



Exposure to sexualized media content and selective attention for sexual cues: An experimental study



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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether exposure to sexualized media influences the subconscious process of attention allocation to subsequently encountered stimuli. One hundred twenty-three participants (61 females) between 18 and 23 years ($M_{age} = 19.99$ years) watched a 3-min video clip containing either neutral, sexually more explicit, or sexually less explicit imagery, before completing a dot detection task measuring selective attention for explicitly displayed sexual stimuli and a word search task measuring attention toward hidden sexual cues. Results of the dot detection task indicated that participants in all conditions were *slower* to detect the dot in trials including sexual stimuli, suggesting absorption by these stimuli. Results of the word search task indicated that participants in the two sexual video conditions, compared to participants in the neutral video condition, were *quicker* to detect a sexual word in the matrix, albeit only if they completed this task before the dot detection task. There were no differences in the number of sexual words found between video conditions. Our findings point out the importance of studying effects of sexualized media exposure on subconscious cognitive processes in young people, as such effects can provide us insights into how sexualized media content is processed and how sexual schemas are formed and strengthened.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, research has focused much attention on the effects of exposure to sexualized media content on the behaviors and cognitions of adolescents and young adults. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have reported a number of negative or problematic sexual outcomes related to sexualized media exposure, including, but not limited to, earlier sexual initiation, a higher number of sexual partners, engaging in risky sex, and permissive attitudes about sex (see Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012, for a review). Self-reported positive outcomes have also been reported, including increased sexual knowledge and a better sex life (Boies, 2002; Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). Furthermore, in the domain of behavioral economics, experimental studies have demonstrated that exposure to sexual stimuli is associated with more risky and impulsive decision-making (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006; Lawyer, 2008; Van den Bergh, Dewitte, & Warlop, 2008). Less is known, however, about how exposure to sexualized media influences more implicit,

automatic, and subconscious cognitive processes in young people. Studying such processes is important for several reasons. First, they may inform us about possible additional and immediate effects of sexualized media exposure that are difficult to reliably assess through self-report measures. Second, learning about the cognitive mechanisms involved in the processing of sexualized media content can offer us important insights into the underlying processes between media exposure and sexual behaviors and cognitions. Despite the increased focus on sexualized media exposure among young people, knowledge on causal effects and/or mediating factors is still limited (Owens et al., 2012).

The current study contributes to the ongoing public and scientific debate about the effects of sexualized media content on young people by experimentally testing the effects of exposure to such content on a specific implicit, subconscious cognitive process: the allocation of attention to subsequently encountered stimuli. Specifically, this study addresses the question whether exposure to sexualized media content results in selective attention (also referred to as attention bias or attentional capture) for sexual cues relative to competing cues in a sample of young adults. Selective attention has been found to influence behavior (e.g. racial discrimination; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) and emotional states (e.g. drug craving; Duka & Townshend, 2004), and may

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therefore be an important component in understanding how sexualized media content is linked to sexual behaviors and cognitions.

1.1. Sexualized media exposure and attention processes

Several models exist that can explain why and how exposure to sexualized media content may influence the allocation of attention, and, eventually, may result in selective attention for sexual cues. The current study is based on a combination of key elements from Priming Theory, Information Processing models, and the Media Practice Model.

Priming Theory asserts that individuals' judgments and behaviors are often based on existing constructs or schemas in memory (Berkowitz, 1984; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). Stimuli such as media content can activate these schemas, and individuals then draw upon them when making decisions. Priming theory generally distinguishes two phenomena: accessibility and biased processing (Davies, Zhu, & Brantley, 2007). Accessibility refers to the idea that repeated activation of cognitive schemas leads to their strengthening and their rapid availability. Hence, frequent and recent exposure to sexualized media content would make sexual schemas in memory more readily accessible. Biased processing occurs when exposure to certain stimuli affects the way in which subsequent information is interpreted. In this sense, exposure to sexualized media content may make conceptually related information or experiences more salient, and may even cause ambiguous cues in the environment to be interpreted in a sexual way – which in turn may shape attitude formations or actual behavior. It is important to note that the phenomena of accessibility and biased processing often occur together. That is, exposure to a prime can enhance the accessibility of a schema, which in turn may serve as a lens through which subsequent information and experiences are interpreted (Davies et al., 2007; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). A classic example of the priming effects of sexualized media content is the study by McKenzie-Mohr and Zanna (1990). In this study, male participants were exposed to either an explicitly sexual or a control video, before being interviewed by a female research assistant. Participants in the sexual video condition were, relative to participants in the control group, more sexually motivated as indicated by a reduced interpersonal distance between themselves and the female research assistant during the interview, and by the fact that they recalled significantly more physical features of the research assistant and significantly less of what she had said. Hence, exposure to sexualized media content can draw attention to sexual cues by activating sexual schemas which form the basis for subsequent judgments and social interactions (Davies et al., 2007).

In the field of *Information Processing*, it is also predicted that schema activation is involved in judgment and decision-making following exposure to stimuli. Some of these models, such as the Information Processing Model of Sexual Arousal (Barlow, 1986; Janssen, Everaerd, Spiering, & Janssen, 2000), incorporate an emotional or motivational component in explaining how information in the environment is perceived, encoded and, translated into action. Specifically, these models suggest that judgments and behaviors are not only dependent upon the activation of (readily accessible) schemas in memory following stimuli exposure, but that encountered cues are first evaluated as either positive, negative, or neutral in meaning, and that this appraisal in turn determines whether or not attention is maintained to the cue. Hence, individuals direct more attention to stimuli that are more emotionally salient to them (e.g. Barlow, 1986; Janssen et al., 2000; Laier, Schulte, & Brand, 2013), which in turn may activate already accessible schemas through which subsequent information is perceived (Ward, 2002). This idea is in line with a study by Wright and Adams (1999), who found increased selective attention for stimuli depicting one's preferred gender.

The idea that emotional salience plays a role in the processing of and attention directed to sexual cues is also in line with media and communication models such as the *Media Practice Model* (Brown, 2000; Steele & Brown, 1995). A key notion within this model is that media users are not just passive spectators who are uniformly influenced by media's messages, but active agents who select, interpret, and apply media based on their needs and preferences at that time. This suggests that exposure to sexualized media content has stronger effects on attention processes for individuals with a stronger interest in such content. Hence, for experimental effects to have maximum real world implications and utility, it is important to consider them in light of regular media preferences and exposure (Ward, 2002).

Taken together, the models described above suggest that exposure to sexualized media content can result in selective attention for sexual cues by increasing the accessibility of sexual schemas, which then form the context in which subsequently encountered information is appraised. Moreover, this would be especially the case for those with a preference for, or a positive evaluation of this content.

1.2. Selective attention: experimental procedures

To measure selective attention for sexual cues, experimental procedures have been designed. The dot detection task (MacLeod, Mathews, & Tata, 1986) is an example of a procedure that allows for the assessment of individuals' attention allocation. A typical dot detection task involves the simultaneous and brief presentation of two images: one from a category of stimuli of interest (e.g. sexual images) and another from an emotionally neutral category, although most versions of the task also include trials containing two images from the neutral category. Immediately after these images disappear, a dot appears where one of the two images was located. Participants are instructed to indicate as quickly as possible the location of the dot on each trial. In studies in which the stimuli of interest were *threatening* or *unpleasant* (e.g. spiders), faster reaction times on trials where the dot appears in the area of these stimuli by an experimental sample (e.g. spider phobics compared to controls) have been explained in terms of an attention bias or hypervigilance for these stimuli (Yiend & Mathews, 2001). However, attention biases in the opposite direction (i.e., prolongation of reaction times when the dot appears in the area of the stimuli of interest) have been documented in cases where the target stimuli were *pleasant* to the experimental sample (e.g. smoke stimuli for heavy smokers; Hogarth, Mogg, Bradley, Duka, & Dickinson, 2003). These prolonged reaction times have been interpreted as increased attentional engagement or absorption by the stimuli in the experimental sample, which hampers execution of the task, i.e., detection of the dot (Prause, Janssen, & Hetrick, 2008; Wright & Adams, 1999). Such absorption by pleasant stimuli implies that reaction times are even more delayed on trials where the dot appears in the area of the neutral image, because participants will have to disengage from the pleasant stimulus and reorient their attention to a different area on the screen in order to locate the dot (Posner & Cohen, 1984). As sexual stimuli are, at least to most people, pleasant or interesting rather than threatening, the current study follows the interpretation by Hogarth et al. (2003) and Wright and Adams (1999), which suggests that selective attention for sexual stimuli is reflected by prolonged reaction times [RTs] for trials that include sexual images.

The dot detection task can be used to measure allocation of attention to explicitly displayed information or cues. However, it is conceivable that exposure to sexualized media content can, through the phenomenon of biased processing (Davies et al., 2007; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994), also result in an increased attention toward less prominently displayed or more hidden sexual cues.

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