

***Sexy Movies: Why is sexual content in feature films relevant to adolescents' sexual health?***

Entry for the 2016 Margaret Jackson Essay Prize

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### **Introduction**

'One erect penis on a US screen is more incendiary than a thousand guns.'

*David Ansen (1)*

The media-saturated world in which we live is a world where sexual content is constant and becoming increasingly explicit. The mass media - television, music, magazines, movies and the Internet – plays a significant role in the lives of people of all ages, however its influence is especially important in adolescents (12-18 years of age)(2). Exposure to this sexual content has been associated with a progression of sexual activity, earlier age of sexual debut and higher risks of unplanned pregnancy and contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs)(2)(3)(4). The media is therefore an important sex educator and is involved with 'sexual socialisation', the process whereby adolescents acquire sexual knowledge and values (5), and should not be underestimated by parents, health educators and policy makers. Most research investigating sexual content in the media and its influence on sexual behaviour has focused on television, however feature films (defined by running time of greater than 40 minutes (6), and hereafter movies) are important sexual educators due to their abundant and progressively overt sexual material, and the ease at which adolescents can access them on the internet (for example through Netflix®). This essay will examine the influence of sexual content in movies on adolescents' sexual behaviour before exploring the implications to adolescent sexual health in the United Kingdom (UK).

### **Context**

Movies have significant potential to influence adolescents' beliefs and behaviours pertaining to sex. The length of time adolescents spend watching movies per day, the ease of access, the lack of enforced restrictions, and the amount of sexual content are all important in explaining this. A 2010 American national survey found that young people (8-18 year olds) spend an average of 7 hours 38 minutes a day consuming media (7), and of this, about 30

minutes daily screen time was spent watching movies (7). The former is almost the same amount of time most adults spend at work each day, however young people use media everyday including non-work days (7). 20% of media consumption occurs on mobile devices (mobile phones, iPods, or iPads)(7), resulting in media being available wherever the consumer wants (7). No such survey has been performed in the UK, but it can be assumed that the results would be similar if not higher due to the likely increase in 'mobile media' consumption since the survey data was collected in 2010.

Movies can be accessed and watched via a variety of mediums, including the cinema, live TV, On demand, Blu-ray™, and internet venues like Netflix®, iTunes® and illegal streaming websites. Since 1912, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) has been responsible for the national classification and censorship of films in the UK. All films rated by the BBFC receive a certificate (Universal (U), Parental Guidance (PG), 12A, 12, 15, 18, and Restricted 18 (R18)) as well as advice to the consumer detailing references to sex, violence and coarse language (8). Certification can limit adolescent exposure in the cinemas, as they can be refused entry if they do not meet the age requirements, but is less successful at restricting viewing in private homes, due to the relative ease of adolescents' access to movies and variations in parental media restrictions. Around 1 in 4 adolescents report that their parents implement 'media rules' (7), and in general, limitations resulted in 3 hours less media content per day compared to young people with no rules (7). Furthermore, the amount and type of sexual content is important. 82% of the top-grossing movies released between 1950 and 2006 contained sexual content (ranging from kissing on the lips to nudity and/ or sexual intercourse), with this sexual content becoming increasingly explicit over time (3).

### **Why are adolescents susceptible?**

Adolescents are more susceptible to external influences than adults, for example those from the movies and their peers (5). In general, adolescents have fewer real-life experiences, making them less knowledgeable and able to critically think. Furthermore, puberty is a time

of great physical and social change, and naturally adolescents turn to outside influences for guidance and answers. Hence, puberty is associated with heightened romantic and sexual interest (9), meaning that movie sexual content will have a bigger impact in shaping adolescents' perception of sexual reality, behaviour and norms. For these reasons, adolescents are more likely to believe movies are portraying the "real world". Thus the more they watch, the more they anticipate their own lives to correspond to the worlds they see in the movies. As their peers get their information from movies and adolescents are more receptive to peer pressure, movies can indirectly as well as directly influence their behaviour.

### **How does sex in movies influence sexual behaviour?**

Exposure to sexual content in movies (and other media) has been associated with a progression of sexual activity, earlier age of sexual debut and higher risks of unplanned pregnancy and contracting STIs (2)(3)(4)(9). Adolescents identify entertainment media as the leading source of information about sexuality and sexual health (7), and as movies tend to show sexual content that is only suggested on television, they provide a variety of answers to common questions about sexual socialisation that adolescents are afraid to or cannot ask their parents, peers and sexual health educators. For example: At what age is it okay to have sex? Are contraceptives and barrier methods needed? Is it okay to be attracted to someone of the same sex? In this way, movies can act as a substitute sexual peer that adolescents can turn to as a relatively safe and less embarrassing way to learn about sex and relationships, rather than their real-life peers (9).

### **Relevance to sexual health**

As movies have a vital role in influencing adolescents' sexual behaviour and norms, they provide a significant opportunity to promote safe sex practices amongst adolescents. However, movies tend to lack direct sexual health messages (9), as social responsibility is not always the movie-makers' prime motivation and movies showing irresponsible sexual

content usually sell more tickets. For example, *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Parts 1 and 2*, which were both rated '12' by the BBFC, have several scenes dealing with adolescent sex, yet the risks of casual sex and the need for contraception and barrier methods are not discussed. The major plot point involves an adolescent female protagonist who gets pregnant after her first sexual encounter, albeit with her husband, and undergoes a dangerous pregnancy that results in her changing into a vampire in order for her to "survive". This subtle safe-sex message to use contraception is too indirect for the majority of adolescent watchers who are likely distracted by the romantic imagery and content, indeed this movie could be exerting a pressure on adolescents to have sex. Furthermore, movies concerning the effects of unprotected sex (such as STIs and unplanned pregnancy) assume the audience has a basic understanding of sexual health and safe-sex practices. For example, *Philadelphia* (12) and *Dallas Buyers Club* (15) focus on the aftermath of HIV infection, with the latter also confronting the stigma that HIV is a disease affecting only men who have sex with men, and only fleetingly allude to sexual health and safe-sex practices. This assumption may be right for adults, but not for adolescents who may believe that heterosexuals do not get HIV/ AIDS. Likewise, movies dealing with unplanned pregnancy due to unprotected sex, such as *Juno* (12A) and *Knocked Up* (15), could encourage similar practices in adolescents. For example, in 2008 (the year *Juno* was released), 17 students under sixteen years of age at the same high school in Massachusetts became pregnant, with *Time* magazine terming it the "Juno Effect" (10). This effect gained more notoriety when Bristol Palin, the seventeen year-old daughter of the Republican Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin, became pregnant at the same time as the media-crazy American Presidential Election campaigns later that year.

Movies also tend to portray sex in gender specific ways. Repeated exposure to unrealistic imagery, gender imbalance and sexual depiction of women may affect gender-related attitudes and beliefs of adolescents (3), resulting in discrimination that can be very damaging. Women are typically represented in a sexualised manner and are

disproportionately involved in sexual content (3), thus contributing to the objectification and sexualisation of women. This is a particular concern for adolescents who have fewer alternative sources of sexual norms, such as parents or friends, as they may grow up believing in the gender imbalance depicted in movies.

## **Solutions**

Many solutions exist, but they require co-operation between the entertainment industry, public health workers, doctors, health educators, parents and the adolescents themselves. Ultimately, limiting adolescent exposure to sexual content in movies, whilst also balancing portrayals of sex in movies with information about safe-sex practices and the possible negative consequences of 'risky' sexual behaviour might reduce the risk of teen pregnancy and STIs. In addition, it may improve gender-related stereotypes and attitudes. Firstly, sexual content in movies must be recognised as a public health issue. Considering that adolescents rank entertainment media as the primary informant about sexuality and sexual health, movie makers have become *de facto* sex educators for young people all over the world. Thus they need to participate with public health workers, doctors and health educators to improve the portrayal of sex and sexuality in the movies, as well as promote sexual health messages. This can only be done as an adjunct to improved sex education in schools, which has typically focused on the biological aspects of sex and offered little guidance on the relational and emotional details, such as intimacy and sexuality. Additionally, sexual health in schools must incorporate media education, thereby helping adolescents become more media savvy and protecting them from harmful influences of the movies. Doctors would also benefit from media education, and may want to include a media history when clerking adolescent patients. Moreover, the movie industry is likely to support increased media education. Finally, parents have a crucial role to play in educating and shaping their children's attitudes regarding sex. Like in schools, parents must also increase their media education to fully comprehend the affects that media can have on their adolescent children. Ideally, they should watch the movies with their children, and explicitly

discuss what is being viewed. However, parent-child relationships differ between families and more conservative or embarrassed may not converse with their child, who may be equally uncomfortable. Parents could also introduce stricter media rules in their households, including mobile devices, thereby restricting the sexual content their adolescents are exposed to. However, parents should not assume that restrictions alone will prevent, delay, or reduce the sexual behaviour associated with sexual content, and must use this as an adjunct to other interventions.

## **Conclusions**

It is likely that the depth and breadth of movie influences on adolescents have been underestimated (5), as they are generally subtle, cumulative and progressive. Extensive research has shown that violence in the movies is associated with negative social, developmental and health outcomes in adolescents (3), however research on the impact of sexual content in the movies lags behind. Clearly sexual content in movies is a public health issue, and funding for more research is needed. The movie industry must work with public health workers, doctors and health educators to promote healthy sex, however the role of parents and the adolescents themselves is also important. Some movie-makers emphasise that sex is shown for entertainment, and not for educational or prosocial purposes. Ergo, like with the powerful tobacco and alcohol industries, is the movie-making industry the next big battle for public health?

*1925 words (excluding references)*

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