

Sexual Socialization Messages on Television Programs Most Popular Among Teens

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This paper examines the portrayal of sexual messages in the top 20 most popular television programs among teenagers in the United States. It compares findings from the 2001–2002 and 2004–2005 seasons. Results show that these programs contained a large number of sexual messages, though their frequency decreased over time. Most messages about sex were in the form of conversations. About 1 in 2 shows included portrayals of sexual behaviors, mostly precursory behaviors. Sexual risk and responsibility concerns were rarely addressed. Most consequences for sexual intercourse portrayed in 2004–2005 were negative, a significant change from 2001–2002. The findings' implications for adolescents' sexual socialization are discussed.

One of the critical challenges facing young people today is developing a healthy understanding of their sexuality. The U. S. Surgeon General (2001) has underscored the importance of this task as one of the nation's leading public health concerns. Knowledge about sexually related matters that is gained in formative years builds the foundation for beliefs and attitudes about sex that can influence each individual's life-long pattern of sexual behavior.

Parents, peers, and schools play a central role in the sexual socialization process. Yet the mass media, and particularly television, are another important element likely to contribute to young people's sexual development (American Academy of Pediat-

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rics, 2001). Adolescence is a time of great change. As they go through physical, emotional, cognitive, moral, and social transformations, adolescents face many developmental tasks, including establishing their own sexual identity and managing their early romantic and sexual relationships (Arnett, 1995). Considering its role as a central source of information on the topic (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002), television is an important agent helping adolescents deal with these tasks. Indeed, some have labeled the media a sexual “super-peer” because of its role in establishing sexual norms and expectations for young people (Brown, Halpern, & L’Engle, 2005, p. 421). Many teens report that television is an important source of information for them about birth control, contraception, and pregnancy prevention (Sutton et al.); about ideas for how to talk to their boyfriend or girlfriend about sexual issues (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1996); and about sexual and romantic scripts and norms for sexual behavior (Brown, Childers, & Waszak, 1990).

Television’s treatment of sexual content in recent years has grown increasingly frequent and prominent, raising societal concerns in an area when decisions about sexual behavior inevitably involve public health issues. Each year in the United States, one of every four sexually active teens is diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease (Institute of Medicine, 1997). Approximately 19 million STD infections are diagnosed annually, with nearly half of them affecting teens and young adults 15–24 years of age (Weinstock, Berman, & Cates, 2004). In addition, the rates of unplanned pregnancies in the United States, though down slightly since the early 1990s, are still among the highest of all industrialized countries (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2004), driven by the fact that one-third (34%) of young women become pregnant at least once before reaching their 20th birthday (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2004).

Television’s Effects on Adolescent Sexual Socialization

Given these statistics, and the fact that young people spend more time with television than any other medium (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005), it is hardly surprising that television’s influence on sexual socialization is a topic of interest among researchers and policy makers. Over the last couple of decades, there has been a significant advancement of knowledge about the effects of sexual content presented in mainstream entertainment television on adolescents.

Research has shown that exposure to sexual content on television is related to an increase in learning and comprehension of sexual information (Greenberg et al., 1993; Silverman-Watkins & Sprafkin, 1983). Recently, an episode of the television show *Friends* in which condom failure was addressed was found to result in significant increases in knowledge about condoms for 17% of a nationally representative sample of 12–17-year-olds who saw the episode (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, &

Hunter, 2003). Moreover, 10% of adolescent viewers of the episode reported talking with an adult about condom efficacy as a result of watching the episode.

Importantly, exposure to sexual content on television has been found to positively relate to the endorsement of more recreational attitudes toward sex (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) and more liberal sexual attitudes (Calfin, Carroll, & Shmidt, 1993). It has been shown to correlate with adolescents' perceptions of their own and others' enjoyment of sexual relationships (Baran, 1976). Bryant and Rockwell (1994) found that adolescents who viewed large doses of television drama programs with extensive sexual content were less negative in their ratings of descriptions of casual sexual encounters than adolescents who viewed no sexual content in an experiment.

Exposure to sexual content on television has also been linked to adolescents' sexual behavior and the early initiation of sexual intercourse (Brown & Newcomer, 1991). In a recent study of 7th and 8th graders, Pardun, L'Engle, and Brown (2005) created an index for each adolescent known as their Sexual Media Diet (SMD). SMD was found to significantly relate to adolescents' level of sexual activity and future intentions to engage in sexual activity. A longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of 12–17-year-old adolescents (Collins et al., 2004) found that heavier exposure to televised sexual content, both talk about sex and sexual behaviors, accelerates the initiation of intercourse and other advanced sexual activities.

The empirical evidence is consistent with theoretical predictions about the role that media exposure plays in shaping adolescents' sexual knowledge, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors. Social cognitive theory (SCT) is often used to guide both content analyses of sexual messages in the media and studies of these messages' effects on viewers (e.g., Aubrey, 2004; Farrar, Kunkel, Biely, Eyal, & Donnerstein, 2003). SCT addresses the notion of establishing expectations and norms about the outcomes of behaviors through observations of models in the media, and then learning and enacting behaviors (Bandura, 1977). This theory lays the foundation for explaining and predicting the effects of exposure to sexual media content on young people.

Sexual Content on Television

Numerous content analyses have been conducted examining the sexual messages across the television landscape and in specific genres (e.g., Greenberg, 1994; Kunkel et al., 2003). Significant increases over time have been documented in the overall frequency of sexual messages, with the most common presentation—in over 60% of shows—being talk about sex, especially about sexual interests and activities (Greenberg, 1994; Greenberg & Busselle, 1994; Kunkel et al., 2003). Sexual behaviors have consistently appeared in about a third of all television shows (Kunkel et al., 2003), with passionate kissing topping the list of behaviors. Intercourse, most often strongly implied rather than directly depicted, was portrayed in about 1 of 7 (14%) shows in the overall television landscape in 2001–2002—a proportion significantly higher than that observed 4 years earlier (Kunkel et al., 2003). Sexual intercourse is

most common in soap operas and in prime-time shows viewed by teens (Greenberg et al., 1993).

Safer sex messages are rare on television, appearing in only about 10% of shows (Heintz-Knowles, 1996; Kunkel, Cope-Farrar, Biely, Farinola, & Donnerstein, 2001). These messages address such topics as sexual patience (i.e., waiting until one is ready before engaging in intercourse), sexual precaution (e.g., the mention of safer-sex terminology, the use of condoms and other preventative measures when engaging in sex), and negative consequences that may result from sexual intercourse (e.g., unwanted pregnancy, STD contraction). Mentions of such risks and responsibilities associated with sexual behaviors send important messages about the seriousness with which this topic should be addressed. Related to this, the studies cited above found that outcomes of sexual intercourse are not often portrayed on television although Heintz-Knowles found that sexual acts mostly resulted in positive relational outcomes in soap operas. Considering that outcome contingencies experienced by characters on television may serve as important cues for viewers about the likely outcomes they themselves might experience (Bandura, 1977), the scarcity of safer sex messages may hold important implications for audience effects. It may signal to young viewers that the potential negative consequences of sexual intercourse are not meaningful, long lasting, or emotionally impactful enough to justify their depiction on television and, therefore, to be taken into serious consideration by youth.

Although adolescents arguably constitute the most sensitive audience for sexual messages on television, only a few previous content analyses have focused on teens' favorite programs (Cope & Kunkel, 2002; Greenberg et al., 1993; Ward, 1995). Consistent with content analyses of television in general, studies find that sexual messages are abundant in programs most popular among teens. Cope and Kunkel (2002) reported that talk about sex was present in 67% of such programs while sexual behavior was present in 62%. These findings are consistent with Ward's report of talk about sex in shows heavily viewed by children and adolescents in 1992–93; and with Greenberg et al. who found that portrayals of sexual behaviors constituted over one-third of all sexual acts in prime-time shows viewed by adolescents.

As is the case with prime-time programs and across the general television landscape, risk and responsibility concerns and the consequences of sexuality are not frequently addressed in programs popular among teens. Only 14% of scenes with sexual content and 11% of programs popular with adolescents were found to place emphasis on such topics, most often referring to sexual patience, or the idea of waiting until one is ready to have sexual intercourse (Cope & Kunkel, 2002). Three-fourths of characters who engaged in sexual behaviors did not experience any clear consequences for their actions. When consequences were portrayed they tended to be mostly positive, including increased peer approval and relationship improvement.

Aubrey (2004), in examining a sample of prime-time drama shows, similarly reported that about two-thirds of scenes with sexual content did not depict consequences. Of the one-third of scenes that did portray sexual consequences, only a small percentage included physical outcomes (e.g., pregnancy, STD contraction).

More often, consequences were emotional or social in nature. Inconsistent with previous findings, Aubrey reported that about a third of consequences were negative. This inconsistent finding may be partly explained by differences between the samples; Aubrey examined only programs that included characters between the ages of 12 and 22, whereas Cope and Kunkel examined shows heavily viewed by adolescents, regardless of the characters' ages.

Overall, programs most popular among teens appear to include a large number of messages about sex, both in the form of talk about sex and portrayals of sexual behaviors. Despite these high levels, safer sex messages and clear depictions of the consequences that may result from sexual behaviors are not consistently incorporated in teen-viewed programs.

The Current Study and Research Questions

The current study examines and compares sexual messages on the shows most heavily viewed by teen audiences in two television seasons, 2001–02 and 2004–05. It adds to the literature in several ways. First, by examining recent programs and comparing them to an earlier season, it provides an over-time and updated picture of the content of teens' favorite shows. Second, by employing measures that have been used in previous content analyses in an ongoing series of studies (Kunkel et al., 2001, 2003), the analysis reported here affords comparison of the sexual content in these shows with that of other programs included in the general television landscape. Third, this study focuses on contextual variables within televised portrayals that are particularly important with regard to adolescent sexual socialization. More than just considering whether or not intercourse is included in the program, it is important to consider how intercourse is portrayed. The context of sexual messages on television helps shape the meanings assigned to these portrayals and, as a result, can shape the effects that ensue from watching them. For example, SCT would argue that the characters seen engaging in certain behaviors on television can convey important messages to viewers about these behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Also, the portrayal of safer sex messages, such as the use of condoms and other contraceptives, and the portrayed consequences of engaging in sexual intercourse are meaningful, as discussed above.

This study examines the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the frequency of sexual messages in the television programs most popular among adolescents? How has this frequency changed from the 2001–2002 to the 2004–2005 television seasons?
- RQ2: How are important contextual features associated with sexual portrayals (e.g., focus on sexual content in scene, explicitness, age of characters involved in sexual intercourse, relationships between sexual partners) depicted in the television programs most popular among adolescents? How have these changed from the 2001–2002 to the 2004–2005 television seasons?
- RQ3: To what extent are sexual risk and responsibility concerns (e.g., sexual patience, sexual precaution, and risks or negative consequences of sexual intercourse) pre-

sented in stories that deal with sex in the television programs most popular among adolescents? How have these changed from the 2001–2002 to the 2004–2005 television seasons?

RQ₄: What is the frequency of sexual messages in the different genres of shows most popular among adolescents? How have these changed from the 2001–2002 to the 2004–2005 television seasons?

RQ₅: What are the consequences portrayed for sexual intercourse in programs most popular among adolescents? How have these changed from 2001–2002 to 2004–2005?

Method

This study analyzed 3 episodes of each of the 20 most frequently watched television series in the 2001–02 and the 2004–05 television seasons for viewers 12–17-years-old, as determined by national audience ratings for this age group by the A. C. Nielsen Company.¹ Across both samples a total of 119 programs were analyzed. This sample size is consistent with other content analyses of sex in television programming most popular among teenagers (e.g., Aubrey, 2004, $N = 84$; Cope & Kunkel, 2002, $N = 45$; Ward, 1995, $N = 36$). Table 1 lists all shows sampled in both seasons.

Content Measures

For this study, sex is defined as any depiction of sexual activity, sexually suggestive behavior, or talk about sexuality or sexual activity (Kunkel, Eyal, Biely, Finnerty, & Donnerstein, 2005). Portrayals involving only talk about sex are measured separately from those that include physical actions, categorized as sexual behaviors.

Sexual Behavior. Actions that are a substantial part of the scene and that convey a sense of potential, likely, or actual sexual intimacy were coded. Sexual behavior was measured using five categories, including physical flirting (behavior meant to arouse or promote sexual interest), passionate kissing (which conveys a sense of sexual intimacy), intimate touching (touching of another's body in a way that is meant to be arousing), sexual intercourse strongly implied (an act of intercourse that is not literally shown on screen but is clearly inferred by narrative device), and sexual intercourse depicted (a direct view is shown of people engaged in intercourse).

Talk about Sex. This variable involves a wide range of types of conversations classified into one of six distinct categories: comments about own/others' sexual actions/interests; talk about sexual intercourse that has already occurred; talk toward sex (efforts to promote sexual activity that are conveyed directly to the desired sexual partner); talk about sex-related crimes; expert advice (the seeking and delivering of sincere advice about sex from an authority figure, someone who has received formal training relevant to the advice they deliver); and other.

Table 1
Summary of 20 Most Frequently Teen-Viewed Programs
in 2001–2002 and 2004–2005

	Comedies	Dramas	Reality Shows	Movies
2001–2002	Malcolm in the Middle (3) The Simpsons (3) Bernie Mac (2) Friends (3) Greg the Bunny (2) * Titus (3) King of the Hill (3) Grounded for Life (3) That '70s Show (3) Andy Richter Controls the Universe (3) Undeclared (3) That '80s Show (3)	7th Heaven (3) CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (1) Boston Public (3)	Fear Factor (1) Survivor (0) WWF: Entertainment (2) WWF: Smackdown (3)	Wonderful World of Disney (2)
2004–2005	<i>The Simpsons</i> (3) <i>Family Guy</i> (3) <i>That '70s Show</i> (3) <i>Quintuplets</i> (3) <i>Arrested Development</i> (3)	<i>Desperate Housewives</i> (3) <i>CSI: Crime Scene Investigation</i> (3) <i>The O. C.</i> (3) <i>One Tree Hill</i> (3) <i>Lost</i> (2) <i>7th Heaven</i> (2) <i>Without a Trace</i> (3) <i>24</i> (1)	<i>American Idol</i> (1) <i>Survivor: Palau</i> (2) <i>Extreme Makeover: Home Edition</i> (0) <i>Survivor: Vanuatu</i> (0) <i>Nanny 911</i> (1) <i>WWE: Smackdown</i> (1) <i>America's Next Top Model</i> (2)	

Note: Numbers in parentheses represent the number of episodes (out of 3 episodes per show) that included any sexual content.

* Due to a damaged tape, only two episodes of *Greg the Bunny* were analyzed.

For any scene involving sexual talk, the degree of 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.² In addition, all scenes that include sexual behavior are coded for degree of explicitness, indicating the physical appearance of the characters involved in the behavior, ranging from provocative/suggestive dress or appearance to full nudity.³ For scenes that include sexual intercourse depicted or strongly implied, the age of characters involved in intercourse is examined as well as the relationship between the characters (i.e., assessing the longevity of their acquaintance and sexual relationship).

When a scene includes sexual content, it is examined for any mention or depiction of sexual risks or responsibilities, defined as issues surrounding the serious outcomes that can be associated with sexual activity. Three distinct categories are examined: (1) sexual patience (e.g., mention or depiction of abstinence, which constitutes arguably the most effective strategy for reducing one's risk for negative outcomes from sex); (2) sexual precaution (e.g., mention or use of a condom or other contraception); and (3) depiction of risks and/or negative consequences of sexual behavior (e.g., concerns about or depictions of actual AIDS, contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, or abortion). For content judged to fit within any of these categories, the degree of scene focus on sexual risks or responsibilities was assessed.

Program Level Contextual Variables. To complement the scene level variables, an assessment was conducted at the overall program level. First, it was considered whether or not each show that contains sexual content places strong emphasis throughout on a sexual risk and responsibility program theme. Three distinct risk and responsibility themes were examined, mirroring the three categories of risks and responsibilities examined at the scene level. Second, each program's overall message regarding the consequences of engaging in sexual intercourse was assessed. Programs were classified as portraying: (1) primarily positive consequences (e.g., increased social status, improving relational quality with partner, personal contentment), (2) primarily negative consequences (e.g., decreased social status, contraction of an STD, unwanted pregnancy, damage to the relationship between the partners), (3) neutral consequences (i.e., no portrayed consequences of sexual intercourse), or (4) mixed consequences (i.e., a balanced portrayal of both positive and negative consequences of sexual intercourse).

Content Coding and Reliability

Coding was conducted as part of a larger examination of the sexual content on television in each of the two sampling periods. To analyze the 2001–2002 television season, a group of 15 undergraduate students at a large West Coast university served as coders. To analyze the 2004–2005 television season, a group of 17 undergraduate

students from a large Southwestern university served as coders. Training was identical for both groups of coders.

Data coding was accomplished by randomly assigning individual coders to assess programs. Data for each program were obtained from a single coder. For each sample, to assess the inter-coder reliability as coders were performing their work, a randomly selected program within a specified genre of content was independently evaluated by all coders. This process was repeated at roughly 10-day intervals during the coding period. Findings across all reliability assessments for each of the samples were then averaged across all programs tested.

Reliability was examined at two distinct levels and was patterned after the approach devised for the National Television Violence Study (see Wilson et al., 1997), which explicates the development of the procedures in detail. The first focuses on unitizing, or the identification of scenes containing any sexual content. Here, a statistic was calculated called the Close Interval around the Agreement Mode (CIAM) which identifies the level of agreement at coding scenes that include sexual content. The second level of reliability assessment is coders' consistency in classifying the portrayals within those scenes classified as containing sexual content.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed as part of the larger content analysis study and was high overall across both samples. Agreement on identifying scenes with sexual content across all programs was 91% on the CIAM measure for the 2001–2002 sample and 89% for the 2004–2005 sample. The consistency for coding scene-level contextual variables was also very strong in both samples, achieving agreement at 90% or above on 22 of the 26 measures reported in this study. No variable obtained less than 83% reliability. Inter-coder reliability on the program-level theme variable was 89% and 96% and on the program-level consequence variable it was 89% and 81% in the 2001–2002 and 2004–2005 samples, respectively.

Analyses

Over time comparisons involved two types of analysis. To compare scene averages across the two samples, independent-samples *t* tests were conducted. To compare percentages across the two samples, the researchers used the VassarStats on-line computation (Lowery, 2005) that calculates a *z*-ratio to test the significance of the difference between two independent samples.

Results

Frequency of Sexual Messages

RQ1 asks about the frequency of sexual messages on shows most popular among adolescents and about change over time in this frequency. Sexual content in these

programs was prevalent across both samples, but diminished over time on several measures. Roughly 4 of every 5 (83%) teen programs in the 2001–2002 sample contained at least 1 scene with sexual content, compared to 7 out of 10 (70%) shows in the 2004–2005 sample (see Table 2), representing a statistically significant drop ($z = 1.68, p < .05$). In contrast, the average number of scenes of sexual content within shows that included sexual messages remained exactly the same across the two samples, at 6.7 per hour. Thus, while the proportion of programs that contain scenes with sexual messages lessened over time, those shows that include such portrayals contained as many scenes of sexual content as they did in the previous season analyzed.

In terms of the specific sexual content in programs, 80% of shows in 2001–2002 included some talk about sex compared to 68% of shows in 2004–2005 (ns) averaging

Table 2
Summary of Sexual Content

	2001–2002	2004–2005
Programs With Any Sexual Content		
Percentage of programs with any sexual content	83.0%	70.0%*
Average number of scenes per hour containing sex	6.7	6.7
<i>N</i> of shows	49.0	42.0
<i>N</i> of hours	36.5	35.5
<i>N</i> of scenes	243.0	237.0
Programs With Talk About Sex		
Percentage of programs with any talk about sex	80.0%	68.0%
Average number of scenes per hour containing talk about sex	6.0	6.4
Average level of talk in scenes	3.0	2.7
<i>N</i> of shows	47.0	41.0
<i>N</i> of hours	35.0	34.5
<i>N</i> of scenes with talk about sex	209.0	220.0
Sexual Behavior		
Percentage of programs with any sexual behavior	49.0%	45.0%
Average number of scenes per hour containing sexual behavior	3.1	2.1*
Average level of behavior in scene	2.1	2.0
<i>N</i> of shows	29.0	27.0
<i>N</i> of hours	20.0	23.5
<i>N</i> of scenes with sexual behavior	61.0	49.0
Total <i>N</i> of shows	59.0	60.0

(continued)

Table 2 (Continued)

	2001–2002	2004–2005
Programs with Precursory Sexual Behaviors Only		
Percentage of programs with precursory sexual behaviors	29.0%	37.0%
Average number of scenes per hour containing precursory sexual behaviors	3.1	1.8*
Average level of precursory sexual behaviors in scene	1.8	1.7
Average level of explicitness in program	0.6	0.3
<i>N</i> of shows	17.0	22.0
<i>N</i> of hours	13.0	19.0
<i>N</i> of scenes with precursory sexual behaviors	40.0	35.0
Programs with Sexual Intercourse		
Percentage of programs with intercourse behaviors	20.0%	8.0%*
Average number of scenes per hour containing sexual intercourse	2.1	1.8
Average level of intercourse behavior in scenes	2.7	2.6
Average level of explicitness in program	1.9	2.0
<i>N</i> of shows	12.0	5.0
<i>N</i> of hours	7.0	4.5
<i>N</i> of scenes with sexual intercourse	15.0	8.0
<i>N</i> of all sexual behavior scenes	21.0	14.0
Total <i>N</i> of shows	59.0	60.0

* $p < .05$.

6.0 (2001–2002) and 6.4 (2004–2005) scenes per hour. In both samples, most talk about sex focused on own and others' sexual interests and activities (79% and 85%).

Nearly one of every two programs most popular among adolescents (49% in 2001–2002 and 45% in 2004–2005) contained portrayals of sexual behaviors (ns, see Table 2). The average number of scenes per hour that contained behaviors was 3.1 in 2001–2002 and 2.1 in 2004–2005, a statistically significant decline ($t[42] = -2.26, p < .05$). In both samples, the behaviors depicted were most often precursory (i.e., behaviors that precede sexual intercourse, including physical flirting, passionate kissing, and intimate touching) (29% in 2001–2002; 37% in 2004–2005; ns).

One of the most striking findings is that in 2001–2002, 1 in every 5 (20%) programs most popular with teens included a portrayal of sexual intercourse (see Table 2). This proportion dropped to only 8% of programs in 2004–2005 ($z = 1.87, p = .06$), with the shift approaching significance. When programs included intercourse, the number of

scenes per hour devoted to these portrayals did not change much over time, averaging 2.1 in 2001–2002 and 1.8 in 2004–2005.

Context of Sexual Messages

RQ2 asks about the context of sexual portrayals, including the extent of focus on sexual conversations and the level of explicitness (i.e., nudity) involved in portrayals of behaviors. The level of emphasis on talk about sex in scenes averaged 3.0 and 2.7 on a 4-point scale in 2001–2002 and 2004–2005, respectively (ns). Scenes with precursory sexual behaviors tended to have a very low level of explicitness (0.6 in 2001–2002 and 0.3 in 2004–2005 on a 4-point scale). Shows with intercourse portrayals averaged 1.9 and 2.0 on a 4-point scale assessing explicitness in 2001–2002 and 2004–2005, respectively, meaning that most scenes depicted characters beginning to disrobe but did not present discreet or full nudity.

Another contextual variable assessed was the age of characters involved in sexual intercourse. The majority (80%, $n = 30$ in 2001–2002 and 88%, $n = 16$ in 2004–2005) were adults over the age of 25. Only small percentages of the characters who engaged in sexual intercourse were young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 (7% in 2001–2002, 6% in 2004–2005) or teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 (13% in 2001–2002, 6% in 2004–2005). No character who engaged in intercourse in either sample was a child, defined as 12 years old or younger. Ten of the 15 scenes with sexual intercourse in 2001–2002 involved characters who had an established relationship. This percentage changed to 50% (4 of 8 scenes) in 2004–2005. This difference was not statistically significant, due to the very small number of sexual intercourse scenes in each sample.

Safer Sex Messages

RQ3 asks about the nature and extent of sexual risk and responsibility topics in programs most popular among adolescents. Findings indicate that although the samples contained much sexual content, the frequency with which sexual risk and responsibility topics were addressed was small. Only 4% of scenes with sexual content in 2001–2002 and 5% in 2004–05 addressed risk and responsibility topics. Even among the small number of risk and responsibility messages, only about half (45% in 2001–2002) received substantial or primary emphasis in scenes. The remaining scenes (55%) afforded only inconsequential or minor focus to these messages. By 2004–2005, a shift was observed, though this was not a statistically significant change, with most scenes (72%) devoting substantial or primary focus to such topics.

At the program level, about 1 in 10 (12% in 2001–2002 and 10% in 2004–2005) shows with sexual content included any mention of sexual risks and responsibilities. However, teen-viewed shows devoted greater attention to risk topics in programs with more advanced types of sexual situations (i.e., intercourse-related content, de-

fined as shows that include conversations about sexual intercourse that had taken place in the past and/or portrayals of intercourse acts), with 45% ($n = 5$, 2001–2002) and 25% ($n = 3$, 2004–2005) engaging such concerns. This recent drop in the proportion of shows with such messages was large but not statistically significant and should be interpreted with caution due to the very small number of cases observed.

Further, shows were identified that incorporated sexual risk and responsibility as a major theme. Only 4% (2001–2002) or 5% (2004–2005) of programs most popular among teens placed a strong emphasis on such a theme. However, of shows with sexual intercourse–related content, 18% (2001–2002) or 17% (2004–2005) placed a primary emphasis on risk and responsibility concerns.

Frequency of Sexual Messages in Different Genres

To answer RQ4, this study also examined differences in sexual content across genres. Among the top 20 most heavily viewed shows by teenagers, represented genres included comedies, dramas, and reality-based shows. The 2001–2002 season also included movies, though this genre was not represented in the 2004–2005 season. Changes in viewing preferences over the years as well as changes in program availability may lead to changes in the generic composition of the samples, underlying differences in sexual messages between the two seasons. Most notably, there were more comedy shows and fewer reality-based programs in 2001–2002 relative to 2004–2005. In 2001–2002, 12 (60%) of the top teen-viewed shows were comedies and only 4 (20%) were reality-based programs. In contrast, in 2004–2005, 7 (35%) shows were reality-based and only 5 (25%) were comedies (see Table 1). Comedies included sexual content more often than reality programs (see Table 1); 94% of comedies included sexual content in all 3 episodes sampled whereas only 9% of reality shows did the same. No differences across genres are statistically significant due to the small number of shows within each genre.

In examining genres more closely, similar trends in sexual content appear across both samples. As will be detailed below, talk about sex and sexual behaviors were more common in comedies and dramas than in reality-based shows. Sexual risk and responsibility concerns were more common in dramas than in comedies and reality-based shows. However, none of these differences across genres were statistically significant, as revealed by chi-square analyses, likely due to the small number of shows in each genre.

Talk about sex is frequent in both comedies (94% and 100% of shows in 2001–2002 and 2004–2005, respectively) and dramas (67% and 83% of shows) and less so in reality shows (50% and 29% of episodes in 2001–2002 and 2004–2005, respectively). A similar pattern was observed with regard to portrayals of sexual behaviors. Comedies include these most often (63% and 60% of episodes in 2001–2002 and 2004–2005, respectively), followed by drama shows (44% and 58%), and then reality shows, which include sexual behaviors in only 17% and 19% of shows in

2001–2002 and 2004–2005, respectively. Intercourse portrayals, though not frequent within any genre, appeared most frequently in comedies (29% in 2001–2002, 7% in 2004–2005) and dramas (22% and 17% in 2001–2002 and 2004–2005, respectively). No episode of reality shows included such portrayals. Finally, none of the reality-based show episodes in either season included any mention of sexual risks and responsibilities. Though no comedies included risk and responsibility messages in 2004–05, 9% of comedies in 2001–2002 incorporated such issues. Only dramas consistently included these topics (33% and 17% of shows in 2001–2002 and 2004–2005, respectively).

Consequences of Sexual Intercourse

RQ5 asks about the consequences of sexual intercourse in the shows most popular among adolescents and the change over time in their portrayal. This program-level variable was examined in shows that are considered most relevant to the discussion of sexual consequences: those which include talk about sexual intercourse that had previously occurred and/or portrayal of sexual intercourse depicted or strongly implied ($n = 17$ in 2001–2002; $n = 12$ in 2004–2005).

Overall, some shifts were observed in the depiction of consequences of sexual intercourse between the two samples. Specifically, positive consequences of intercourse were depicted in 2 shows (12%) with intercourse-related content in 2001–2002 but not at all in 2004–2005. In contrast, 5 programs (29%) depicted negative consequences of intercourse in 2001–2002, whereas 8 programs (67%) depicted negative consequences in 2004–2005, representing a statistically significant shift ($z = -1.99, p < .05$). In 2001–2002, 58% of programs that included sexual intercourse-related content portrayed either mixed consequences of intercourse (7 shows, 41%) or no consequences at all (3 shows, 18%). In contrast, in 2004–2005, no program presented mixed consequences and 4 shows (33%) presented no consequences at all. Overall, the slight trend seems to be in the direction of portraying less positive and mixed consequences of sexual intercourse on shows popular among teens and portraying more clearly negative consequences of this behavior.

Discussion

This study presents the results of a content analysis of sexual messages in the shows most popular among teenagers in the United States. Overall, the findings make it clear that the shows most heavily viewed by adolescents have very high levels of sexual content, a finding consistent with previous studies (Cope & Kunkel, 2002). Though numbers of sexual messages in these programs remain high, their frequency declined in some, though not all, of the content areas assessed. But even where statistically significant reductions were observed, their practical implications for effects seem less meaningful as the overall frequency of sexual messages on

television remains very high, with 70% of the top 20 most popular shows among teens including such content.

Moreover, a more responsible presentation style is observed on some fronts, such as the fact that fewer young characters engage in sexual intercourse and there is more consideration of the negative consequences that may result from engaging in sexual intercourse. Still, there is only minimal inclusion of messages about the risks and responsibilities associated with sexual behavior in these shows. Thus, it seems that though the frequency of sexual messages has decreased, there is still a large number of messages about sex on programs that teens watch most often while at the same time there is little portrayal of messages about the sexual risks and responsibilities associated with these behaviors. The frequency and context of sexual portrayals have important implications for effects on young audience members, as will be discussed below.

Modest downward shifts have been observed in the percentage of shows that include both conversations about sex and portrayals of sexual behaviors. The majority of messages about sex on teen-viewed shows are in the form of conversations about sex, especially about sexual interests and/or activities. These conversations tend to receive a substantial focus within scenes. About 1 in every 2 teen programs includes at least some portrayal of sexual behavior, most commonly precursory (rather than intercourse) behavior, and especially passionate kissing. These behaviors are characterized by very low levels of explicitness. The average number of scenes with precursory behaviors in programs significantly dropped from 2001–2002 to 2004–2005.

A noteworthy difference over time in this study is the finding that the frequency of programs with sexual intercourse dropped significantly from 1 in 5 (20%) in 2001–2002 to about 1 in 12 (8%) in 2004–2005. A likely explanation for this reduction may be found in the shifting popularity of television program genres. In 2001–02, the list of the top 20 programs viewed by teenagers was dominated by comedies and dramas, with few reality-based programs. In 2004–05, the proportion of reality-based programs tripled, representing 30% of the sample. Comedies and dramas have among the highest rates of sexual content across all genres while reality programs have the lowest rate (Kunkel et al., 2005). Moreover, reality shows in this study tended to include less intercourse portrayals than drama and comedy shows, though the number of shows involved was insufficient to establish statistical significance. Considering the increased popularity of reality-based programs in 2004–05, it is not surprising that the frequency of sexual content has declined in the shows most heavily viewed by teens. The shift in teenage viewing behavior may result in slightly less exposure to sexual messages, particularly intercourse portrayals, than was common a few years ago. Nonetheless, the norms for sexual messages in the most popular teen programs remain at high levels overall.

Like previous investigations (Cope & Kunkel, 2002), this study observed that most characters engaged in sexual intercourse have an established relationship. The people most often portrayed as engaging in intercourse are age 25 or older and only very few of the characters engaging in this behavior are teens or young adults. This pattern suggests that in programs which teens watch most often, they are not very likely to en-

counter characters engaging in sexual intercourse who are similar to themselves in age. Though the role of age in eliciting attention and enhancing relationships with mediated characters has not been thoroughly researched, there is evidence to suggest that similarity between viewer and character in demographic aspects, such as gender, as well as in traits (e.g., aggressiveness) can lead to increased identification and parasocial interaction with the character (e.g., Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Feilitzen & Linne, 1975). Following these findings, as well as theoretical predictions that similarity between viewer and character would increase the likelihood of attention paid to the screen and subsequent effects (Bandura, 1977), it is possible that portrayals of intercourse between individuals older than 25 years of age are less likely than portrayals involving younger characters to bring about sexual knowledge acquisition and the imitation of the behavior by teens.

However, it is also possible that characters older than 25 years of age who engage in sexual intercourse can serve as role models whom young viewers aspire to emulate. Through engaging in wishful identification, portrayals of older individuals and their behaviors will draw the attention of young viewers. Wishful identification has been defined as a desire to act like, or imitate, mediated characters (Hoffner, 1996). Wishful identification has been found to take place in both children (Hoffner, 1996) and young adults (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005) and is impacted by demographic aspects, specifically, gender, but also by other attributes of the characters, such as their level of success, intelligence, attractiveness, and attitudes. Future research should examine more closely the attributes of characters who engage in sexual intercourse, beyond their age and relational status, to more precisely tap into their likelihood of impacting young viewers.

The use of the same measures to assess sexual televised messages in this study allows for a comparison of the findings with those reported by Kunkel et al. (2005) with regard to the overall television landscape. Importantly, the top 20 shows most heavily viewed by teenagers had a higher incidence of sexual messages (83%) in 2001–2002 than those reported by Kunkel et al. for television overall (64%). In 2004–2005, the samples had an equal proportion of shows with sexual content (70%). In both years, heavily viewed teen shows had a higher average number of scenes per hour that included sexual messages (e.g., 2004–2005: teen shows—6.7, overall television sample—5.0). Similar comparisons emerge when evaluating the overall television landscape and teen-viewed shows on the extent of talk about sex included in their programs.

Teen-preferred shows outnumbered or were nearly equal to the overall television landscape in the proportion of shows that included portrayals of sexual behaviors (Kunkel et al., 2005). This was true for precursory behaviors (2004–2005: teen sample—37%, overall television landscape—24%) and for intercourse acts (2004–2005: teen sample—8%, overall television—11%). The context of sexual intercourse portrayals—mostly presenting adult characters who are in established relationships—was the same across both groups of shows. Overall, then, teen-viewed shows include as much or more sexual content as other shows on television.

In terms of the change over time in the treatment of sexual risk and responsibility concerns in the programs most heavily viewed by teens, there is very little change in the proportion of scenes or programs that include any risk messages. They are included in only about 10% of shows and less than 20% of scenes in each of the samples. Similarly, modest shifts were observed in the percentage of shows that place a primary emphasis on such topics. Only few shows with any sexual content (4% in 2001–2002, 5% in 2004–2005) placed such an emphasis. This is an important finding considering the role that television is likely to play in disseminating information to teenagers about safer sex issues. Because these are sensitive topics that young people are often embarrassed to discuss, and because teenagers look to sources of authority and credibility with regard to such information (e.g., Selverstone, 1992), television is likely to be an important source of information for adolescents about such issues.

A more overt change was identified in the frequency of sexual risk messages in teen-viewed programs that include intercourse-related content. These programs exhibited a drop from 45% of all programs sampled in 2001–2002 to just 25% of shows in 2004–2005. This drop was not statistically significant and should be interpreted with caution due to the very small number of programs being compared. In 2001–2002, the emphasis placed on such topics within scenes tended to be mostly inconsequential to minor but there has been a slight move toward placing greater emphasis on these topics in over 70% of shows in 2004–2005. In a different analysis, the researchers examined programs with intercourse-related content and found that nearly 1 in 5 place a primary emphasis on risk and responsibility concerns in each of the two samples examined in this study.

In comparing these findings with those reported by Kunkel et al. (2005) for the overall television landscape, the researchers find that teen-viewed shows include more messages about sexual risks and responsibilities in programs that contain intercourse-related content in 2001–2002 as compared to television overall (45% and 26%, respectively), though the two groups were more similar in 2004–2005 (25% and 27%, respectively). Teen shows outperformed other shows when it came to placing a primary emphasis on a theme of risks and responsibilities, especially in shows with intercourse-related content. For example, in 2004–2005, 18% of teen-viewed shows placed such an emphasis whereas none of the shows in the overall television landscape did. Teen-viewed shows, then, are equal in, or exceed, the frequency with which they include sexual messages as compared with television, in general, but they fare slightly better in placing an emphasis on such topics in shows with intercourse-related content (Kunkel et al., 2005).

Finally, when considering the consequences of sexual intercourse as they are portrayed in teen-viewed shows, the small number of positive consequences portrayed for sexual intercourse in 2001–2002 has declined so that no programs portrayed positive or mixed consequences in 2004–2005. In contrast, there has been a statistically significant increase in the number of negative consequences portrayed for this behavior between 2001–2002 and 2004–2005. Fewer programs in 2004–05, as compared to 2001–02, portray no consequences for sexual intercourse.

The study's findings are consistent with previous research on teen-viewed programs. Cope and Kunkel's (2002) findings that the majority of characters engaged in sexual intercourse did not experience any clear consequences for their behavior are consistent with the findings from the 2001–2002 sample. The findings regarding consequences from the 2004–2005 season are in line with those reported by Aubrey (2004), who found clearly depicted consequences were mostly negative. It may be, then, that the change we find in 2004–2005 reflects transformations that have taken place in the 3 years of programming. That is, television producers may have augmented the incorporation of clear consequences of sexual intercourse.

From an effects perspective, consequences to behaviors play an important role in the social learning process (Bandura, 1977) and thus hold critical implications for television's sexual socialization influences on young people. Bandura specified that positive, negative, and neutral consequences are likely to have specific influences on audience members' learning of social behaviors and norms. These effects were established in media violence research (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961), as well as in the realm of pornography (Malamuth & Check, 1985) and media effects on body image disorder and eating disorder (Harrison & Cantor, 1997), among other topic areas. For example, Harrison and Cantor explained a positive association between exposure to magazines and women's drive for thinness based on the fact that thinness is often linked with positive rewards or consequences for characters (e.g., personal success, higher social status), thereby enhancing the drive to obtain the same physique in viewers. In the realm of sexual media content, there has thus far been only minimal examination of the role of portrayed consequences to these behaviors on television with mixed support (Eyal & Kunkel, 2005). Further examination of the effects of consequences associated with sexual activity is warranted.

In conclusion, teenagers are exposed to a considerable amount of sexual content in the shows they view most frequently. This frequency has been significantly reduced between 2001–2002 and 2004–2005, but continues to be high. What remains stable across the samples is the fact that the likelihood of encountering sexual risk and responsibility messages in these programs is small, except in programs that include intercourse-related content. However, over the past several years, even in these programs there seems to be a slight reduction in the number of risk and responsibility messages. When encountering messages about sexual intercourse on the programs they view most often, teenagers in 2004–2005 are more likely to see negative consequences portrayed for this behavior than in 2001–2002, a potentially critical factor in subsequent outcomes.

Considering the importance of television as an agent of sexual socialization and as a source to which adolescents turn to learn about sex and sexuality, the findings from this study may carry important implications for subsequent effects. The fact that adolescents may be exposed to very high levels of sexual content in the most popular programs but to only few messages about the risks and responsibilities associated with sexual behavior may contribute to an unrealistic perception about the dangerous outcomes of sexual activity and a relative lack of concern with sexual health risks. Future

research should continue to examine the link between the content patterns and contextual elements identified in studies such as this and subsequent effects on young audience members.

Notes

¹The programs sampled reflect the top 20 most popular shows among teens ages 12–17 according to Nielsen ratings for each season examined. Ratings were season cumes: for 2001–2002 they are for the period of September 24, 2001–May 17, 2002; for 2004–2005 they are for the period of September 20, 2004–April 3, 2005. The sampling strategy resulted in the collection of 59 programs for the 2001–2002 sample (one tape was inadvertently damaged and could not be recovered) and 60 programs for the 2004–2005 sample.

²The scales for levels of sexual talk and behavior in scenes were constructed from the following categories: 1 = Inconsequential focus; 2 = Minor focus; 3 = Substantial focus; 4 = Primary focus.

³The scale for sexual explicitness in scenes was constructed from the following categories: 0 = No explicitness; 1 = Provocative dress or appearance (attire alone reflects a strong effort to flaunt one's sexuality); 2 = Characters begin disrobing (the removing of clothing that reveals parts of the body not normally exposed); 3 = Discreet nudity (characters are known to be nude but no private parts of the body are shown); 4 = Nudity (barring of normally private parts).

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