depictions of women in roles such as professional or mother. Similar rates were reported in Baker's (2005) analysis of four men's magazines (e.g., *GQ*, *Maxim*), in which 68% of women were depicted in the sex object function, and 25% as spouse/partner. Indeed, scholars have criticized magazines for considering female appearance as the most suitable sexual "instrument" that women can and should use to attract or sexually please a man (Bogaert, Turkovich, & Hafer, 1993; Ricciardelli et al., 2010).

Similar content pervades erotic or pornographic magazines. Although these magazines feature more nudity than lad magazines, specifically exposure of women's breasts and genitals (Bogaert et al., 1993), analyses suggest that rates of sexualizing content are not necessarily higher in pornographic magazines than in lad magazines. Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink (2001) analyzed portrayals in *Playboy*, coding every picture that was not an advertisement, and found that the top function for women was sex object (70.9%), followed by spouse/partner (23.9%). These rates are comparable to those reported above for lad magazines. Indeed, many researchers (e.g., Ward et al., 2011) study all categories of male-oriented magazines together, not drawing distinctions. For example, in their analysis of 14 diverse men's magazines (e.g., *Maxim*, *Playboy*), Stankiewicz and Rosselli (2008) found that 76% of advertisements that included women featured them as sexual objects. Together, these data indicate that in men's magazines – both lad and pornographic – the most prominent way that women are featured is as sexual objects, valued only for their beauty and sexiness. Thus, this is a critical component of the Heterosexual Script that readers of men's magazines could learn.

Effects of men's magazines on sexual objectification and sexual beliefs

Regular exposure to sexually objectifying media content is believed to have significant consequences for media consumers. Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) argues that the pervasiveness of sexual objectification in society gradually socializes girls and women to view themselves as sexual objects to be evaluated on the basis of appearance and sexual appeal. This self-objectification has been shown to have numerous consequences for women, and is associated with disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, and depressive affect (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Although much attention has focused on how girls/women develop objectifying notions about themselves, less is known about how boys/men develop objectifying notions about women. Objectification theory expects that exposure to sexually objectifying content socializes women and men to treat women's bodies as sexual objects. Therefore, it can be assumed that boys' exposure to media featuring this content would lead them to endorse objectifying perspectives of women, just as it might lead women to self-objectify. Indeed, Brooks (1997) describes how regular exposure to sexualizing media may trigger a "centerfold syndrome" among men. This syndrome encompasses a set of stereotypical beliefs about men's and women's sexual roles that assert that gazing at attractive women is natural for men and expected by women; that reduces women to sexual objects; that constructs attractive women as trophies that can be used to gain status; and that privileges nonrelational and recreational sex. According to these two theories, then, it is expected that higher levels of exposure to media content that sexually objectifies women would lead boys/men to internalize and support these perspectives.

Emerging evidence indicates that exposure to sexual content across diverse media does affect young men's beliefs about women and courtship. First, as noted earlier, greater exposure to sexualizing content is associated with men's being more accepting of the notion that women are sexual objects (e.g., Hust & Lei, 2008; Ward, 2002). For example, Kistler and Lee (2010)

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