

The Portrayal of Sexual Intercourse on Prime-Time Programming

Keren Eyal & Keli Finnerty

This study examines portrayals of acts and consequences of sexual intercourse on prime-time television programs. Results indicate that few types of consequences of intercourse are presented, headed by emotional outcomes. Both acts of intercourse and their consequences receive only minimal focus within programs. Consequences are nearly equally positively and negatively valenced, but have a slight leaning toward being portrayed as transient and emotionally insignificant. Movies include the greatest number of acts of sexual intercourse and the most consequences for this behavior. Generic differences are also identified in the contextual presentation of consequences. Findings are discussed in light of effects on viewers.

Keywords: Content Analysis; Prime-Time; Sexual Content; Television

Characterizing the patterns of portrayals of sexual messages on television is a crucial task facing communication scholars, especially considering the scientific evidence regarding the effects of such messages on audience members. This study reports on a content analysis of sexual intercourse portrayals on prime-time television shows. It examines the consequences portrayed for this behavior as well as important contextual elements in these portrayals, including the consequences' valence, duration of impact, extent of emotional impact, and emphasis placed on them within shows.

A growing body of research has established that exposure to high amounts of televised sexual content contributes to viewers' perceptions about sex and sexual behaviors (e.g., Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Causal links have been found between

Keren Eyal (PhD, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2004) is a Lecturer in the Sammy Ofer School of Communications at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel. This research was conducted while Keren Eyal was Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Arizona. Keli Finnerty (MA, Pepperdine University, 2003) is a Doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Arizona. *Correspondence:* Keren Eyal, Sammy Ofer School of Communications, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Israel. E-mail: keyal@idc.ac.il

contextual elements in televised sexual portrayals, such as the inclusion of safer sex messages, and outcomes such as knowledge about contraception (Collins, Elliot, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003). The high, albeit declining, rates of teen pregnancies in the United States (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2004) and contraction of AIDS/HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases among youths (Fox, 2004) make it important to examine televised portrayals of sexual intercourse and their effects on viewers.

Theoretical perspectives such as social cognitive theory (SCT) account for the role of television in viewers' socialization, including in the realm of sex. SCT (Bandura, 1977) argues that television viewers learn the norms and expectations associated with behaviors as well as what outcomes can potentially result from them. Attitudes consistent with such expectations are likely to be fostered in viewers, and these in turn may shape behaviors. Identifying specific elements within televised portrayals of sex that can lead to such outcomes is crucial.

One type of televised content in which sexual messages have been examined is prime-time programming, where researchers have consistently found large amounts of sexual content, in general (Greenberg & Hofscire, 2000) and in shows preferred by child and adolescent viewers, specifically (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002; Ward, 1995). Sexual behaviors appear mostly in the form of passionate kissing or intimate touching (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005). Sexual intercourse is most often presented implicitly rather than explicitly (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002). Recently, Farrar, Kunkel, Biely, Eyal, and Donnerstein (2003) reported that the rate of prime-time shows with intercourse portrayals has remained relatively stable since the 1997–1998 television season, at about 1 of every 10 shows.

Generic differences have been identified in the presentation of sexual messages on prime-time shows (Farrar et al., 2003; Kunkel et al., 2005). Movies tend to include the highest rates of sexual messages (at over 90% of all movies), followed by comedies and dramas (in 70–91% of all shows). Comedies and dramas, though, tend to greatly surpass movies in the average number of scenes of sexual messages per hour. News magazines and reality shows include smaller proportions of sexual messages.

Whereas information has accumulated regarding the portrayal of sexual intercourse on television, less is known about the outcomes portrayed for this behavior. SCT suggests that outcomes portrayed on television send important messages to viewers about behaviors as “powerful vicarious consequences affect the memorability of events, as well as attentiveness to them. Seeing others experience potent outcomes is likely to prompt covert rehearsal of appropriate behavior to instill the information for future use” (Bandura, 1986, p. 300). Whereas vicarious rewards can promote viewers' personal engagement in behaviors, vicarious punishments can serve as deterrents. Moreover, the omission of clear consequences for a behavior from a mediated portrayal also sends important messages about the appeal of imitating this behavior. Viewers approach the content with certain outcome expectancies, and violating these can serve as an inhibitor or disinhibitor of behaviors. Cope-Farrar and Kunkel (2002) found that most characters on prime-time comedy and drama shows preferred by young viewers experienced no clear consequences for their sexual behaviors and, when they did, most outcomes were positive. Aubrey (2004), in a study of drama shows that

involve young characters, found that emotional and social outcomes for sexuality were more common than physical ones. Portrayed consequences tended to be negative.

The current study focuses specifically on the consequences that result from sexual intercourse acts, as this is arguably the most relevant behavior for young viewers in light of the myriad of potential health and social concerns associated with it. It examines a variety of contextual elements within the portrayal of intercourse and its consequences, as SCT suggests that such diverse factors can work together to shape viewers' outcome expectancies (Bandura, 1986). The study aims to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: *How often and with what emphasis is sexual intercourse portrayed on prime-time television shows?*
- RQ2: *What is the frequency of different consequences for intercourse presented on prime-time shows?*
- RQ3: *What is the context of the portrayal of consequences for sexual intercourse on prime-time shows?*
- RQ4: *What are the generic differences in the portrayals of acts of intercourse and their consequences?*

Method

Sample

To represent sexual intercourse portrayals in prime-time programming, shows coded in this study were drawn from the prime-time over-sample of the Sex on TV 4 content analysis (Kunkel et al., 2005). Kunkel et al. analyzed three weeks of randomly selected programs from the main broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox) sampled from 7pm to 10pm MST between October 2004 and April 2005. All genres were coded except for daily newscasts, sports events, and children's programming (see Kunkel et al. for a review of the sampling procedures). Overall, Kunkel et al. coded 261 prime-time programs. For the current study, only programs identified by Kunkel et al. as including sexual intercourse-related content (as defined below) were examined. One program was dropped from the sample as it did not include a portrayal of heterosexual intercourse. The final sample thus consisted of 41 programs ($n = 41$ hours), representing 16% of the prime-time landscape. Table 1 identifies the number of shows from each genre.

Content Coding and Reliability

A group of eight undergraduate students served as coders for this project as part of a larger content analysis (see Eyal & Finnerty, 2006). After undergoing extensive training and achieving acceptable intercoder reliability, the students proceeded to individually code the sample's shows. Scott's Pi (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999) was used to assess intercoder reliability throughout the coding period by having all eight students code 18 (12%) randomly-selected programs from the larger sample.

Table 1 Generic Comparisons of the Portrayal of Acts and Consequences of Sexual Intercourse in Prime-Time Programming (N = 41 shows, 151 consequences)

Genre	Number of shows	Mean number of intercourse acts (SD)	Mean number of consequences (SD)	Number of consequences	Consequence valence (n)			Consequence duration (n)			Consequence emotional impact (n)		
					Pos.	Neg.	Mix.	Tran.	Endu.	Insig.	Mean.		
Dramas	26	1.50 (0.65)	1.81 (1.02)	82	40% (33)	56% (46)	4% (3)	71% (58)	29% (24)	71% (58)	29% (24)		
Comedies	8	1.63 (1.06)	1.63 (0.74)	26	81% (21)	19% (5)	0% (0)	88% (23)	12% (3)	77% (20)	23% (6)		
Movies	3	2.67 (2.08)	2.67 (2.08)	22	82% (18)	18% (4)	0% (0)	64% (14)	36% (8)	36% (8)	64% (14)		
News magazines	2	2.00 (1.41)	3.00 (2.83)	16	0% (0)	100% (16)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (16)	0% (0)	100% (16)		
Reality	2	2.00 (1.41)	1.50 (0.71)	5	0% (0)	100% (5)	0% (0)	20% (1)	80% (4)	20% (1)	80% (4)		

Note: Mean number of sexual intercourse acts: $F(4, 177) = 20.47, p < .001$. Mean number of consequences portrayed for sexual intercourse: $F(4, 177) = 21.70, p < .001$. Valence: $\chi^2 = 50.04, df = 12, p < .001$. Duration: $\chi^2 = 47.37, df = 8, p < .001$. Emotional impact: $\chi^2 = 44.64, df = 8, p < .001$.

Scores across all 18 programs were averaged to create an overall intercoder reliability score for each variable. No variable exhibited less than 81% agreement. Reliability for each variable is reported in parenthesis below.

Measures

Coders identified sexual intercourse acts with high agreement (Scott's $Pi = .93$). An act was defined as any specific instance of heterosexual intercourse that is either engaged in or discussed in the episode. Information about the act from the entire program was taken into account. Acts were identified based on the following categories (Kunkel et al., 2005):

1. talk about a specific act of sexual intercourse that has already occurred,
2. intercourse implied (i.e., the narrative reveals that sex has taken place immediately before or after events are portrayed),
3. intercourse depicted (i.e., the physical act, or some portion of it, is portrayed on screen),

or any combination of the three.

Following Signorielli's (2000) suggestion that the significance of sexual content to the overall show's plot is important, the focus on each act of intercourse within the program (Scott's $Pi = .89$) was coded. Four categories, based on Kunkel et al. (2005), were used to indicate increased emphasis, from an isolated remark or brief portrayal to mentions or depictions of the act so that it significantly contributes to the plot's development. The four categories were collapsed into two, representing trivial or major focus.

For each act, consequences were identified as any specific outcomes mentioned or depicted in the show as experienced by participants in the act of sexual intercourse. The category of the outcome was identified (Scott's $Pi = .95$) based on an exhaustive list of possible outcomes generated through a review of past content analyses (Aubrey, 2004; Kunkel et al., 2005) and based on a survey research with college students (Eyal & Fox, 2005). When no consequence of the act was identified, "not known" was coded. When outcomes were clear, they were categorized as one of the following: physical outcomes (pregnancy, STD or HIV/AIDS contraction, and experiencing an orgasm), emotional outcomes (categorized as either happiness; regret, shame, or discomfort; or effects on self esteem), relational outcomes (effects on relationship with partner, peers, or a child or parent), institutional outcomes (reactions from schools, religious groups, or organizations, such as formal sanctions, accusation or conviction of a sex crime), and material outcomes (e.g., either getting or losing gifts, money, or a promotion).

For each consequence identified, several contextual elements in its portrayal were coded. Valence (Scott's $Pi = .96$) was assessed using categories created by Kunkel et al. (2005), including primarily positive consequences, such as characters experiencing an orgasm or gaining personal satisfaction or peer approval; primarily negative consequences, including characters feeling guilt, suffering diminished status,

or contracting a sexually transmitted disease; and mixed consequences, including a balanced presentation of both positive and negative outcomes. The duration of the outcome (Scott's $P_i = .86$) was coded as transient (e.g., immediate and brief physical consequences, such as an orgasm) or enduring (e.g., damaging a long-standing relationship such as a marriage). Emotional impact (Scott's $P_i = .81$) on the character was coded as insignificant or meaningful. The focus on the consequence in the program (Scott's $P_i = .87$) was coded using the same categories used for the act level measure above.

Results

Prime-time programs that portrayed sexual intercourse-related content included a total of 68 acts of sexual intercourse engaged in by 136 characters. In answering RQ1, more than half of the acts ($n = 37$) were found to be presented only through conversations. Sixteen were presented only through behavioral portrayals, mostly implied ($n = 11$), and 15 included a combination of conversations and behavioral portrayals. On average, the shows included 1.66 acts ($SD = 0.88$) and fewer than two consequences per act of intercourse ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.14$). It was found that 78% of the acts received only inconsequential or minor focus, meaning they were mentioned in either one or a couple of fleeting comments or through brief visual portrayals. Only one of five acts (22%) were found to contribute to the development of a show's plot.

For 31 characters who engaged in sexual intercourse, no consequences were clearly identified for this behavior. For the remaining characters, 151 unique consequences of intercourse were identified.

To answer RQ2, by far, the most common category of outcomes portrayed on these programs was emotional, accounting for 64% of identifiable consequences. About two-thirds of these were positive emotions (happiness or excitement), and the remaining were negative (e.g., regret, shame). Emotional consequences were followed by relational outcomes (23%), most often effects on the relationship with one's sexual partner and peers. Institutional outcomes (i.e., accusation of or conviction in sexual crimes) accounted for 8% of all consequences. Only 4% of all consequences were physical in nature, mostly in the form of experiencing an orgasm and pregnancy. No consequences were identified as material in nature.

In answering RQ3, identifiable consequences were nearly equally as likely to be positive (48%) as negative (50%; n.s. as found in a Chi-square goodness of fit test). Only 2% ($n = 3$) of consequences portrayed a mixed valence. That is, though within the specific category of emotional outcomes there was a tendency to portray more positive (about two-thirds) than negative consequences, when considering all consequence categories together, the valence tended to be presented in a more balanced fashion. Consequences were more likely to be transient (64%) than enduring (36%) ($\chi^2 = 11.13$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) and have an insignificant emotional impact (58%) on characters than a meaningful impact (42%; ns). Consequences most often received minimal focus within programs (91%) than major focus (9%) ($\chi^2 = 100.19$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$).

Finally, to answer RQ4, generic comparisons were conducted (see Table 1). These analyses revealed that movies portrayed the greatest number of sexual intercourse acts ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.53$), $F(4, 177) = 20.47$, $p < .001$, and also the most outcomes for intercourse ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 2.83$), $F(4, 177) = 21.70$, $p < .001$. Though statistically significant differences emerged across the genres, it is important to note that some genres were represented by only two or three episodes in this sample. When comparing the context of portrayal of consequences of sexual intercourse across the genres, it was found that all consequences identified in the genre of news magazines ($n = 16$), which in this sample were two episodes of *20/20*, were negative, enduring, and emotionally meaningful for the characters. Reality shows followed news magazines in the consistency of presentation of consequences of intercourse ($n = 5$) as 100% of their consequences were negative and 80% were enduring and emotionally meaningful. This is not surprising, as both episodes of prime-time reality shows coded in this sample were from the show *America's Most Wanted*. Most different from these two genres were comedies, which presented mostly positive consequences (81%) that were transient (88%) and emotionally insignificant (77%). Drama shows (56% negative, 71% transient and insignificant emotionally consequences) and movies (82% positive, 64% transient, and 64% meaningful consequences) presented less consistent pictures of the consequences of sexual intercourse, perhaps consistent with their fictional nature. All comparisons across genres were statistically significant, as revealed by chi-square comparisons and detailed in Table 1.

Discussion

This study investigates the portrayal of sexual intercourse and its consequences on prime-time shows. Like Signorielli (2000), we find that sexual intercourse and its outcomes constitute an insignificant portion of most programs and tend to not meaningfully contribute to the development of show plots. However, the relative lack of narrative emphasis on this behavior does not mean that these portrayals go unnoticed by audience members. With many adolescents turning to television for information about sex (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002) and as television is one of few outlets in which models are seen engaging in this otherwise discrete behavior, television plays a central role in youth sexual socialization. Sexual intercourse portrayals, even if tangential to the plot, are likely to draw much viewer attention.

Consistent with Aubrey (2004), this study finds that, by far, the most common consequences of intercourse are emotional, most frequently happiness and excitement on the part of characters who engage in this behavior, but also regret, shame, and discomfort. To a lesser extent, prime-time shows present relational outcomes for intercourse. Very infrequently, programs depict institutional and physical consequences for intercourse. Many other important consequences that can potentially result from intercourse, such as STD contraction and effects on one's social status, are largely ignored on these shows.

Overall, consequences for sexual intercourse are about as likely to be positive as they are to be negative. This balance is different from previous content analyses reports

(Aubrey, 2004; Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002), likely due to methodological differences across the studies. Both studies cited above coded broader categories related to sex than just intercourse. Perhaps it is the valence of consequences of sexual references and behaviors other than intercourse that has tipped the scale in these studies.

The duration and emotional impact associated with intercourse consequences on prime-time shows are nearly balanced, with a slight inclination for consequences to be portrayed as brief in duration and as having an insignificant emotional impact on characters. This pattern of portrayal may have important implications for viewer effects. SCT (Bandura, 1986) implies that, with personally functional behaviors (e.g., sexual intercourse), inhibitions are difficult to establish and sustain through mediated depictions. For example, with regard to media violence, only clearly-depicted negative outcomes portrayed to violent acts produced an inhibition effect on young viewers (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). Though more effects studies are needed in the realm of mediated sexual content to elucidate the specific role of context in the portrayal of intercourse, SCT would suggest that the presentation of intercourse as a behavior that results in little, or unimportant, outcomes is not to be dismissed from an effects perspective.

Consistent with past research (Kunkel et al., 2005; Signorielli, 2000), this study finds that movies portray the greatest number of sexual intercourse acts and the greatest number of consequences for this behavior. Inconsistent with previous studies, we find that comedies and dramas include fewer intercourse portrayals than genres like news magazines and reality shows. Most likely, comedies and dramas include more precursory behaviors (e.g., kissing, intimate touching) but fewer intercourse acts. Young viewers who, from a social learning perspective, may turn to intercourse portrayals as a source of information, typically have been found to prefer television dramas and comedies (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002; Ward, 1995). However, a more recent examination of the shows most heavily viewed by teens (Eyal, Kunkel, Biely, & Finnerty, *in press*), based on Nielsen data, reveals a shift toward more reality programs. This study finds that reality shows have nearly the same average number of intercourse acts as movies but the fewest consequences portrayed for this behavior of all genres, though consequences in this genre are nearly always presented as serious (that is, enduring and emotionally meaningful). Not surprisingly, comedies, often preferred by teen audiences, portray the most optimistic picture of the consequences of intercourse, as they depict most outcomes as positive in valence, brief in duration, and emotionally insignificant.

In sum, in analyzing a wide range of consequences for sexual intercourse portrayed on prime-time television programs and the contextual elements associated with their portrayals, this study adds to the body of research on televised sexual content. This study highlights contextual elements, rarely examined in past studies, that are key to understanding the portrayal of sexual intercourse on television. With theory and research indicating that the consumption of televised sexual content affects viewers' attitudes and actions, (Bandura, 1986; Collins et al., 2003; Pardun et al., 2005), future research should continue to examine the portrayal of different sexual behaviors on

television as well as experimentally test the role of these specific contextual elements in media effects.

References

- Alan Guttmacher Institute. (2004). U.S. teenage pregnancy statistics: Overall trends, trends by race and ethnicity and state-by-state information. Alan Guttmacher Institute. Retrieved March 2, 2004, from http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/state_pregnancy_trends.pdf
- Aubrey, J. (2004). Sex and punishment: An examination of sexual consequences and the sexual double standard in teen programming. *Sex Roles, 50*, 505–514.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S. A. (1961). Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models. *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology, 63*, 575–582.
- Collins, R., Elliott, M., Berry, S., Kanouse, D., & Hunter, S. (2003). Entertainment television as a healthy sex educator: The impact of condom-efficacy information in an episode of Friends. *Pediatrics, 112*, 1115–1121.
- Cope-Farrar, K. & Kunkel, D. (2002). Sexual messages in teens' favorite prime-time TV programs. In J. Brown, J. Steele, & K. Walsh-Childers (Eds.), *Sexual teens, sexual media* (pp. 59–78). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eyal, K. & Finnerty, K. (November 2006). The portrayal of consequences of sexual intercourse on television: How, who, and with what consequences? Paper presented at the annual conference of the National Communication Association, San Antonio, Texas.
- Eyal, K. & Fox, J. A. (April, 2005). A relationship between television exposure and young adults' perceptions of sexual behaviors. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Broadcast Education Association, Las Vegas, Nevada.
- Eyal, K., Kunkel, D., Biely, E., & Finnerty, K. (In press). Sexual socialization messages on television programs most popular among teens. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*.
- Farrar, K., Kunkel, D., Biely, E., Eyal, K., & Donnerstein, E. (2003). Sexual messages during prime-time programming. *Sexuality & Culture, 7*, 7–37.
- Fox, M. (2004). Half of Americans will get an STD—Reports. Reuters Health. Retrieved March 2, 2004, from http://nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory_16232.html
- Greenberg, B.S. & Hofschire, L. (2000). Sex on entertainment television. In D. Zillmann & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Media entertainment: The psychology of its appeal* (pp. 93–111). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Kunkel, D., Eyal, K., Finnerty, K., Biely, E., & Donnerstein, E. (2005). *Sex on TV4*. Menlo Park, Calif.: Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Pardun, C. J., L'Engle, K. L., & Brown, J. D. (2005). Linking exposure to outcomes: Early adolescents' consumption of sexual content in six media. *Mass Communication & Society, 8*, 75–91.
- Potter, W. J. & Levine-Donnerstein, D. (1999). Rethinking validity and reliability in content analysis. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 2*, 258–284.
- Signorielli, N. (2000). Sex on prime-time in the 90's. *Communication Research Reports, 17*, 70–78.
- Sutton, M. J., Brown, J. D., Wilson, K. M., & Klein, J. D. (2002). Shaking the tree of knowledge: Where adolescents learn about sexuality and contraception. In J. D. Brown, J. R. Steele, & K. Walsh-Childers (Eds.), *Sexual teens, sexual media: Investigating media's influence on adolescent sexuality* (pp. 25–55). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ward, L. M. (1995). Talking about sex: Common themes about sexuality in the prime-time television programs children and adolescents view most. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence, 24*, 595–615.

Copyright of Communication Research Reports is the property of Eastern Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Communication Research Reports is the property of Eastern Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.