Adolescent sexual socialization & teen magazines: a cross-national study between the United States and the Netherlands
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CONCLUSION

For decades, the media have been recognized as one of the most important sources of sexual information for adolescents (for a review, see Ward, 2003). Of all the media available, teen magazines are perhaps the most relevant to adolescent sexual socialization for a multitude of reasons. Not only are teen magazines targeted at a teenage audience, so the sexual content within them is often especially suitable to teens (APA, 2007; Durham, 1996, 1998; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998), but teen magazines also cover topics more in-depth than other media, such as television, which may only skim the surface of sex-related topics (Ward, 2003). Moreover, the sexual information within teen magazines is accessible without difficulty because teen magazines are easily available at public libraries and bookstores, or can be mailed directly to one’s home (Ward, 2003).

Given the importance of teen magazines to adolescent sexual socialization, the two main goals of this dissertation were to (a) analyze sex-related topics such as sexual desire, sexual danger, virginity loss, pregnancy, and a hook-up culture within teen girl magazines; and (b) find out whether reading teen girl magazines is associated with how young people feel about sex, notably whether they are fearful of sex. Both of these goals were addressed from a cross-national comparative perspective by investigating these topics in US and Dutch teen girl magazines. All four of the studies in this dissertation aimed to reveal the cultural contingency of the sex-related coverage within teen girl magazines and its association to US and Dutch adolescents’ sexual socialization.

Main Findings

The first three studies of this dissertation investigated the most popular US and Dutch teen girl magazines for content related to sexual desire, sexual danger, virginity loss, pregnancy, and the hook-up culture. In terms of sexual desire (i.e., sexual wanting, and pleasure), sexual wanting occurred more often in the US magazines than in the Dutch magazines. In the US coverage, boys’ sexual wanting received more attention than girls’ sexual wanting, whereas sexual wanting occurred equally often for boys and girls in the Dutch coverage. Unexpectedly, the depiction of sexual pleasure did not vary by gender in either country, but was generally more visible in the Dutch teen girl magazines than in the US teen girl magazines. Regarding sexual danger (i.e., sexual risk, and negative physical/health consequences of sex), a clear gender and country difference emerged. Sexual risk and the negative consequences of sex were associated with girls more than boys, and were more frequently depicted in the US coverage than in the Dutch coverage.

Stories about virginity loss occurred equally often in the US and Dutch teen girl magazines. Virginity loss was portrayed with a positive tone more often in the Dutch coverage than in the US coverage. While virginity loss was rarely mentioned in the teen girl magazines of both countries, the findings of this dissertation question the general
assumption that the normalization of adolescent sexuality increases the coverage of virginity loss. It may be that in countries such as the Netherlands, where adolescent sexuality is considered to be more normal, virginity loss has become such an integral part of adolescent sexual development that it is hardly worth reporting in teen magazines. In countries such as the US, where adolescent sexuality is not yet fully accepted, virginity loss may be an issue that is harder to cover in teen magazines. As a result, the teen magazines from these two countries seem to resemble each other in how often they cover virginity loss, but perhaps for different reasons.

Pregnancy-related stories were included equally often in the US and Dutch teen girl magazines, and were attached with a negative tone in the coverage of both countries. Our results contradict Hofstede’s (2001) masculinity/femininity dimension, which suggests that pregnancy would be less of an issue in the Netherlands. One explanation for this unexpected finding may be that teen pregnancy is generally considered a serious incident (Amy & Loeber, 2007; Thompson, 1995). Therefore, it is a topic which is covered in both the US and Dutch teen magazines, regardless of larger cultural differences surrounding adolescent sexuality in both countries. Nevertheless, pregnancy was depicted as a negative consequence of sex more often in the US coverage than in the Dutch coverage. This finding reconfirms the existence of a danger discourse surrounding adolescent sexuality in the US (e.g., Hollway, 1989; Kim, et al., 2007).

With regard to a hook-up culture (i.e., casual versus committed sex; presence or absence of love; specific sexual activities of petting, oral sex, anal sex, and coital sex; and the occurrence and tone of condoms and birth control pills), this dissertation found that stories about casual sex occurred more often in the US teen girl magazines than in the Dutch teen girl magazines, and committed sex was portrayed more often in the Dutch coverage than the US coverage. Similarly, sex occurred more often within the context of love in the Dutch coverage than in the US coverage. These findings coincide with Hofstede’s (1998) distinction between masculine and feminine societies. Differences also occurred in the coverage of specific sexual activities in the US and Dutch teen girl magazines. The sexual activity of petting was mentioned more frequently in the Dutch magazines, while coital sex was mentioned more often in the US coverage. It seems that the US magazines’ portrayal of sex is somewhat confined to a more literal definition of sex that is perhaps also more adult-oriented, whereas the Dutch magazines seem to devote more attention to ‘softer’ forms of sexual activity like petting, which are often associated with adolescence (Tolman, 2002). Overall, we find that a hook-up culture is more visible in the US coverage for the occurrence of casual sex and a lack of love in stories about sex, compared to the Dutch coverage which emphasizes commitment and love in sexual relations. All in all, the first three studies of this dissertation reveal that Hofstede’s masculinity/femininity dimension is reflected to varying extents in the coverage of magazines targeted at teenage girls.

Against the backdrop of a stronger presence of a danger discourse in the US coverage than in the Dutch coverage, the fourth study of this dissertation investigated
whether fear of sex was differentially related to reading teen magazines in the US and the Netherlands. As expected, exposure to the overall content of teen magazines was related to a greater fear of sex for US young people, but was not for Dutch young people. Moreover, fear of sex was not linked to an exposure to specific messages about sexual risk and pleasure within teen magazines, neither among the Dutch nor among the US young people. Surprisingly, exposure to specific messages about sexual risk were more strongly related to sexual fear among less religious US readers than among more religious US readers, while no relationship was found among Dutch respondents with different levels of religiosity for exposure to specific messages about sexual risk and fear of sex. This finding seems to suggest that religiosity acts as a barrier to fear of sex for readers of teen girl magazines in the US. Highly religious readers’ fear of sex may not be associated with reading teen magazines because many religious individuals choose to abstain from having sex, which could make messages about sex and sexual wanting inapplicable to their own lives. Nevertheless, there was no association between exposure to specific messages about sexual pleasure and fear of sex in both the US and the Netherlands, and this association did not differ by the US and Dutch readers’ level of religiosity.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

This dissertation is one of the first to systematically compare the coverage of teen girl magazines from a cross-national comparative perspective. This perspective elicits several important theoretical implications and contributions to existing research on teen girl magazines and adolescent sexual socialization. First, the findings from this dissertation shed some new light on the Heterosexual Script. The Heterosexual Script outlines romantic encounters and sexual interactions for boys and girls (e.g., Hyde & Oliver, 1993) by placing a strong emphasis on men’s and boys’ sexual ability and sexual drive (Farvid & Braun, 2006) while portraying women as passive (e.g., Clarke & Hatfield, 1989; McCormick, 1979; McCormick, Brannigan, & LaPlante, 1984; Tolman, 1994, 2002). In depicting sexual wanting more often for boys and sexual risks more often for girls, US teen girl magazines are in line with the Heterosexual Script. Our findings also coincide with what Fine (1988) revealed more than 20 years ago with regard to a missing discourse of desire for girls, which still seems to be present in today’s US teen girl magazines. This, however, does not seem to be the case for the Dutch teen girl magazines. While the risks and consequences of sex are stressed for Dutch girls more than boys, sexual wanting and pleasure occur equally as often for boys and girls in the Dutch magazines. This suggests that heterosexuality is constructed in a more egalitarian way in the Netherlands than it is in the US, at least when it comes to the coverage of sexual wanting. In sum, by revealing that the Heterosexual Script is mirrored for both desire and danger in the US teen girl magazines but not in the Dutch teen girl magazines, this dissertation points to a cultural specificity of the Heterosexual Script.

This dissertation’s comparative analysis of sexual desire and danger also extends
Tolman’s (2002) finding on ambivalence in US adolescent girls’ sexuality. Tolman (2002) found that the media often encourages teenage girls to look sexy even though these girls usually know very little about what it means to be sexual, have sexual desires, and make responsible decisions regarding intimacy in relationships. This scenario implies that girls are often represented as the object of someone else’s desire but are rarely considered sexual subjects who have desires of their own (Garner et al., 1998; Tolman, 1994). This dissertation found that compared to the Dutch teen girl magazines, the US teen girl magazines seem to contain more sexually ambivalent messages — that is, mixed messages about sex and sexuality (Joshi, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2010). For instance, the coverage of sexual wanting and of sexual risk and the negative physical/health consequences of sex occurred more often in the US magazines compared to the Dutch magazines. Similarly, the US magazines focused more often on casual sex while simultaneously being more negative about virginity loss than the Dutch magazines. Thus, the ambivalence which Tolman identifies for US girls is also present in the US teen girl magazines. More importantly, these findings reveal that the ambivalence concept may be culturally specific to the US.

This dissertation also refines previous cross-national comparative research, notably Schalet’s (2000) work, on differences in adolescent sexuality between the US and the Netherlands. Schalet concluded that adolescent sexuality in the US is marked by dramatization, defined as “the interplay of internal urges, external pressures and a self unable yet to direct or protect itself” (Schalet, 2000, p. 84), whereas in the Netherlands adolescent sexuality is characterized by normalization. This dissertation found that the normalization of adolescent sex in the Netherlands as identified by Schalet is also mirrored in Dutch teen girl magazines: there is less focus placed on the dangers of sex, and more emphasis on the pleasures of sex and committed sexual relations with love. While Schalet refers to adolescent sex in the US as being dramatized, based on our findings, dramatization may not be the only, or even correct characterization for US teen girl magazines. Rather, the US magazines seem to portray the Heterosexual Script and a danger discourse — where more emphasis is placed on boys’ sexual wants, and the risks and negative consequences of sex are stressed for girls.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from this dissertation — that more casual sex than committed sex was covered in the US teen girl magazines, and this being reversed in the Netherlands — also extends Schalet’s (2000) work. Schalet found that US parents, when interviewed, did not usually refer to a relational or emotional context when talking about teenage sex. According to Schalet, one reason for why US parents may not associate teenage sexuality with love or a meaningful relationship is “a widespread belief that 16-year-olds are unable to form deep or steady romantic attachments” because “they’re not mature enough to handle a serious relationship” (Schalet, 2000, p. 82). Schalet points to a clear dissociation of teenage sexuality from love and commitment as expressed by US parents, while Dutch parents think about teenage sexuality within the context of a relationship and emotions of being ‘verliefd’ (in love or infatuated [2000], p. 84). These same ideologies are reflected in our findings.
This dissertation also investigated the applicability of Hofstede’s cultural dimension of masculinity/femininity to teen girl magazines. The masculinity/femininity dimension focuses on the extent to which a society interprets sex as an achievement (i.e., masculine society such as the US) or a relationship (i.e., feminine society such as the Netherlands). Masculine cultures are identified as being less open about sexual issues than feminine cultures (Hofstede, 1998). While Hofstede uses specific factors to outline differences between sex and sexual attitudes in the US and the Netherlands, no research to date had applied these factors to an investigation of teen girl magazine content from these two countries. This dissertation is the first to provide evidence that the masculinity/femininity distinction is also apparent in the coverage of US and Dutch teen girl magazines. Specifically, we found that the masculinity/femininity dimension as outlined by Hofstede (2001) was applicable to findings on sexual pleasure, sexual risk, the negative consequences of sex, the tone of virginity loss, the association of virginity loss to negative consequences, pregnancy as a negative consequence of sex, casual and committed sex, love, and petting as a sexual activity.

There were, however, a few instances where Hofstede’s dimension did not apply to the teen magazine coverage of the US and the Netherlands. For instance, the masculinity/femininity dimension did not apply to sexual wanting, which occurred more often in the US coverage than the Dutch coverage. One possible explanation is that sex in the Netherlands is strongly associated with love and is rarely stigmatized (Hofstede, 1998; Schalet, 2000). In contrast, the stigmatization of sex in the US (Schalet, 2000) may make sex more of a forbidden fruit, especially for US teenagers. Consequently, the appeal of sex may be higher for US adolescents than for Dutch adolescents, and this is reflected in the teen magazine coverage through sexual wanting.

In addition, Hofstede’s (2001) masculinity/femininity dimension suggested that pregnancy would be less of an issue in the Netherlands; however, pregnancy was mentioned to the same extent in the US and Dutch coverage. It could be that this similarity in the US and Dutch coverage of teen pregnancy not only reflects the general seriousness of teen pregnancy to adolescent sexual socialization (Amy & Loeber, 2007; Thompson, 1995), but it also suggests that some overlap exists between how adolescent sexuality is approached in the US and the Netherlands, at least in the coverage of pregnancy in teen girl magazines. We also expected pregnancy would be mentioned with a negative tone more often in the US magazines, because girls are known for having more agency in sexual relations in feminine societies such as the Netherlands (Hofstede, 1998b). However, these cultural differences did not translate into a different evaluation of pregnancy in the coverage of teen magazines because teen pregnancy is generally equated with failure in both the US and Dutch teen magazines. Therefore, future research should focus less on the tone of the coverage and more on the reasons for why teen pregnancy is portrayed negatively. It could be that in a masculine society, with its emphasis on morals and norms, becoming pregnant as a teenager may be a sign of lacking morals. Feminine societies, however, emphasize (female) sexual agency, so teenage pregnancy may point to a lack of sexual self-efficacy.
 Nonetheless, Hofstede’s dimension of masculinity/femininity does overall provide an useful framework for understanding sex-related content in US and Dutch teen girl magazines. While this dimension may not have held true for every sex-related concept we studied in this dissertation, it was applicable to the majority of the concepts we investigated. This dissertation therefore ultimately reveals that broader cultural factors hold a potential for explaining national differences in the media coverage of adolescent sexuality. Despite these national differences, similarities in adolescent sexuality irrespective of culture should not be overlooked. For instance, the negative tone towards teenage pregnancy in the US and Dutch teen girl magazines was the same. This could be because on one hand some teenage sex-related issues are global concerns that are approached similarly between countries. On the other hand, it could be that certain topics are approached similarly in US and Dutch teen magazines, but for fundamentally different reasons that are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Finally, this dissertation applied cultivation theory to a cross-national investigation of teen magazine reading and fear of sex. While cultivation theory has been used to explain the link between sexual media content and adolescents’ sexual socialization (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002; Ward, 2003), the theory was originally developed to study the association between television exposure and fear of crime (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009). Moreover, it has been noted that cultivation theory is well suited to cross-national comparative studies (Gerbner, 1977, 1989; Morgan, 1990), but this aspect of the theory has been understudied. This dissertation therefore aimed to extend cultivation theory by studying teen magazine reading and fear of sex in a cross-national comparative manner. Our finding of an association between magazine reading and fear of sex in the US but not in the Netherlands contributes to cultivation research in two ways. First, this finding generally shows that cultivation theory can be successfully applied to the study of teen magazines and fear of sex. Second, the culturally specific nature of the association between magazine reading and fear of sex is revealed, which indicates that findings from one country cannot be generalized to another country – even if they are obtained within an established theoretical framework such as cultivation theory.

**Practical Implications**

The main findings of this dissertation also provide useful implications for parents, health educators, government officials, and magazine editors. First, this dissertation offers meaningful information to parents on the sex-related content that teenage girls are exposed to through reading teen girl magazines. US parents may be especially interested to know that a substantial amount of the sex-related coverage within US teen girl magazines is devoted to the sexual wants of boys, and that casual sex stories occur much more often than stories about sex within the context of love and commitment. As a result of these findings, some US parents may choose to have more open conversations with their teenagers about this material. For instance, parents may try to explain to their teenagers that love and commitment are important components to a healthy sexual relationship, and that the sexual wishes of both partners are important in intimate relations. Similarly, US parents
may be interested in knowing that US teen girl magazines cover the dangers associated with sex much more often for girls than for boys, that the coverage related to the risks and negative consequences of sex occurs more often in the US teen girl magazines than in comparable Dutch teen magazines, and that reading teen magazines was associated with a fear of sex for US readers but not for Dutch readers. Knowing this information, US parents may choose to explain to their teens that, while there are certain risks and consequences to engaging in sex, sex is not necessarily something to be feared and can be experienced in a safe manner when the time is right. Essentially, the findings from this dissertation may serve as a springboard for more open talks about these topics between parents and teenagers, notably in the US.

Health educators and government officials can also benefit from the findings of this dissertation. Considering that the majority of US schools offer abstinence-only sex education programs to young people (Luker, 2006; Schalet, 2011), government officials and health educators in the US may be especially interested to know what kinds of differences exist between the coverage of sex in US and Dutch teen magazines. This dissertation found that US teen magazines offer readers more stories about casual sex, include more sexual risks, and cover more negative consequences to sex than Dutch teen magazines. When placing these findings into context with the type of sex education that is offered to the majority of young people in the US, government officials and health educators may choose to re-evaluate their current approach. Given the success of the Dutch approach to adolescent sexuality, with teenage pregnancy rates being among the lowest in the Western world, US officials and health educators may consider offering comprehensive sex education programs which include more discussion of safe sex practices and contraceptives. Dutch government officials and health educators, on the other hand, may be pleased to know from this dissertation that the sex-related content in the Dutch teen girl magazines coincides with what young people in the Netherlands are learning in sex education programs. Dutch sex education programs are more comprehensive in nature and stress the importance of love and commitment when having sex (Schalet, 2000). Adolescent sex is approached in a pragmatic manner and sex is neither something to be celebrated nor feared; teens are taught that it is merely a normal part of life and should be approached in a responsible way.

Nevertheless, it is important for parent and practitioners alike to take into account that teen magazines are only one part of adolescents’ sexual media diet (Brown et al., 2006). Young people today are known for being more media savvy than previous generations and engage themselves in multiple media from television to the Internet to video games, and often at the same time through media multitasking (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). All of these different media cover sexual topics to some degree (Brown et al., 2006), and in this sexualized media environment adolescents are bound to be exposed to a variety of sexual messages with different degrees of explicitness. This may present both US and Dutch adolescents with a heterogeneous array of messages, which may counteract or reinforce each other. Therefore, government officials and health educators should evaluate the role
of teen magazines and other sexualized media in adolescents’ sexual socialization, and consider making sexualized media one topic of discussion within sex education programs.

Lastly, magazine editors can use insights from this dissertation to create more teenager-relevant publications. For instance, it seems that depending on gender and culture, sexual wanting and pleasure are either acceptable or unacceptable for coverage in teen girl magazines. US magazine editors may want to re-evaluate the content in their own publications to provide teenage girls with a more balanced view of their own sexuality, by exploring topics related to girls’ sexual wanting and pleasures without focusing primarily on the sexual wishes of boys. Moreover, we found that compared to other topics, virginity loss rarely occurred in the coverage of both US and Dutch teen magazines. As most young people today start exploring their sexuality during their teenage years, both Dutch and US teen magazines may benefit their readers by including more content related to the topic of virginity loss. Finally, this dissertation may also stimulate magazine editors to reconsider the role of teen magazines in today’s sexualized media environment. Teen magazines are in a privileged position to explain and explore a variety of sex-related topics in more depth than some other media. For instance, television shows often include sexual content for entertainment purposes rather than educational purposes, and are limited in the amount of depth they can go into due to time restrictions on programming. Teen magazines, however, are a special medium targeted at teenagers and read by teenagers. Therefore, teen magazine editors may consider using the privileged position of teen magazines as unique and important sexual educators to cover a wide range of sex-related topics in more depth.

Future Research

All of the studies in this dissertation reveal the cultural contingency of the sexual content of teen girl magazines, and the potential differences in US and Dutch adolescent sexual socialization. This dissertation is therefore a promising starting point for more cross-national comparative research on teen magazines in particular, and sexualized media in general. One important line of study which can be inspired from this dissertation is an investigation into the production process of teen magazines in different countries. Examining how editors in different countries choose the sex-related content that they publish can provide valuable insight into how the production process of sex-related issues may differ by culture. A similar study could be conducted with other sexualized media, such as television, by investigating how producers of popular TV shows choose sexual content and determine which sex-related storylines to air. Studies such as these would allow researchers to gain a better understanding of the cultural phenomena and norms surrounding sex, which ultimately seem to end up in the media and play an important role in adolescents’ sexual socialization.

Moreover, many teenage girls may have easy access to women’s magazines, for instance at doctor’s offices or because their mother or older sister(s) subscribe to them at home. Magazines such as Cosmopolitan and Elle, which are targeted at older female readers, may publish sexual content more frequently, more in-depth, and differently than teen girl magazines. If teenage girls are reading these women’s publications, the sex-related content
within these magazines may play a role in shaping young girls’ ideas and attitudes about sex and sexuality. Future research should consider conducting a study similar to ours by analyzing the most popular and widely read women’s magazines for sex-related content; exploring whether reading these women’s magazines is linked to certain sexual attitudes in teenagers, and investigating whether the sexual content of these magazines and the attitudes of teen readers vary between different countries. The results could then be compared to the findings from this dissertation to see if more or less sex-related coverage occurs in the women’s magazines or the teen girl magazines. Furthermore, we would be able to find out if fear of sex is exclusively associated with reading teen girl magazines or if it is also linked to reading women’s magazines.

Lastly, analyzing the sex-related content of other media, such as television shows and Internet porn, and then investigating this content within the framework of cultivation could (a) help uncover any (in)consistencies in the media coverage of sex, and (b) help identify the sexual attitudes and emotions which are associated with these media. Moreover, we would be able to find out whether the attitudes linked to these other media reinforce or counteract the findings from this dissertation on teen girl magazines. A study of other media could also help place the findings from this dissertation on teen girl magazines into perspective. Moreover, it could help provide a more complete understanding of the media’s role, as a whole, in adolescents’ sexual socialization.

In conclusion, this dissertation has added to existing research on media and adolescent sexual socialization by investigating the understudied medium of teen girl magazines, and doing so from a cross-national comparative perspective. The findings from this dissertation therefore help put previous single-country research on teen magazines into perspective by shedding light on the fact that one country’s findings can only be better understood when having something to compare it to. This dissertation also uncovered the cultural contingency of teen magazines by revealing that marked differences exist in the teen magazine coverage of sex for different countries. Currently, the findings from this dissertation on teen girl magazines serve as one piece of the puzzle. By investigating other media, researchers can create more puzzle pieces which, when put together, can provide a more comprehensive picture of the sexualized media environment of today’s adolescents.
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