

## **SEXUAL MESSAGES DURING PRIME-TIME PROGRAMMING**

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Television provides a wide range of depictions that help to shape people's knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors. In the realm of sexual socialization, television is thought to contribute to young people's knowledge about sexual relationships, their judgments about social norms regarding sexual activity, and their attitudes about sexual behaviors, among other influences. An increasing collection of evidence documents these and other related effects of sexual content on television. In this research, we consider the patterns that are associated with television's portrayal of sexual themes and topics, focusing on broadcast network prime-time programming.

Even with a plethora of new media technologies at their disposal, youth between the ages of 8 and 13 watch nearly four (3:43) hours of television per day, while adolescents aged 14-18 watch almost three hours (2:43) (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). In other words, despite heavy competition in the media environ-

ment, television still remains the most heavily used form of mass communication. For most individuals, television is unlikely to be the only or even primary sexual socialization factor, but as the predominant mass medium in young people's lives, it has such a broad reach that it must be considered a significant social force. Because almost everyone watches television, its influence is widespread and pervasive.

Many teenagers report that they do not get adequate information about sex from parents or from school during adolescence (Brown, Greenberg, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1993). Therefore, it is not surprising that young people report using television as an important source of information about sex and sexual issues (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1998; Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002). Research confirms that sex on television can influence young people's attitudes and beliefs about sexuality (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993; Greeson & Williams, 1986), as well as their moral judgments. In one of the few experiments conducted in this area, teens who had just viewed television dramas laden with sexual content subsequently rated descriptions of casual sexual encounters less negatively than teens who had not viewed such programming (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994). While such direct evidence of the effects of media portrayals of sex is still somewhat limited, all of the available research is consistent with the hypothesis that sexual content does have an effect on young audiences (Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998; Malamuth & Impett, 2001).

Theoretical perspectives on media effects provide insight into some of the processes by which television can influence young people. Social learning theory argues that viewers can learn "appropriate" behaviors by observing televised actions that are highly valued and rewarded (Bandura, 1994). Huesmann (1986) uses script theory derived from social cognition to help explain the effects of television violence; his ideas seem just as relevant for the learning of sexual behaviors as for aggressive actions. He argues that social behavior is to a great extent controlled by scripts for behavior that are learned throughout a person's development. These scripts can be learned from the media, and can encompass everything from how to drive a car to when to invite someone on a date. In the area

of sexual socialization, one would expect that young people can easily learn scripts through watching television that establish when it is appropriate to have sex with someone or what outcomes one can expect from sexual encounters.

Given that theoretical perspectives and the available empirical evidence all suggest that sexual content on television can play a significant role in the sexual socialization of young people, it is important to understand the types of sexual messages that television presents. Television's influence on social beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors generally occurs through a gradual and cumulative process that develops with repeated exposure over time to common and consistent messages. It is the purpose of this analysis to document in the patterns and portrayal of sexual messages on broadcast network television during the prime-time viewing hours.

Prime time, typically defined as the evening hours between 8 p.m. and 11p.m. (Pacific and Eastern Time), still attracts the largest number of viewers relative to all other day parts (Nielsen Media Research, 2000 ), even given the dramatic increase in programming choices across the day. The average adult watches approximately 8 hours of prime-time programming per week (Nielsen Media Research, 2000). Prime-time programming also attracts a large number of younger viewers. In fact, according to recent Nielsen data, 17 of the 20 shows most frequently viewed by young people ages 12 to 17 were aired during the prime-time hours (Nielsen Media Research, 2002).

Numerous studies have looked at sexual content during prime time. Greenberg, Stanley, Siemicki, Heeter, Soderman, and Linsangan (1993) found that just under an average of three sexual acts (visual or verbal references to sexual activity) occurred per hour during the most popular prime-time shows watched by their sample of 9th and 10th graders in 1985. Lowry and Shidler (1993) found an average of 10 instances of sexual behaviors (including verbal suggestiveness) per hour. Kunkel, Cope, and Colvin (1996), in a study of "family hour" programming, found 8.5 sexual interactions per hour of programs during the period from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. Ward (1995) found that more than one in four of the verbal interactions in the prime-time diet of young viewers contained statements

related to sexuality. Applying any of these rates, a young person who watches one hour of prime-time television a day would be exposed to more than 3,000 messages involving sexual topics in one year.

While previous studies establish that sexual messages on prime time are frequent, past research has tended to be solely cross-sectional at unique points in time. Because of the lack of common definitions or measures across studies, it is difficult to draw precise, concrete conclusions about specific content patterns over time. In addition, much of the previous research has provided only modest contextual analysis, focusing primarily on simple counts of certain types of actions. Research in other realms of media effects, particularly televised violence, suggests that the context of a portrayal may play an important role in mediating the effects process (Comstock & Paik, 1991; Gunter, 1994; Wilson, Linz, & Randall, 1990).

In the area of sexual portrayals, it seems important to consider such contextual factors as the age of the characters involved, the nature of their relationship, the consequences of the behavior, and other related factors that might help to shape the meaning of the portrayals for the audience. For example, a depiction of a character having unprotected sexual intercourse and experiencing no negative outcomes is likely to send a very different socialization message than a portrayal that focuses on the serious range of negative outcomes that can result from such behavior.

It is the aim of this study to address these limitations and to further advance knowledge about the patterns of sexual messages presented on prime-time television. The programming analyzed here is drawn from three separate samples taped and analyzed for sexual content on a biennial basis, starting with the 1997-98 television season, including the 1999-2000 season, and ending with the 2001-02 season. Across all of these samples of programming, we employ the same operational definition of sexual content and apply the same measures, allowing us to draw firm conclusions about changes over time in the nature of the portrayals presented. Finally, one of the major goals of this longitudinal research effort is to enumerate the context within which sexual messages are presented on television.

The following research questions are addressed:

- RQ<sub>1</sub>: How frequently are sexual messages found during prime-time network television programming?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>: What types of sexual messages are portrayed?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>: What contextual features accompany portrayals of sexual intercourse?
- RQ<sub>4</sub>: How frequently are messages concerning sexual risks and responsibilities presented?
- RQ<sub>5</sub>: How does sexual content vary according to the genre of the program?

In addition, we also consider the extent to which the patterns identified within each of these areas have changed over time during the period of our investigation.

## Methodology

### *Sample of Programs*

For each channel included in the study (ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox), three composite week samples spanning the hours between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. were constructed by random selection. This process began with an empty grid of half-hour time slots for all seven days of the week for each of the channels studied. Then across the span of approximately six months (October to March) that comprised the sampling period for each of the three years studied, half-hour time slots were randomly selected for videotaping. Programs that extended beyond their half-hour slot were taped and analyzed in their entirety. Ultimately, 797 programs were analyzed (N=274 in 1997-98; 265 in 1999-2000; and 258 in 2001-02).

All types of programs aired during prime time were analyzed with the exception of sports competition, which was excluded due to its lack of fit with our focus on scripted entertainment programming, which included both fiction (e.g., comedy, drama) and non-fiction (reality shows, news magazines) content. The only prime-time programming excluded during each of the three television seasons studied was ABC's *Monday Night Football*.

All taping of programs was accomplished using the network affiliate stations in Los Angeles, California, though all programs taped

were distributed nationwide. As each program was chosen randomly, we can be confident in generalizing the findings produced from our sample to the larger population of all network prime-time shows.

### *Content Measures*

For this research, sex is defined as any depiction of talk or behavior that involves sexuality, sexual suggestiveness, or sexual activities and relationships. Affection that implies potential or likely sexual intimacy is included. Actual sexual activity or relations need not occur to meet this definition. Sexual behavior and talk about sex are measured separately, with the caveat that dialogue categorized as talk towards sex that occurs concurrently with any sexual behavior is not recorded to avoid double-coding. For purposes of measuring talk about sex, both the topic of reproductive issues (such as contraception or abortion) and sexually transmitted diseases (including but not limited to AIDS) are considered sexual.

Coding for any portrayal involving sexual content was performed at two distinct levels of analysis: the scene level and the program level, each of which are addressed in turn below.

*Scene level variables.* The *type of sexual behavior* was measured using a range of six categories: physical flirting (behavior meant to arouse or promote sexual interest); passionate kissing; intimate touching; sexual intercourse strongly implied (portrayal of one or more scenes immediately adjacent in time and place to an act of sexual intercourse clearly inferred by narrative device); and of sexual intercourse depicted (direct view of any person engaged in the act of intercourse, regardless of the degree of nudity or explicitness).

Sexual dialogue, or *type of talk about sex*, was classified into one of five distinct categories: comments about own or others' sexual interests; talk about sexual intercourse that has already occurred; talk toward sex (efforts to promote sexual activity conveyed directly to desired partner); expert advice; and other.

For any material involving either sexual dialogue or behavior, the degree of *scene focus on sex* is judged, differentiating minor or

inconsequential references and depictions from portrayals in which there is a substantial or primary emphasis on sex. For sexual behavior, only those depictions coded as having a “substantial” or “primary” emphasis on sex were included for analysis.

All scenes that include sexual behavior were coded for *degree of explicitness*, which indicates the physical appearance of the characters involved in the behavior. The categories included provocative/suggestive dress or appearance (attire alone reflects a strong effort to flaunt one’s sexuality); characters begin disrobing (the removing of clothing that reveals parts of the body not normally exposed); discreet nudity (characters are known to be nude but no private parts of the body are shown); and nudity (baring of normally private parts, such as the buttocks or a woman’s breasts).

Finally, when a scene included sexual content, coders also determined whether that scene contained any mention or depiction of *sexual risks or responsibilities*. Three subcategories were employed to identify different types of sexual risk or responsibility messages: sexual patience (e.g., mention or depiction of abstinence, virginity or waiting to have sex); sexual precaution (e.g., mention or use of a condom or other contraception); and depiction of risks or negative consequences of sexual behavior (e.g., concern about or actual depiction of AIDS, other STDs, unwanted pregnancy or abortion).

While it is important to quantify the nature and context of sexual portrayals at the scene level, it is also important to consider the collective theme or pattern of messages an entire program conveys. Therefore, programs were also evaluated for the presence or absence of a strong emphasis throughout the program plot on a *sexual risk or responsibility program theme*. The three categories are the same as those examined at the scene level: sexual patience; sexual precaution; and depiction of risks or negative consequences of sexual behavior.

*Variable scaling information.* In the analyses we employ to generate findings for the study, some of the individual variables described above have been combined to create an index that will help to simplify the presentation of data. Here we provide information

to explicate how we have calculated several basic measures that we present in our subsequent report of findings.

To assess the level of sexual behavior, we report values on a scale of 1 to 4: a value of 1 indicates physical flirting, a value of 2 indicates intimate touching or passionate kissing, a value of 3 reflects sexual intercourse strongly implied, and a value of 4 represents intercourse depicted. Explicitness is measured on a scale of 0 to 4, with 0 indicating none, 1 indicating suggestive/provocative dress, 2 indicating disrobing, 3 reflecting discreet nudity, and 4 indicating nudity. Both of these scales are reported as a threshold score within each scene. For example, a scene that contains kissing and intercourse strongly implied yields a score of 3, the higher of the two behavior values.

To assess the level of talk about sex, we are constrained by the fact that there is no apparent rationale for assigning greater or lesser values to any one of the various categories of sexual dialogue over another for purposes of considering their implications for audience effects. Therefore, we have chosen to construct a scale for the level of talk about sex that considers all scenes that present differing categories of dialogue as being of the same potential weight. We then based our calculation on the judgment that indicates the degree of focus, or emphasis, placed on any applicable talk category. The degree of focus involving talk about sex was measured on a four-point scale reflecting a continuum from minor to primary emphasis within each scene.

### *Reliability*

During each year of the study, judgments about the programming were recorded by approximately 15 undergraduate student coders who received approximately 80 hours of training over a 10-week period before they began to generate data for the project. Data for each program were generated by a single coder, and therefore it is important to assess the degree of inter-coder agreement throughout all phases of the data collection process. Regular tests of reliability were accomplished in which all coders evaluated all aspects of the same program. Reliability was assessed at two dis-



tinct levels: agreement on unitizing decisions (i.e., identifying sexual content within scenes); and agreement on the applicable context measures used to describe any sexual content identified. This framework for reliability assessment is the same as that devised for the National Television Violence Study (Wilson et al., 1997), which represents the largest scientific study of television content yet conducted.

For unitizing decisions, the CIAM (Close Interval Around the Mode) is the key statistic. The mean agreement for identifying scenes that contained sexual content across all programs was 79% for the first sample of programs, 86% for the second and 91% for the third sample on the CIAM measure. The consistency for unitizing (i.e., identifying both sexual behavior and sexual dialogue within scenes) is highly credible given the complexity of the task and the number of coders involved. The consistency for coding the scene-level contextual variables also was strong. For the 1997-98 data, coders achieved agreement at 85% or above on 20 of the 23 measures reported, and no variable was below 73% agreement. For the 1999-2000 data, coders achieved agreement at 88% or above on 21 of the 23 measures reported, with no variable below 80% agreement. For the 2001-02 data, coders achieved agreement at 90% or above on 21 of the 23 measures reported, with no variable below 70% agreement. Inter-coder reliability on the program-level variables was 89% or above for all waves of the study. Overall, the reliability analyses indicate strong inter-coder agreement on measures across all of the seasons studied.

## Results

Most of the analyses reported here are based upon our examination of the 258 prime-time programs sampled for the 2001-02 television season. Where applicable, we have compared these findings to those from the 1997-98 season using the Fisher-Irwin binomial distribution test (Glass & Hopkins, 1996) and independent sample T-tests. Changes over time that proved statistically significant are indicated by subscript attached to the relevant data points in the tables that follow.

*RQ<sub>1</sub>: Frequency of Sexual Messages*

Across the 2001-02 season, nearly three of every four programs (71%) contained some sexual content, either talk or behavior or both (see Table 1). In programs that contained sexual material, an average of 6.1 scenes per hour with sexual content was observed. Thus, sex is clearly a common aspect of prime-time television programming, both in terms of the percentage of programs that include such content and in the number of scenes that contain sexual content as an element.

The study differentiated two primary types of sexual content: talk about sex and sexual behavior. The lower portion of Table 1 presents separate data for each of these categories. Talk about sex is more common during prime-time programs, both from the perspective of the percentage of programs that include such content and the number of scenes per hour in which talk about sex occurs. Across all programs examined in the 2001-02 sample, 69% included some talk about sex, while 33% included some sexual behavior. Within those programs that contain such content, talk about sex tends to be included more frequently (an average of 5.8 scenes per hour) than sexual behavior (2.3 scenes per hour). Finally, the level of talk and behavior presented in each scene can also be considered. The average level of talk about sex within scenes was 2.9 on the 4-point scale that assessed the degree of emphasis placed on sexual topics. This indicates that most scenes involving talk about sex were moderate in terms of focus and did not merely present isolated or fleeting references to sexual matters. The average level of sexual behavior in scenes was 2.0 on the 4-point scale assessing the highest level of sexual behavior found in each scene. Again, this suggests a moderate level of sexual behavior in most scenes, typically encompassing such behaviors as passionate kissing and intimate touching.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the way in which prime-time television presents instances of sexual intercourse, we have analyzed our data further by isolating those shows that present scenes with sexual intercourse from the remaining shows that portray other sexual behaviors but not sexual intercourse. (This latter group, which we have termed "precursory behaviors," includes

Table 1

## Summary of Sexual Content

		ANY SEXUAL CONTENT			
		1998	2000	2002	
		<b>Percentage of Programs With Any Sexual Content</b>	67%	75%	71%
<b>Of Programs With Any Sex:</b>	<b>Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Sex</b>	5.3	5.8	6.1	
	N of Shows	184	199	183	
	N of Hours	152.5	178.5	163.5	
	N of Scenes	810	1031	1005	
		TALK ABOUT SEX			
		<b>Percentage of Programs With Any Talk About Sex</b>	65%	73%	69%
<b>Of Programs With Any Talk About Sex:</b>	<b>Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Talk</b>	5.2	5.5	5.8	
	<b>Average Level of Talk in Scenes</b>	2.9	3.0	2.9	
	N of Shows	178	194	177	
	N of Hours	147	170.5	155.5	
	N of Scenes With Talk About Sex	763	931	903	
		SEXUAL BEHAVIOR			
		<b>Percentage of Programs With Any Sexual Behavior</b>	24% <sub>a</sub>	29%	33% <sub>b</sub>
<b>Of Programs With Any Sexual Behavior:</b>	<b>Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Behavior</b>	1.8 <sub>a</sub>	2.1	2.3	
	<b>Average Level of Behavior in Scenes</b>	2.0	2.1	2.0	
	N of Shows	67	77	85	
	N of Hours	64.5	82	76.5	
	N of Scenes With Sexual Behavior	113	174	179	
	<b>TOTAL N OF SHOWS</b>	274	265	258	

Note: Any given scene may contain talk about sex as well as sexual behavior. Due to the occurrence of such overlap within scenes, the data for talk about sex cannot be summed with the data for sexual behavior to yield the findings for any sexual content overall.

Findings with different subscripts are significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

Table 2

Summary of Sexual Behavior				
SEXUAL BEHAVIOR OVERALL				
		1998	2000	2002
<b>Percentage of Programs With Any Sexual Behavior</b>		24% <sub>a</sub>	29%	33% <sub>b</sub>
<b>Of Programs With Any Sexual Behavior:</b>	<b>Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Behavior</b>	1.8 <sub>a</sub>	2.1	2.3 <sub>b</sub>
	<b>Average Level of Behavior in Scenes</b>	2.0	2.1	2.0
	<b>Average Level of Explicitness in Program</b>	1.1	0.8	0.9
	N of Shows	67	77	85
	N of Hours	64.5	82	76.5
	N of Scenes With Sexual Behavior	113	174	179
	<b>PROGRAMS WITH PRECURSORY BEHAVIOR ONLY</b>			
<b>Percentage of Programs With Precursory Behaviors Only</b>		16%	21%	20%
<b>Of Programs With Precursory Behaviors Only:</b>	<b>Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Precursory Behavior</b>	1.7	1.9	2.2
	<b>Average Level of Behavior in Scenes</b>	1.6	1.8	1.7
	<b>Average Level of Explicitness in Program</b>	0.7	0.4	0.4
	N of Shows	43	55	53
	N of Hours	36	57	48
	N of Scenes With Precursory	61	107	107
<b>PROGRAMS WITH SEXUAL INTERCOURSE</b>				
<b>Percentage of Programs With Intercourse Behaviors</b>		9%	8%	12%
<b>Of Programs With Intercourse Behaviors:</b>	<b>Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Intercourse Behavior</b>	1.1	1.2	1.4
	<b>Average Level of Behavior in Scenes</b>	2.6	2.4	2.5
	<b>Average Level of Explicitness in Program</b>	1.9	1.8	1.7
	N of Shows	24	22	32
	N of Hours	28.5	25	28.5
	N of Scenes With Intercourse	31	31	40
	N of All Sexual Behavior Scenes	52	67	72
<b>TOTAL N OF SHOWS</b>		274	265	258

Findings with different subscripts are significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

such actions as physical flirting, passionate kissing, and intimate touching.) The lower half of Table 2 presents one of our most important findings, indicating that one of every eight prime-time programs (12%) includes a portrayal of sexual intercourse. On the whole, the level of explicitness, or nudity, in those programs with intercourse scenes is not high, averaging 1.7 on a 4 point scale, although it is greater than the level found in programs with precursory behaviors only, at a mean of 0.4.

In sum, precursory behaviors are the most common physical actions in prime-time programming, although sexual intercourse occurs with some regularity. Sexual intercourse, when portrayed, typically involves very little nudity. Interestingly, viewers are much more likely to encounter a portrayal of sexual intercourse than they are to find even a modest level of nudity in any of the sexual depictions on prime-time television.

*Change over time.* Our findings regarding the presence of sexual messages during prime-time programming are noteworthy for their general consistency over time, with just one exception. While a slight increase occurred in the proportion of programs that contain any sexual content from 1997-98 to 2001-02 (from 67% to 71% of programs), this difference did not prove statistically significant. There was also a modest increase in the average number of scenes containing sexual material, from 5.3 scenes per hour in 1997-98 to 6.1 scenes per hour in 2001-02, although this change again was not statistically significant. This same general pattern of slight increases that were not statistically significant also held true for the sub-area of talk about sex.

In contrast, a more meaningful shift over time was observed in the percentage of programs that included sexual behavior. These increased from 24% in 1997-98 to 33% in 2001-02, and the increase is statistically significant. Additionally, the number of scenes including sexual behavior increased significantly over this same time frame, from 1.8 to 2.3 per hour on average. This increase in the frequency with which sexual behaviors are depicted on prime-time television represents the most noteworthy shift over time in the presentation of sexual material during the years examined.

*RQ<sub>2</sub>: Type of Sexual Messages*

*Talk about sex.* As noted, talk about sex is much more common during prime-time programs than is sexual behavior. The study categorized a range of different types of talk about sex, and Table 3 provides the distribution of these different groupings. As we present the findings for each of the categories, we also offer descriptive examples of scenes that illustrate the various types of talk about sex observed in the study.

By far the most common type of talk about sex involved comments about one's own or another's interest in sexual topics or activities (68% of all cases of talk about sex). Conversations in this category could address specific targets of sexual interest, or may involve more general statements about one's views on sexual topics or issues.

Ally is speaking to her therapist about Glen, her latest love interest. Even though she is strongly attracted to Glen, Ally confides that she knows he isn't the right man for her. Taking her hand, the therapist asks, "Would you like to be able to stop thinking about Glen?" Ally replies firmly, "Yes." The therapist continues, "When the attraction is sexual and only sexual, the best way to extinguish it is to go to your—self, with him in mind." Startled as she begins to recognize that her therapist is recommending masturbation, Ally whispers quietly, "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?" He responds with the explanation, "Libido is a thirst, Alison. Best to quench it. If you can do so without him actually in the room, much neater." His final words leave little to the imagination. "If your attraction for him is sexual and only sexual, the means for beating it lie in your own hands." The scene ends with Ally nodding in agreement. (*Ally McBeal*, Fox)

The next most frequent category was talk about sex-related crimes, which accounted for 17% of all cases of talk about sex. This category encompasses such topics as prostitution, rape, and incest.

Two police detectives are in the emergency room of a hospital, interviewing a distraught woman who is painfully describing how she was raped by a police officer who pulled her over for drunk driving. Sobbing, she explains, "He pushed me into the back seat.... I tried to fight him off. He had his hands around my ... my throat, and then he ... he raped ... raped me." There is a brief visual flashback of the incident that shows the woman cuffed and thrown around in the back of a police car. One of the detectives asks care-

fully, “Are you sure he was a police officer?” She replies, “Yes.” Then through the hospital room window, the woman spots a male police officer outside in the hallway and identifies him as the man who just raped her. (*The District*, CBS)

Talk about sexual intercourse that has already occurred accounted for 8% of all cases of talk about sex.

Raymond is watching sports on television in his living room with his brother Robert and two friends. Between breaks in the action, Ray subtly tries to draw attention to his injured wrist. Finally, one of the men makes a joke about Ray’s wrist, asking, “Did you sprain it opening a jar of marmalade?” Raymond seizes the opportunity to discuss the real cause. “Deborah and I had some wild sex last night,” Ray tells his friends. Naturally, the group pressures him for more details. One friend remarks, “I haven’t had sex since my kid was born... Tell me your story.” Ray says, “Things were happening, and it got a little crazy. The next thing I know, we’re airborne. Long story short, this was no marmalade accident... The lady got a little bit out of control.” One of the friends responds, “I got to tell you, I always thought that about Deborah.” The other adds, “She seems to be very animal.” Then Raymond’s father walks into the room to join the group, which prompts Ray to tell his friends, “Shut up about the ‘boom de de boom boom.’” (*Everybody Loves Raymond*, CBS)

Conversations intended to promote future sexual activity directly, or talk toward sex, only accounted for 2% of all cases of talk about sex, and expert advice related to sexual matters accounted for 1%. Finally, comments or conversations that did not fit neatly into any of the above categories were coded as “other” and accounted for 5% of all talk about sex.

*Sexual Behavior.* While talk about sex is more common on prime time, one out of every three shows (33%) does contain some sexual behavior. As mentioned, most of this behavior can be considered precursory in nature. In fact, the most common type of sexual behavior seen during prime time is passionate kissing (46% of all sexual behavior) (see Table 3, bottom half). As with talk about sex, we provide examples from the data that illustrate the various types of sexual behavior observed in the study.

Baldwin, a police officer, and Valerie, a district attorney, have recently begun a romantic relationship. Valerie shows up at his apartment and surprises Baldwin as he is coming out of the shower. He answers the door

Table 3

Distribution of Types of Talk About Sex and Sexual Behavior		
Talk about Sex		
Types of Talk About Sex	N	Percent of Cases of Talk about Sex
Comments About Own/Other's Interests	714	68%
Talk About Sexual Intercourse Already Occurred	81	8%
Talk About Sex-Related Crimes	173	17%
Talk Toward Sex	17	2%
Expert Advice/Technical Information	8	1%
Other	49	5%
Total	1042	100%
Sexual Behavior		
Types of Sexual Behavior	N	Percent of Cases of Sexual Behavior
Physical Flirting	52	24%
Passionate Kiss	100	46%
Intimate Touch	23	11%
Sexual Intercourse Implied	36	17%
Sexual Intercourse Depicted	4	2%
Other	0	0%
Total	215	100%

dressed only in a towel wrapped around his waist. As she comes inside, Valerie immediately launches into a long story about the movie, "Grease." At the end of the movie, she explains, the very uptight and conservative female character finally lets her hair down and comes alive. Then she draws a parallel with herself. "It dawned on me that I have been really wrapped up with work too much, and I haven't let my hair down with you," she says as she unbuttons her blouse and tosses it on to the floor. "And you were right yesterday when you said that we could use a little spontaneity," she continues as she unsnaps her skirt and throws it aside. Standing now directly in front of Baldwin dressed only in her bra and panties, Valerie asks in a provocative tone, "Do you want to get spontaneous with me, Baldwin?" She pulls off the towel wrapped around his waist, and they embrace as they begin an extended series of passionate kisses. (*NYPD Blue*, ABC)



The next most common type of sexual behavior observed was physical flirting (24%). Together, kissing and flirting account for 70% of all sexual behavior seen during prime time.

J.D., an inexperienced young doctor at the hospital, is checking on a rich and beautiful patient, Miss Sullivan, who serves on the hospital board. Miss Sullivan emerges from the bathroom fully dressed, and the doctor asks why she isn't in her robe. She makes fun of him and comments sarcastically that she is going to a party. "I assume my tests are normal or else you wouldn't be chatting me up," she says condescendingly. Fed up, J.D. becomes forceful with the woman. "I'm the doctor here, so put your gown back on, get back in bed, and shut the hell up!" Trying to appear perturbed, she remarks, "No one talks to me that way!" Glaring intensely at her, he barks, "Well get used to it, Missy!" Aroused by J.D.'s forceful manner, the woman stares at him longingly and without a word begins to unbutton her blouse revealing her black lace bra. Responding nervously, J.D. stutters, "I didn't mean to be such a hard ass just now. You can totally wait till I'm gone to put your gown back on." Taking control of the situation, she shuts the door to the room, smiles, and orders him to take off his pants. Ceding control back to her, all he can say is "Yes, ma'am," as he drops his pants on the floor and the scene comes to a close. (*Scrubs*, NBC)

Portrayals of sexual intercourse occur with relative frequency and account for 19% of all instances of sexual behavior (17% of cases involve intercourse implied, 2% intercourse depicted).

Eric and Donna are two teenagers who have recently broken up. Donna is upset because her mom has left her dad and abandoned the family. Eric comes to cheer up Donna, entering the kitchen with a casserole he has brought as a gift. "Look, I'm really sorry about your mom," he says. Eric then starts to reveal his true feelings as Donna begins to eat the casserole while they talk. "Donna, look, I know we broke up, but I still care about you." As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Donna throws down the casserole, grabs him forcefully, and plants a passionate kiss on his lips. After a brief pause, they kiss long and hard again, this time with Donna unbuttoning Eric's shirt in the process. As they break their second kiss, Eric sweeps all of the dishes on the kitchen table to the floor, motioning for them to have sex on the tabletop. Donna commands simply "Eric, in the bedroom." "Oh yeah, I knew that," he says as they rush out of the kitchen. Next they are shown lying tranquilly in bed after having sex. After a brief conversation, Donna begins kissing Eric on the neck. Eric inquires incredulously, "Again?" "Yes please," she responds as she pulls him on top of her in the bed. (*That '70s Show*, Fox)

During a long Transpacific air flight, a 30ish man and a younger adult woman seated next to one another become acquainted and begin to flirt

with one another. Their banter escalates in short, cryptic scenes interspersed between cut-aways to other elements of the plot. In the previous scene, the two seem to sense a chemistry but say nothing suggestive. Then a scene opens with the two of them together in an airplane bathroom, tightly embraced and kissing frantically, but visible only from the shoulders up. There are furtive movements in the cramped quarters and then the man grunts deeply. The couple breaks their embrace and pull back slightly from each other within the limited confines. Then the man pulls his pants up, making it clear that the two have just been engaging in intercourse. Out of breath, she asks, "What's your name?" to which he replies, "Martin." She then offers, "I'm Mandy. Hey, maybe we can get together in L.A. or something." He shrugs her off with, "I'm gonna be pretty busy," and leaves her behind in the bathroom without a backward glance. (24, Fox)

Finally, intimate touching accounted for 11% of all cases of sexual behavior.

A giant party is underway as part of this reality show in which eligible singles try to seduce individuals of the opposite sex who are in committed relationships. In this scene the focus turns to Edmundo as two young women, Hillary and Amanda, alternatively vie for his attention, employing extraordinarily brazen tactics. In a collage of visual cuts that documents their interaction, Hilary is shown licking Edmundo's face, caressing his neck, and kissing him while he holds her tightly to his body and strokes her bare back which is covered by only the tiny string supporting her skimpy halter top. Moments later, Edmundo turns from Hilary on his left to Amanda on his right and begins a provocative exchange with the second woman. He buries his face in the nape of Amanda's neck, kissing her repeatedly. Amanda then grabs Edmundo's nipple from outside of his shirt and pinches it several times to excite him. Next she reaches inside of his shirt and massages his breast and nipple while he grins broadly at the pleasure he is receiving. In a voice-over narrative, Edmundo remarks, "I want the full experience. I don't just want to narrow it down to one or two girls." (*Temptation Island II*, Fox)

In sum, while most sexual behavior seen during prime-time television falls on the lower end of the continuum (such as kissing and flirting), more advanced actions such as intimate touching and sexual intercourse represent 30% of all sexual behaviors shown.

### *RQ3: Context of Sexual Intercourse Portrayals*

Portrayals of sexual intercourse on television provide information about sexual norms for many young people. Indeed, questions

such as the age at which one should engage in sexual intercourse and the strength of the relationship that typically exists between intercourse partners are important concerns for many young people. Thus, we analyzed scenes with sexual intercourse for several additional contextual features.

Table 4

Contextual Elements in Scenes with Sexual Intercourse						
APPARENT AGE OF CHARACTERS INVOLVED						
	1998		2000		2002	
	N	Percent Of Characters	N	Percent Of Characters	N	Percent Of Characters
Child (<12)	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Teen (13-17)	0	0%	0	0%	4	9%
Young Adult (18-24)	10	24%	4	13%	9	20%
Adult (25+)	31	76%	28	87%	31	70%
Total N of Characters	41	100%	32	100%	44	100
PARTICIPANTS' RELATIONSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER						
	N	Percent Of Scenes	N	Percent Of Scenes	N	Percent Of Scenes
Have An Established Relationship	17	55%	15	48%	26	65%
Have Met Before But No Established Relationship	11	35%	7	23%	4	10%
Have Just Met	2	7%	6	19%	5	12%
Can't Tell	1	3%	3	10%	5	12%
DRUGS						
	N	Percent Of Scenes	N	Percent Of Scenes	N	Percent Of Scenes
Use Of Drugs In Scene	1	3%	0	0%	1	3%
ALCOHOL						
	N	Percent Of Scenes	N	Percent Of Scenes	N	Percent Of Scenes
Use Of Alcohol In Scene	5	16%	3	10%	3	8%
<b>TOTAL N OF SCENES</b>	31	100%	31	100%	40	100%

Findings with different subscripts are significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

First, the scenes found to contain sexual intercourse in our sample were coded for age of the character involved (see Table 4). Most characters (70%) engaging in sexual intercourse were adult (age 25 and older). This was followed by young adults (ages 18 – 24), which accounted for 20% of all characters shown engaging in sexual intercourse. Teenagers accounted for 9% of all characters engaging in sexual intercourse. No children under 12 were involved in sexual intercourse.

Participants in sexual intercourse also were coded for their relationship with one another. In general, characters that engage in sexual intercourse on prime-time television have an established relationship with one another (65% of scenes). However, 12% of all scenes with sexual intercourse involve participants who have just met for the first time, and another 10% of the scenes depicted partners who have met before but have no established sexual or romantic relationship. Both of these situations reflect sexual scenarios known to be risky from a public health standpoint (Levinson, Jaccard, & Beamer, 1995). In the remaining 12% of cases, the participants' relationship with one another could not be determined.

Alcohol and drugs were infrequent during scenes with sexual intercourse. Fewer than one out of 10 (8%) scenes featured some portrayal of alcohol, and depictions or mentions of drugs were even less common (3% of all scenes).

*Change Over Time.* As with most of our other findings, the pattern of contextual features accompanying portrayals of sexual intercourse remained generally stable over the period examined. No significant differences emerged for any of the contextual elements involved in scenes with sexual intercourse when comparing the 1997-98 season to the 2001-02 season. It should be noted, however, that the relatively small number of cases involved limited the statistical power of our comparisons.

#### *RQ4: Frequency of Messages Related to Sexual Risk and Responsibility*

In analyzing programs, each scene containing any sexual content was evaluated for any mention or depiction of topics related to sexual risks and responsibilities. Three main types of themes were

analyzed: sexual patience; sexual precaution; and depiction of risks and/or negative consequences of irresponsible sexual behavior.

Table 5 indicates that treatment of these topics within scenes was relatively rare overall. Only 4% of all scenes with sexual content in the 2001-02 sample incorporated any messages about the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity. In other words, only about one in every 25 times that the topic of sex arises during prime time is there any mention of sexual risk or responsibility concerns, regardless of the degree of emphasis involved.

Of the three risk and responsibility themes coded in this study, sexual patience did not occur in any scenes in the 2001-02 sample. Sexual precaution and depiction of risks and negative consequences both occurred in 2% of all scenes with any sexual content. Sexual precaution scenes most often mentioned or depicted the use of condoms.

Table 5

Distribution of Risk/Responsibility Topics Included in Scenes						
Types of Risk/ Responsibility	1998		2000		2002	
	N Of Scenes	Percentage of Sexual Scenes that Contain R/R	N Of Scenes	Percentage of Sexual Scenes that Contain R/R	N Of Scenes	Percentage of Sexual Scenes that Contain R/R
Sexual Precaution	18	2%	15	1%	16	2%
Depiction of Risks/Negative Consequences	12	1%	11	1%	20	2%
Sexual Patience	2	0%	8	1%	5	0%
N Of Scenes With Any R/R	31 <sup>‡</sup>	4%	31 <sup>‡‡</sup>	3%	40 <sup>‡‡‡</sup>	4%
Total N of Scenes With Sexual Content	810	-	1031	-	1005	-

<sup>‡</sup> 1 case contained two aspects of risk/responsibility within a single scene. Thus, a total of only 31 independent scenes were found to include any risk/responsibility.

<sup>‡‡</sup> 3 cases contained two aspects of risk/responsibility within a single scene. Thus, a total of only 31 independent scenes were found to include any risk/responsibility.

<sup>‡‡‡</sup> 1 cases contained two aspects of risk/responsibility within a single scene. Thus, a total of only 40 independent scenes were found to include any risk/responsibility.

The program opens with two unfamiliar characters parked in a car at an unknown location. A 40-year-old woman named Lisa is in the back seat with Patrick, a 16-year-old. Later in the program it is revealed that the couple met while they were doing community service in a shelter. The two are moaning ecstatically and breathing heavily, when suddenly Lisa says, "Patrick, don't!" The young man holds out a condom, explaining, "I brought one this time." Lisa continues to object weakly, but Patrick interrupts, "You worry too much!" He leans toward her, and they kiss deeply. As Lisa strokes Patrick's chest, he tries to open the condom package, fiddling with the wrapper unsuccessfully. Frustrated, he complains, "Geez, is this thing in a child safety wrapper, or what?" She takes the condom package from him, opens it, and then pauses. "I can't keep doing this," she says. Patrick puts one arm around her shoulder and with his other hand strokes her face, murmuring, "That's what you always say." (*Family Law*, CBS).

Depiction of risks and/or negative consequences presented such serious, life-altering outcomes as unwanted pregnancies or the contraction of sexually-transmitted diseases.

David Zachary, an aspiring rapper known as "Diamond Z," has been taken to the hospital after being beaten up in a brawl at a hip hop club. Following treatment for his injuries, Diamond sits in a hospital room, toying with his wheelchair and joking cheerfully with his girlfriend, Ayesha. Dr. Carter enters the room and Ayesha leaves to get a root beer. "Your rapid HIV test came back," Dr. Carter intones, and then pauses somberly. Realizing that the doctor is about to inform him that he is HIV-positive, Diamond shakes his head in disbelief, objecting, "Aww ... no way. I come here with a bum back and you tellin' me I..." Dr. Carter shakes his head and interrupts, "I'm sorry." "I don't do needles, and I ain't no faggot," Diamond says. Carter holds up Diamond's chart and affirms, "You're positive." "How?" Diamond asks. "I don't know but Ayesha should be tested, too," Carter says. "I told you, she's clean," says Diamond. Dr. Carter continues to stress the importance of telling Ayesha about his HIV status, but Diamond still insists that he won't tell her. "Diamond, it is really important that we find out how you contracted the virus," emphasizes Dr. Carter, as Ayesha opens the door. Putting on his fur coat, Diamond says, "This is messed up! We're outta here." He grabs Ayesha by the arm and drags her out of the room as Dr. Carter objects loudly. (*ER*, NBC)

The findings in Table 5 evaluate the presence of risk or responsibility messages as a percentage of all scenes with sexual content found during prime time. Many programs, however, may include risk or responsibility messages later in the program, rather than addressing such topics immediately within the scene in which talk

about sex or sexual behavior occurs. Therefore, it also makes sense to analyze our findings from an overall program perspective, evaluating the frequency with which shows that include sexual content present a risk or responsibility message anywhere within the same program. In the 2001-02 sample of prime-time programs, 9% of shows with sexual content included at least one scene addressing sexual risk or responsibility somewhere within the program (see Table 6).

Clearly, not all programs feature sexual content at the level where messages about sexual risks and responsibilities are as salient. Therefore, another perspective can be gained by examining the presence or absence of these topics within programs that present more advanced types of sexual content. Programs that include either talk about sex that has already occurred, or that present portrayals of characters engaging in sexual intercourse, are most the most relevant contexts for messages about sexual risks and responsibilities. Programs with either of these two types of sexual content are labeled as “intercourse related content” in Table 6. This analysis reveals that these types of programs are more likely to include messages about sexual risks and responsibilities when compared to all programs with any sexual content. While just 9% of shows with any sexual content incorporated any of these important themes, this percentage rises to 25% when examining only shows featuring intercourse-related content.

The data reported above are based solely upon scene-level measures. We also gathered data at the level of the entire program judged as a whole. We studied whether programs containing sexual messages, evaluated in their entirety, placed strong emphasis on any risk or responsibility concern. We used the same three overall topics areas as those used to identify such content within scenes at the program level.

This analysis, reported in the lower half of Table 6, indicates that such program level emphasis on sexually responsible topics is extremely rare. Of all programs with any sexual content, just 2% contained a sexually responsible program level theme. In programs that contained intercourse-related content, where such concerns are arguably much more salient, no programs featured a sexually re-

Table 6

## Presence of Sexual Risk/Responsibility Themes

	ALL PROGRAMS WITH ANY SEXUAL CONTENT			ALL PROGRAMS WITH INTERCOURSE RELATED CONTENT		
	1998	2000	2002	1998	2000	2002
<b>Percentage Of Shows With Any Mention of R/R</b>	7%	7%	9%	14%	14%	25%
N of Shows With Any Mention of R/R	19	18	23	11	12	13
Total N of Shows	276	265	258	76	86	53
<b>Percentage Of Shows With Primary Emphasis On R/R</b>	2%	3%	2%	7%	6%	0%
N of Shows With Primary Emphasis On R/R	6	7	3	5	5	0
Total N of Shows	276	265	258	76	86	53

Note: Programs with intercourse-related content include shows with scenes in which there is talk about intercourse that has already occurred; or in which intercourse behavior is depicted or strongly implied.

sponsible theme. The following example illustrates the type of programming that qualified as placing strong emphasis on sexual risk or responsibility concerns:

Denise, a high-school senior, is closing in on her goal of being valedictorian of her graduating class. In this episode, she interviews with an admissions officer from Princeton, her top choice for college. The interview is unexpectedly interrupted when Denise faints, and tests soon reveal that pregnancy is the cause of her fainting. Once back at school, she discusses her pregnancy with her favorite teacher, Miss Davis. Denise is firm in her decision to keep the baby and abandon her plans for college. Miss Davis



tries to convince her not to give up on her college dreams despite the difficult situation. But Mr. Harper, the vice-principal, delivers stern news that complicates matters further. Once her pregnancy begins to “show,” he says, Denise must be transferred to a continuation school for pregnant girls. Denise and Miss Davis argue for an exception, noting that Denise is the top student at the school. Mr. Harper refuses, insisting that policy must be followed as a deterrent for other students. Denise now stands to lose both her college dreams and the distinction of graduating first in her class. The next day, Denise asks for another meeting with Mr. Harper and Miss Davis, and the news she delivers shocks them. “It’s not an issue anymore,” Denise says. “I took care of it...I just want all of this to be over, which it now is.” She has had an abortion. Miss Davis tells Denise adamantly that she must meet with a counselor to help her deal with the emotional aftermath of her decision. But Denise is too embarrassed to let anyone else know about her situation, and ends up having a heartfelt conversation with Miss Davis instead. Opening up with the teacher, Denise shares her angst. “It was a boy. I wasn’t prepared for him to look real, you know? Two arms, two legs...” She is overcome with emotion as the scene draws to a close. (*Boston Public, Fox*)

*Change Over Time.* Our findings from the most recent sample make it clear that messages addressing important sexual risk and responsibility topics are very infrequent during prime-time programming. In fact, this pattern has remained quite stable since our first sample of programming in 1997-98. No significant differences were found over time in the treatment of sexual risk and responsibility concerns in prime time.

#### *RQ<sub>5</sub>: Sexual Content in Different Program Genres*

In the preceding sections, we have analyzed sexual content across the entire sample of prime-time programs. In this section, we alter our focus and examine individual program types, or genres, more closely. This is important, as research suggests that different viewer demographics are associated with different types of programming. Adolescents, for example, tend to watch mostly situation comedies and dramas (Nielsen Media Research, 2002).

Table 7 reports the frequency with which these different genres present sexual material. Three of the five genres represented during the 2002 prime-time sample featured sexual content in more than 7 out of 10 shows. Movies were the genre most likely to fea-

ture sexual content (94% of movies), followed by comedy series (89%) and dramas (73%). These findings help to underscore the frequency with which sexual messages are found across the prime-time television landscape. While movies were the most likely to include some sexual content, situation comedies had the highest number of scenes of sexual content per hour (9.5). This was followed by drama series (6.1 scenes per hour), news magazine shows (4.3), reality shows (3.7) and movies (3.3).

Table 7

Summary of Sexual Content by Genre

ANY SEXUAL CONTENT									
	COMEDY SERIES	DRAMA SERIES	MOVIE	NEWS MAGAZINE	SOAP OPERA	TALK SHOW	REALITY	TOTAL	
	89%	73%	94%	41%	n/a	n/a	20%	71%	
Of Programs With Any Sex	Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Sex	9.5	6.1	3.3	4.3	n/a	n/a	3.7	6.1
	N of Shows	80	73	15	9	n/a	n/a	6	183
	N of Hours	40	73	35	9	n/a	n/a	6.5	163.5
	N of Scenes	379	448	115	39	n/a	n/a	24	1005
TALK ABOUT SEX									
	87%	71%	81%	41%	n/a	n/a	20%	69%	
Of Programs With Any Talk About Sex:	Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Talk	8.9	5.9	2.5	4.3	n/a	n/a	3.4	5.8
	Average Level of Talk in Scenes	2.4	2.7	2.1	2.2	n/a	n/a	2.2	2.5
	N of Shows	78	71	13	9	n/a	n/a	6	177
	N of Hours	39	71	30	9	n/a	n/a	6.5	155.5
	N of Scenes With Talk About Sex	349	418	75	39	n/a	n/a	22	903
SEXUAL BEHAVIOR									
	48%	31%	56%	0%	n/a	n/a	7%	33%	
Of Programs With Any Sexual Behavior:	Average Number of Scenes Per Hour Containing Behavior	3.4	1.6	2.2	0	n/a	n/a	‡	2.3
	Average Level of Behavior in Scenes	1.9	2.1	2.0	0	n/a	n/a	‡	2.0
	N of Shows	43	31	9	0	n/a	n/a	2	85
	N of Hours	21.5	31	22	0	n/a	n/a	2	76.5
	N of Scenes With Sexual Behavior	73	51	48	0	n/a	n/a	7	179
TOTAL N OF SHOWS	90	100	16	22	0	0	30	258	

‡ Indicates cases are too few to provide stable estimates.

In terms of different types of sexual content, comedy series were the most likely to contain talk about sex (87% of programs), followed by movies (81%), dramas (71%), news magazines (41%), and reality programs (20%). Comedy series also feature the most scenes per hour of talk about sex (8.9), followed by dramas (5.9), news magazines (4.3), reality programs (3.4), and movies (2.5). In other words, comedy programs are the most likely to contain talk about sex and when they do, they feature more scenes per hour of sexual talk compared to all other genres.

A similar pattern holds for portrayals of sexual behavior. Movies (56%), comedies (48%), and dramas (31%) are the most likely to contain sexual behavior. Only 7% of reality shows had any sexual behavior, and none of the 22 news magazine shows in the prime-time sample contained any sexual behavior. While in this case movies are the most likely to contain some sexual behavior, comedy series still feature the most scenes per hour of sexual behavior (3.4). Movies had, on average, 2.2 scenes per hour of sexual behavior while dramas had 1.6.

In sum, movies, dramas, and comedy series are the genres most likely to contain sexual content. Of these, comedy series tend to have the greatest amount of sexual material.

## Discussion

Media effects theory and research indicate that television contributes to the sexual socialization of young people, although the nuances of that relationship are not yet fully understood. Young people report that they often turn to television to gain perspective on such questions as with whom to have sex, when is it appropriate to have sex, and what precautions, if any, are called for. Our evidence makes clear that television, through its themes and storylines, offers plenty of answers.

As with most other aspects of media influence, the effects of viewing sexual content are not thought to be direct and powerful, with a single exposure to a given program leading a viewer to think or act in a certain way. Rather, the effects of televised messages about sex are seen more as the product of a slow and cumulative

process. Because media influence tends to be gradual in nature, it is the overall pattern of messages across programs to which viewers are exposed that is of primary interest for understanding such effects.

The learning of scripts related to sexuality can occur both from observing others convey social norms through their talk about sex and from watching actual sexual behavior. Thus, our analysis examined both such types of portrayals. We found that talk about sex is by far the most common means of conveying sexual messages on television, although sexual behaviors are portrayed frequently also. Indeed, our over-time comparisons make clear that the depiction of sexual behaviors on television has increased significantly in recent years. Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is that one of every eight programs aired in prime time (12%) present characters engaging in sexual intercourse. At this rate of frequency, it would be difficult for the average viewer to avoid encountering such portrayals on a regular basis.

When television depicts sexual intercourse in prime time, it does so in discreet fashion. In 90% of the instances when intercourse is included in a program, the approach used to present it is to strongly imply the act rather than to depict it directly. For example, characters are often shown initiating foreplay just prior to the act, or getting dressed and talking about the experience immediately afterward. Even in those cases where characters are actually shown on-screen while intercourse is occurring, the level of explicitness is highly discreet. Manipulation of camera angles or careful placement of bed sheets are common tools to avoid any substantial degree of nudity. It is not yet known whether these differences in the manner in which intercourse is portrayed moderate the audience effects that may occur.

The extent to which programs devote any attention to sexual risk or responsibility topics continues to remain low. The most basic of our multiple indicators in this area is a measure of the proportion of all scenes of sexual content that include any mention or depiction of risk or responsibility concerns. This statistic has remained between 3% and 4% across all three of the recent television seasons studied. Analyzing this issue in terms of programs rather

than scenes, we see that only 7% to 9% of all shows with any sexual content include some treatment of a risk or responsibility concern. These topics are somewhat more visible in programs that portray more advanced sexual situations, such as scenes with talk about intercourse or depiction of intercourse behaviors. In those shows, the rate at which sexual risk topics are addressed is markedly higher, reaching 25% of such programs in the 2001-02 television season. While this statistic represents a high-water mark for the inclusion of such public health concerns in sexual programming, it nonetheless underscores the fact that sex without any real-world baggage remains the predominant theme on television.

The relative lack of attention to sexual risk or responsibility topics at best reduces the salience of these concerns for viewers, and may in fact exert stronger influence in undercutting public health efforts to address such issues as AIDS, STDs, and unplanned pregnancies, though this is conjecture at present. Greater investigation of the role of media in shaping sexual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors is urgently needed. Given the extent to which television addresses sexual topics and the importance of sexual health concerns in our society, such knowledge is long overdue.

Before this study was completed, most observers already knew that sex on television was quite common. The contribution of this research is to provide precise evidence about just how common it is, and more importantly, to provide rich contextual information about the ways in which it is presented. Such knowledge should be of value in tracking industry trends in television programming over time, as well as in helping to set the agenda for future audience effects research in this realm. As our knowledge of the effects of sexual media content grows over time, it will undoubtedly be more important to consider how sex is shown on television rather than simply how much it is shown. This research provides a useful foundation of evidence as this mode of inquiry begins to move forward.

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