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Are We Past the Heterosexual Script? A Content Analysis of Contextual Cues Within the Heterosexual Script in Tween, Teen, and Young Adult Television Programs

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ABSTRACT

In light of recent research establishing the prevalence of the heterosexual script on television (Aubrey et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2007), the present study investigated the context of the heterosexual script in 182 episodes of tween, teen, and young adult television programs. The following scripts were assessed: sex as masculinity (masculinity is achieved through sexuality), good girls (women are sexual gatekeepers), male commitment (men avoid commitment), and female commitment (women seek commitment). Results revealed that depictions of the heterosexual script varied with sexual behavior, sexual talk, and the composition of gender in conversation dyads but not with the gender of sexual initiators. Sex as masculinity was most likely to occur with intimate touching, talk about sexual interests, and mostly discussed within female-female dyads. The good girls script was most likely to occur with instances of intimate touching and talk about sexual advice, whereas male commitment was most likely to occur in portrayals of intercourse and talk about sexual experiences. Lastly, female commitment was most likely to occur in talk toward sex and in male-male dyads.

Although young people in the digital age have access to diverse types of media, television continues to be an influential source for adolescents to learn about sexual relationships (Reichert et al., 2011). With greater accessibility (e.g., online streaming), television has become a potent source for sexual expectations in relationships and for discussion of sexual topics (e.g., pregnancy,

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sexually transmitted diseases) with others (Boyar et al., 2011; Ward, 2003). Young viewers are especially attentive to these messages because they yearn to know what is expected of them and what they should expect in sexual encounters. Therefore, the messages within television can establish the norms of sexuality for young people.

Yet, learning sexual norms from television is potentially problematic due to the prevalence of the heterosexual script portrayed on television (Kim et al., 2007). The heterosexual script depicts unequal and stereotypical gender roles that men and women should follow in romantic and sexual encounters. According to sexual scripts theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), the heterosexual script can be utilized as a guide that influences youths' navigation of their own sexual relationships and attitudes (Hust & Rodgers, 2018; Seabrook et al., 2016). Indeed, Simon and Gagnon (1986) posit that sexuality is learned through environmental and social cues (i.e., television) and through behavioral sequences of events expected in sexual situations. As such, the contextual features depicted within the heterosexual script on television can teach viewers the specific ways to navigate similar sexual situations, such as who behaves or talks in what way with specific people. Nonetheless, little is known about the context in which sex is portrayed in conjunction with the heterosexual script.

Focusing on tween, teen, and young-adult television programming, this study sought to examine how the heterosexual script varies according to the following contextual cues: (a) types of sexual behavior, (b) types of sexual talk, (c) gender of the initiator of sexual behaviors, and (d) the composition of gender of the dyad of the sexual conversation. We address three main issues with the existing approach. First, the television landscape has shifted (Jaffray, 2018), and further work is needed that examines television content across streaming sources and cable networks. Second, teens are more sexually inactive than ever before (Twenge et al., 2017). Further investigation of the media's depiction of sex could likely help in explaining current adolescent sexual behaviors and norms. Lastly, recent evidence suggested that the heterosexual script continues to be depicted on television targeting youth (Aubrey et al., 2020), and media effects research has demonstrated that people utilize these scripts as guides to inform their sexual decision-making (Seabrook et al., 2016). Contextual cues specifically are an integral component of the heterosexual script, as they offer specific guides on how to enact the script. Due to both the presence of the heterosexual script in popular television shows and little contextual understanding of how it unfolds, further research in this area is needed.

Sexual scripts theory

Sexual scripts theory posits that individuals obtain sexual knowledge in the form of sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sexual scripts are stored in

individuals' memory to inform a variety of sexual behaviors. If people interpret the script to be appropriate for a given situation (e.g., perceive the script to be socially acceptable or expect a reward from enactment of the script), the person will behave in accordance with the acquired script. This process unfolds via three levels of sexual scripts: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts.

Cultural scripts create and enforce a dominant set of "rules," such as common sexual behaviors that are universally agreed-upon (e.g., men are sexual initiators, women are sexually submissive; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Common sources of cultural scripts include family, peers, and the media (Ward, 2003). These sources have immense power to determine what scripts are socially acceptable or which scripts will garner rewards, rather than costs. In turn, cultural scripts guide interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. Intrapsychic scripts are developed from the self and are experienced as a person's private desires. Interpersonal scripts, which are in between cultural and intrapsychic scripts, are context-specific guides for sexual behaviors. Such scripts are derived by the individual attempting to bridge the appropriate identities from cultural scripts in accordance with their intrapsychic scripts. Therefore, interpersonal scripts can vary based on contextual cues (e.g., the individual or situation presented).

Of interest to the present study are the cultural scripts individuals utilize as guides for enactment and creation of their interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. In the present study we focus on cultural scripts depicted in television. On television, contextual cues of sexual scripts, specifically the heterosexual script, can provide narrative, detailed accounts of when and how sex happens and to what consequence.

The heterosexual script

According to sexual scripts theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), society encourages stereotypical sexual roles that differ by gender. Such roles do not necessarily consider what men and women sexually desire, rather they foreground socially acceptable roles, which are enforced by cultural scripts. To illustrate, the dominant cultural script for men is to be sexual pursuers and dominators, whereas the script for women is to give in to men's sexual desires and be primarily interested in commitment (Kim et al., 2007). Kim and colleagues expanded on Simon and Gagnon (1986) notion of cultural scripts with their conceptualization of the heterosexual script on television. The heterosexual script, which consists of four dominant ideas, are a set of complementary scripts for individuals to follow in romantic and sexual interactions that maintain power inequalities by gender.

The first heterosexual script is the sexual double standard, which is the idea that men are expected to have sex and that sex is an important part of

masculinity (sex as masculinity script), whereas women are sexual gatekeepers and do not demand their own sexual pleasure (good girls script; Kim et al., 2007). The second heterosexual script includes courtship strategies, which conceptualizes men as protectors, who are strong and assertive in relationships (masculine courting script), and describes women as passive, often using indirect ways to attract men through their appearances (feminine courting script). Third, the commitment script involves men prioritizing sexual pleasure and fulfillment over relational intimacy and commitment (masculine commitment), while women only feel complete if they have a romantic relationship and ultimately prioritize that over everything else in their lives (feminine commitment). Lastly, the homophobia script is the idea that men should avoid behaving in a feminine manner that could be seen as gay (male homophobia script), whereas homoeroticism between women is a “turn on” to men (female homophobia).

Kim et al. (2007) found that these scripts were present across primetime television programs, suggesting that television establishes stereotypical and impoverished constructs of male and female sexuality. The sex as masculinity script was the most common script, whereas the homophobia script was the least common. Since Kim et al.’s (2007) foundational work on the heterosexual script, a growing body of content analyses have continued to further our understanding of sex on television.

Content analyses of sex on television

Two content analyses have reexamined the heterosexual script on television utilizing the same components from Kim et al. (2007). First, Kirsch and Murnen (2015) examined the heterosexual script in seven children’s television programs. The researchers found that the sex as masculinity script was the most common followed by feminine courtship strategies, masculine courtship strategies, and male-oriented homophobia. Additionally, programs with male leads were the most likely to depict components of the heterosexual script. Second, Aubrey et al. (2020) recently provided a 15-year update from Kim et al.’s (2007) original content analysis. Like previous work (e.g., Kim et al., 2007; Kirsch & Murnen, 2015), Aubrey et al. (2020) found that the dominant heterosexual script continued to be the sex as masculinity script, followed by the good girls script, the male and female commitment script, and the homophobia script. They also found that 37.3% of tween shows, 46.9% of teen shows, and 50.8% of young-adult shows invoked the heterosexual script. The researchers also found that the heterosexual script was least likely invoked in committed relationships compared to hookups and nonsexual/nonromantic relationships. These results illustrate that the heterosexual script is strategically placed in specific instances. However, more traditional contextual work from sex and television content

analyses is lacking and needed to further understand the heterosexual script to which viewers are building in more specific instances.

Examining sexual themes more broadly, Kunkel et al. (2005) established ways of documenting two components of sexual content on television: sexual behavior and sexual talk. Sexual behavior was conceptualized as any scene that contained instances of passionate kissing, physical flirting, intimate touching, implied sexual intercourse, or sexual intercourse. Sexual talk included comments about own/others' sexual actions/interests, talk about sexual intercourse that had already occurred, talk toward sex, and talk about sex-related crimes. In the top-20 television shows with teen viewers, an average of 6.7 scenes per hour contain sexual talk and sexual behavior compared to 5.0 scenes per hour across the general television landscape (Eyal et al., 2011). At the program level, most adult and adolescent programs contain at least one sexual behavior, whereas sexual talk is slightly more frequent (Malacane & Martins, 2017). A more recent study found that sexual talk and/or behavior occurs in 20% of all scenes coded within 53.5 hours of television programming (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017).

Some scholars have also explored the context of Kunkel et al.'s (2005) components of sexual behavior and sexual talk on television and have found that sex occurs primarily among young and unmarried characters (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002). In addition, 31% of sexual behavior within television occurs in a hookup, and 18% occurs in a casual sex relationship (Timmermans & Van Den Bulck, 2018). Sexual behaviors for committed relationships are limited to passionate kissing, whereas sexual behaviors within a hookup or casual relationship context are more likely to show explicit portrayals of sexual intercourse. Talk about sexual interests is less likely invoked on teen shows compared to adult shows (Malacane & Martins, 2017). In sum, these findings contribute to our understanding of contextual cues of sex on television that can be comparable to one another, given they employ Kunkel et al.'s (2005) definitions of sexual talk and behavior. The present study applied these contextual cues to the heterosexual script.

Contextual variables and the heterosexual script

The present study examined the contextual details of the heterosexual script. The first contextual variable was the type of sexual behavior, which can inform viewers of how they should behave in their own similar sexual behaviors. For example, if a television program depicts the good girls script co-occurring with physical flirting, viewers may acquire the cultural script that women should be sexually submissive and refrain from more advanced sexual intercourse. Thus, viewers could build a specific script for types of sexual behavior and how they work within the heterosexual script.

RQ1: How does the portrayal of the heterosexual script vary according to the type of sexual behavior portrayed?

The second contextual variable we examined was the type of sexual talk. Sexual talk has consistently been found as the most common type of sexual reference (Kunkel et al., 2005; Malacane & Martins, 2017). If viewers view the sex as masculinity script co-occurring with talk about sexual past, viewers may encode the cultural script that men *should* discuss their previous sexual experiences as a way to emphasize their masculine role.

RQ2: How does the portrayal of the heterosexual script vary according to the type of sexual talk portrayed?

Previous content analyses have shown that male characters typically dominate the initiation of sex, whereas women are more likely to initiate physical flirting (Aubrey, 2004; Kunkel et al., 2005). However, scholars indicate a shift in the initiation of sexual behaviors, such that women are as likely as men to initiate casual sexual encounters (Ortiz & Brooks, 2014; Timmermans & Van Den Bulck, 2018). Depictions of the heterosexual script and the sexual initiator could inform viewers of the script they should build when initiating sexual behaviors. To illustrate, if a scene depicts the sex as masculinity script and a male initiator of a sexual behavior, viewers could encode a cultural script that men are expected to have many sexual relations and they should often initiate those sexual relations.

RQ3: How does the portrayal of the heterosexual script vary according to the gender of the character who initiates the sexual behavior?

The final contextual cue we examined was the gender composition involved in sexual talk, exploring whether the dyad differs according to which component of the heterosexual script is portrayed. While components of the heterosexual script are mostly enacted by male characters, Kirsch and Murnen (2015) also found that they are especially enacted in the presence of other-gender peers. This may occur due to conversational behaviors and topics of conversation changing drastically between same-gender versus mixed-gender relationships (Guerrero, 1997). Mixed-gender relationships garner higher expectations and relational maintenance, while same-gender relationships are more likely to provide social support and advice (Fuhrman et al., 2009). For example, in television programs, same-gender dyads could include two female friends discussing sex that occurred at one point in time, whereas mixed-gender dyads could include discussions about sex within that specific relationship.

RQ4: How does the portrayal of the heterosexual script vary according to the gender composition of the dyad involved in sexual talk?

Methods

Sample

The sample included tween, teen, and young-adult television programs. We utilized a systematic sampling strategy following three steps. First, we identified platforms/channels that had at least one program for a tween, teen, or young-adult audience. We examined a variety of platforms, including streaming services, basic cable networks, premium networks, and broadcast networks. Second, we gathered shows that were available in 2016 on each of these platforms/channels. The sampling criterion was that the program must contain at least one tween character (ages 8–12), teen character (ages 13–19), or young adult character (in their twenties) in the principal cast of the show. We considered various sources in order to determine the age of the principal characters (IMBd, Wikipedia, fan sites, and the show's official website). Using this criterion, we selected 14 tween (e.g., *Austin & Ally*, *Thundermans*), 23 teen (e.g., *Glee*, *The 100*), and 33 young adult shows (e.g., *Jane the Virgin*, *Shameless*). Third, we randomly selected three episodes from each show (Manganello et al., 2008). In total, 210 episodes were coded, but 28 were not represented in the final sample because they did not include any sexual references. The final sample consisted of 182 episodes. For a full list of all episodes, please refer to supplementary appendix 1.

Units of analysis

The unit of analysis was the sexual reference. Using the Kunkel et al. (2005) definition, we defined a sexual reference as a discrete instance of either sexual behavior or talk. We decided on utilizing the Kunkel definition of sexual references because it would allow us to draw comparisons across other landmark and recent studies which utilize the same definition (e.g., Aubrey et al., 2020; Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017; Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018). As such, this would allow us to draw comparisons in how the same sexual references can differ across multiple contexts and across time.

When sexual talk and behavior occurred simultaneously, the behavior was coded rather than the talk. This methodological decision reflects an attempt to avoid double coding (Kunkel et al., 2005). Coders were trained to code for the sexual references separately when the topic of the sexual talk or the behavior

changed. That is, if a discussion went from discussing sexual interests to talking about anticipated sexual behavior, the coders coded these two references separately. Sexual references were also coded separately when a scene changed, which occurs when there is commercial break, new character(s) enter a scene, or if there is a change in location or time (Kunkel et al., 2005). Although this coding procedure leaves open the possibility that a sexual reference could be double-coded if the same sexual reference (such as a kiss) starts before a commercial break and continues, uninterrupted, after the commercial break, there were no instances of this happening in the current sample. This process yielded 1,237 sexual references.

To code for the heterosexual script, the unit of analysis was the already-selected sexual reference. Following Krippendorff's (2014) recommendations, we used the entire scene as the context unit, which reflects the parameters on the relevant information that should be considered in coding. By unitizing by sexual reference, we differed from Kim et al.'s (2007) procedure. They did not unitize their episodes; instead, they coded for every invocation of the heterosexual script per episode. In the present study, it was necessary to unitize by sexual references so that we could capture the contextual variables that were necessary to address our RQs.

Measurement

Sexual behavior

Following the measurement technique of Kunkel et al. (2005), sexual behavior was defined as any instance of physical flirting, passionate kissing, intimate touching, or sexual intercourse (both depicted and implied). If there was a clear sexual behavior that did not fall into these categories, coders selected an "other" option; examples included pornography consumption and masturbation.

Sexual talk

We also used the Kunkel et al. (2005) definition of sexual talk. This included any conversation relating to sexual interests, past sexual experiences, talk toward sex, sexual advice, and all "other" sexual talk.

Gender of initiator of sexual behavior

For each sexual behavior, the gender of the character who initiated the behavior was recorded. This consisted of the following options: female, male, or shared equally between male and female.

Gender composition of the dyad involved in sexual talk

For each instance of sexual talk, the gender of the individual who initiated the conversation and the gender of the target(s) of the sexual talk were

coded. From these coding decisions, we constructed a variable representing the gender composition of sexual talk: female-female, male-female, or male-male.

The heterosexual script

We used the codebook that Kim et al. (2007) created. The original codebook included four sets of complementary codes to capture the heterosexual script on television: the sexual double standard, courtship strategies, commitment, and homophobia. We were not able to achieve intercoder reliability for courtship strategies. This was because courtship strategies occurred rarely in the context of a sexual reference. When a category of a variable rarely occurs, it is difficult to obtain intercoder reliability (Neuendorf, 2017); thus, we removed this category from our codebook.

Sexual double standard. The first set of the heterosexual script is the sexual double standard. “Sex as masculinity” is the idea that sex is linked to a man’s masculinity, which included four main components: men are sexual initiators, men are sex-obsessed, men receive positive evaluations from peers for their sexual experiences, and men should be good sexual performers. Contrarily, the “good girls” category is the idea that women are expected to be sexually submissive, which included four main components: women are sexual gatekeepers, women prioritize men’s sexual pleasure over their own, women are evaluated negatively for their sexual behaviors, and women should not be good sexual performers.

When coding for sexual behavior, each type of sexual behavior could be depicted in any of the components from the heterosexual script. To illustrate, if a male character initiated a kiss by leaning in first this would constitute a sex as masculinity code. In this scenario, the male character is the sexual aggressor and therefore enacting the sex as masculinity script. An example of good girls and kissing could be depicted as the female character pushing the male character away when he leans in to kiss her. This would indicate the female character as being the sexual gatekeeper by not allowing the male character to kiss her.

Commitment. The commitment category conceptualizes relationship commitment into a masculine and feminine category. Masculine commitment is the notion that men avoid commitment within four main themes: men prioritize sex over relationships, men want to avoid commitment, men are often depicted cheating, and men do not show enthusiasm for relationship maintenance but when they do, they are mocked by their male peers. The female commitment category is the idea that women seek commitment in their relationships and is illustrated within four main themes: women prioritize commitment over sex, women often overlook negative qualities

from their partners to attain or maintain commitment, women often make sacrifices in their relationship to attain commitment, and women who have difficulty finding commitment are mocked.

Homophobia. The male homophobia script is the notion that men are discouraged from acting in a feminine way. If men are feminine, they are mocked or ostracized. The female homophobia script suggests that homosexuality between women is sexy and arousing to men.

Coding and reliability

Two teams of coders were trained. The first team (four undergraduate students) unitized episodes and coded contextual variables. These coders enrolled in a research practicum class with one of the study's authors. During the first eight weeks of the class, they met for training as a group for 2.5 hours per week, and they coded episodes independently for an additional 1–1.5 hours per week (for a total training period of approximately 30 hours). Coders began coding the episodes independently once intercoder reliability was at least tentatively acceptable (Krippendorff $\alpha > .667$; Krippendorff, 2014). The coders unitized the episodes on the sexual reference level (78.0% agreement). Twenty randomly selected episodes were chosen for the reliability subsample; these episodes were coded by all four coders to check reliability ($n = 153$ references), representing 12.4% of the entire sample of sexual references (Neuendorf, 2017). The coders were not aware which episodes in the sample were being used to test for intercoder reliability.

The second round of coding included a different team (three graduate students) that used Kim et al.'s (2007) heterosexual script codebook. The heterosexual script codes were applied to the sexual references identified by the first team of coders. Because the codebook was only minimally revised from Kim et al. (i.e., updating examples from the TV shows and altering the wording of some definitions without altering the substance of those definitions), the training period was longer and focused on consensus building. The coders went through 60 hours of training over six months. Once coders reached an acceptable level of intercoder reliability, each person coded the sample independently. Again, the same randomly selected episodes were used to test for intercoder reliability, and the coders were not aware of which episodes in their coding assignments were being used for intercoder reliability during the coding period.

Although Krippendorff's alpha is a typically used method to assess intercoder reliability, it is an unstable statistic to use for skewed variables. For the heterosexual script variables, the distributions were skewed, as the absence of the script was more common than its presence. In these

instances, it is appropriate to calculate intercoder reliability with Gwet's AC1 statistic, which is a preferable measure of intercoder reliability when percent agreement is high between coders, yet there is a skewed distribution where categories of specific variables are represented more than others (Neuendorf, 2017). Gwet's AC1 statistic avoids "the instability that comes from a category with low prevalence by using a chance model that assumes only an unknown subset of coding is assigned at random" (p. 272). In other words, many of the older, more often used, measures of intercoder reliability suffer from "kappa paradoxes," (p. 178) in which percent agreement is high but the intercoder reliability coefficient is low. Thus, while calculating Gwet's AC1 (and AC2 for continuous variables) for intercoder reliability is a newer statistical method, it is increasingly being recommended in science fields (Heyman et al., 2014). Both Gwet (2002) and Heyman et al. (2014) present statistical trials that confirm that it is a paradox-robust substitute for existing agreement reliability statistics, and it has been assessed in comparison to other standard measures of intercoder reliability and performed favorably validated (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). A Gwet's AC1 statistic of 0.80 or higher is a level "that would be acceptable to all" (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 168), whereas an ICR of .60 or greater is described as "acceptable in most situations" (p. 168).

In supplementary material 2, we provide the Krippendorff's alpha, the Gwet's AC1 coefficients, and the percent agreements for all variables. With the sexual references variables, both alpha and AC1 coefficients were in acceptable range, as these variables were not skewed. With the heterosexual script variables, the alphas were below acceptable standards in three of the six variables. However, the AC1 coefficients were in the acceptable range, and more closely yoked to the percent agreement, as illustrated in supplementary material 2. Thus, based on the adequate AC1 coefficients, we deemed the heterosexual script variables to have sufficient intercoder reliability.

To illustrate how our coding systems and teams worked together, the first team of coders first identified four contextual cues: (a) types of sexual behavior, (b) types of sexual talk, (c) gender of initiator of sexual behavior, and (d) gender composition of the dyad involved in sexual talk. The first team also provided specific time points where instances of sexual talk and behavior occurred within the program. When the first team completed their coding, the second team of coders, who identified the heterosexual script within the sexual references, were provided with the specific time points where sexual references occurred. The second team of coders coded whether each component of the heterosexual script was present respectively within the sexual reference, using the entire scene of the sexual reference as their context unit.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Of the 210 episodes, 13.8% ($n = 28$) did not contain any sexual references. Because the unit of analysis for our RQs is the sexual reference, this means that these episodes were not reflected in the final sample of 1,237 sexual references.

Of the 1,237 sexual references, sexual talk (59.3%, $n = 733$) occurred more than sexual behaviors (40.7%, $n = 504$), $\chi^2(1, n = 1,237) = 42.39$, $p < .001$. Male characters (39.9%, $n = 201$) initiated sexual behaviors with almost the same frequency as female characters (37.7%, $n = 190$). In 10.1% ($n = 51$) of sexual initiations, a male and female character mutually initiated the sexual behavior. In the remaining 12.3% ($n = 62$) of sexual behaviors, coders could not identify the initiator (e.g., initiation occurred off screen). Of the sexual references coded as sexual talk ($n = 733$), 78.7% ($n = 577$) included more than one person whose gender could be identified and thus could be included in the dyad analyses. Of these, most of the sexual talk occurred in dyads with a male-female gender composition (51.0%, $n = 294$), followed by male-male dyads (31.7%, $n = 183$), and female-female dyads (17.3%, $n = 100$).

In total, the heterosexual script was invoked in just under half of the sexual references (48.0%, $n = 594$). Sex as masculinity was the most frequently occurring component of the heterosexual script (35.2%, $n = 436$) in the 1,237 sexual references. The next-most common was the male commitment script (8.0%, $n = 99$), followed by good girls (6.5%, $n = 80$), and female commitment (5.1%, $n = 63$). The homophobia scripts occurred very rarely ($n = 7$ for male homophobia and $n = 4$ for female homophobia). Because of this low occurrence, we did not include the homophobia scripts in the analyses by contextual variables.

Addressing the research questions

To address RQ1, we investigated whether the portrayal of the heterosexual script differed by the type of sexual behavior shown. Sexual behaviors that were coded as “other” were omitted from these analyses, restricting the sample to 477 instances of sexual behavior. We found a significant relationship between type of sexual behavior and the sex as masculinity script, the good girls script, and the male commitment script, but not with the female commitment script, $\chi^2(3, n = 477) = 2.88$, $p = .410$. See supplementary material 3.

The relationship between sexual behavior and sex as masculinity was significant, $\chi^2(3, n = 477) = 16.31$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .19$. Of the 477

instances in which the heterosexual script co-occurred with sexual behavior, sex as masculinity was proportionately more likely to occur with intimate touching (57.1%, $n = 24$) than physical flirting (28.1%, $n = 27$) and kissing (26.7%, $n = 277$). The incidence of sex as masculinity occurring in the context of sexual intercourse (32.3%, $n = 20$) did not differ from any of these categories. We also found a significant relationship between the type of sexual behavior and the good girls script, $\chi^2 (3, n = 477) = 23.81$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .22$. Of the 477 instances, the good girls script was proportionately more likely to occur in instances of intimate touching (16.7%, $n = 7$) than in kissing (3.6%, $n = 10$), intercourse (1.6%, $n = 1$), or physical flirting (0%, $n = 0$). There was also a significant relationship between the type of sexual behavior and the male commitment script, $\chi^2 (3, n = 477) = 14.00$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .17$. The male commitment script was proportionately more likely to occur in portrayals of intercourse (16.1%, $n = 10$) than in kissing (4.3%, $n = 12$).

For RQ2, we examined whether the portrayal of the heterosexual script varied according to the types of sexual talk. Sexual talk that was coded as "other" was omitted from these analyses, restricting the analyses to 539 instances of sexual talk. We found that type of sexual talk was significantly associated with each of the four components of the sexual script that we tested (see supplementary material 4). First, there was significant relationship between type of sexual talk and the sex as masculinity script, $\chi^2 (3, n = 539) = 11.50$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .15$. Of the 539 instances in which the heterosexual script co-occurred with sexual talk, sex as masculinity was more commonly depicted in talk about sexual interests than in talk about past sexual experiences. We also found a significant relationship between sexual talk and the good girls script, $\chi^2 (3, n = 539) = 15.62$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .17$. The good girls script was proportionately more likely to occur in sexual advice than in past sexual experiences, or sexual interests. The relationship between male commitment and sexual talk was also significant, $\chi^2 (3, n = 539) = 27.32$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .23$. The male commitment script was more likely to occur in past sexual experiences than in talk about sexual interests. Next, we found a significant relationship between the female commitment script and sexual talk, $\chi^2 (3, n = 539) = 8.36$, $p < .01$, Cramer's $V = .13$. The female commitment script was proportionately more likely to occur in talk toward sex than in talk about past experiences.

To address RQ3, we examined whether the heterosexual script varied according to the gender of the character who initiated the sexual behavior (female, male, mutual). We omitted from analysis 62 sexual behaviors for which the initiator could not be identified. The gender of the initiator did not vary with any component of the heterosexual script: sex as masculinity, $\chi^2 (2, n = 442) = 4.39$, $p = .11$; good girls, $\chi^2 (2, n = 442) = 3.09$, $p = .21$;

male commitment, $\chi^2 (2, n = 442) = 1.46, p = .48$; or feminine commitment, $\chi^2 (2, n = 442) = 0.94, p = .63$.

RQ4 examined whether the heterosexual script varied according to the gender dyad involved in the sexual conversation. As described above for the descriptive statistics, only 577 of the 733 instances of sexual talk had dyads in which the gender composition could be coded. Of the four scripts that we tested, we found a significant relationship between the gender composition of the dyad and sex as masculinity and female commitment. However, we did not find that the gender composition of the dyad varied by good girls, $\chi^2 (2, n = 577) = 3.53, p = .17$, or by male commitment, $\chi^2 (2, n = 577) = 1.89, p = .39$. See supplementary material 5.

There was a significant relationship between the gender composition of the sex talk dyad and the sex as masculinity script, $\chi^2 (2, n = 577) = 43.01, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .27$. Of the 577 instances, sex as masculinity was proportionately more likely to be discussed in female-female dyads, followed by male-female dyads, and then male-male dyads. We also found a significant relationship between the gender dyad and the female commitment script, $\chi^2 (2, n = 577) = 7.15, p = .028$, Cramer's $V = .11$. The female commitment script was more likely to occur in male-male dyads than in female-female dyads.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to understand how the heterosexual script is portrayed in conjunction with contextual cues on television for young audiences. Our results contribute to the understanding of mediated portrayals of the heterosexual script and young viewers' script building with four key findings. First, sexual behavior varied with depictions of the sex as masculinity, good girls, and male commitment scripts, indicating that television characters' specific sexual behaviors are utilized to enforce specific components of the heterosexual script. Second, sex as masculinity was mostly depicted with talk about sexual interests, and the male commitment script was mostly depicted with talk about sexual past. Third, sex as masculinity was mostly depicted in female-female dyads, whereas the female commitment script was only depicted in male-female or male-male dyads. Finally, our more optimistic finding demonstrates that the homophobia scripts rarely appear in television programs.

With the exception of sex as masculinity, which occurred in roughly 35% of sexual references, we acknowledge that the remaining scripts were rather rare in the present sample; each was present in less than 10% of the sexual references. Of course, this makes it challenging to further parse the heterosexual script by contextual features of the sexual references because we are examining differences between small numbers in each category. Thus, we

must regard as tentative the findings for the scripts that do not involve sex as masculinity, and we would recommend that in the future, researchers make attempts to revise and adapt the coding scheme to better reflect the sexual scripts in the current television landscape. We also note that only 13.8% of the television programs in our sample did not contain sexual references, compared to approximately 30% of the episodes coded in Kunkel et al.'s (2005) general-audience television sample. This difference in sexual content may be a result of television content producers knowing that young viewers are interested in storylines about sex and want to attract high ratings among their target audience.

The sex as masculinity script was more frequent in instances of intimate touching than in milder forms of sexual behavior (physical flirting and kissing). Although more tentative, our findings also indicate that women's role as sexual gatekeepers are also depicted in contexts in which characters are engaged in intimate touching. Because intimate touching can be seen as a pivotal stage wherein characters must decide if more advanced sexual behavior is going to occur, it is not surprising that this is the stage that is most consistently tied to the invocation of the sexual double standard. As they contemplate moving to the next stage of behavior, female characters' worries about their virtue and their needs to slow down sexual activities appear to be salient. At the same stage of sexual behavior, male characters have differing motives as they would want to persuade their partners to advance to the next stage.

Again, although we are making inferences among a small number of cases, the male commitment script, which is the idea that men want to avoid commitment, co-occurred most frequently with sexual intercourse. In these cases, it was often the case that the male character had sex with a partner even though he was not interested in a committed relationship. This finding supports previous content analytic findings showing that casual sex occurs in 31% of sexual behaviors (Timmermans & Van Den Bulck, 2018), perhaps because uncommitted sex serves the normative cultural script that men prefer to have sexual interactions without the confines of commitment. For example, in an episode of Netflix's *Love*, the main character, Gus Cruickshank, has sex with a coworker because he is flattered by her attention even though he indicates that he is not looking for a relationship with her.

We found that the sex as masculinity script was more likely to be depicted in talk about sexual interests, whereas the male commitment script was most likely to be shown in talk about sexual past. It appears that men's future oriented sexual interests are tied to wanting to be perceived like a man and wanting to feel masculine. On the other hand, men's lack of interest in romantic commitment is tied with conversations about past experiences. When talking about their past experiences, women may

complain about men's lack of romantic commitment in previous relationships, whereas men may express wanting to get out of committed relationships like the ones they may have had in the past. One episode from *New Girl* illustrates this pattern. In the program, Liam Connor has casual sex with a woman because his ex-girlfriend, the main character Jessica Day, kissed another man when they were in a relationship.

We also explored how gender composition of the dyad partners who talked about sex was linked to the heterosexual script. Sex as masculinity was most commonly depicted in female-female dyads. This finding implies that female characters are aware that men prioritize sex as a component of their masculinity, and they talk about this pattern with other female characters. Some examples in our sample involved female characters turning to each other for support about how to deal with men's obsession with sex. This finding supports the idea that same-sex friendships serve to alleviate romantic stressors (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998). For instance, in the show *Crazyhead*, a woman tells her female friend that her brother likes her and says, "He fancies you, so he's probably just thinking about his dick." In cases like this one, women turn to each other for advice regarding their hypersexual male partners. In other cases, we found that female characters gave other female characters advice as to how they should act in order to come to terms with men's preoccupation of sex. For example, in the show *Chewing Gum*, one female tells her friend that her boyfriend would like it if she would sext him. She also teaches her friend how to send a "blowjob selfie" to her boyfriend to satisfy his needs. Although we do not know whether the majority of this talk was of a condoning or complaining nature, this finding does suggest that men's sex drive is a preoccupation of female characters' conversations.

Conversely, the female commitment script was only depicted in sexual talk in male-female or male-male dyads. This suggests that women's prioritizing of intimacy and commitment over sexual pleasure is a preoccupation of male characters. For male-male dyads, we found that in many cases male characters were aware of the desire for female characters to secure commitment with them before sex commences, and they were motivated to discuss this concern with other male characters or with their female partners. To illustrate, in an episode of HBO's *Insecure*, a group of men discuss how women should always stay faithful in relationships, even if their men are not faithful, and fittingly, this conversation transpired at a strip club. In cases such as these, men complain with one another about women who do not prioritize their relationship because this is seen as violating the heterosexual script.

For male-female dyad cases, some female characters acknowledged that they often overlook negative qualities in a partner to maintain female commitment. For instance, in the tween show *Gamer's Guide to Pretty*

Much Everything, a female character tells her romantic interest, “You’re a dead-rat chucking, dump-loving troll. And I’ll say it. That’s my type.” It is noteworthy that comments such as this one never happened within female-female dyads, perhaps because female characters were embarrassed to acknowledge their desire for commitment that results in them overlooking negative qualities.

Sex as masculinity was the least commonly portrayed in male-male dyads. It could be that sex as masculinity is an unspoken understanding between men. Men likely are socialized to know that they are expected to have sex with multiple women to be considered a real man and don’t discuss it with other men. It could also be that men do not discuss sex as masculinity because they feel as if they are competing with one another to be more masculine and have more sex. Thus, it appears that men and women are reinforcing each other’s sexual and relational roles on television.

Our results call attention to two optimistic findings. The first is the lack of the homophobia scripts, which were too infrequent to analyze within the current study. This could be one way in which the heterosexual script is changing; the tropes associated with homophobia may no longer be acceptable with media targeting youth. This is consistent with previous research within the last decade which demonstrates that homosexual characters are not only being depicted more frequently, but also as part of more accepting rather than demeaning narratives (Bond, 2014). In support of this, Bond (2014) found that talk about gay sexualities on television is twice as likely to be validating in nature compared to demeaning in nature. Thus, these depictions could be one reason there is a lack of the homophobia script within television (Aubrey et al., 2020). Second, our findings did not support the sexual double standard in the initiation of sexual behaviors. Overall, we found relative gender parity in the initiation of sexual behaviors with 45.6% of sexual behaviors initiated by male characters, and 42.9% initiated by female characters. Although previous research has shown that sexual behaviors are more likely initiated by male characters than female characters (Aubrey, 2004), our findings suggest that this trend also seems to be changing. Together, these findings imply that there might be less weight placed on the initiation of sexual behaviors to support the sexual double standards than previous studies have found. We therefore suggest that the idea of a counterscript indicating gender equity for sexual initiation is starting to be a common component of television programs.

Finally, our findings have societal implications for the encoding of young peoples’ sexual scripts. Young viewers could learn about gender equality pertaining to sexual initiation, such that both men and women can indeed initiate sexual behaviors regardless of the heterosexual script. In addition, young viewers may not be so inclined to activate homophobic scripts due to the lack of male and female-oriented homophobia in popular

television programs. On the other hand, the dominant presence we found of the other components of the heterosexual script and how they unfold within specific sexual behaviors, talk, and gender compositions could be worrisome. Adolescents and young adults who lack access to other alternative scripts could be susceptible to interpreting the contextual details of these scripts, such as who behaves/talks in what way in which circumstance, as realistic and applicable (Hust & Rodgers, 2018). For instance, viewers could acquire the script that sex as masculinity is enforced during the intimate touching phase, as men want to advance to the next stage of sexual intercourse.

Limitations and future directions

There are a few noteworthy limitations to the present study. First, while our study utilized the same codebook as Kim et al. (2007), we were not able to achieve intercoder reliability on the courtship strategy variables from the original codebook. In the future, broadening the unit of analysis to all romantic *or* sexual references might alleviate this issue. Another limitation related to the unitization was that the coders only achieved 78% agreement on the unitization of sexual references, despite great efforts in the training period. Although there is no set standard for unitization reliability, functionally, the unitization error magnified the disagreements on the four contextual variables, as it is difficult to establish reliable coding in the context of sexual references when the coders do not necessarily agree on what counts as a sexual reference. This magnification issue could explain the just-above acceptable reliability for two of the four context variables (i.e., gender of initiator and gender composition of dyad). In terms of our coding procedures, the reliability sample was chosen randomly, but when a show was not selected for the reliability sample, often all three episodes were assigned to one coder. This was done to help coders understand the context of a particular show and become more familiar with characters and storylines, which aided the coding process. However, their familiarity with the show could have introduced a systematic error into their coding. Additionally, we only examined the sexual references within the Kunkel et al. (2005) coding approach and did not consider how the heterosexual script varied with other forms of sexual talk or behavior. Future research should seek to examine a broader range of sexual references and contextual cues in relation to the heterosexual script.

Another limitation is our focus on the heterosexual characters and the heterosexual script. Although an examination of LGBTQ+ sexual scripts is beyond the scope of the current study, it is a worthwhile direction for future research. However, a quantitative content analytic approach to this issue is limited by the under-representation of LGBTQ+ characters on

mainstream television (Bond, 2014) and perhaps would require an analysis of programming specifically created for LBGTQ+ audiences.

Lastly, there are three factors that we did not consider that would be enlightening to further explore. While our study categorized the television shows targeted to tween, teen, and young adult audiences, future research could examine whether sexual scripts vary with older characters. Although the current study focused on the heterosexual script, we noticed that heterosexual *counterscripts* were present in a variety of shows. That is, female characters were sometimes portrayed as sexual pursuers, and male characters were sometimes depicted as sexual limit setters. Future research could further examine how (and if) heterosexual counterscripts unfold in television. Third, because the heterosexual script is least likely depicted in tween/teen television programs, this could possibly explain why teens are more sexually inactive than ever before. That is, perhaps a decrease in exposure to the heterosexual script could explain a decrease in sexual activity. This is an empirical question which we suggest should be examined with a longitudinal design.

Conclusion

Are we past the heterosexual script? To answer this question, we report mixed findings. We have documented little homophobia in the television landscape. In addition, female passivity of sexual initiation seems to be something of the past, which supports more recent research illustrating that female characters are just as likely as male characters to initiate sexual behavior (Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the cultural promotion of the sexual double standard can depend on how the initiation of sexual activity is treated across television programs. For example, if male initiation is rewarded and female initiation is punished throughout televised storylines, a sexual double standard remains. Moreover, we are still seeing men portrayed as hypersexual with minimal commitment whereas women are framed as sexual gatekeepers that seek commitment in specific instances of sexual behavior and sexual talk. Male characters seem to be preoccupied with women's need for commitment and, conversely, female characters are preoccupied with men's obsession with sex. Parents, educators, and health practitioners should be aware of these common portrayals regarding sexuality on television that can contribute to cultural scripts about sex and strive to be mindful of them as a learning source.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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