

ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY AND THE MEDIA

Gruber & Grube (2000).

INTRODUCTION

- There is growing concern about young people's exposure to sexual content through television and media in relation to the potential effects on their sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours.
- Researchers have documented the growing prevalence of sexual talk and portrayals of sexual behaviour in media, as well as associations between adolescent viewing patterns and their sexual activities.

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED...

- Although sexual content in the media can affect any age group, adolescents may be particularly vulnerable.
- Adolescents may be exposed to sexual content in the media during a developmental period when gender roles, sexual attitudes, and sexual behaviours are being shaped.
- This group may be particularly at risk because the cognitive skills that allow them to critically analyse messages from the media and to make decisions based on possible future outcomes are not fully developed.



INTRODUCTION CONTINUED...

- Analyses of media content indicate that teenage viewers see 143 incidents of sexual behaviour on network television at prime time each week, with portrayals of three to four times as many sexual activities occurring between unmarried partners as between spouses.
- As much as 80% of all movies shown on network television have sexual content.
- An analysis of music videos indicates that 60% portray sexual feelings and impulses, and a substantial minority display provocative clothing and sexually suggestive body movements.
- Analyses of media content also show that sexual messages are almost universally presented in a positive light, with little discussion of the potential risks of unprotected sexual intercourse and few portrayals of adverse consequences.

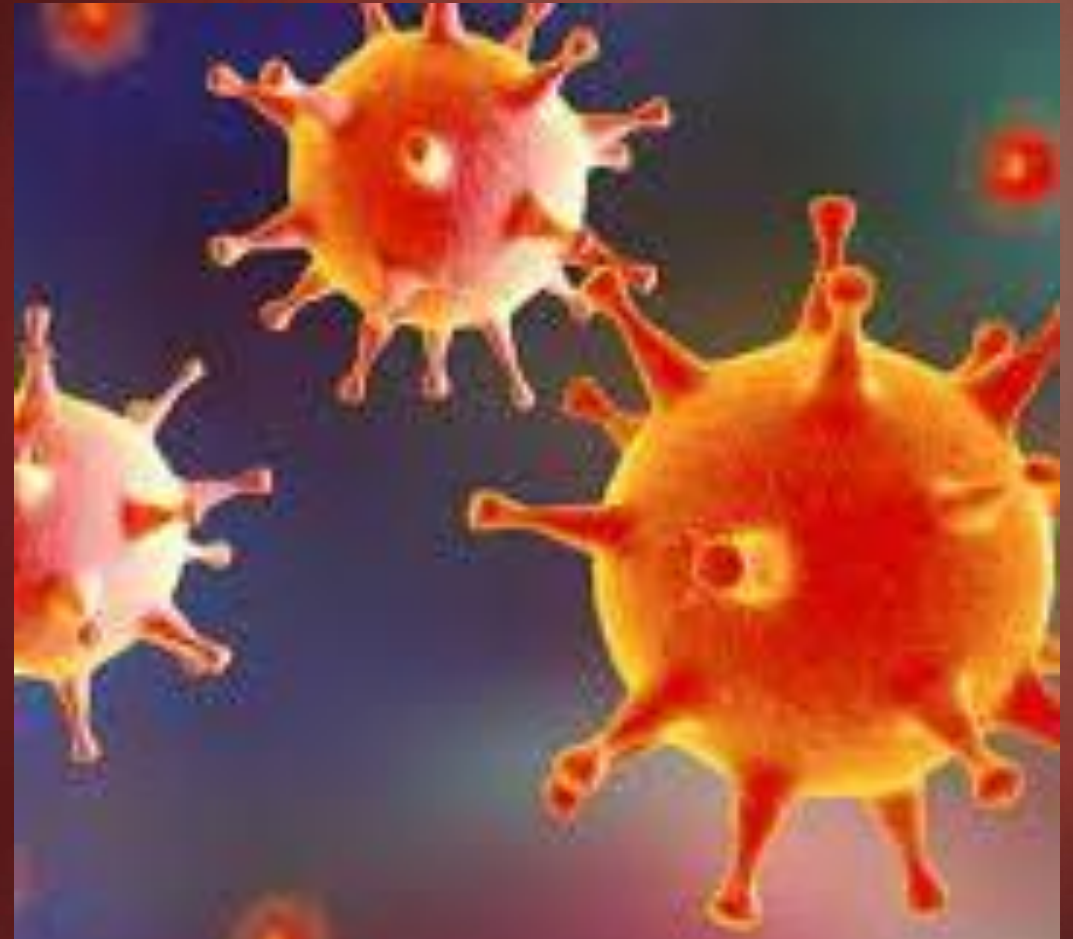
INTRODUCTION CONTINUED...

- Survey data show that adolescents' access to and use of media as sources of information are substantial.
- In a national study, more than 80% of high school students reported that their peers find out some or a lot about sex, drugs, and violence from TV, movies, and entertainment media.
- About 10% of teens acknowledge that they have learned more about the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) from these media sources than from parents, school personnel, clergy, or friends.

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

- Policy makers and health professionals have long been concerned about premarital sexual activity in teens and the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including infection with HIV.
- Nationwide, nearly half of all high school students have had sexual intercourse.
- Research suggests that even among teenagers who have not experienced vaginal intercourse, substantial numbers engage in other intimate sexual behaviours that carry health risks.

- Among adolescent girls aged between 15 and 17 years, 75 per 1,000 become pregnant each year.
- Those adolescents (19% of the adolescent population) who report four or more lifetime sexual partners are at greater risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection.
- Overall, 25% of sexually active teenagers and 13% of all adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 become infected with sexually transmitted diseases each year, representing 3 million cases or about 25% of all new cases reported annually.



WHAT DO WE KNOW?



- What we know about the potential effects of televised sexual content on adolescents is based largely on **content analyses** of media that quantify levels of sexual material and track trends from year to year, including network programming, music videos and X-rated films.
- In addition to content analyses, correlational studies have linked sociodemographic factors to adolescents' viewing preferences and to their understanding and interpretation of sexual material in the media.
- **Findings**
 - Adolescent girls choose network TV with sexual content more often than adolescent boys and spend more time watching it, often in the company of parents.
 - Older adolescent boys, are more oriented to the hard-core sexual content found in explicit music and X-rated films. They are also more drawn to media handheld devices, the Internet, and computer games.
 - Adolescents of both sexes who watch and listen to a lot of media are more likely to accept stereotypes of sex roles on television as realistic than are less frequent viewers.

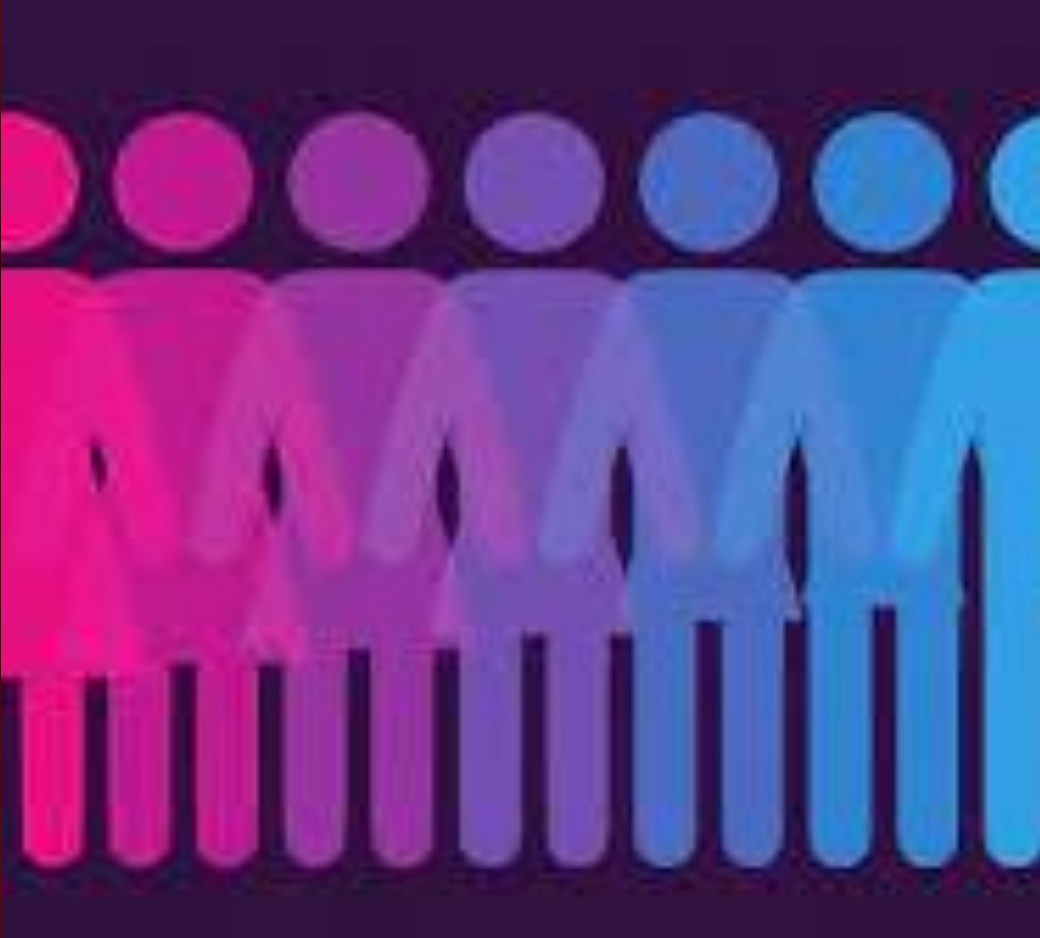
AGES AND STAGES

- Age or stage of development also influences comprehension and interpretation of sexual content.
- In a study of sexual innuendo on television, 12-year-olds were less likely to understand suggestive material than 14- and 16-year-olds.
- Similarly, in a qualitative study of adolescent girls aged 11 to 15, those who were at an earlier stage of physiological development were less interested in sex whereas more mature young women were intrigued and more actively sought out sexual content as a means of “learning the rules, rituals, and skills” of romance and relationships.
- Specifically, they reported that the media provided models for achieving the “right look” to become popular and attract boys.

IDENTITY, RELATIONSHIPS, SEXUALITY, AND RISKY BEHAVIOURS OF ADOLESCENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

(Eleuteri, Saladinob & Verrastro, 2017)

WHY SO IMPORTANT?



LITERATURE REVIEW

- Adolescent identity development and social media
- Adolescence is considered a pivotal time in identity development as young people explore various ways to present themselves and “be” in the world (Sadowski, 2008).
- This phase, as historically explained by Erikson (1968), is focused on the struggle between identity and identity confusion. The cognitive and socioemotional development occurring helps to lead feelings, personal coherence, and consistency.
- To construct our identity, we need an individual's interpretation of context and other mediating events to support healthy identity formation (Kroger, 2000).

- Steinberg (2008) stated that the adolescent brain develops using the following strategies: decision-making, emotional and social reactions, and identity exploration.
- Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by suboptimal decisions, and actions that are associated with an increased incidence of unintentional injuries, violence, substance abuse, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (Eaton et al., 2006).
- Researchers have found that adolescents find it more difficult to control impulsive behaviours when with their peers or if high emotions are involved.
- Examples include delinquent behaviour in peer groups and at-risk behaviour caused by decreased emotion regulation abilities (Russell, Heller, & Hutchison, 2017).

- In a recent review of the literature on human adolescent brain development, Yurgelun-Todd (2007) suggests that cognitive development during adolescence is associated with progressively greater efficiency of cognitive control and affective modulation.
- Social media has the power to influence a teen's decision-making by connecting them to their peers. This can especially impact health-risk behaviours like the use of alcohol and tobacco (Halpern-Felsher, Baker, & Stitzel, 2016).

- Teenagers are able to be connected to social media 24/7, allowing them constant exposure to carefully moulded profiles that project perfected images.
- Social media has been known to evoke anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression problems in teenagers (Woods & Scott, 2016).
- Thus, people, especially teenagers, work feverishly on maintaining their reputation on social media.

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY

- Two fundamental elements of adolescence are relationship formation and socialization (Khan, Gagne, Yang, & Shapka, 2016).
- The latter emerges with the first couple relationships, where teenagers experiment with themselves in a new role, different from that of a child (Catharine, 2016).
- This new role requires greater self-awareness and leads to the development of identity, which is the primary goal of adolescence (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008).
- Today, the Internet and social media represent an accessible manner to discover and explore human sexuality without restrictive sexual standards (Griffiths, 2012).
- In Europe, many adolescents use the Internet almost every day at home and without parental control (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005).



- Adolescents use the Internet for various purposes, keeping in contact with friends or partners and some have used it for online sexual activities (OSA), especially for cybersex.
- Research on OSA among adolescents shows that adolescents actively explore the Internet looking for sexual material, and frequently communicate about topics of a sexual nature (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009).
- While OSA can be seen as a means of sexual exploration, important and healthy in the context of adolescent development, such activities can also be categorized as risky behaviours, potentially entailing negative consequences and experiences (Tripodi et al., 2015).

- Some scholars hypothesize that particular characteristics of adolescents, such as lack of control and sensation-seeking, facilitate the risky use of cybersex, because adolescents do not have enough understanding and development to distinguish healthy and unhealthy use of it (Freeman-Longo, 2000).
- Interactions in cyberspace lower our inhibitions, accelerate intimacy, and produce an identity that may not correspond with the self that we present in person (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013).
- Because self-disclosure is the hallmark of intimate exchange, and because we disclose far more readily using digital technologies, we often experience an accelerated process of intimacy. Researchers call this the “hyper-personalisation effect” (Ramirez & Wang, 2008).

- Establishing interpersonal connections, both with peers and with romantic partners, is one of the most important developmental tasks in adolescence.
- Teens have so wholly embraced instant messaging, despite its perceived limitations, because it satisfies two important developmental needs of adolescence.
- These needs are connecting with peers, and enhancing one's group identity – each of which occurs through enabling teens to join peers of cliques or crowds online and offline without more formal rules.

- The Internet and social media have also expanded the access to sexually explicit content and pornography;
- This increased access, coupled with the reality of teen's sexual identity development and exploration, has meant that teens are more likely to be exposed to explicit sexual material than adolescents in prior generations (Ballester-Arnal, GimenezGarcia, Gil-Llario, & Castro-Calvo, 2016).
- Indeed, a significant number of adolescents reported having their first sexual experience online (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009).



IDENTITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND RISKS

- Technology and social networks have changed the way teenagers interact with each other.
- The Internet and social networks decrease distance and give the opportunity for those who are distant, friends or couples, to communicate.
- However, this immediate communication also presents various risks and disadvantages.
- One of these is the difficulty in managing social networks in a functional way. In fact, many teenagers become addicted to the Internet, online video gaming, or online gambling (Griffiths, 2000).
- This can facilitate such out of control or addict-like behaviours, especially in those who have psychotic traits, low self-esteem, and problems at school and in their families (Munno et al., 2017).

- For the family, it becomes increasingly complicated to control children who are closed and evasive about leisure time management.
- Adolescence is also a period in which young people of all genders feel the need to find their own identity.
- In the past, the teenager had to include their family, peers, and school in their own developmental process. Today, they must also include cyberspace – where it is more difficult to find oneself and where there is the risk of losing oneself.

- Shifflet-Chila, Harold, Fitton, and Ahmedani (2016) collected 128 interviews with teenagers aimed at investigating autonomy and identity in the digital age, and exploring conversations adolescents have with their parents about the use of technology.
- **Thematic analysis** revealed two major themes.
- First, adolescents spoke with their parents about their expertise on using technologies and social networks.
- Another aspect is the sense of pride adolescents felt in their own ability and the parents' acknowledgement of this ability. Participants also did not perceive a need of supervision by their parents, but thought that younger teenagers and children must to be more controlled while using social networks.

Research shows that the use of social networks and technologies is something adolescents are proud of, and want their parents to be proud of them for as well. However, parents often continue to demonstrate what may be a generation gap by not always being proud or even accepting of their teens' technology use (Valenzuela, Bachmann, & Aguilar, 2016).



- New technologies affect the way teenagers see themselves and raise a conflict between the unidentified identity of the adolescent and their desire to be seen.
- This desire can lead the adolescent to expose themselves online (Barry, Doucette, Loflin, Rivera-Hudson, & Herrington, 2017).
- An example is the use of selfies to present themselves in social media and to gain followers. In the modern age, digital performance via social media is a task of development. The number of likes, comments, and followers reflects a teenager's online identity and sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem.
- For example, college students who identify as being more shy offline perceive Facebook as a safe and enjoyable place for self-disclosure (Sheldon, 2013).
- Thus, due to having a higher degree of online exposure in comparison to more mature adults, adolescents may have a higher likelihood of becoming cyber victims (Young, Subramanian, Miles, Hinnant, & Andsager, 2016).



- Another important aspect of the use of selfies is the correlation with identity and social reputation.
- Social networks are becoming more and more like the real world – in that connecting with people online is almost an approximation of connecting with people offline (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013).
- Most teenagers do not send just one selfie, but they exchange different selfies. This method gives a feeling of inclusion in the world, and a sense of tangible presence (Allen, 2015).

- Sexting can be another modern way in which teenagers can experiment with identity, particularly sexual identity.
- Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita, and Rullo (2013) have studied the incidence of the phenomenon of sexting among 606 high school students.
- Their research showed that 20% of all participants had at some point sent sexually explicit photos via mobiles while at least twice that many had received sexually explicit photos via their phones.
- Significantly more males (49.7%) than females (30.9%) reported having received a sext.
- As for the age, younger males received and sent sexually explicit messages more than senior males (26.5% vs. 9.2%). Among female participants, there were no significant differences among age groups.
- Generally speaking, 5.9% of females and 4.4% of males view sexting as a personal choice (Strassberg et al., 2013).

- Over 25% of all participants forwarded the pictures sexted to them to other people while 50.4% of females and 33.9% of males reported thinking that it is always wrong to send or forward sext or sexually explicit photos (Strassberg et al., 2013).
- Among the participants, 26.1% of females and 31% of males declared that it is acceptable to send pictures of themselves, but not of other people. 1.5% of females and 3.8% of males thought that it was acceptable to forward pictures, but not to be the first one to send a picture.
- A small group of participants (5.1% of females, 12.2% of males, respectively) said that it was acceptable to send, receive, and forward pictures (Strassberg et al., 2013).

- Finally, only 26% of all participants responded to an open-ended question asking what they believed were (if any) the current legal consequence for sexting.
- Their responses included things like cyberstalking, child pornography charges, and engagement in sexually offensive activity (Strassberg et al., 2013).
- The low response to this question is particularly jarring considering that sexting can become sexual coercion or cyberbullying when photos, videos, or text messages are shared without permission or with coercion (Gross, 2017).



- Therefore, sexting has a role in sexual violence, because people can interpret sexting as a sexual consent in online and offline environments (Dir, 2017).
- Sexting also can play a part in cyberbullying, which can lead to experiences of humiliation and embarrassment, reduced social status, damaged relationships, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation (Medrano, Rosales, & Gamez-Guadix, 2017).
- In recent years, there has been an increase in new forms of sexual violence and aggressive behaviour.

- Technology and social networks have provided new opportunities for sexually aggressive behaviours like revenge pornography, cyberstalking, sexual coercion, and grooming (Branch, Rosick, Johnson, & Solano, 2017).
- For instance, in longitudinal research with 1320 students in Massachusetts, over the years, large numbers of students reported that sexually explicit pictures had been released without their consent after relationships had ended (Englander & McCoy, 2017).
- Victims of pornographic revenge activity were predominantly teen girls who sent sexual pictures, because of pressure from a guy. The majority of private photos were forwarded and sent by an ex-boyfriend.
- Technology has increased the risk for children to become victims of adults. In recent years, child trafficking has become increasingly widespread.
- Many children are used for prostitution, pornography, and sexual tourism (Miller-Perril & Wurtele, 2016).

GROENESTEIN, BAAS, VAN DEURSEN, AND DE JONG (2016)

- In two **focus group** studies, Groenestein, Baas, Van Deursen, and De Jong (2016) investigated the capacity of teen girls to assess if an online stranger is an adult or a peer.
- Their findings suggest that only 43% were able to assess correctly this difference.
- The problem seems to be that teen girls ignore completely personal questions, and the exaggerated interest in sexual things.

SO WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE?

- 1. children and adolescents are vulnerable to media messages because of their age, developmental status, peer pressure, identity formation and many other factors.
- 2. young people engage with media on an increasing amount year on year and it is their first port of call for information and often social support.
- 3. media relationships are not the same as face to face relationships for a number of reasons, and children are not always aware of this.
- 4. The vulnerable among us are particularly susceptible to abuse, online and even worse potentially face to face danger.