

Messages About Sex on Israeli Television: Comparing Local and Foreign Programming

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A content analysis of 584 prime-time programs examines messages about sex on Israeli television, comparing local and foreign shows. A 2-week composite sample from 7 commercial broadcast, cable, and satellite channels is analyzed. Results show that sexual content is highly prevalent, with a significantly higher frequency in foreign than local shows. Less than 20% of programs with sexual content address sexual health and risks; foreign shows again exceed local ones. Few differences emerge between local and foreign content in the contextual presentation of sex. Findings are discussed in light of theory, research, and implications for audience effects, policy, and education.

Research on sexual content on entertainment television and its effects on viewers has widely expanded. Such scholarly interest often is motivated by public health implications, such as rates of unintended pregnancies and the increasing prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs, Channel 2 News, 2010) and by psychological outcomes such as regretting sexual decisions (Martino, Collins, Elliott, Kanouse, & Berry, 2009). In sexual socialization, sexual beliefs are established, attitudes crystallize, and behavioral patterns develop. Socialization that encourages risky sexual behaviors, such as earlier sexual initiation, can lead to concerning physical and mental health outcomes. Promoting responsible sexual behaviors can minimize such risks. Understanding that television may play a role in sexual socialization has contributed to the focused attention on this topic within the social sciences (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005). Even with recent media advances, television content still dominates youth's media leisure time (e.g., Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts,

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2010). Analyzing the messages about sex conveyed through this content is important for understanding youth sexuality. This content analysis examines sexual messages in television programs aired in Israel. The study compares sexual messages in locally produced programming and in imported, United States content. In this, the study contributes to the field of media and sexuality and to the understanding of globalization and cultural aspects associated with television content.

Sex on Television: Audience Effects and Content

A growing literature has examined mainstream media as a factor in youth sexual socialization (Collins, Martino, Elliott, & Miu, 2011). Viewing sexual content has been linked with expectations about sex, more permissive sexual attitudes, increased acceptance of the rape myth, greater endorsement of sexual stereotypes, and earlier sexual experience (e.g., Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003). Causal links have been found between viewer sexuality and exposure to specific television portrayals. Portrayals of safer sex issues, discussions of STDs, and the consequences associated with sex were found to impact attitudes toward sex and condom use, moral judgments, and inclination to communicate about sex (e.g., Moyer-Guse, Chung, & Jain, 2011). These studies confirm that sexual outcomes depend, among other factors, on the amount and types of televised sexual presentations.

Studies of sexual television messages—largely conducted in the US—have documented an increase in representation over the years (e.g., Greenberg & Hofschire, 2000). Kunkel et al. (2005) found that 70% of television shows included at least some mention of sex. Studies have examined diverse samples, including the entire television landscape, the prime-time schedule, specific genres, and programs preferred by teens (e.g., Heintz-Knowles, 1996). Across these, several findings have emerged consistently, such as that the verbal representation of sex is more common than the physical manifestation of sexual behaviors on screen (e.g., Greenberg & Busselle, 1994). Portrayed behaviors are mostly mild, including flirtations and kissing. More advanced sexual actions such as intercourse—considered more salient for curious young viewers—are less frequent, but are portrayed in an appealing manner, as a mostly recreational activity (Ward, 1995), with a tendency for positive and transient consequences (Eyal & Finnerty, 2007). Certain genres—movies, dramas, and comedies—have been found to include a large amount of sexual messages (Kunkel et al., 2005) as have music videos, which target a young audience (Sherman & Dominick, 1986). Genres found to include less sexual content include talk shows and news magazines (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2004).

Considering the public health implications of sexual socialization, scholars have examined the depiction of sexual health topics. Such content has consistently been shown to be rare on television (Kunkel et al., 2005). This also is true for teen-favored content (Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008), with only 10% of sexual television scenes containing sexual precaution messages. When messages about sexual health are more common, they are generally embedded within extremely large amount of

sexual portrayals (Jensen & Jensen, 2007). The message about sex typically conveyed on television—that this common, casual behavior does not involve serious responsibilities or long-term risks—is inconsistent with the real-life experience of sexuality for many youth (e.g., Hoff, Green, & Davis, 2003). Yet such a persistent televised presentation of a topic of relevance for youth can carry important implications.

Theoretical Perspectives Linking Exposure to Sexual Television Content and Audience Effects

Two prominent perspectives that have informed the field of media and sexuality serve as frameworks for this study: cultivation theory and social cognitive theory.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory posits that continuous exposure to television will yield cumulative, long-term effects on viewers' perceptions of the world (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). The cultivation process assumes that television is a major source of cultural messages. It creates a symbolic environment in which heavier viewers are more apt than lighter viewers to believe that social reality is similar to that portrayed on television. As television content is developed for a wide audience, recurring themes are common and consistent across programming. Cultivation has served as a theoretical basis for many studies that reveal small but consistent audience effects (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997), also in the context of sex (e.g., Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993).

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory emphasizes the psychological mechanisms and individual differences through which the symbolic environment influences audience members (Bandura, 2009). The theory states that people obtain information and learn behaviors through observing models, also on television. It states that several factors affect what information is acquired from models, how it is processed, and whether or not it is demonstrated in subsequent behavior. More than the overall amount of sexual messages to which one is exposed on television, the theory emphasizes their nature and the contextual elements involved in their portrayal. The perspective assumes that certain portrayals are likely to be more salient, and hence more influential for viewers. For example, Bandura suggested that the portrayal (or lack thereof) of consequences of social behaviors may be relevant as these serve as deterrents to, or promoters of, behaviors. Such premises have sprung much research documenting the effects of the media in realms such as violence, pornography, body image, and prosocial behaviors (e.g., Check & Malamuth, 1986) and also with regard to sexual effects (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008).

In sum, the two perspectives offer different vantage points from which to approach the examination of sexual television messages. Cultivation theory addresses the cultural role of television, emphasizing overall themes within the content. Social cognitive theory complements it by highlighting the context of presentation. The current study will examine both aspects to provide significant data to enable future audience effects studies.

Sex and Television: The Israeli Case

Youth Sexuality in Israel.

Changes have been reported over the years in the national approach toward sexuality in Israel with a rise in information dissemination to the public, especially after sexual education became compulsory in 1987 (Cavaglioni, 2000). Shtarkshall, Carmel, Jaffe-Hirschfield, and Woloski-Wruble (2009) noted increased openness toward sexuality, communication about sex, and contraception use, especially among the secular Jewish population. Such an approach is consistent with Hofstede's (2001) categorization of Israel as a feminine culture, which has a generally accepting and tolerating approach to sex. Alongside this, concerning data report a significantly higher number of sexual partners for Israeli youth relative to other countries (Cardoso, 2007). Though Israel is considered a low incidence country for HIV infections (Svenson, Carmel, & Varnhagen, 1997), and has relatively low youth pregnancy rates, the incidence of STDs has recently grown alongside a significant increase of new AIDS cases (Green, Anis, Gandacu, & Grotto, 2003). It is important to ascertain if the identified relationships between television and sexuality exist also in Israel and can explain some of the health outcomes.

Israeli Television: Local and Foreign Content.

In the past two decades, Israeli television has undergone dramatic changes, transforming from a one national public channel system into a multichannel television environment, including commercial channels, cable, and satellite (Cohen, 2005). With this, the content transformed, bringing with it more imported shows and channels completely composed of foreign programs and introducing more entertainment content into the prime-time (Hetsroni, 2005). Though local content is favored by many Israelis (Cohen, 2008), content originating in the US is commonplace and strongly appeals to local audiences (Weimann, 2000).

The Concern about Imported Television Content.

Many concerns have been expressed worldwide about importing foreign media content into other countries. Chief among these are cultural imperialism and the adoption of American values at the expense of the authentic local culture, a fragmentation of the local public, an increased desire to immigrate to the US, and an idealized perception of American life by heavy viewers (e.g., Weimann,

2000). Previous research has largely focused on the effect of exposure to imported television content on local perceptions of the US; a weak and positive correlation has been found with knowledge, attitudes, and values as they related to the country of origin of the content (Elasmar & Hunter, 2003). Recently, research has expanded to examine the relationship between exposure to foreign television content and locally focused perceptions and personal attitudes (e.g., Cohen, 2008).

Despite the prevalence of imported televised content in Israel, little is known about how this content compares with locally produced content. Hetsroni (2005) suggested that Israel and the US—its largest importer of television content—can be considered under the same American model; though geographically and linguistically distant, they share common values including a belief in democracy and education. Avraham and First (2003) also addressed the increased similarity between Israeli and American media due to an assimilation of American-inspired styles and norms into Israeli culture.

However, both theory and research suggest that content originating in the two countries may differ. This may be especially true with regard to sexual content, which is both shaped by and may shape cultural norms and attitudes (Haung & Lowry, 2011). Normative traditions with regard to sexuality differ by sociocultural contexts, habits, and preferences (Laumann et al., 2006). Specifically with regard to Israel and the US, several studies have found that the two countries differ in their attitudes toward sexual activities (e.g., premarital sex) (e.g., Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1997) with Israel considered more moderate and the US more conservative. Israelis have further been shown to attribute a relatively higher importance to, but report less satisfaction with sex than Americans (Laumann et al.). The authors suggested that Israeli culture sees sex as geared toward reproduction and discounts its relational importance, especially for women, relative to the US. But, as studies did not specifically address the representation of sex on Israeli television, an empirical investigation is needed as to the extent and nature of sexual content and whether it differs from countries of divergent sexual norms. This investigation contributes to the literature by comparing sexual messages in local versus foreign, US-originated content. Thus, the study complements research on globalization and can contribute to studies about the outcomes of exposure to different types of programming.

Research Questions

The study aims to compare the presentation of sexual messages in local (Israeli) and foreign (US) programs on Israeli prime-time television. As few studies have addressed this comparison, with mixed conclusions and minimal consideration of sexuality, questions are posed:

RQ₁: What is the frequency of messages about sex in local and foreign prime-time television programming?

- RQ₂: What is the context of presentation of messages about sex in local and foreign prime-time television programming?
- RQ₃: What is the frequency presentation of messages about sexual health, risks, and responsibilities in local and foreign prime-time programming?

Methodology

Sample

Prime-time—7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. (The Second Authority of Television & Radio, 2007)—represents the time in which the greatest number of people watch television. Two composite week samples were constructed for each of seven television channels, representing all aspects of Israeli television: commercial broadcast (Channels 10, 2, the music channel 24), cable (Hot Family, Hot Israeli Entertainment), and satellite (Yes Drama, Yes Comedy). Programs were randomly sampled to fill hour-long slots within the composite sample between October 2010 and March 2011. This sampling technique mirrors previous studies (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2005). It is innovative in the Israeli context and enhances the generalizability and validity of the sample by avoiding scheduling irregularities and by accounting for cable and satellite channels.

As part of a larger study, 619 programs were recorded. Consistent with previous research (Kunkel et al., 2005), daily newscasts, sports, and breaking events were excluded, resulting in 584 programs. As programs were represented as complete units, some time overlap was inevitable as a result of scheduling structure. The final sample represents nearly 451 hours of programming; the excess time is similar to past analyses using a similar sampling technique. The sample included 315 (53.90%) local Israeli, Hebrew-language programs and 269 (46.10%) foreign US, English-language programs. The most highly prevalent genres among local programs were entertainment ($n = 101$, 32.10%), reality shows ($n = 47$, 14.90%), and dramas ($n = 32$, 10.20%); there was a wide range of genres, including comedies, movies, cooking shows, etc. Among the foreign shows, the most common genres were comedies ($n = 130$, 48.30%) and dramas ($n = 115$, 42.8%); others were reality shows, entertainment programs, and game shows.

Sample Coding: Procedure and Reliability

A group of 10 undergraduates served as coders. After undergoing extensive training for a few months and achieving acceptable intercoder reliability, the students proceeded to individually code the sample's shows, which were randomly divided among them. Scott's pi (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999) was used to assess intercoder reliability throughout this period by having multiple coders assess 39 randomly selected episodes from the larger sample, representing all genres and

channels. Each reliability test involved between 2 and 10 coders in diverse compositions; each coder participated in no less than 27 tests. Scores across all tests were averaged for an overall reliability score for each variable, ranging from 83–100% (scores follow each variable below).

Measures

Variables were analyzed at two levels: the sexual scene and the overall program. Sexual content was defined as any portrayal of sexual activity, sexually suggestive behavior, or conversations about sexual topics, interests, intentions, expectations, or behaviors (Kunkel et al., 2005). A scene was defined as “a sequence in which the place and time generally hold constant” (p. 14). Coders identified each scene with either sexual talk or behavior. They completed this unitizing task with high agreement (85%), assessed using the Close Interval Around the Mode (CIAM) method (Kunkel et al.). The variables detailed below were chosen based on research about audience effects of exposure to televised sexual depictions and on past content analyses (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2005).

Talk about Sex.

Conversations about sex were categorized by the following *topics*: sexual interests, intentions, or behaviors (95%); sexual intercourse that involves virginity loss (100%); specific past sexual intercourse encounters (97%); conversations intended to promote immediate sexual actions (99%) and such attempts that are denied/rejected (100%); sexual crimes (100%); conversations with a sexual health expert (100%); oral sex (100%); and other (98%). For each scene with sexual talk, coders identified whether messages were presented in *innuendo* by coding the extent to which the conversation explicitly mentioned sexuality versus if the conversation relied heavily or partly on sexual hints, metaphors, word play, etc. (83%).

Sexual Behavior.

Consistent with past research (Kunkel et al., 2005), sexual actions were coded if they involved central plot characters or received central focus. They were categorized by the following *topics*: Physical flirtation (97%), passionate and intimate kissing (98%), intimate touching of another person’s private body parts (97%), intercourse that is implied (98%), intercourse that is explicitly depicted on the screen (100%), oral sex—either implied (100%) or depicted (100%), and other (100%). For each scene with sexual behavior, coders indicated the extent to which it involved nudity (*explicitness* – 90%), with a range from the characters being fully clothed through disrobing, partial nudity, and full nudity.

For scenes that involved either talk and/or sexual behavior, coders assessed *seriousness* as the approach to sexuality being mostly serious, mostly frivolous, or mixed (83%). A serious approach to sexuality involves a literal, honest, earnest,

and sincere approach to the topic. It is often associated with a concern about sexuality and is sometimes displayed in a grave or severe tone. A frivolous approach treats sexuality with humor, sarcasm, satire, absurdity, exaggeration, and disregard; it minimizes the importance of sexuality or its consequences as though they should be taken lightly or carelessly.

Sexual Health Risk and Responsibilities.

For each scene with sexual talk, behavior, or both, coders identified any mention or depiction of sexual health, risks, or responsibilities, including *categories* of safer sex terminology or contraception methods, physical outcomes (e.g., pregnancy, contraction or fear of contraction of STDs, abortion), and sexual abstinence (100%). Categories were considered in accordance with past research (e.g., Jensen & Jensen, 2007).

At the program level, any show with at least one sexual scene was examined to identify whether it places a strong emphasis on sexual responsibility. Coders indicated if this topic constituted a *central theme* within the program, clearly and consistently communicating a message about the importance of considering sexuality and its consequences (99%). Past research (Kunkel et al., 2005) suggested three central themes: sexual patience (delaying sexual relations, maintaining one's virginity), contraception use/consideration in the context of sexual relations, and risks and/or negative consequences of irresponsible/unplanned sexual relations. Another theme—emphasizing negative outcomes of nonconsensual sexual relations—also was considered.

Results

The sample of 584 prime-time programs aired between October 2010 and March 2011 on commercial broadcast, cable, and satellite television in Israel. Coders identified 2,564 scenes with sexual content.

RQ1: Frequency of Sexual Content

Four in five (80.48%, $n = 470$) television shows presented at least one scene with sexual content (see Table 1). Among these, the number of sexual scenes ranged from 1 to 25 ($m = 5.41$, $SD = 3.83$). Though scene number is impacted by show length, it is noteworthy that only 61 shows (13.00%) included 1 sexual scene; all others had 2 or more scenes. The study found significant differences between local and foreign shows in these frequencies (see Table 2). A significantly higher percentage of foreign shows (93.31%, $n = 251$) involved sexual content than local shows (69.52%, $n = 219$) ($\chi^2[1] = 52.25$, $p < .001$). Foreign shows included significantly more sexual scenes ($m = 5.76$, $SD = 4.12$) than local shows ($m = 3.16$, $SD = 3.58$) ($t[582] = -8.16$, $p < .001$).

Table 1
Frequency of Sexual Content (N Shows = 584)

	Any Sexual Content	Sexual Talk	Sexual Behavior
N of shows (%)	470 (80.48%)	444 (76.00%)	331 (56.70%)
Average N of scenes per episode with this content (SD)	5.41 (3.83)	4.31 (3.40)	1.82 (2.14)

Similar patterns were identified within talk and behavior scenes (see Table 1). Overall, 76% of shows in the sample included sexual conversations, averaging 4.31 scenes per show with sexual content (*SD* = 3.40, range: 0–19). Foreign shows (*n* = 240, 89.22%) included higher percentages of scenes with sexual conversations than local shows (*n* = 204, 64.76%) ($\chi^2[1] = 47.62, p < .001$) (see Table 2). Sexual behaviors were depicted in 56.70% of shows (*n* = 331) (*m* = 1.82, *SD* = 2.14, range: 0–22). Foreign shows (*n* = 182, 67.66%) included higher percentages of such scenes than local shows (*n* = 149, 47.30%) ($\chi^2[1] = 24.49, p < .001$).

In both local and foreign programming, in scenes with sexual conversations, the most common topic was sexual interests/activities (foreign: 88.97%, *n* = 1,151; local: 88.17%, *n* = 641). This was followed by conversations about past sexual intercourse incidents (foreign: 11.83%, *n* = 154; local: 5.91%, *n* = 43), sexual crimes (foreign: 3.07%, *n* = 40; local: 5.63%, *n* = 41), conversations intended to promote sexual activities (foreign: 3.61%, *n* = 47; local: 2.88%, *n* = 21), virginity loss (foreign: 1.53%, *n* = 20; local: 1.37%, *n* = 10), and advice from expert sources (foreign: 0.31%, *n* = 4; local: 0.13%, *n* = 1). Sexual talk that was unclassified into one of these categories appeared in 52 foreign scenes (3.99%) and 38 (5.22%) local scenes.

In both local and foreign shows, precursory sexual behaviors were more common than intercourse acts. The most common category of sexual behaviors was

Table 2
Frequency of Sexual Content in Local (n = 315) and Foreign (n = 269) Television Programs

	Local Programs N (%)	Foreign Programs N (%)	
Sexual content	219 (69.52)	251 (93.31)	$\chi^2[1] = 52.25^{***}$
Sexual talk	204 (64.76)	240 (89.22)	$\chi^2[1] = 47.62^{***}$
Sexual behavior	149 (47.30)	182 (67.66)	$\chi^2[1] = 24.49^{***}$

Note. ****p* < .001.

passionate kissing (foreign: 58.95%, $n = 260$; local: 49.53%, $n = 213$), followed by depictions of physical flirtation (foreign: 23.12%, $n = 102$; local: 38.83%, $n = 167$), intimate touching of another person's private body parts (foreign: 14.73%, $n = 65$; local: 21.62%, $n = 93$), intercourse implied (foreign: 14.28%, $n = 63$; local: 8.83%, $n = 38$), and intercourse depicted (foreign: 2.72%, $n = 12$; local: 1.86%, $n = 8$). Sexual behaviors that were unclassified appeared in 17 foreign scenes (3.85%) and 7 (1.62%) local scenes.

RQ₂: The Nature of Sexual Content

Israeli prime-time television treated the topic of sex mostly seriously (64.00% of scenes with sexual content, $n = 1,642$). About a third ($n = 765$, 29.80%) were presented in a light and humorous fashion. An additional 6.00% ($n = 154$) of the scenes involved a mixed serious-and-humorous tone. Local shows presented sex in a more serious tone (adjusted residual: 5.0) than foreign shows (adjusted residual: 4.5) ($\chi^2[2] = 25.40$, $p < .001$).

About half of the talk scenes (49.60%, $n = 1,005$) explicitly mentioned sexual terms whereas half (50.40%, $n = 1,023$) only hinted about it, relying on innuendo. There were no significant differences between local and foreign shows in use of innuendo ($\chi^2[2] = 1.83$, $p = .40$). More than half of sexual behaviors were enacted by fully-clothed characters ($n = 502$, 57.60%). Characters wore provocative clothing in 178 sexual behavior scenes (20.40%), began to disrobe in 64 behavioral scenes (7.30%), were shown in discrete nudity in 99 scenes (11.40%), and only 28 (3.20%) showed explicit nudity. The difference between local and foreign shows on level of explicitness was marginally significant ($\chi^2[4] = 9.24$, $p = .06$).

RQ₃: Sexual Health Risks and Responsibilities

Of all shows in the sample, 89 (15.24%) addressed sexual risks and responsibilities. This constitutes 18.94% of shows with sexual content. Foreign shows, which involved greater sexuality, involved more messages about sexual health risks and responsibilities, doubling the percentage in local shows ($\chi^2[1] = 13.67$, $p < .001$; foreign: 57 shows, 21.19%; local: 32 shows, 10.16%).

In the 134 scenes that addressed sexual health and risks, the most common category in local shows was negative risks associated with sexuality ($n = 30$, 61.20%; only 35.30% [$n = 30$] of foreign scenes with sexual health mentions addressed this issue) whereas in foreign shows, the most common category was precaution use/mention ($n = 45$, 52.90%; only 26.50% [$n = 13$] of local scenes with sexual health mentions addressed this). All programming only minimally accounted for sexual patience (foreign: 18.80% [$n = 16$] of all scenes with sexual health content; local: 6.10% [$n = 3$]).

At the program level, of all shows with sexual content, only 11 (2.34%) treated sexual health, risks, and responsibilities as a central, major theme; most of these

($n = 8$, 72.73%) addressed sexual risks. Only one program each (0.20%) addressed the themes of sexual patience, precaution, and nonconsensual behaviors. There was not a significant difference between local and foreign shows in their treatment of sexual health topics as major themes ($\chi^2[4] = 5.95$, $p = .20$).

Discussion

The study examines the representation of sex on Israeli prime-time television and compares local and foreign (US) programming. The study finds a high prevalence of messages about sex, with four out of five prime-time programs containing sexual talk, behaviors, or both. Moreover, these messages appear with high frequency, averaging over five scenes per episode with sexual content. That is, sex and sexual topics make up a constant and repetitive aspect of televised portrayals in this environment. These numbers are slightly higher than those reported in previous studies of U.S. prime-time programming (e.g., Fisher et al., 2004). Though data do not enable overtime comparisons in Israel, the slight rise from the previous decade suggests that the trend toward increased televised sexual content reported by Kunkel et al. (2005) is continuing within the prime-time hours.

An innovative contribution of this study is in the comparison of local and foreign content. Considering the centrality of cultural topics in public and policy debates, and the concerns reported regarding processes of globalization and Americanization, this comparison is timely. The study finds significant differences on all frequency measures of sexual content between foreign and local shows aired during prime-time in Israel. Foreign shows include significantly more sexual conversations and sexual behaviors, and significantly more scenes with sexual messages, than local programs. No differences are identified, though, in the manner of portrayal of sexuality between local and foreign shows. Both types of programming include more conversations about sex than sexual behaviors, and largely rely on precursory behaviors. The topics of sexual talk are similar in both programming types, with minimal attention afforded to sex crimes and expert advice about sex.

Cohen's (2005) typology of television channels in Israel may have suggested an opposite trend—no differences between local and foreign shows—as the shows examined in this study are broadcast on channels classified into one of two categories: local channels or window channels. Both types of channels, whereas different in their reliance on mainly local or foreign content, respectively, address certain aspects of local identity by broadcasting with the Israeli schedule in mind and by creating Hebrew-based channel identities. Even a theoretical framework that would have predicted differences between local and foreign shows most likely would have expected more sexual content on local Israeli content than the imported content. As Hofstede (2001) wrote, Israel, a feminine culture, is more tolerant of sexuality and more open in dealing with sexual issues than the more masculine U.S. culture.

However, this study finds the opposite pattern in portrayals. Perhaps, the reliance on local personalities and actors in local programming can explain these findings,

as Israel is a small country with a feeling that “everyone knows everyone” involving a higher risk of embarrassment resulting from the presentation of sexual topics than in the US. Another possibility is that consideration of the growing religious population in Israel (Bistrov & Sofer, 2010) is impacting production and broadcasting decisions on the country’s main broadcast channels, those on which local Hebrew programming is primarily aired. Future research should examine this question, also by interviewing the creators of media content and assessing their perspectives.

In considering the contextual presentation of sexuality, the study finds that local shows address sex with more seriousness than foreign shows, though both slightly lean toward a serious tone. Moyer-Guse, Mahood, and Brookes (2011) found that presenting messages about sexual health and risks in a humorous comedic context led to greater trivialization of the issues, less counter-arguing, and fewer intentions to avoid risky sexual situations. Humorous portrayals of sexual topics may be especially detrimental for adolescent viewers, who may find it difficult to extract a clear message from complex televised depictions (e.g., Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003).

There is no difference between local and foreign shows in their explicitness when verbally addressing sexual issues, with a nearly even split between relying on innuendo and using explicit sexual terminology. Much like humor, this also can be linked with young viewers’ difficulty contending with televised sexual messages. Adolescents’ level of cognitive development, limited real-world experience, and restricted familiarity with the topic of sex may result in confusion or misunderstanding upon exposure to sexual matters presented with innuendo (Silverman-Watkins & Sprafkin, 1983).

The study finds that local shows have a slightly higher tendency than foreign shows to present sexual behaviors with discreet nudity. This difference only approached statistical significance and no differences between local and foreign shows are identified on other levels of nudity (e.g., full clothing). Moreover, neither type of show relies heavily on nudity, with only 20% of shows with sexual behaviors across the entire sample involving any state of undress. This finding is consistent with past studies of advertising that have found relatively low levels of nudity in mainstream media (Huang & Lowry, 2011). Moreover, any differences between local and foreign shows on this variable should be interpreted with caution as past research found only a small correlation between nudity in media and cultural dimensions such as femininity/masculinity (Nelson & Paek, 2008). Overall, little difference was found in the context of presentation of sex between local and foreign shows.

In examining the presentation of sexual health topics, the study finds that foreign shows afford slightly greater focus to these than local shows. But neither type of programming contains much of this content, which appears in less than 20% of all shows with sexual content. Moreover, neither local nor foreign programs place a strong emphasis on sexual health topics, with only 2% of any shows with sexual content involving a major theme. The findings are consistent with Jensen and Jensen (2007) who found that a television show with considerably more sexual content also accounted more for sexual risks and responsibilities than other shows. For

many Israelis, who prefer local content and spend the majority of their television time with this fare (Katz, 2009), the implications may be exposure to relatively high levels of sexual content with little mention of sexual health topics.

The origin of the disparities in frequency of sex and sexual health portrayals between local Israeli and foreign US shows may be attributed to differences in the cultural values of these countries. Hofstede (2001) argues that Israeli culture is less tolerant of aggressive expressions and expects more modesty and intimacy relative to the masculine U.S. culture. However, such differences could also be attributed to regulatory policies (Katz, 2009) that place restrictions and quotas on local programming in the different broadcast systems. In the US, too, different broadcasting systems have been found to differ in their presentation of sex (e.g., Fisher et al., 2004). Brown (2010), in her study of sexual messages in China, also found significant differences between locally produced Chinese content and U.S.-originated shows, which she suggestively attributed to cultural characteristics but also to regulations of the Chinese television market. Clearly, more research is needed to identify the origin of these differences, perhaps through conversations with producers, writers, and industry professionals in Israel.

Theoretically, the high prevalence of sexual messages—in both local and foreign shows—is consistent with cultivation theory's concern about the formulaic representation of messages on television (Gerbner et al., 1994). Whereas conversations about sex appear in a similar frequency in prime-time shows as that found by Kunkel et al. (2005), the percentage of shows involving sexual behaviors is much higher on Israeli television in 2010–2011. Kunkel et al. found that 38% of prime-time shows depicted sexual behaviors and this study found that 57% of shows do so. Whereas little change has been identified in the depiction of intercourse behaviors, there is a higher percentage of shows with precursory sexual behaviors. The concrete portrayal of sexual behaviors on screen is of interest from a social cognitive theory perspective, which suggests that these may increase the likelihood of learning and imitating the actions (Bandura, 2009).

With regard to the presentation of sexual health and risks, this study finds that overall, 19% of shows with sexual content addressed such issues. Though still far from constituting a majority of shows, these data do represent an increase from 11% of shows with sexual content that addressed sexual health in 2005 (Kunkel et al., 2005). According to social cognitive theory, salient portrayals are likely to be especially influential for viewers. Shows that place a strong emphasis on issues of sexual health and risks enhance the potential for learning, as the message is more strongly communicated. However, less than 3% of all shows with sexual content in the current sample included a major theme of sexual health.

Limitations, Future Research, and Implications

The current study's many strengths include its representative sample of prime-time Israeli television programming from multiple channels and all major broadcasting

systems. But some limitations should be acknowledged. First, content analytic methods do not enable drawing conclusions about audience effects. It is necessary to directly examine viewers who may interpret the same sexual content differently according to their local cultures and values (Rogers, Sinhal, & Thombre, 2004).

Future research also would benefit from examining additional television programming, such as preferred programs among adolescents. A survey among 1,580 10th–12th graders in Israel, conducted at about the same time as the current study's sampling (see Eyal & Raz, 2013, for survey sampling details), revealed that more than half ($n = 14$) of the top 25 favorite series are represented in this prime-time sample. Most of the additional 11 series were broadcast soon after the current sampling period ended, reflecting the irregular Israeli schedule. Eight of these shows were comedies and dramas—genres that traditionally include much sexuality (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2005). Overall, the teen-preferred series are largely representative of the prime-time landscape and rarely specifically target a young audience (e.g., *Desperate Housewives*, *CSI*). Thus, it is likely that teen preferred shows include a large amount of sexual messages, but the specific composition of these messages and the characters and health messages within them should be examined in comparison to the overall television landscape.

Moreover, the current study uses the program's country of origin as a proxy for cultural representation. Whereas country-level differences exist with regard to sexual values and norms (Laumann et al., 2006), future research should elaborate about cultural themes in the content, perhaps through qualitative methods of analysis. The current study also does not address the entire wide range of values associated with sexuality (e.g., the importance of love or romance in sex, sexual gender stereotypes). Future research would benefit from examining culture-dependent values that reflect normative perceptions of sexuality.

It is important to note that, although the differences identified may reflect cultural variations in the creation and production of the content in the US versus Israel, this study represents the Israeli broadcast schedule and the deliberate choices made by Israeli network programmers from among the larger availability of U.S. programming. The findings should be interpreted with caution as the content chosen to be broadcast to Israeli viewers may not fully represent the overall U.S. programming.

It is also important to consider the genre of programming in interpreting these results. Local programming in Hebrew includes a much broader range of genres than the foreign programming which only falls into one of four genres and is largely based on comedies and dramas. Considering previous research that has identified differences in genres' presentation of sexuality, as noted above, it may be that genre differences can account for the current findings. Further, this study used the scene and the episode as units of analysis. Considering the series as another unit of analysis, or focusing on specific series, can provide further insight about unique program contexts (e.g., Jensen & Jensen, 2007).

The study's findings carry important practical implications. Parents can learn about the content of sexual messages on television shows to which their children are exposed and use this knowledge to make more effective decisions regarding parental

mediation (e.g., Bersamin et al., 2008; Fisher et al., 2009). Policy makers can consider such findings in constructing rating systems. Israeli television policy-making, which is highly concerned with issues of local versus global culture, can also rely on these data. Finally, educators and advocacy groups can consider these data in creating effective media literacy curriculum and sexual education interventions.

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