

# It Only Happens Once: Adolescents’ Interpretations of Mediated Messages About Sexual Initiation

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The current study examines adolescents’ interpretations of a televised scene narrative describing a sexual initiation encounter. The study uses the media practice model as a theoretical framework. Two hundred ninety-three 10th, 11th, and 12th graders suggested possible endings to the narrative, reflecting their outcome expectancies for sexual initiation. The adolescents’ suggested scene endings were divided into 10 categories, including emotional, physical, and relational outcomes. A thematic analysis of their outcome expectancies revealed some shared themes, but important individual differences based on gender and sexual experience also were identified, consistent with media practice model assumptions. Male students were more technical and less emotional than female students in their scene interpretations. Adolescents without sexual experience suggested more simplistic and deterministic outcomes than more sexually experienced teens. The study contributes to the understanding of adolescents’

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interpretation of mediated narratives in the context of sexual initiation and supports their complex, active, and developmentally consistent understanding of this topic.

The rising interest in sex, as part of the quest for identity achievement, is a marker of adolescence (Arnett, 2000). Specifically, first-time intercourse, as leading to virginity loss, is of interest for teens who are known to devote cognitive and emotional effort to this event and its related decisions (Carpenter, 2002). First-time intercourse often takes place during adolescence and is considered integral to normative sexual development (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Sexual initiation is considered a positive experience but can also carry important consequences. Earlier sexual initiation during adolescence has been associated with more negative experiences relative to a delayed first intercourse (Walsh, Ward, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2011). Moreover, especially among women, physiological and psychological satisfaction at first sexual encounter is relatively rare, experienced by only about one fourth to one third of women; among men, about two thirds commonly report satisfaction (Higgins, Trussell, Moore, & Davidson, 2010). Many studies also have identified concerning health symptoms of early sexual initiation (e.g., depression, regret; Madkour, Farhat, Halpern, Godeau, & Gabhainn, 2010). Considering the complex experience of sexual initiation, it is important to understand how different factors may play a role in constructing it as a positive or negative experience.

Sexual initiation is driven by both biological and social factors; alongside other social agents, the media may satisfy adolescents' interest in sexual initiation by providing memorable information and appealing role models (Cantor, Mares, & Hyde, 2003). The focus of the current study is on understanding the "interaction of the message, the human, and the environment" over time (Lang, 2013, p. 21). Thus, the study uses the media practice model (MPM) to theoretically frame the examination of the intricate relationship between mediated messages and youth's social perceptions (Steele & Brown, 1995). The study examines adolescents' interpretations of mediated messages about sexual initiation in light of their personal characteristics and experiences.

## THE MPM AND SEXUAL SOCIALIZATION VIA TELEVISION

Sexual socialization, which largely occurs during adolescence as part of identity construction, involves the establishment of one's perceptions of, attitudes toward, and preferences for sex (Ward, 2003). Both identity

development and sexual self-construction occur vis-à-vis parents, friends, and mass media images. A theoretical framework that links identity construction with media use in the context of adolescent sexual development is Steele and Brown's (1995) MPM. The MPM emphasizes adolescents as active participants in the media environment, consistently engaging in a construction and reconstruction of media messages in ways that help them make sense of their world and themselves (Steele, 1999). The model recognizes that media narratives across different platforms—magazines, television, radio—can be interpreted in the context of adolescents' "lived experiences": Their everyday interactions and personal characteristics both impact and are impacted by media exposure (Hawk, Vanwesenbeeck, de Graaf, & Bakker, 2006).

The model details four main stages, connected among themselves in a transactional manner (Harrison, 2006). The first stage is the identity work in which the adolescent engages, the most important developmental task at this life's stage. Identity construction involves learning about oneself across different contexts, among them the sexual realm. The second stage is selectivity in media use, which is impacted by exposure motivations, attention to the content, and personal characteristics (e.g., gender, habits). Adolescents are active in their choice of media preferences, creating repertoires of media diets, which in turn are associated with different levels of sexual content exposure (Schooler, Sorsoli, Kim, & Tolman, 2009). The third stage is interaction, which involves a cognitive, affective, and behavioral interpretation of the media content, which may produce cultural meaning (Steele, 1999). Narratives may lead to varied interpretations due to personal (e.g., level of success in school) and contextual variations (e.g., family life and neighborhood experiences; Steele & Brown, 1995) and due to adolescents' personal experience with the media content (e.g., identification with its personae, comparing media content with real-life experiences). The fourth stage is the application of the media's messages in the teen's life. One can decide to incorporate the messages (e.g., imitating a behavior seen on the screen) or to reject them (e.g., criticizing sexual depictions in the media; Steele & Brown, 1995). As a result, identity is further shaped and reinforced, resuming the ongoing reciprocity between the mediated world and the everyday world of adolescents.

Among the different media, television viewing is especially relevant for adolescents' identity work as it is central among teens' media activities (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Relevant for the MPM, the myriad television channels and programs, along with recording devices and the availability of its content across mobile platforms allow for much selection in information exposure; Bleakley, Hennessy, and Fishbein (2011) reported that 50% of adolescents actively choose sexual content in their media exposure. Moreover, its reliance on appealing characters and focus on sexual topics make television especially likely to act as a source of information and

role modeling for young people (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). TV narratives may be used by adolescents to construct their sense of sexual norms and practices and, as a result, their sexual identity (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005).

### Television's Portrayal of Sexual Initiation

Adolescents encounter many sexual narratives and themes on television. One narrative is the nature of sexual initiation. Although relatively rare (Kunkel, Eyal, Biely, Finnerty, & Donnerstein, 2005), televised scenes of sexual initiation may be salient for young audiences, as they often involve characters who are of the same age and who experience similar dilemmas as the teen viewers. Kelly (2010) found that about one fourth of teen characters on teen television dramas experienced concerns about first-time intercourse. Based on Carpenter's (2005) work, Kelly found three main scripts in these narratives: (a) virginity loss is a gift to a loved one, (b) virginity is stigmatized, and (c) virginity loss is a task in need of management. Although television does not frequently address sexual health and risks (e.g., condom use, abstinence; Kunkel et al., 2005), scenes with first-time sex were found often to do so. Kelly found that many virginity loss storylines in teen dramas involved consenting characters within monogamous relationships that consider contraception.

Although it is important to avoid assuming catastrophic outcomes of media exposure (Bowman, 2016), research has revealed links between media use and sexual initiation (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008). Steinberg and Monahan (2010) called into question the causal link between media exposure and sexual behavior, but audience selectivity and activity, as purported by the MPM, may nonetheless help explain audience perceptions of media content. For example, Carpenter (2009) found that young adults creatively used plotlines in popular movies to construct a personal interpretation of virginity loss and ideal virginity-loss scenarios. Thus, consistent with the MPM, young audience members selectively interpret and reconstruct television messages, applying them to their own experiences with and understanding of sex.

### The MPM: Adolescent Development and Individual Differences

Sexual socialization and sexual identity construction occur alongside many developmental tasks facing adolescents and that are relevant for their media experiences. Adolescents in Piaget's formal operational age (i.e., after about age 11) have a growing ability to logically think about the long-term implications of actions, consider hypothetical scenarios, and more efficiently process information, including televised messages about sex (Goswami, 2008). Adolescents become increasingly independent from their parents and experience more peer pressure with regard to

sexuality (Steinberg & Morris, 2001), which may push them to television's compelling messages about virginity loss. Finally, adolescents are able to reach a higher level of moral reasoning, taking into account a relativistic perspective of social relationships in constructing moral decisions (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Indeed, media research has shown that, with age, the ability to incorporate cues from mediated messages into moral reasoning and to articulate this reasoning increases, starting after about the age of 7 (Krcmar & Cooke, 2001). Television messages about virginity loss communicate norms and are likely targets of moral evaluations.

The MPM also considers individual differences, stating that "teens respond to media from where they are and from what they know about life" (Steele, 1999, p. 340). Especially relevant for the interaction of adolescents with televised sexual narratives is gender (Steele & Brown, 1995). Gender differences have been found in media exposure, attention to media content, and effects (e.g., Chock, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). For example, men have been found to attend primarily to male-oriented scripts (e.g., about seeking multiple sexual partners) and women to female-oriented narratives (e.g., about seeking emotional commitment). Gender differences are also pronounced in sexual experience, expectations, and attitudes (e.g., Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003). Men tend to endorse more permissive premarital sexual attitudes, and women report more anxiety in sexual contexts (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Gender differences have been found in the recollection and interpretation of sexual televised messages (Cantor et al., 2003).

Sexual experience is another individual difference construct thought to be linked with exposure to sexual media content, especially television portrayals of risky behavior (e.g., having many sexual partners, nonuse of contraception; Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmuller, Vogrincic, & Sauer, 2011; Steele, 1999). Sexual experience may moderate the relationship between television exposure and sexual attitudes (Finnerty-Myers, 2011), serving as a meaningful reference point against which evaluations of televised sexual messages are weighted. Finnerty-Myers (2011) found that only participants who had limited risky sexual experience were impacted in their safer-sex attitudes and behavioral intentions by portrayals of negative outcomes experienced by television characters.

## STUDY RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines adolescents' reactions to messages about sexual initiation in a television narrative. An important aspect of the interpretations of television messages is adolescents' outcome expectancies about sexual initiation. Outcome expectancies—how one predicts sexual encounters are likely to end—underlie sexual perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors and may mediate the exposure–audience–effects relationship. Martino, Collins, Kanouse,

Elliott, and Berry (2005) found that adolescents who were heavier viewers of sexual television content exhibited fewer negative outcome expectancies and, in turn, had a higher likelihood of having had initiated sexual relations in a follow-up survey. Television portrayals of sexual behaviors often end ambiguously, without a clearly attached valence (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002), allowing adolescents to complete the stories however they see fit. Thus, the study focuses specifically on adolescents' outcome expectancies, asking the following:

- RQ1: In what ways do adolescents' outcome expectancies for sexual initiation in a televised scene narrative reflect adolescent developmental markers (e.g., moral evaluation of characters)? In what ways do adolescents' outcome expectancies in this context reflect an understanding of the televisual nature of the narratives as compared to "real-life endings"?
- RQ2: In what ways do adolescents' individual factors (a) gender and (b) sexual experience—theorized by the MPM to be important in determining interpretations of televised narratives—shape and have an association with different outcome expectancies for sexual initiation described in a televised scene narrative?

## METHOD

Consistent with investigations of interpretations of media narratives, the study involves an analysis of adolescents' suggestions for the completion of narratives describing a televised scene about sexual initiation. Lewis, Tamborini, and Weber (2014) similarly assessed students' responses to written narratives representing "plots to several hypothetical films" (p. 408). The current study was conducted in Israel, where 23% of 10th-grade boys and 8% of 10th-grade girls in the Jewish public school system reported having had sex by the age of 15 (Weisblay, 2010). The Israeli public school system offers only limited sexual education in 60% of schools (Kashti, 2010).

### Sample

In June 2011 and October 2011–March 2012, 1,636 tenth to twelfth graders participated in a survey about adolescent sexuality and television. The study was approved by the first author's institution. Of these, 56 surveys (3.42%) were discarded for missing many answers. The survey included questions about television exposure, sexual attitudes and practices, communication about sex, perceived outcomes of sex, and demographics (a description of

the larger study is available from the authors). The survey was distributed in six rural and urban high schools in different areas of the country with the approval of the Israeli Ministry of Education and the school principals. Parents were provided in advance with a letter explaining the study's purpose and procedure and could disallow their child's participation; only a handful of parents did so. Surveys were then distributed during a class period. Students were informed about the study's topic and procedure, that their participation was voluntary, that it was confidential, and that they could stop participating without penalty. Research assistants were present to answer questions.

Within the survey, participants were randomly assigned to read one of four narratives described as scenes intended to be integrated into a television show. Each scene detailed a sexual encounter between a male and a female adolescent. The scenes ended ambiguously, without an explicit mention of the characters actually having sexual intercourse and without clear outcomes. Both of these aspects validly represent the wide majority of ambiguous televised implied depictions of sexual intercourse (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2005). To closely simulate television-based narratives, the authors consulted Kunkel et al.'s write-ups of actual sexual televised scenes. All scenes dealt with situations that are relevant for secular, heterosexual adolescents' experiences in the Israeli context, using terminology and phrasing that is typical among Israeli youth.

The current study focuses on the responses of 420 adolescents randomly assigned to the sexual initiation scene (see next). There were 217 female (51.70%) and 203 male (48.30%) adolescents. Ages ranged from 15 to 18 ( $M = 15.96$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ). The students were nearly equally divided across the different regions of the country (North:  $n = 140$ , 33.30%; central:  $n = 143$ , 34.00%; South:  $n = 137$ , 32.60%) and between urban ( $n = 193$ , 46.00%) and rural ( $n = 227$ , 54.00%) schools. All schools were from the Israeli Hebrew public school system (and not from the Arab public school system, the religious public system, or the Haredi system). Within this assumed to be largely Jewish population, the majority of participants reported being secular ( $n = 287$ , 68.3%), a minority reported being traditional (somewhat religious) in their religious beliefs ( $n = 115$ , 27.4%), and only 10 students reported being religious (2.4%). Moreover, 136 (32.40%) have never been in a romantic relationship, 192 (45.70%) were in a relationship in the past, and 92 (21.90%) are currently in one.

## Procedure

As noted, after responding to questions about sexuality and television viewing as part of the larger survey, participants were asked to read and respond to the following scene narrative:

Dafna [female] and Amir [male] are high school students who have been in a romantic relationship for a few months. They talked many times about having sex for the first time together and decided to wait for the appropriate time, when they both feel ready. The scene begins with Dafna arriving at Amir's house after a tough day and sharing with him her bad mood. Amir listens with a loving gaze, puts his hand on her shoulder, and approaches to hug her. Dafna smiles at him and they hug for a while. Amir tells Dafna that he loves her and they kiss. As intimacy evolves, Dafna says: "You're just charming. I love you very much and . . . and I think I'm ready. . . ." Surprised, Amir looks into Dafna's eyes and asks quietly if she's certain. Dafna's embarrassed smile confirms that she is, and Amir says that he too feels ready. The two kiss with increasing passion as they slowly lay on the bed. The scene ends.

Participants were asked to suggest, in a seven-line open-ended format, the continuation of the scene and the logical outcomes for the situation it describes. Of the 420 participants, 293 (69.76%) suggested a scene ending; their suggestions are analyzed herein.

### Analysis of Scene Completion Suggestions

To identify the outcome expectancies for the narrative, participant responses (for all four narratives) were coded by 10 undergraduate students in two steps: First, five coders sorted about one fifth of the responses into emerging categories. The coders identified 10 categories of outcome expectancies (Table 1). Second, all coders distributed all study comments to one or more of these categories. They found that the categories fit the responses of the entire sample well. Intercoder reliability was assessed on a random subsample of 16% of the comments, each coded by five to 10 coders. Potter and Levine-Donnerstein's (1999) Scott's pi formula, which accounts for coders' chance agreement, was used, similar to other large-scale content analysis (e.g., Stern & Morr, 2013), with high agreement for all categories (Table 1).

*Thematic Analysis.* Having identified the major categories of outcome expectancies proposed by the participants, a qualitative approach was adopted to distill metathemes that cut across categories and reflect broad thinking patterns about the topic of sexual initiation as presented in the media. The two authors qualitatively analyzed the open-ended suggested scene endings. This approach enables an interpretive, subjective consideration of the participants' expressions and of the ideas they consider most important (Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008). The analysis proceeded in a systematic fashion; the authors read together all endings to identify topics, patterns, and themes. Once a theme was identified, all



TABLE 1  
Categories of Outcome Expectancies in Adolescents' Suggested Scene Endings

Category (Scott's Pi Intercoder Reliability)	Description	Examples	Gender		Sexual Experience			
			No. / % Fit Category	Male (n = 139)	Female (n = 154)	No Sexual Exp. (n = 65)	Precursory Sex Exp. (n = 147)	Intercourse Exp. (n = 72)
Sexual relationship advancement (92%) 43 / 59.72%	The partners advance their sexual relationship, engage in more sexual behaviors.	"After the intercourse, Dafna and Amir will feel closer to one another and will have more sex during their relationship."	168 / 57.34%	92 / 66.19%	76 /	49.35%	30 / 46.15%	90 / 61.22%
Cessation of sexual relationship (95%)	Deciding to stop the sexual activity, during this specific encounter or in the future.	"The couple will feel closer or it might be that the girl doesn't enjoy it, and therefore she doesn't want to have sex again; their relationship severed."	16 / 5.46%	5 / 3.60%	11 / 7.14%	3 / 4.62%	7 / 4.76%	5 / 6.94%
Pregnancy and/or abortion (98%) 8 / 11.11%	Any mention of an actual or potential pregnancy or pregnancy scare; mention of abortion or its consideration.	"In my opinion, the logical outcome is that Dafna will get pregnant and then Amir will break up with her."	49 / 16.72%	23 / 16.55%	26 /	16.88%	18 / 22.80%	22 / 14.97%
Contracting an STD (100%)	Any mention of contraction of an STD, concern about such contraction, or its prevention.	"Either they are doing it, and that's it; happy, etc.; or that she contracts an STD and dies or gets pregnant and ruins her reputation."	17 / 5.80%	10 / 7.19%	7 / 4.55%	7 / 10.77%	7 / 4.76%	3 / 4.17%
Emotional consequences (92%)	Any mention of emotions that arose in one or both partners as a result of this sexual encounter, either positive or negative, including happiness, regret, shame, etc.	"The relationship ... will grow and develop. It might be that Dafna will regret a little because she did not think logically ... Amir will ... understand that she did it because she was sad at the moment."	104 / 35.49%	39 / 28.06%	65 /	42.21%	30 / 46.15%	49 / 33.33%

22 / 30.56%

Impact on the romantic relationship (89%)	Any change in the romantic relationship—positive (e.g., growing appreciation) or negative (e.g., anger)—toward one another.	90 / 30.72%	35 / 25.18%	55 / 35.71%	23 / 35.38%	47 / 31.97%
17 / 23.61%						
Mention of parents/peers (94%)	Any mention of social agents (e.g., peer rejection, increased popularity, parental objection).	17 / 5.80%	6 / 4.32%	11 / 7.14%	9 / 6.12%	3 / 4.17%
Mention of contraception use/absence (99%)	Any mention of contraception (e.g., condom, "the morning-after pill," birth control pill) or criticism of its absence in this encounter.	42 / 14.33%	17 / 12.23%	25 / 16.23%	11 / 16.92%	16 / 10.88%
14 / 19.44%						
Violence/Drug use (100%)	Escalation of the sexual encounter to other extreme/risky behaviors.	3 / 1.02%	3 / 2.16%	0 / 0%	0 / 0.00%	2 / 2.78%
Other (96%)	Any mention of an outcome that does not fit the preceding categories.	16 / 5.46%	9 / 6.47%	7 / 4.55%	7 / 10.77%	3 / 4.17%

Note. STD = sexually transmitted disease.

comments were reviewed again to find all relevant examples supporting it. Each comment could be related to more than one theme. To verify the decisions and resolve conflicts, the authors engaged in constant discussions, as in previous research (e.g., Repta & Clarke, 2013).

Moreover, comments were analyzed according to two important individual variables: gender and sexual experience. In separate waves, all comments were analyzed by the authors according to the themes identified in the process just cited. This analysis was done by separating comments made by (a) male versus female adolescents and (b) adolescents with no sexual experience ( $n = 65$ ), those with only precursory sexual experience (i.e., who reported having kissed or fondled another person's private parts;  $n = 147$ ), and those who reported having also had oral or sexual intercourse experience ( $n = 72$ ). This categorization was done according to survey responses to dichotomous yes/no questions if they had ever taken part in romantic kissing, fondling another person's private body parts, sexual intercourse, and oral sex, similar to Eyal and Kunkel (2008). Most participants reported having had engaged in romantic kissing ( $n = 218$ , 74.40%), intimate touch ( $n = 159$ , 54.27%), oral sex ( $n = 62$ , 21.16%), and intercourse ( $n = 52$ , 17.75%). One fifth ( $n = 65$ , 22.18%) reported not having engaged in sexual activities.

## RESULTS

### RQ1: The Diverse and Critical Nature of Adolescents' Sexual Initiation Outcome Expectancies

In examining the outcome expectancies suggested by adolescents as scene endings, a large diversity of consequences was identified. Within the 293 suggested endings, nine categories of outcomes were identified (plus an "other" category). The three most prevalent categories were advancement in sexual activity ( $n = 168$ , 57.34%), emotional reactions ( $n = 104$ , 35.49%), and effects on the relationship with the romantic/sexual partner ( $n = 90$ , 30.72%). These were followed distantly by the categories pregnancy and/or abortion ( $n = 49$ , 16.72%), mention of contraception ( $n = 42$ , 14.33%), mention of parents and/or peers and mention of sexually transmitted diseases ( $n = 17$  each, 5.80%), cessation of sexual activities ( $n = 16$ , 5.46%), and escalation to violence/drug use ( $n = 3$ , 1.02%). Sixteen suggested endings were unclassified above and were coded as "other" (5.46%).

Each of the participants who offered a possible ending to the scene addressed one to five different categories ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ). Half of the adolescents

who suggested endings to the scene ( $n = 159$ , 54.27%) wrote more than one ending and sometimes even contradictory outcomes (e.g., both positive and negative outcomes, outcomes that referred to the individual vs. social/relational consequences). For example,

In my opinion, there is a greater chance that both of them will enjoy it and decide to repeat this. But, there is also a chance that one of them or both of them will not enjoy and decide to stop. Because they are doing it without contraception, there could be a pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease. (male adolescent, age 16)

Qualitatively, several interesting themes emerged from participants' suggested scene endings: (a) identification of motivations and situational factors leading to certain outcomes, (b) morally evaluating the characters' actions, and (c) differentiating "TV endings" and "real-life endings."

*Theme 1: Identification of Motivations and Situational Factors Leading to Certain Outcomes.* Although not specifically instructed to do so, many adolescents also provided an explanation as to why they predicted a certain outcome. Adolescents identified the issue of mutual consent as one of the main causes leading to outcomes:

They will have sex and both will enjoy and feel good about themselves later because it was done with mutual consent from both sides. (female adolescent, age 17)

Moreover, adolescents were sensitive to cues in the narrative as important determinants of possible outcomes. The characters' previous discussion of the topic of sexual initiation was seen as a reason for positive outcomes, whereas cues about the specific date not being preplanned were taken to imply negative outcomes. Moreover, the characters' moods were considered as important; several adolescents mentioned that Dafna had a bad day:

After having sex, Dafna feels sorry about it and feels ashamed and insecure. . . . The relationship between her and Amir is ruined because she had sex on a day that did not go well for her and because of this day and the pressure she had sex that was not of her *free will* from the beginning. (female adolescent, age 16)

*Theme 2: Morally Evaluating the Characters' Actions.* Many adolescents either praised or condemned the characters' choice to engage in sexual intercourse in the scene. Participants engaged in a moral, critical assessment of the characters' behavior and often used emotional and judgmental language in doing so. Much of the criticism was directed toward the male character, accusing Amir of taking

advantage of or manipulating Dafna's emotional state and the fact that she was vulnerable. Dafna, on the other hand, was often accused of acting harshly and irresponsibly:

The couple will feel regret because they did this out of mental distress (the girl) and her boyfriend (her partner) took advantage of this. (female adolescent, age 16)

In my opinion, the girl decided to act rashly without taking responsibility and of course, without thinking about contraception, this is not OK. (female adolescent, age 18)

Many adolescents assumed that contraception was not used in the narrative's described encounter; responses reprimanded the characters for being irresponsible or "stupid," noting the decision's negative long-term implications. Participants suggested that obtaining some form of contraception is a logical ending to the narrative. Implications of nonuse of contraception were mostly pregnancy or an abortion. Mostly, sexual health repercussions for the characters' behaviors were perceived as negative, threats to their happiness:

After the sex she did not get her period and got pregnant because of the lack of responsibility. In a situation in which there is no condom or precaution, do not do it!! (female adolescent, age 17)

*Theme 3: Differentiating "TV Endings" and "Real-Life Endings".*

Comments that specifically referred to the televised nature of the narrative highlighted adolescents' understanding of television genres, financial interests, and production conventions. Some participants expressed a cynical attitude toward television's representation of sex, noting that narratives are intended to gain audience attention and arouse emotions, often in an exaggerated manner, and based on the genre that they intend to serve:

If it is a telenovela, the appropriate situation is pregnancy or AIDS to cause a problem and if it is a romantic comedy it will end without a problem. (male adolescent, age 17)

Alternatively, a few responses specifically addressed the expectation for an educational role of television in conveying responsible sexual health information to the youth audience:

It would have been important to mention contraception use, because if this scene is in a television series and it will not mention contraception use the importance of this will be decreased among many teens, who will hurry to have sex and will forget because of excitement and happiness to use contraception. (male adolescent, age 17)

As part of the critical evaluation that these responses reflected, some participants differentiated between the scene ending as likely to be encountered on television and how such a situation is likely to end in real life, mostly noting that the two will differ in meaningful ways:

If it is a continuation in the series, then for sure everything will end well. But in reality, they can contract sexually transmitted diseases (because of the passion they forgot to use contraception) or get pregnant, shame, scared of telling their parents. (female adolescent, age 16)

## RQ2: Personal Variations in Adolescents' Scene Ending Interpretations

*RQ2a. Gender Patterns: Female Adolescents' Emotional Elaboration versus Male Adolescents' Technical Concreteness.* Female and male adolescents differed in the focus of their suggested scene endings. The most common outcome suggested by male adolescents was pregnancy, followed by relational improvement, relational deterioration, and STD contraction. The top emotional outcome among male adolescents was happiness. In contrast, female adolescents mostly referred to regret and relational improvement as possible outcomes. These qualitative findings were supported by a chi-square analysis of gender differences, wherein it was found that female adolescents referred more in their outcome suggestions to emotional consequences than did male,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.39$ ,  $p < .05$  (adjusted residual for female = + 2.5), and male adolescents referred more than female to an advancement of the sexual relationship,  $\chi^2(1) = 8.47$ ,  $p < .01$  (adjusted residual for male = + 2.9). There were no other statistically significant differences between the genders in their mention of outcome categories. Gender differences were also reflected in the language used in the comments. Male adolescents wrote shorter comments and used more technical language, focusing on the physical aspects of sexual encounters, such as "sleep together" and the colloquial term "come." On the contrary, female adolescents tended to use more emotional expressions such as "love," "perfect couple," and "excited":

... They have sex and feel good about it. They are happy because it was meaningful for them, because it was with someone they love and they were ready for this. Their relationship will be more mature, open, and intimate now. (female adolescent, age 15)

Terms reflecting love and affection were also present in male adolescents' responses, but female adolescents elaborated on these with pathos and passion, whereas male adolescents' writing was more restrained:

In my opinion, the boy will tell her 'one minute' and go get a condom and in the meantime the girl will get undressed and stay in her underwear and get under the covers and the boy will return with a condom, get undressed as well and get under the covers. They will kiss on top. The boy will put on the condom and they will sleep together. (male adolescent, age 16)

Finally, a surprising finding was that male adolescents referred in their comments to social agents—parents and peers (e.g., parents will be upset)—more than female. Female adolescents were more concerned with the relational partner:

Amir ran to tell his friends, because he turned out to be “a man.” Dafna cries to her girlfriends that she is not sure that she was truly ready and she thinks it would ruin everything. He wasn't even that good. (male adolescent, age 15)

The two will be happy that they went through it together because they are in love, and will also tell their close ones, The reactions will mostly be accepting and happy but of course there will be objections but at the end it will be the right move. (female adolescent, age 16)

*RQ2b. Experience Matters: Simplistic Determinism versus Realistic Complexity.* Participants were divided into three groups according to their sexual experience: no previous sexual experience, only precursory sexual experience, and intercourse and/or oral sex experience. Regardless of past sexual experience, the most common expected outcome for the scene was increased love/affection and an improvement in the couple's relationship. Such a positive relational outcome was predicted nearly twice as much by adolescents with no sexual experience relative to the other two groups. Also, pregnancy was mentioned as a possible outcome in all three sexual experience groups, but participants with no sexual experience mentioned pregnancy twice as much as those with precursory experience and 3 times as much as the intercourse experience group. The qualitative finding was supported by a chi-square analysis,  $\chi^2(2) = 7.50, p < .05$  (adjusted residual for the no sexual experience group = + 2.6). Overall, adolescents with no sexual experience tended to be more simplistic and extreme in their outcome suggestions—either pure love and marriage or an ominous, tragic consequence of unintended pregnancy.

... Dafna and Amir will have sex for the first time, be very excited and each one of them will tell their best friends and their relationship will improve, they will fall in love and get married. (male adolescent, age 15, no sexual experience)

After some time, Dafna will get pregnant, and Amir does not want the child. They break up and from this they conclude that if they had decided in advance about a specific date instead of waiting, they could have prepared (a condom) and the tragedy would have been avoided. (male adolescent, age 16, no sexual experience)

In comparison, adolescents with more sexual experience had a more complex and realistic view of the situation. They tended to ground their predicted outcomes in the context of the characters' relationship, referring to motivations, preparation for the sexual act, and its mutual nature. For them, sex is only one aspect of the romantic relationship and is more likely to lead to relational improvement when personal and emotional factors enable this and when the behavior is responsible:

They will sleep together with precaution and their relationship will continue and only grow stronger because they feel comfortable to both talk about the bad things that happened to them throughout the day and also to have sex. (female adolescent, age 15, precursory sexual experience)

Sexually experienced adolescents did not foresee much regret as an outcome for the characters in the scene. On the contrary, inexperienced adolescents and those with only precursory sexual experience predicted that the situation will result in regret, especially on the part of the female character, twice or 3 times more often.

The logical outcome to the situation is that the characters have sex, the girl will not feel good about herself afterward and the man will feel good. And their relationship will deteriorate. The man would like to continue having sex and the girl will not but she may give up to him because of the desire to continue having a relationship with him. (female adolescent, age 15, precursory sexual experience)

Adolescents with any sexual experience tended to refer more to personal happiness and confusion, whereas inexperienced adolescents tended to mention implications for the characters' social relationship with parents and peers:

They most likely will have sex and when they're done, each one of them can know if s/he was really ready. If yes, they will both feel happiness and joy and if not, one of them or both will feel bad. (male adolescent, age 15, precursory sexual experience)

"Rumors" will begin to fly at school about what happened, and (others) will begin to ask each of them if the rumors are true. People will maybe even laugh at them when they see them together, but some will tell Amir "What a guy!" or something like this. (male adolescent, age 15, no sexual experience)



Finally, sexually experienced adolescents tended to use more explicit, adult-like, coarse language and referred more directly to the sexual acts compared to less experienced adolescents. For example, they often referred to ejaculation in everyday terms (e.g., “coming”):

After their fucking, their love will grow and they will continue to fuck, but at some point both will get tired of it and they will break up. (male adolescent, age 16, precursory sexual experience)

Dafna is happy that she consented, because it was fun and much less scary than she thought. Amir is a bit disappointed by his performances, but believes that he will have many more times to fix and he is also happy. (male adolescent, age 18, intercourse experience)

## DISCUSSION

The study presents an analysis of late adolescents’ interpretations and understanding of messages about teen sex they are likely to encounter on television. Rather than trying to identify a specific media effect (Lang, 2013), the study examines the interaction between the media message and the individual in the context of their ongoing experiences. In accordance with the theoretical framework of the media practice model, the study’s findings highlight both common themes in the interpretation of media narratives about sex among adolescents and individual variations based on gender and sexual experience. The overall agreement about possible outcomes reflects a shared perception of sexual initiation encounters. Most prevalent was a reference to an advancement of sexual activity, followed by emotional reactions and relational consequences toward the romantic partner.

It is interesting that few adolescents ( $n = 8$ ) referred in their responses to sexual pleasure. These references mentioned “enjoyment,” one wrote about “satisfaction,” and no response mentioned physical pleasure. The minimal reference to pleasure is surprising, as sex is generally considered a positive experience and one third of women and half of men report satisfaction in their first sexual intercourse (Higgins et al., 2010). The committed nature of the characters’ relationship in the narrative should have increased the likelihood of pleasure. However, research has found that the ability to discuss pleasure, especially among female late adolescents, is related to other personal factors (e.g., self-objectification; Hirschman, Impett, & Schooler, 2006), which may be at play here too.

Many suggested scene endings included more than one possible outcome, and even conflicting outcomes. Moreover, many adolescents wrote elaborate endings, noting the motivations for the characters' behaviors. Such elaboration reflects several developmental markers of adolescence: (a) a high level of involvement in the topic of sexual initiation (Carpenter, 2002), (b) a complex and relativistic view of sexual initiation as a meaningful experience for youth (Goswami, 2008), and (c) higher order thinking and emerging understanding that situations are not inevitable and are context dependent (Shaffer & Kipp, 2014). Hypothesizing about different situations is especially relevant to ambivalent televised narratives such as the one used in this study.

Another common theme was a moral evaluation and criticism of the characters' sexual decisions, especially with regard to contraception use. The consideration of contraception is consistent with reports that most youth use some method of contraception at first sex, with significant increases since the late 1980s (e.g., Harel-Fisch et al., 2011). Likely, these real-world trends bear more on adolescents' outcome expectancies than televised portrayals, which do not often address contraception (Kunkel et al., 2005). The real-world relevance reflects the MPM's emphasis on lived experiences (Steele, 1999) as driving youth's interpretations of mediated narratives.

Adolescents largely directed their criticism for lack of contraception use toward the female character. Dafna was accused of engaging in a reckless behavior, letting Amir "stupidly" take advantage of her. Studies have consistently shown that teen-targeted television content often involves stereotypical sexual gender representations, including the attribution of responsibility for safer-sex practices to women (e.g., Hust et al., 2008). In contrast, Amir was blamed for taking advantage of Dafna's fragile situation, not considering her feelings, and preferring his gratification over her needs. Most adolescents are likely in the interpersonal concordance phase of the conventional moral developmental stage, which is characterized by a near-absolute acceptance of social norms (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). The desire to conform to social order is strong, and violations of it are judged harshly. Amir's actions are criticized, as they do not conform to the expectations of proper behavior. Kohlberg and Hersh (1977) wrote that in this stage of moral development "one earns approval by being nice" (p. 55).

Adolescents' criticism was also directed toward the televised representation, as adolescents explicitly contrasted it with real life. They wrote that television often exaggerates and overdramatizes events. Adolescents seem to have a savvy approach to television and recognize that the embedded latent messages may result from the economic nature of the industry (Andsager, Weintraub Austin, & Pinkleton, 2002). To date, research has examined skepticism toward advertising (e.g., Weintraub Austin, Chen, & Grube, 2006); responses in this study reflect a similar approach toward the television

industry, more broadly. They also resonate with the fourth step in the MPM: the application of mediated messages to audience's lives.

### Individual Differences in Narrative Interpretations

Beyond the common themes that emerged in the study, we identified variations based on two individual difference variables, consistent with the MPM: gender and sexual experience. A gender difference was reflected both in the expected outcomes (e.g., men predicted pregnancy more than women) and in the language used (e.g., men tended to use more technical and explicit terms, whereas women were more emotional). This finding is consistent with past studies that found that male adolescents respond to physical elements and female adolescents respond more to the relational context (e.g., Cantor et al., 2003). According to the MPM, gender is a variable likely to increase involvement with the content, which in turn increases interest and motivation to seek further sexual television content. This cognitive and affective engagement with the content then produces cultural and personal meaning, which is at the heart of the MPM (Steele, 1999) and is likely related to meaningful differences between the genders in their interpretation of the content.

With regard to sexual experience, the main difference identified was that adolescents with no sexual experience wrote rather simplistic and deterministic outcome expectancies. They tended to suggest one of two extremes—that the sexual encounter will lead to everlasting love and marriage or that it will end in a catastrophic outcome, pregnancy, and even death. Inexperienced adolescents also tended to refer more to the social environment than more experienced teens. It may be that not having had experienced sex makes the adolescent more concerned about others' possible reactions. Another difference is that more sexually experienced youth tended to mention regret as a possible outcome to the narrative less frequently than did less experienced youth. The narrative may be describing a more ideal situation (e.g., a long-term, loving relationship) than what these youth actually experienced in their first intercourse encounter, and therefore they suggested fewer negative outcomes.

The finding about differences between more and less experienced youth is consistent with recent studies on the role of past sexual experience in media effects (e.g., Finnerty-Myers, 2011). As predicted by the MPM (Steele, 1999), sexual experience seems to play a moderating role, guiding adolescents' attention to different elements within televised narratives and, perhaps, later guiding their interpretations and behavioral choices. More information about the specific sexual initiation experience of the adolescents in our study is missing to enable drawing this conclusion with confidence.

In sum, the study contributes to the understanding of adolescents' interpretations of televised narratives in the context of sexual initiation and supports the MPM. Considering the importance of outcome expectancies in determining attitudes and future behaviors, it is important to understand how narratives shape and reflect such beliefs among youth. As can be seen, there is much variability in adolescents' responses to the narrative, indicating audience activity and involvement. Indeed, the MPM's concepts help us understand how the lived experiences and personal variables of youth play a role in their understanding of televised narratives about sexual initiation. At the same time, one cannot disregard the importance of the mediated narrative itself, as associations were identified between patterns in adolescents' responses and common patterns of televised sexual messages. Clearly, adolescents are engaged with the topic of sex—as reflected by their intricate familiarity with its different aspects, including health issues—and they are engaged with television and its messages, as reflected by their evaluation of its authenticity and moral value.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

The response to the narrative was preceded by survey questions about sexual attitudes and behaviors, which could have prompted the suggested scene endings. However, it is unlikely that the study's findings can be explained by such a technical matter, as participants exhibited much diversity in their suggested endings and several issues were raised that were not mentioned in the survey. Also, the study relied on self-reports within a class setting, and thus its findings may be sensitive to social desirability. However, effort was made to maintain a quiet classroom atmosphere, and research assistants were at the site to ensure as much privacy as possible for the students.

Another study limitation is that participants responded to written narratives and not actual televised scenes. Although participants were told that these are descriptions of televised scenes, and although care was taken to ensure that the writing mirrored that on television, adolescents may still react differently when encountering actual characters on television. However, other studies have used written narrative as representations of televisual scenes (e.g., Lewis et al., 2014) and researchers have suggested that the mental processes involved in audiences' responses to print and video narratives share more similarities than differences (Green et al., 2008; Riddle, 2013). Indeed, participants' responses reflect that they were thinking of a televised scene.

Future research would benefit from incorporating more information about adolescents' past sexual experience (e.g., the valence of the sexual initiation experience) and additional personal variables (e.g., religiosity) in making sense of their responses to televised scenes. The current sample included little variation in religiosity, and information about ethnicity and socioeconomic status was unavailable. Future research can also examine personal and cultural-based reactions to narratives of nonheterosexual encounters and consider sexual orientation as an individual difference factor in the interpretations of narratives.

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