Sex, Love, and Risk-n-Responsibility: A Content Analysis of Entertainment Television

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Abstract

This study documents the extent of sexual content, including sexual health content, in scenes with and without expressions of love on network and cable television popular with emerging adults. Sexual talk and/or behavior was found in 20% of all television scenes coded across 53.5 hours of programming. A third of these scenes featured sex alongside expressions of love. An additional 10% of scenes suggested love but not sex. Coded as a separate category, 25% of analyzed scenes contained a passing joke or pun referencing sexual organs, making these non-specific comedic one-liners the predominant reference to sex in this sample. Beyond jokes, most of the sexual or loving talk in this sample consisted of expressing a romantic interest in someone; sex- and love-related behaviors largely consisted of kissing or flirting. Very few scenes specifically referenced sexual intercourse. Sexual health messages were also rare. The majority of scenes mentioning any health consequence (= 7% of analyzed scenes) concerned emotional heartache. One scene mentioned sexually-transmitted infections; 12 of the nearly 2,600 scenes coded mentioned condoms or contraceptives. It is thus a challenging proposition to build upon existing sexual depictions on television to promote safe sex practices within sexual and loving contexts.

Keywords

content analysis; love; romance; sex; television

During our transition from childhood to adulthood, we learn from the lessons media, and television in particular, teach us about our sexual selves and what we might expect from romantic encounters (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005). The extent to which we are exposed to sexual content on television might thus influence when and how we choose to engage in sexual activity as we make that transition (Collins, Martino, Elliott, & Miu, 2011; Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Certainly, exposure to sexually explicit material has been linked with risky sexual attitudes, endorsement of less progressive gender roles, and early onset of sexual activity (Brown & L'Engle, 2009). However, exposure to sexual content in mainstream entertainment television has also been associated with risky sexual attitudes and behaviors (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008), as well as negative consequences such as unwanted pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008).

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A silver lining in this problematic media environment is a small but growing presence of sexual health messages embedded within this entertainment content—messages with the potential to challenge risky sexual attitudes that might predict risky behaviors (Farrar, 2006; Geary, Burke, Neupane, Castelnau, & Brown, 2006; Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008). Yet, whether emerging adults notice the health message and how they interpret that message will likely depend on how the sex and sexual health cues are contextualized within the television program (Manganello & Blake, 2010; see Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott, & Berry, 2005 on the cognitive processing of sexual messages).

Recent evidence suggests some sexual health messages might, in fact, be considered irrelevant if they appear within a loving rather than purely sexual context (Dillman Carpentier, 2016). Yet, as will be discussed further below, a significant portion of the sexual content that has traditionally hosted sexual health messages (see Kunkel et al., 2007) might reside within content suggestive of love (Brown et al., 2013; Ward, 1995). Unfortunately, information about sexual health, risk, and responsibility messages on television is a decade old, if not longer; existing knowledge of the media environment might not reflect the current landscape, given how rapidly sexual content increases and changes in entertainment media (Kunkel et al., 2007; Strasburger & The Council on Communications and Media, 2010).

The offerings of the present study are three-fold. We apply a rigorous content analysis (see Manganello & Blake, 2010) to document the frequency and nature of sexual content in network and cable entertainment television popular with emerging adults, whose developmental stage is characterized by increases in sexual motivation and risky sexual behavior (Patrick & Lee, 2010; Patrick, Maggs, & Abar, 2007). We add to the existing understanding of sexual television content consumed by this at-risk age group by incorporating additional analyses of expressions of love within this content; this incorporation serves to illuminate the extent to which sexual cues exist in tandem with cues suggesting love, as well as revealing the relative balance of sex and love on television. Finally, we analyze the extent to which sexual health, risk, and responsibility is featured within and outside sexual and loving scenes in the analyzed television programs. This combination of data allows for a more thorough understanding of the various lessons emerging adults might learn about sex, love, and health while their own sexual attitudes and beliefs are evolving.s

Sexual Content on Television

The present television content analysis is both inspired and guided by sexual script theory. According to sexual script theory, sexual activity is determined by a combination of cultural, social, and intrapsychic negotiations that influence the development of sexual attitudes and behaviors throughout the life course (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In merging formal education with observational learning and interpersonal experiences, people learn how to interpret, as well as engage in new sexual encounters (see Wiederman, 2015 for review). In general, a script consists of a sequence of typical actions, including talk and behavior, that is expected to be performed during a given event (Schank & Abelson, 1977). Scripts thus provide a structure for understanding and navigating through the social event, for example a fine

dining experience, or in the case of sexual scripts, refusal of unwanted sex (see Frith & Kitzinger, 2001).

Analyses of mass media can reveal the prevailing sexual scripts that inform people's own understanding of sexuality at the cultural and social levels. For example, loss of virginity has been shown to be predominately portrayed in teen dramas as either delay of virginity loss and encouragement of abstinence, stigmatization of virginity and encouragement of virginity loss, or management of the physical, social, and emotional components of the inevitable loss of virginity (Kelly, 2010). A heterosexual script that depicts men as active pursuers of sex and women as willing, submissive, and objectified recipients of these encounters has been identified across a number of primetime television programs aimed at adolescent audiences (Kim et al., 2007).

Regarding the contextualization of sex, more than half of the sexual depictions on primetime television in the 1990's emphasized recreation rather than relational themes (Ward, 1995). Nearly half of the sexual intercourse portrayals across network and cable television are staged outside of relational commitment (Kunkel et al., 2007). Correspondingly, one study of Chinese television noted that over half of all love scenes were devoid of sexual talk or behavior, and only 2% of love scenes depicted or implied sexual intercourse (Brown et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, despite the aforementioned exception (Brown et al., 2013), little attention has been paid to analyzing the frequency and nature of cues about love. Rather, concentration has been placed on the description and analysis of sexual content among either television for general audiences (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2007; Ward, 1995) or television viewed by adolescents (e.g., Brown et al., 2006). Contextualization of sex within relational contexts, as opposed to recreational contexts, has been most often used to indicate whether sexual partners are in love (relational) or not in love (recreational); identification of these contexts are based on such cues as prior dating behavior, intent to see the sexual partner again, or talk/behavior indicating monogamy, love, or intent to procreate (Mahay, Laumann, & Michaels, 2005; Markle, 2008; Ward, 1995). Brown et al. (2013) extended the operationalization of expressions of love to behaviors indicative of romantic tenderness (e.g., caresses, hand-holding) and talk about romantic liking, love, relationship building, and relationship harm, which encompasses a wider range of behaviors and feelings associated with the attitudes of love at the beginning, middle, and end of romantic relationships (Hammock & Richardson, 2011).

Having an operational definition of expressions of love that are not dependent on the presence of sexual content (e.g., passionate kissing) allows for the comparison of the extent to which themes of sex and themes of love exist separately, as well as in tandem. This ability to make this comparison is important, as recent research suggests social judgments are biased toward thoughts of tenderness and love upon receipt of romantic love cues, whereas people who receive sexual cues without additional cues of love view others more as sexual objects (Dillman Carpentier, Parrott, & Northup, 2014). Moreover, sexual cues within a loving context might temporarily decrease interest in casual sex (i.e., sexual permissiveness), whereas sexual cues outside a loving context might temporarily increase this interest

(Dillman Carpentier, 2016). The implication for decreasing this interest is important to sexual health, as attitudes and behaviors associated with casual sex are likewise associated with negative consequences including depression, regret, loneliness, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STI), and sexual violence (see Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012).

The aim of the current study is ultimately to assess the extent to which cues relating to sexual health, risk, and responsibility are accompanied by sexual cues and expressions of love in television popular with emerging adults. Necessarily, this study includes a categorization of sexual content as relational or recreational to facilitate comparisons with prior research, but this study further analyzes various expressions of love within and beyond scenes that contain sexual cues to more fully document scenes with indications of sex without love (e.g., flirting with a stranger with no clear intent to commit to a relationship), love without sex (e.g., talk about loving someone), and both sex and love (e.g., passionate kissing within a committed relationship). Also extending existing research, this study provides new information on media representations of the physical, psychological, and social risks associated with sexual attitudes and behaviors, noting how these risks are depicted alongside cues of sex and expressions of love in these media.

Knowledge of the general television environment in the early 2000's indicates that just over 65% of television programs across network and cable channels contained some form of sexual content, most of the content being sexual talk rather than behavior (Kunkel et al., 2007). This percentage represents an increase in sexual content from assessments conducted in the 1990s (e.g., Farrar et al., 2003; Gorham, 1994; Ward, 1995). Of the programs that included any depiction of sexual behavior (one-third of analyzed programs), about half depicted sexual intercourse, and as previously noted, just over half of those depictions indicated that the partners were in an established relationship; this amount is out of 3000 programs analyzed across six broadcast networks, including PBS, three select cable channels, and one premium channel (Kunkel et al., 2007). However, recall that the majority of sexual content on television, overall, had previously been shown to indicate recreational rather than relational themes (Ward, 1995).

Information specific to sexual health was found in 15% of programs that included sexual content; emphasis on health was primarily limited to mentions of sexual precaution (e.g., condom use), which occurred in fewer than 5% of the scenes with sexual talk or behavior (Kunkel et al., 2007; see also Hust et al., 2008; Olson, 1994). This latter observation is important to review in new television program samples, as exposure to sexual content featuring condoms might engender positive attitudes toward safe sex (Farrar, 2006). Missing from the existing literature is an assessment of how sexual health messages are contextualized, beyond their appearance alongside depictions of sexual intercourse; safe sex information has been observed to co-occur with intercourse-related content (Kunkel et al., 2007). Given that depictions of intercourse might be more relational than recreational, the present investigation will thus assess whether sexual health mentions are more associated with relational rather than recreational themes, as described in the above research—a finding that would call into question the relevance of these mentions if sexual health risk lies with attitudes and behaviors most associated with recreational sex (Garcia et al., 2012). This

analysis will be conducted in addition to the broader assessment of expressions of love offered in this study.

Finally, missing from the existing studies are calculations of the number of scenes with sexual content within each hour, relative to the total number of scenes per hour. This information is necessary to assess the extent to which programs that feature this type of content are primarily sexual in nature, or if sexual content is largely incidental to the theme of the episode. The present investigation addresses this information need, as well, using a sample of television shows spanning network, cable, and streaming channels popular with emerging adults in the mid-2000s.

The following research questions are addressed:

> RQ1: What is the frequency of scenes with indications of sex and/or love in television programming popular with emerging adults?

> RQ2: What are the most common features of sexual and loving talk and behavior in this television programming?

> RQ3: How are mentions of sexual health risk and responsibility contextualized in this television programming?

Method

Television Program Selection

Popular television programs among Millennials were selected by first using Nielsen ratings to generate a list of the 30 most-viewed television programs within the 18-to-25-year-old age group. This list was compared with other online reports of popular television shows among Millennials and young adults to help ensure that the most popular shows among this age group was included in the list. A survey was then distributed during the fall of 2014 to Millennials (N = 166), who were asked to indicate which of the 30 listed television shows they liked to watch live or on demand (see Nielsen, 2014a). The 25 most-checked programs from this survey were: *Orange is the New Black*, *Scandal*, *Game of Thrones*, *Modern Family*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Parks & Recreation*, *Breaking Bad*, *House of Cards*, *Doctor Who*, *Mad Men*, *The Mindy Project*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Downton Abbey*, *The Walking Dead*, *American Horror Story*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *CSI*, *Glee*, *NCIS*, *True Blood*, *Suits*, *The Blacklist*, *Masters of Sex*, and *Gossip Girl*. Eighteen of these programs were designed to be 1-hour programs if commercial breaks were included; seven programs were designed to be half-hour shows. Three episodes from each program's most recent season were randomly selected for analysis; three episodes have been shown to be an acceptable amount of content to assess sexual content at the program level (Manganello, Franzini, & Jordan, 2008). Excluding commercial breaks, this content constituted about 53.5 hours of programming. Episodes were accessed through *Netflix*, *HBOGo*, *Showtime*, and *Amazon Instant Video.*

Unit of Analysis

Every scene of each individual episode was coded. A scene was defined as a passage in a story when the time generally holds constant. A scene was defined as ending when the primary setting shifts in time, place, or when there is an addition of a new character entering at the time or place. A total of 2578 scenes were coded across 75 episodes. There were approximately 48 scenes per hour of television content.

Coder Training

Three coders underwent 10 hours of training, in addition to coding 3 of the 75 episodes as a group for further coder training. Coders ranged in age from 26 to 30 and had been regular viewers of between 2 and 6 of the shows included in the content analysis; this familiarity with shows as viewers was seen as important to facilitate interpretation of the content in similar ways as emerging adults might interpret the content (see Manganello & Blake, 2010). Acceptable intercoder reliability was achieved after coders analyzed five episodes randomly selected from the sample for intercoder reliability testing, possibly due to the extent of content categories (see below) or due to the simplicity of the coding decisions (most decisions were presence/absence of an element). Across all coding categories, Krippendorff's α = .81 and average pairwise agreement = 94% for these five episodes; α_K and agreement percentages are reported for each content category below. Three of these five episodes were hour-long programs with commercial breaks, one episode was a half-hour program with commercial breaks, and one episode was an hour without commercials. This reliability sample initially constituted 10% of the initial planned coding sample of 2 episodes per program (= 50 episodes). However, the coding sample was expanded after the reliability assessment to include 3 episodes per program, based on suggestions in Manganello, Franzini, and Jordan (2008). Thus, a limitation of this study is that the current reliability sample, which constitutes 6.67% of the full coding sample, falls below the suggested 10% of the full sample (Neuendorf, 2002). After training and reliability assessments, one coder's analysis was randomly selected to represent each of the five abovementioned episodes in the final data set and coding of the remaining episodes commenced.

Content Categories

The codebook, which was also applied in Stevens and Garrett (2016), included categorizations of behavior, talk, sexual health risk and responsibility, and contextualization of scenes according to implication of sex, love, relational and recreational contexts. Categories of behavior and talk associated with sex or expressions of love were coded using adaptations of categories outlined in Kunkel et al. (2007), with additions from other content analyses of sex, love, and sexual health (Brown et al., 2013; Collins, 2011; Eyal, Kunkel, Biely, & Finnerty, 2007; Farrar et al., 2003; Farrar, 2006; Signorielli & Bievenour, 2015). Loving contexts were particularly informed by prior content analyses performed by Brown et al. (2013) and Anderegg, Dale, and Fox (2014). The coding scheme used to categorize sexual risk and responsibility was adapted from work by Hust et al. (2008) and Kunkel et al. (2007).

Scenes were analyzed for presence of the following eight categories of sexual or loving behavior, α_K = .91, average pairwise agreement = 98%. *Dating or courting behavior* was

defined as a direct manifestation of changing the relationship in question (such as building or ending a relationship or developing a relationship from dating to marriage), or the possibility or desire of changing the relationship. *Light kissing or touching* was defined as touching of another's body in a way that was meant to be loving or that symbolized a romantic/dating relationship between the two people involved. This category could also include light or closed-mouth kisses between potential partners. *Physical flirting* was defined as a behavior intended to promote sexual interest or to cause sexual arousal. *Passionate kissing* was defined as being loving or sexual in nature and had the suggestion of subsequent sexual behavior (more than just a kiss). *Intimate touching* was defined as being loving or sexual in nature and having the suggestion of subsequent sexual behavior, though that potential also did not need to be immediate. Intimate touching included touching of another's body in a way that was meant to be sexually arousing or to demonstrate sexual love/desire. *Masturbation* was defined as a depiction of a person stimulating his/her own genitals for pleasurable sensations or to experience orgasm. *Implied intercourse* was defined as strong inferences that physical acts involving sex (vaginal or anal penetration, oral sex) had occurred, were occurring, or would immediately occur. *Depicted intercourse* was defined as when a direct view was shown of any person engaged in sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal penetration, oral sex), regardless of the degree of nudity shown.

Scenes were also coded for presence of the following 11 categories of talk about sex or love, which included dialogue, discussions, or words (spoken or written) relating to sex or love, $\alpha_K = .74$, average pairwise agreement = 96%. *Talk about liking or loving a person romantically* referred to words conveying that a person likes or loves someone else in a romantic way. However, there was no direct reference to creating or maintaining a romantic relationship. *Talk about building or maintaining a romantic relationship* referred to words that directly referenced starting or strengthening a loving relationship with someone. *Talk about harming or ending a romantic relationship* referred to words that directly referenced ending or damaging a loving relationship. *Talk about one's own or others' current, new, or future sexual actions or interests* referred to talk that described immediate or future sexual activity or desires for sexual interaction. *Talk about one's own or others' past sexual actions or interests* referred to references about past sexual behaviors (other than mere dating/ courting behavior). *Talk specifically about past sexual intercourse* referred to descriptions or references to sexual intercourse or oral sex that had actually occurred. *Talk toward sex (conveyed to desired sexual partner)* encompassed seductive or intimate talk meant to encourage immediate, or subsequent, sexual activity, including verbal flirting, sexual innuendos, double entendre, and "phone sex." *Talk about sex-related crimes* referred to any reference, mention, or discussion of unsolicited or illegal sexual activity including sexual harassment, sexual bribery, prostitution, rape, date rape or sexual coercion, statutory rape, sexual child abuse, or other sexual violations. *Expert advice* was defined as talk meant to describe, clarify, and provide accurate information about sexual activity, sexual risks, or other health-related information related to sexual risk or responsibility, or to the improvement of the sexual experience (excluding sexual development). *Talk about physical or sex-related development* was specifically reserved for talk about development of the sexual organs, puberty and associated body changes, sexual reproduction, body changes during pregnancy, and sexual dysfunction. *Talk about waiting for sex until marriage* was

defined as talk specifically about abstinence until marriage. *Sex jokes or puns* encompassed non-specific sexual banter defined as jokes or puns that might refer to sexual organs or development but could not be identified as talk about sexual actions or interests; for example, one male character might equate a failure with being "kicked in the nuts," which elicits a laugh from the other characters.

Regarding sexual health, scenes were coded for presence of any mention of talk or behavior relating to physical or emotional health risks of having sex, as well as family or social risks of having sex or choosing sexual partners, $\alpha_K = .68$, average pairwise agreement = 98%. Note that the α_K is low, yet the percentage of agreement is very high. This inconsistency suggests there were too few disagreements observed to provide a valid calculation of agreement versus disagreement, and as the results will show, there were likely too few observations of health, risk, and responsibility overall to generate a meaningful α_K assessment (Krippendorff, 2004a). Still, this observed α_K allows for tentative conclusions to be drawn, as indicated by Krippendorff (2004b).

Within this category, *mention or show of abstinence/refusal of sex* involved refusing direct or implied overtures to date or engage in sexual activity with a potential partner. Scenes containing this theme could be coded as containing endorsement of abstinence/refusal (e.g., saying yes to abstinence), as well as containing rejection of abstinence/refusal (e.g., saying no to abstinence). *Mention or show of family or social expectations or restrictions* referred to scenes showing third parties (e.g., family members, religion, friends or peers, social customs) playing an important role in a character's marriage, romantic relationships, or decisions regarding sexual activity. Both endorsement and rejection of family/society expectations or restrictions were coded. *Mention or show of condoms or contraceptives* included scenes depicting in some way the use or idea of using condoms or other contraceptives. Endorsement and rejection of condoms or contraceptives were separately coded. *Abortion or emergency contraceptives* encapsulated any reference to or depiction of abortion or emergency contraceptives that would be taken after having unprotected sex. Scenes were coded for endorsement or rejection of these measures.

The following health categories did not contain subcategories to indicate endorsement or rejection of the featured theme. *Mention or show of emotional harm*, in other words negative emotional consequences, was defined as the discussion or depiction of unintended or unwelcome emotional results of dating/relationships or sexual activity. *Mention or show of HIV/AIDS or sexually transmitted infections (STIs)* included the discussion or depiction of specific health consequences of sexual activity relating to HIV/AIDS, gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, HPV (human papilloma virus), genital warts/condoloma, PID, herpes/HSV, hepatitis B/HBV, and trichomoniasis. *Mention of unwanted pregnancy* included the discussion or depiction of pregnancy that was not planned or desired. *Mention or show of wanted or planned pregnancy* included pregnancy either wanted immediately or at a certain planned time.

Informed by the above coding results, scenes were identified as having (or not having) indications of sex and indications of love, $\alpha_K = .83$, 92% average pairwise agreement. Scenes were identified as having *indications of sex* if a coder detected presence of any

description of sexual behavior, any seductive presentation of the human body, and/or any explicit or implicit reference to intimate sexual behavior, sexual organs, or other sex-related activity. Scenes were identified as having *indications of love* if there was any presence of talk or activity that showed changes (e.g., developing, ending) of a committed relationship and/or if at least one of the actors in the scene was portrayed as having romantic feelings for another actor on or off the screen, in recognition of love attitudes at the different stages of relationships (Hammock & Richardson, 2011). To code these indications for scenes with sexual content, coders were required to identify and interpret cues beyond the sexual activity (e.g., intercourse, passionate kissing) to determine whether the scenes had suggestions of love in addition to sex.

Furthermore, scenes identified as having indications of sex and/or love were rated for their emphasis on sex, as well as their emphasis on love, $\alpha_K = .83$, 89% average pairwise agreement. For *emphasis on sex*, coders rated each scene on a five-point scale that included the following response choices: no references to or depictions of sex ($= 1$), minor, inconsequential references to or depictions of sex ($= 2$), some, but not much emphasis on sex ($= 3$), major, but not sole emphasis on sex ($= 4$), and sole emphasis on sex ($= 5$). Ratings for emphasis on love were similar, with "sex" replaced with "love/commitment" and instructions to encompass the expressions of love identified in Brown et al. (2013) that cover the various stages of romantic relationships, as well as acknowledge the definition of relational contexts in Mahay et al. (2005) that conceptualizes relational commitment as partners in love.

Degree of explicitness of nudity was additionally rated for those scenes with implications of sex, $\alpha_K = .76$, 91% average pairwise agreement, average inter-item $r = .78$. Response choices included: none ($= 1$), provocative/suggestive dress or appearance ($= 2$), characters being disrobed ($= 3$), discreet nudity ($= 4$), partial nudity ($= 5$), and full nudity ($= 6$). Worthy of note, partial and full nudity were most likely to occur on television shows airing on subscription-based premium cable channels, as network television shows would be restricted from showing nudity.

Finally, scenes with indications of sex and/or love were coded for their general orientation toward relational and/or recreational themes, $\alpha_K = .63$, 97% average pairwise agreement, the low α_K likely due to there being too few disagreements to support a valid assessment of agreement versus disagreement (Krippendorff, 2004a). *Relational themes* encompassed reference to committed relationships, whether that reference indicated building, maintenance, or harm. Sexual violence was excluded from this category. *Recreational themes* included references to sexual activity outside a committed relationship, excluding sex with prostitutes, sexual violence, and sexual manipulation. For analysis, scenes were identified as relational, recreational, both relational and recreational, or neither relational nor recreational.

Coding for relational/recreational themes in addition to coding for indications of sex and/or love allowed for the counting of scenes that mentioned a desire for love without a specific partner in mind (indications of love without a relational nor recreational theme), as well as scenes that depicted recreational sex with one partner (as the main emphasis) and an

additional cue about harm to an existing relationship with a different partner, i.e., scenes about adultery. However, based on these definitions, it was assumed that scenes that were relational in theme would have indications of love and sex if sexual activity was depicted and indications of love if no sexual activity was shown (relational themes might also encompass scenes depicting wedding plans, engagements, or interpersonal struggles that harm a committed relationship). In contrast, few scenes with recreational themes were expected to have indications of love.

Results

In address of RQ1, nearly one-third of the 2578 scenes in the sample contained some type of sexual and/or loving content, $n = 775$, 30%. Shown in Table 1, about 13% of scenes were sexual in nature but devoid of any indications of love (indications of sex but not love $n = 325$), which amounts to 7.56 minutes per hour of television scenes that include at least one sexual mention or depiction—this time estimate refers to scene length rather than the amount of screen time given to the actual mention or depiction. About 10% of all scenes contained suggestions of love but not sex, $n = 260$. An additional 7% of scenes featured the co-occurrence of sex and love, $n = 190$. As shown in Table 1 and supported by a chi-square analysis, scenes containing sex were most likely to convey a recreational sex theme rather than a relational theme, whereas the scenes with mentions or depictions of love were more likely to convey a relational rather than recreational theme, $\chi^2(1) = 112.69$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .49. As noted below (see Table 3), non-specific sexual banter (jokes or puns primarily about sexual organs) was largely excluded from the above findings, as most scenes depicting this type of banter did not indicate sex or love, nor did these scenes reflect a relational or recreational theme, according to coders.

In partial address of RQ2, overall emphasis on sex within scenes indicating sex, love, and both sex and love ($n = 775$ scenes) was below the midpoint of its scale, $M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.21$, $range = 1$ to 5. Emphasis on love was likewise below the midpoint of its scale for these same scenes, $M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.27$, $range = 1$ to 5. For those scenes with some indication of sex ($n = 515$), there was an expected low degree of sexual explicitness, given many of the shows aired on network television, $M = 1.51$, $SD = 1.11$, $range = 1$ to 6.

Emphasis on sex was analyzed in an ANOVA using indication (sex only vs. love only) and theme (relational only vs. recreational only) as two-level independent factors, $n = 462$. As would be expected from the coding protocol, scenes indicating sex were rated as having significantly stronger emphases on sex, compared to scenes indicating love, $F(1, 458) = 548.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .40$, $M_{SEX} = 3.15$, $SD = 1.08$, $M_{LOVE} = 1.02$, $SD = .27$. To a lesser extent, scenes with a recreational theme were likewise rated as having a stronger emphasis on sex, compared to scenes with a relational theme, $F(1, 458) = 4.92$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .004$, $M_{RECREATION} = 2.64$, $SD = 1.20$, $M_{RELATION} = 1.74$, $SD = 1.27$. The interaction between indication and theme was not statistically significant, $F(1, 458) = 3.86$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .003$.

A similar evaluation was performed for emphasis on love. As might be expected, scenes indicating love were rated as having significantly stronger emphases on love, compared to scenes indicating sex, $F(1, 458) = 637.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .38$, $M_{LOVE} = 3.15$, $SD = .92$,

$M_{\text{SEX}} = 1.00$, $SD = .07$. Although in the expected direction, scenes with a relational theme did not statistically differ from scenes with a recreational theme in emphasis on love, $F(1, 458) = 3.42$, $p = .065$, $\eta^2 = .002$, $M_{\text{RELATION}} = 2.52$, $SD = 1.27$, $M_{\text{RECREATION}} = 1.34$, $SD = .79$. The indication X theme interaction was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 458) = 2.93$, $p = .087$, $\eta^2 = .002$.

Degree of sexual explicitness was also analyzed in an ANOVA that compared scenes with indications of sex vs. sex and love, in interaction with theme (relational only vs. recreational only). Scenes indicating only sex had a slightly but significantly higher degree of explicitness, on average, compared to scenes featuring a combination of sex and love, $F(1, 376) = 4.62$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $M_{\text{SEX}} = 1.61$, $SD = 1.21$, $M_{\text{BOTH}} = 1.40$, $SD = 1.02$. No differences in explicitness were noted based on theme or the theme X indication interaction, $F\text{s} < 1$.

In total, 291 (11%) of the 2578 scenes contained some type of sexual and/or loving behavior. Table 2 contains details about behavior. In address of RQ2, the most widely occurring type of behavior depicted in scenes with indications of sex and/or love was light kissing, followed by physical flirting (see Table 2). Within scenes with sex but not love, physical flirting, light kissing, and passionate kissing were the predominant behaviors depicted. Physical flirting and passionate kissing were the predominant behaviors in scenes with recreational themes (Table 2). Light kissing was the most widely depicted behavior in love-only and relational scenes.

Implied or depicted sexual intercourse was present in only 56 (2%) of the 2578 scenes coded. Combining implied and explicit intercourse, these depictions were featured only slightly more in recreational ($n = 26$) rather than relational contexts ($n = 19$). However, depicted intercourse was more likely to occur within a recreational theme, whereas implied intercourse was equally likely to occur in recreational and relational frames.

The most widely occurring type of talk across all coded scenes was the sexual joke or pun (see Table 3). These jokes resided primarily outside scenes featuring relational and recreational contexts (Table 3); scenes featuring a sexual joke constituted 15.06 minutes per hour of television. The next most frequent types of talk were about liking or loving someone, harming or ending a relationship, and building or maintaining a relationship. These categories of talk were primarily present in scenes with some indication of love or relational theme (Table 3). In scenes indicating sex, the primary type of talk was physical/sexual development (primarily references to pregnancy). Talk about current, future, and past sexual activities or interests (excluding intercourse) constituted the next most prevalent talk within the sexual scenes. Talk specifically about sexual intercourse was in 82 (6%) of the 1268 scenes featuring some type of sexual or loving talk. Expert advice and discussion about abstinence until marriage were largely absent.

In address of RQ3, only 183 (7%) of all coded scenes contained a mention or depiction of sexual health, risk, and/or responsibility (see Table 4). Most of the health content resided within scenes featuring some form of sexual content, $n = 93$, 78, and 12 scenes with indications of sex only, sex and love, and love only, respectively (Table 4). In fact, health

messages were significantly more likely to be present in sex-only versus love-only scenes, $\chi^2(1) = 56.49$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .31. Also, within the sex-only scenes ($n = 222$), a greater number of scenes with health implications were framed within a relational rather than recreational context, $n_{RELATION} = 42$, $n_{RECREATION} = 31$, $\chi^2(1) = 11.61$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .23. This difference did not extent across all content analyzed, however. Although there were more scenes with health content that featured relational rather than recreational themes, the difference in health presence when comparing relational-only versus recreational-only scenes was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) < 1$; $n = 94$, 12, and 51 health scenes with relational-only, relational and recreational, and recreational-only themes (see Table 4 for frequencies).

The most prominent risk/responsibility message was an acknowledgment of negative emotional consequences of sex and/or relationships, $n = 80$. These mentions included difficulties with adultery or other relationship harm, in addition to regret over a past sexual encounter. Negative emotional consequences were mentioned most often in scenes with both sex and love and appeared equally within relational and recreational themes. This category of content explains the overarching location of health content in scenes with relational themes.

The next most prevalent health content dealt with family and societal expectations for sex and relationships, followed by mentions or depictions of wanted and unwanted pregnancy. Content about family and society expectations appeared to be in scenes that had sexual content within either a relational or recreational context. Both planned and unwanted pregnancy were exclusively in scenes containing sex, as would be expected. However, whereas unwanted pregnancy was evenly dispersed across relational and recreational contexts, planned pregnancy was largely contextualized within a relational theme.

As shown in Table 4, mention of HIV/AIDS or other STIs appeared in only 1 of the 2578 scenes viewed. This scene featured dating and light kissing behaviors, in addition to talk about current sexual interest. Mention of abortion appeared in just four scenes; emergency contraception was not mentioned. These four scenes did not include any sexual or loving behavior, and the only sexual/loving talk featured was in reference to physical or sexual development. Mention of condoms or other contraceptives appeared in 12 scenes—fewer than 7% of the scenes with any indication of sexual health, risk, and/or responsibility and fewer than 1% of the total number of scenes coded. Only one of these scenes depicted any sort of behavior: dating/courting behavior, kissing, and physical flirting. In 7 of these 12 scenes, talk was focused solely on physical or sexual development; two of these scenes included expert advice. The remaining scenes featured talk about current or past sexual actions or intercourse.

Discussion

Exposure to sexual content in mass media contributes to our sexual development; the body of evidence in support of this assertion is massive and convincing (see Gunter, 2014 for comprehensive review of the literature). Missing from this evidence is information about how this sexual content is contextualized, which is important for understanding whether the

framing of sexual content on television is as uniform as its ubiquity seemingly is. The present study therefore addressed this gap, in response to recent research suggests the problematic effects of sexual content viewing, for example engagement in casual sex (e.g., Brown et al., 2006) might be tempered if the sexual content is featured in scenes that also have expressions of love or relational commitment (Dillman Carpentier, 2016).

Nearly half of the television content analyzed—network and cable shows popular with an emerging adult population—contained some representation of sexual matter, if sexual talk, behavior, and non-specific sexual banter (i.e., jokes and puns) are included. This is a slightly lower amount than what was previously noted in comprehensive sample by Kunkel et al. (2007), which spanned content popular with multiple audiences. Excluding non-specific sexual banter (jokes) and scenes devoid of sexual suggestion, sexual content was observed in a fifth of all scenes included in this study. Perhaps surprising, more of the sexual content on television was characterized as relational rather than recreational in nature. However, relational sex—monogamous sex with partners who would be seeing each other again—was not always accompanied by expressions of love. In the scenes that featured sex without overt expressions of love, such as hugs, hand-holding, or saying "I love you," sex was still portrayed within a relational context not quite half the time, corroborating earlier studies of general television content (Kunkel et al., 2007; Ward, 1995). Important to note, also, most scenes with sexual content did not have sex as its main emphasis. Rather, sexual content was often secondary to other elements of the story.

Overall, the sexual content on television appeared to be more suggestive than overt— perhaps a function of many of the shows airing on network television. Based on this analysis, one can readily expect kissing, flirting, talk about liking or loving someone, and talk about relationships and sexual interests from popular television. However, active pursuit of sex (i.e., talk toward sex) and implied or realized depictions of sexual intercourse might be rarely encountered in these types of programs, as was also observed by Kunkel et al. (2007). Thus, it is possible that the documented effects of television exposure on sexual attitudes and behaviors might be explained by a small but salient amount of content that overtly references sexual foreplay and intercourse. Research is needed to identify the types of scenes that might be most responsible for the observed effects, as well as explore psychosocial factors that explain why those scenes might be especially effective in encouraging risky attitudes and behaviors.

It is also possible that the constant, less unobtrusive references to sexual behavior are responsible for keeping sexual concepts at the top of viewers' minds, which then makes viewers more likely to interpret new information, and new people, using a sexualized lens (e.g., Dillman Carpentier, Northup, & Parrott, 2014). If this is the case, then more attention needs to be paid to what appear to be insignificant, if not innocent comedic banter alluding to sexual organs and functions. Jokes of this nature were observed in a third of the scenes included in the analysis; there were more scenes that included a sex-related joke than there were scenes that included sexual behaviors or other types of sexual talk. The current investigation did not delve into the nature of this general banter, other than to record and differentiate it from overt references to sexual activity and interests. However, this

understudied content might be an important factor in considering how salient sex is in the minds of heavy television viewers.

Behaviors or talk suggesting love or commitment were not as prevalent in these television shows as might be expected. Less than one-fifth of these television programs included scenes with expressions of love, which in this study encompassed behaviors and talk suggestive of initiation, maintenance, or ending of romantic relationships. Close to half of these scenes with love cues also included sexual content. Furthermore, scenes with indications of love, whether or not they also featured sexual depictions, did not appear to emphasize love as an overriding theme. Again, the seemingly subordinate nature of sex and love across all scenes analyzed in this study suggests that effects observed in other research might be a function of the constant cuing of sex and love and the rare but salient exemplars of risky behaviors—salient, perhaps, because of the constant media cuing and resulting chronic accessibility of these thoughts (see Chandler, Konrath, & Schwarz, 2009 on effects of chronic accessibility on judgments).

More research is needed, however, to understand how the contextualization of sexual content with and without expressions of love might lead to different interpretations of sexual risk; risky behaviors might be encouraged through different attitudinal pathways. Note that within emerging adults, unprotected sex is associated with both casual sex and sex within a relational partnership (see Jones & Paulhus, 2012 about sexual and emotional promiscuity). Thus, depictions of sex within loving contexts might still predict endorsement of some forms of risky behavior without consideration for potential negative health outcomes.

Across the sample coded, sexual health, risk, and responsibility messages were remarkably absent. Thus, it is of little surprise that the extant literature suggests a general disregard to engage consistently in sexual health measures (see Strasburger et al., 2010). Most of the sexual health, risk, and responsibility mentions were embedded within scenes that included both sex and love. These mentions, however, were largely about negative emotional consequences surrounding problems in relationships, as well as rebellion against family and societal expectations of partnering. Driven by the presence of one popular show in the sample that featured a pregnant obstetrician as the protagonist (*The Mindy Project*), planned pregnancy was the next most frequently referenced health issue, featured primarily in scenes featuring sexual content without accompanying cues of love.

Messages specific to safe sex, namely condom and contraceptive use and unwanted pregnancy, were almost non-existent. The few scenes that did touch on these subjects were largely devoid of loving talk or behaviors. Yet, the sexual content in these scenes were equally likely to be recreational as they were to be relational in nature. This finding suggests there might be a foundation for discussing sexual health risk as important for both casual and committed partnerships. Note, however, that this foundation is flimsy; only 25 of 2578 scenes featured any mention of STI, contraception, or unwanted pregnancy.

In light of this investigation's limited sample of television programs, as well as potential differences in how the content coders and emerging adult viewers might interpret sexual and romantic cues in these shows, this investigation nonetheless adds important detail to the

existing knowledge of sex on television. This investigation constitutes a pioneering examination of the extent of love on U.S. television, as well (Anderegg, Dale, & Fox, 2014 provide an examination of relationships on television). Moreover, this investigation suggests that the scarce sexual health information on television is not reserved only to permissive sex. Thus, there might be potential to leverage existing depictions and embed new messages that promote safe sex practices within both recreational and relational encounters. The danger to this strategy is that the overall result might be more rather than smarter depictions of sex; it is thus imperative to evaluate the extent to which mere exposure to any sexual cue contributes to the endorsement of risky sex, compared to specific, enticing exemplars of risky sexual attitudes and behaviors.

Although we do not expect writers and producers of television shows to increase their address of sexual health, we do hope that parents, doctors, and educators can use the information in this research as a reminder that safe sex is uncommon in today's media and that what is seen in shows with regards to sex is not an accurate depiction in most cases. Thus, in conversations with youth and in media literacy programs, it is important to reinforce that television is not a viable source for learning about safe sex norms. Rather, knowledge of media depictions can be used to understand what young adults are viewing and help build a conversation with these viewers about the consequences to unsafe sex that include and extend beyond the negative emotions found in this study to be the predominant sexual health risks depicted on television.

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Table 1.

Categorization of scenes based on indications of sex and love, as well as predominance of relational and recreational themes ($N = 2578$)

Predominant Theme	Scene Contains…				Total Scenes
	Sex Only	Love Only	Sex and Love	Neither	
Relational theme	92	212	117	0	421
Recreational theme	130	28	41	0	199
Both relational and recreational	4	2	19	0	25
Neither relational nor recreational	99	18	13	1803	1933
Total scenes	325	260	190	1803	2578

Note. Relational themes most significantly associated with love-only scenes and recreational themes most significantly associated with sex-only scenes, according to a chi-square analysis comparing sex-only vs. love-only scenes with presence of relational-only versus recreational-only themes, $\chi^2(1) = 112.69$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = .49.

Table 2.

Scenes with sexual and romantic behaviors based on whether the scene is relational and/or recreational in theme and whether the scene indicates sex and/or love

Behavior	In scenes with which theme?				In scenes with which indication?				Total Scenes	Approx Min/Hr
	Relational	Recreational	Both	Neither	Sex	Love	Both	Neither		
Dating/courting behavior	28	22	2	1	12	23	18	0	53	1.23
Light kissing	102	27	4	11	38	45	61	0	144	3.35
Physical flirting	31	44	5	11	46	3	42	0	91	2.12
Passionate kissing	32	30	6	1	37	1	31	0	69	1.61
Intimate touching	9	20	4	7	26	0	14	0	40	0.93
Masturbation	0	4	0	0	4	0	0	0	4	0.09
Intercourse implied	14	15	2	3	24	0	10	0	34	0.79
Intercourse depicted	5	11	0	6	19	0	3	0	22	0.51
No sexual behaviors	266	108	16	1897	202	197	85	1803	2287	53.23
Total scenes	421	199	25	1933	325	260	190	1803	2578	60.00

Note. Scenes with at least some type of sexual and/or romantic behavior (= 291 scenes) might have one or more type of behavior; categories beyond "no sexual behaviors" are not mutually exclusive.

Table 3.

Scenes with sexual and romantic talk based on whether the scene is relational and/or recreational in theme and whether the scene indicates sex and/or love

Talk	In scenes with which theme?				In scenes with which indication?				Total Scenes	Approx Min/Hr
	Relational	Recreational	Both	Neither	Sex	Love	Both	Neither		
Liking/loving	168	50	12	17	4	134	109	0	247	5.75
Building relationship	111	8	4	10	5	77	51	0	133	3.10
Harming relationship	112	25	15	11	8	91	64	0	163	3.79
New/future sexual actions	41	34	7	12	51	2	41	0	94	2.19
Past sexual actions	25	37	10	11	49	2	32	0	83	1.93
Past sexual intercourse	31	34	5	12	38	1	43	0	82	1.91
Talk toward sex (desire)	11	27	3	8	37	0	12	0	49	1.14
Sex related crimes	3	2	0	15	17	0	3	0	20	0.47
Expert advice	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	2	0.05
Sex-related development	65	10	0	28	73	1	29	0	103	2.40
Waiting until marriage	2	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	3	0.07
Sex joke or pun	26	16	2	603	45	13	6	583	647	15.06
No sexual talk	32	28	1	1249	71	13	6	1220	1310	30.49
Total scenes	421	199	25	1933	325	260	190	1803	2578	60.00

Note. Scenes with at least some type of sexual and/or romantic talk (= 1268 scenes) might have one or more type of talk; categories beyond "no sexual talk" are not mutually exclusive.

Table 4.

Scenes with sexual health, risk, and responsibility content based on whether the scene is relational and/or recreational in theme and whether the scene indicates sex and/or love

Health/risk/responsibility	In scenes with which theme?				In scenes with which indication?				Total Scenes	Approx Min/Hr
	Relational	Recreational	Both	Neither	Sex	Love	Both	Neither		
Yes to abstinence	4	0	0	4	5	0	3	0	8	0.19
No to abstinence	2	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	3	0.07
Yes to social expectations	2	2	0	9	8	1	4	0	13	0.30
No to social expectations	12	8	2	12	13	5	16	0	34	0.79
Yes to contraceptives	3	4	0	3	9	0	1	0	10	0.23
No to contraceptives	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	2	0.05
Emotional harm	29	32	12	7	26	6	48	0	80	1.86
HIV/AIDS or STIs	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.02
Unwanted pregnancy	8	8	0	13	23	0	6	0	29	0.67
Yes to abortion	1	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	3	0.07
No to abortion	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0.02
Planned pregnancy	50	2	0	0	34	1	17	0	52	1.21
No risk/responsibility	327	148	13	1907	232	248	112	1803	2395	55.74
Total scenes	421	199	25	1933	325	260	190	1803	2578	60.00

Note. Scenes with at least some mention of health/risk/responsibility (= 183 scenes) might have one or more types of health mention; categories beyond "no risk" are not mutually exclusive.