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Love and sexual scripts: A content analysis of 19 Netflix teen series

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ABSTRACT

Since 2015, Netflix has been one of the largest holders of teen viewers, greatly surpassing cable TV and other streaming platforms. This study focused on depictions of romantic love on screen, how these scenes intersected with sexual scripts, and the gender initiation and reception of this material. A content analysis was performed on 19 Netflix original series, which were coded using categories influenced by sexual script theory and adapted from Dillman Carpentier: loving language, loving behavior, sexual language, sexual behavior, and sexual health. Results found instances of loving or sexual content in each episode. Both loving and sexual language were the predominant aspects with sexual health instances in a few episodes. Included in the findings is a focus on loving language scripts that focus on ending a relationship rather than building or maintaining a relationship which has implications for teen expectations. Gender initiation and reception was largely equal across the five categories indicating a shift in gendered scripts. This study addresses the limited research within Netflix original series and furthers how sexual script theory understands the connection between loving and sexual content in teen programming.

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Television; streaming; teens; content analysis; sexual scripts; romantic love

IMPACT SUMMARIES

Prior State of Knowledge: Previous research has found that sexual scripts on television follow the traditional heterosexual script, with men as the pursuers and women being more emotional. Often, teen programming is more likely to show committed relationships, separating casual and committed sexual relationships.

Novel Contributions: Our findings suggest that within Netflix teen programming, men and women are equally likely to initiate loving or sexual behavior. Programming is also more likely to see scripts skewed toward ending relationships rather than toward building healthy relationships.

Practical Implications: Romantic and sexual scripts in television can influence teenagers' expectations of relationships, including sexual health behaviors. Parents and educators should be aware of the romantic language and behavior dynamics shaping viewers' perspectives, specifically given the lack of safe sex depictions.

Introduction

Throughout childhood and into adulthood, we absorb messages from media content that help us build our expectations for romantic and sexual encounters (van Meer & Pollmann, 2021). In fact, without other interpersonal interventions, the media becomes a “sexual super peer,” providing lessons to early maturing adolescents on love and sex (Brown et al., 2005). Existing research has focused on content and the scripts presented within it (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2007; Terán et al., 2021). These studies have found sexual content to be prevalent, whereas loving language or discussions of sexual health were less prominent. Although this has been addressed in network and cable television content, there is limited research on the rapidly growing streaming programming, revealing a new market targeting teens.

Since 2015, Netflix has been the largest holder of teen viewers, greatly surpassing cable TV and other streaming platforms, including YouTube (McAlone, 2018). Survey data suggest that 38% of daily video consumption is on Netflix (Murphy et al., 2018), which was noted as Gen-Z’s fourth favorite brand, marking Netflix as a highly desired platform for teens (Premack, 2018). In January 2019, Netflix announced that it earns approximately 10% of screen time in the United States, with revenue in the billions (Jarvey, 2019). Netflix maintains its influence as a global programming leader utilizing its power to shape the streaming industry (CNBC, 2022). Therefore, its content choices reflect potential developing standards with far-reaching implications.

Given the sizeable teenage viewership of Netflix, the distribution platform gains a significant amount of soft power, which is only enhanced by the fact that there is no outside content monitoring organization. All ratings and content warnings are self-assessed and incorporated, making Netflix an outlier of traditional broadcasting systems. While Netflix has become the first streaming platform to join the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) (McClintock, 2019), the company does not employ the MPAA rating system (Associated Press, 2019). This may mean greater flexibility in content produced as Netflix is not subject to the same guidelines as the MPAA rating system, especially as mature shows (TV-MA) are incorporated into their “teen” programming with teenage main characters (Belcher, 2021; Cobb, 2018).

Like all preceding entertainment media, Netflix has incorporated love and sex into its storytelling. The purpose of this study is to analyze the interplay between loving language and behavior and sexual language and behavior while addressing gender interaction disparities on Netflix programming for teenagers. Further, this study updates scholarship from Dillman Carpentier et al. (2017) work on sexual script theory, given the current speed of television distribution, and to assess the self-rated Netflix platform. Since Netflix, as a distributor, monitors its ratings, the company has the ability to create its boundaries of explicit content and, in turn, how love is expressed. Meaning, Netflix is only beholden to its own sensibilities and audience commentary and could become a significant source of relationship information with teens. While other studies have addressed heterosexual scripting on television (Aubrey et al., 2020) by focusing on initiators and receivers, the present study illustrates a potential shift with more equal gender dynamics on screen. This study’s results also reveal the boundaries of the heterosexual script that has dominated the cultural level of sexual script theory.

Sexual script theory

Sexual script theory (SST) finds that sexual activity is constructed through cultural, social, and psychological components and develops into lifelong sexual attitudes and behaviors (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Gagnon and Simon (1973) find that “[s]cripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequencing of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience” (Gagnon & Simon, 1973, p. 19). If a script is effective or an individual believes it will be effective, it is likely to be absorbed (Terán et al., 2021) and crystalized (W. Simon & J. H. Gagnon, 1984). Developmentally, adolescence lends cultural scenarios to become more impactful than in later stages of life (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). This scripting process occurs on three levels: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic.

Cultural scenarios are illustrated and reinforced in entertainment media through behaviors and dialogue. This script level projects what is acceptable and unacceptable and where boundaries are drawn (Wiederman et al., 2015). These displayed scripts, such as kissing or talking about ending a relationship, are often normalized on screen, thereby implying to the audience that the depictions are accurate and rational. We address SST from the cultural perspective, as 70% of 13–24-year-olds revealed that they use television as a form of sex information and education (Boyar et al., 2011). With less experience, adolescents and young adults turn to media (Wright, 2009, 2011), hoping to learn more about sexual and romantic expectations (Coyne et al., 2013; Finnerty-Myers, 2011). Mediated scripts influence behaviors and ideas about sexuality and relationships by developing a set of directives (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) often in a narrative format (Wiederman et al., 2015). Interpersonal scripts adapt cultural scripts to specific situations, while intrapsychic scripts focus on the internal experience. Each individual adapts the guidelines provided in cultural scripts and then incorporates them into their own experiences (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which can be adjusted to each scenario (Wiederman et al., 2015).

The heterosexual script and the relationship of love

The heterosexual script has long dominated television (Aubrey et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2007), limiting diverse script representation. Heterosexual scripts present in media are based on double standards where sex for men is praised, and women should be the “sexual gatekeepers” (Terán et al., 2021, p. 9). Additional heterosexual scripts include male dominance in courting and pleasure, with women desiring a romantic relationship over other aspects of their lives (Kim et al., 2007). However, we do not singularly analyze the heterosexual script in this study as Gen Z is marked by increasing gender awareness and acceptance (Kenney, 2020); therefore, we grounded the data on behaviors and language.

The heterosexual script is tied with idealized versions of monogamy that are still pervasive (Lelaurain et al., 2021). Romantic love has been described as an emotional relationship with physical sexual desire (O’Meara, 1989). However, to differentiate a sexual moment from an emotional one, we operationalize relational and romantic love as emotional intimacy. Meaning, an instance of loving behavior or language would be without the explicit purpose of sexual release in that instance. An example would be an

intimate conversation between partners where one kisses the other on the forehead and hugs them. While this romantic relational script may be between characters who are sexually active, this scene is focused on the emotional connection, thereby reaffirming relational intimacy on screen. The expressions of love are similar to Dillman Carpentier et al. (2017), who viewed themes of sex and love separately to compare the prevalence of each. We approach sex as the physical representation of desire and the intention of sexual pleasure. These depictions, such as oral sex and manual stimulation in addition to full-bodied passionate kissing, are all categorized as sex (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017).

Scripts identify the type and order of appropriate behaviors (Beres, 2014), and sexual scripts are often embedded with gendered stereotypes (Dajches et al., 2021). This understanding, coupled with the predominance of the heterosexual script (Aubrey et al., 2020), is the rationale for analyzing gender role initiation and reception of language and behavior. To widen the scope of gendered scripts on television, we focused not on tropes but the behaviors and language as they are presented on screen, reflecting the genders as presented without pre-categorizing scripts. Coupled with Netflix's self-regulation and absence of direct advertisers, the company can be more fluid in its depictions of relationship scripts. Nevertheless, the longstanding norm of the heterosexual script may lead to narrative bias and audience effects.

The purpose of this study is to expose the scripts on Netflix's teen programming by separating loving and sexual scripts to determine the predilection of one over the other and the gendered nature of each. Though physical and emotional expressions are intertwined in relationships, it is the sequence of a situation that becomes the script (Schank & Abelson, 1977), which audiences can absorb. Therefore, if a particular linguistic script, such as discussions about harming or ending a romantic relationship (one of this study's categories), is repeatedly reinforced, it may indicate a prominent cultural script shaping expectations.

Scripting effects

Scholarship has often found a link between cultural scripts and sexual interaction expectations, moderated by increased television consumption impacting the absorption of messages (Gamble & Nelson, 2016; Seabrook et al., 2017). Mobile devices and streaming give teens an easily accessible source of entertainment media information. As one's home, school, and peer environments (Brown et al., 2005) may lack other information or outlets for questions, preteens' and teens' sexual development may be negatively impacted by reliance on mass and entertainment media (Rousseau et al., 2018).

In teen programming, emotional connections can lead to more idealized romantic viewpoints with the potential to instill longer-lasting scripts since younger adolescents may be affected by media content at higher rates (Driesmans et al., 2016). Media exposure increases the sexual risk "naivety" (Wright et al., 2012) as well as the reinforcement of gendered stereotypes associated with sexual activity (Dajches et al., 2021). In fact, adolescent content is more likely than general programming to feature sexual content, particularly in a casual relationship. Conversely, messages about risks, responsibility, and safety in sexual activity are largely absent (Wright et al., 2012). Extensive effects research illustrates a relationship between sexual or romantic content and romantic perceptions and satisfaction, though effect size remains small, and further research is needed. While not all beliefs negatively affect individuals, research speaks to the influence of entertainment media.

Scripting in television

Application of sexual script theory to television at the cultural level has been wide-reaching, detailing scripting behavior and language across broadcast and cable programming that targets younger audiences (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2007; Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018). Our study recognizes loving or romantic scripts to be more emotional versus sexual scripts to be more physical and that the presence of loving scripts is not dependent on sexual scripts (Terán et al., 2021). Instead, we operationalize loving and sexual cultural scripts separately within a comparative frame. Within this area of research, two major segments contextualize this study: gendered and sexual scripts.

Kim et al. (2007) seminal work illustrated the reinforcement of the heterosexual script: male characters were the pursuers and encouraged to have sexual encounters, whereas female sexuality was encouraged but simultaneously devalued as a way to emphasize the good girl narrative. Continued prominence on the heterosexual script depicted male dominance driving approximately half of all sexual mentions, and sexual behavior was more often casual (Aubrey et al., 2020). Masculinity is continuously tied to sex, good girl narratives (where girls retain the responsibility to monitor sexual behavior) remain, and a lack of outward homophobia is stable across television (Aubrey et al., 2020). In fact, sex as a form of masculinity, particularly intimate touching, dominates the small screen, and it is the female character's responsibility to slow down intimacy, even as the initiation of sexual behavior is equally distributed amount genders (Terán et al., 2021). Netflix's original programming, specifically, has been found to employ the "Beauty and the Beast" script with a gender twist: females are more assertive and rebellious (beast), and males are patient and caring (beauty) (Fedele & Masanet, 2021). This narrative indicates a swap of gender roles; however, the boys do not save the girls, and therefore the girls are left in turmoil (Fedele & Masanet, 2021).

Sexual content tends to be separated into casual or relational categories. Frequencies of sexual behavior in casual (more sexual) and committed (more romantic) relationships have been found to be essentially equal in modern television (Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018). Nevertheless, casual scenarios consist of explicit content (intercourse), whereas committed relationships typically focus on passionate kissing, which could lead viewers to assume sex is more likely to occur in casual relationships (Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018). Likewise, male characters will regularly have sex with a partner they were disinterested in romantically (Terán et al., 2021). However, tween shows are more likely to depict sexual behaviors within committed relationships, though teen and young adult shows more frequently present hookups or relational casual sex (Dajches & Aubrey, 2020). Sexual positivity and health have similarly been investigated on Netflix.

Recent research indicates that prosocial and sexual health messaging is regularly present on Netflix (Creager, 2019; Maes & Vandenbosch, 2021; Tauty et al., 2021). "Open and mutually respectful" dialogue was found to be the most common prosocial messaging indicating purposeful enforcement of sexual health (Maes & Vandenbosch, 2021, p. 14). However, prosocial sexual messages often coincide with negative sexual messaging, or antisocial sexual messaging, potentially warping perceptions by conflating the two messages (Maes & Vandenbosch, 2021). Nevertheless, sexual health discourse on Netflix is likely to be factual and focused on healthy, not risky behaviors, demonstrating an evolution on this issue (Tauty et al., 2021). Perhaps due to Netflix's self-regulation and ratings, there is more flexibility for direct scripts on health.

This study utilized the codebook and design from Dillman Carpentier et al. (2017), which focused on sexual content in network and cable television targeting emerging adults. To unpack representations, the study analyzed loving, sexual, and sexual health content finding one-third of the programming to have sexual or loving material, though more often suggestive, not overt. Sexual health content, including mentions of safe-sex practices and emotional harm resulting from a romantic or sexual relationship, remained almost nonexistent, indicating a continued disregard for discussions on how individuals can navigate sexual health and avoid risks. Further, while sexual responsibility, such as when to have sex, is delegated to female characters, the content has avoided discussions of sexual health responsibility. The current study expands Dillman Carpentier et al. (2017) by incorporating gender initiators and receivers while assessing streaming programming that does not have the same regulatory oversight as broadcasting. To further detail this relationship, the present study analyzes the connection between love and sex to understand the messages targeted at teens, which ultimately could rearrange their romantic scripts.

Based on this literature, and in the interest of addressing the limited work on Netflix, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: What loving language and behavior is present in Netflix original series teen programming (ages 13–18)?

RQ2: What sexual language and behavior is present in Netflix original series teen programming (ages 13–18)?

RQ3: What content related to sexual health is present in Netflix original series teen programming (ages 13–18)?

RQ4: What is the correlation between instances of loving language and behavior and instances of sexual language and behavior?

RQ5: Which gender initiates and receives the loving language and behavior and the sexual language and behavior?

Method

Sampling

As this study solely focused on Netflix original content, sampling was reserved to such programming on their platform that is intended for teenage viewers. It is estimated that of the approximately 90,000 minutes of original programming in 2018 on Netflix, 66% of this is within series compared to 10% on films (Rodriguez, 2019); therefore, this study examines only the series. While Netflix has international viewership, available content differs by location, so content for this analysis is restricted to Netflix's U.S. offerings. The sample was collected through Netflix's "Teen TV Show" tag on its platform (Appendix A). Since the sample is taken directly from Netflix's platform, it also allows a greater understanding of

what Netflix believes is teen television programming. Shows range in length, typically half-hour to hour-long episodes.

The sample included series from January 2015 – June 2020. We eliminated shows from the sample if they were not Netflix originals. Only live-action programming was included to incorporate material teens could most likely relate to; reality programs and docuseries were eliminated, as the focus of the study is fictional works. To guarantee that translations were not misconstrued from the original program, only English language programming was included. Only shows with more than one season or shows with one season that were considered continuing shows (there were no cancellation announcements and more seasons were anticipated) at the time of data collection were included to ensure recent material with high enough viewership for renewal. The final sample was cross checked against Netflix's maturity rating, and original languages were recorded. Programs rated TV-PG were eliminated to ensure more overt programming for teenagers that are more likely to contain content that would influence their expectations for love and sexual scripts. Similarly, our focus on TV-14 and TV-MA shows is due to their inclusion in the "Teen TV Show," specifically how much mature content is included.

Units of analysis

A final sample of 19 series was collected ([Appendix A](#)). To be representative of the series and as recommended by Manganello et al. (2008), three episodes of each show were coded from the most recent season at the time of analysis per Dillman Carpentier et al. (2017). Episodes were randomized (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017) to allow for a more representative sample rather than singling out specific scenes or episodes. However, coders viewed episodes in chronological order. For an episode-based analysis, instances were coded at the scene level to determine the number of instances per episode. Multiple instances could occur within the same scene if there were different couples or interactions. Each instance was coded for scenes that included multiple instances, but each interaction between a couple was only coded once. As an example, an intimate kiss between two romantic partners occurring back-to-back in the same scene would be coded as one instance of *Loving Behavior*. The final sample included 57 episodes from 19 series. Twenty-four episodes are rated TV-14, and the other 33 are rated TV-MA. Seven of the programs are approximately half-hour shows, and the other twelve are approximately 1-hour programs.

Coder training

Coders underwent detailed training, including coding the reliability sample. Acceptable intercoder reliability was determined through a sample of six episodes randomly selected, meeting the 10% mark of the full sample as recommended by Neuendorf (2002). The two coders were 27 years of age and had familiarity with the sample series, increasing the likelihood that the interpretation of the content is similar to that of teenage viewers, as existing research recommends Manganello et al., 2010; Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017). We randomly assigned episodes to the coders. Intercoder reliability was calculated with Krippendorff's alpha, and across all coding categories, Krippendorff's alpha was $\alpha = .88$ and the average agreement was 95%. Due to some outlying variables which are addressed below, agreement for individual codes ranged from 67% – 100% ($\alpha = .31-1$)

Content categories

Coding categories were adapted from Dillman Carpentier et al. (2017). These categories have been applied to network and cable television, specifically popular with young adults (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017). The non-verbal instances are categorized as behaviors, and the verbal communication is categorized as language. Categories were separated into five sections: Loving Behavior, Loving Language, Sexual Behavior, Sexual Language, and Sexual Health (Tables 1–5); however, the descriptions of the specific behavior and language were maintained from the original codebook (see Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017). Coding was determined by the presence of the categories.

In addition to coding the behaviors and languages, the gender of the initiator and receiver was classified to determine if heterosexual scripts or gender biases are instilled in the content. These aspects were incorporated as few studies detail the genders participating in sexual or loving material. Gender codes were based on visual gender presentation (Table 6). Initiation and reception were coded separately for each instance of the behavior or language. If the participants of a behavior initiated action simultaneously, the genders were coded, and both were identified as initiators.

Loving behavior was defined as romantic and intimate content, such as touching a partner’s body in a non-sexual manner or a change in a relationship from dating to engagement ($\alpha = .88$, average agreement = 95%). Due to limited instances in these episodes, reliability for *light kissing or touching* fell under $\alpha = .80$ ($\alpha = .78$, average agreement = 83%) due to disagreement on one instance. *Loving language* was defined as direct discussions on emotional

Table 1. Coding Loving Behavior.

Variables
Dating or courting behavior
Light kissing or touching
Intimate touching

Table 2. Coding Loving Language.

Variables
Talk about liking or loving a person romantically
Talk about building or maintaining a romantic relationship
Talk about harming or ending a romantic relationship
Talk about relationship status or romantic partner

Table 3. Coding Sexual Behavior.

Variables
Physical flirting
Passionate kissing
Masturbation
Implied oral sex
Depicted oral sex
Implied intercourse
Depicted intercourse

Table 4. Coding Sexual Language.

Variables
Talk about one's own or others' current, new, or future sexual actions or interests
Talk about one's own or others' past sexual actions or interests
Talk toward sex (conveyed to desired sexual partner)
Talk of a direct sexual nature
Talk about sex-related crimes
Expert Advice
Talk about physical or sex-related development
Talk about waiting for sex until marriage
Sex jokes or puns

Table 5. Coding Sexual Health.

Variables
Endorsement of condoms or contraception
Rejection of condoms or contraception
Mention or show of abstinence/refusal of sex
Endorsement of abortion or emergency contraceptives
Rejection of abortion or emergency contraceptives
Mention or show of emotional harm
Mention or show of HIV/AIDS or STIs
Mention of unwanted pregnancy
Mention or show of wanted or planned pregnancy

Table 6. Coding Gender.

Variables
Female
Male
Non-binary/unknown

connections and commitments ($\alpha = .90$, average agreement = 96%). Due to limited instances in these episodes, reliability for *talk about liking or loving a person romantically* fell under $\alpha = .80$ ($\alpha = .76$, average agreement = 83%) due to disagreement on one instance. *Sexual Behavior* was distinct as it describes physical contact with the implication of sexual desire or implied intercourse ($\alpha = .90$, average agreement = 98%). Due to limited instances in these episodes, reliability for *passionate kissing* fell under $\alpha = .80$ ($\alpha = .73$, average agreement = 83%). *Sexual language* related to conversations about any sexual experience, act, or interest either within friend groups or directly to a desired partner; this category also includes “talk of a direct sexual nature” would include sexual jokes or puns that could be increasingly included in teenage content ($\alpha = .81$, average agreement = 95%). One code in this category, *talk about one's own or others' past sexual actions or interests*, was an outlier in overall reliability ($\alpha = .31$, average agreement = 67%). This was due to there being only two instances of this code in the episodes used for intercoder reliability and a discrepancy of whether one of those instances fell under that category versus *talk specifically about past sexual intercourse*. *Sexual health* consisted of conversation that mentions, promotes, or rejects behaviors (physical or emotional) that relate to sexual health ($\alpha = .89$, average agreement = 95%). All instances of these categories, no matter the age of the character, were coded.

Results

RQ1 and RQ2 address the presence and frequency of loving and sexual language and behavior. These remain prevalent in teen Netflix programming, with only two episodes ($N = 2$, 4%) void of loving language and behavior and four ($N = 4$, 8%) void of sexual language and behavior. Loving language was the most frequent coding category, with 93% of episodes ($N = 53$) containing one or more instances, followed by sexual language ($N = 51$, 89%), loving behavior ($N = 50$, 88%), and sexual behavior ($N = 38$, 67%). A total of $N = 870$ instances were recorded among those four categories, as well as sexual health, which had a relatively negligible number of instances. Loving language accounted for one-third of the recorded instances, with an average of 5.02 per episode ($N = 286$, 33%), followed by sexual language averaging 3.91 instances per episode ($N = 223$, 26%), loving behavior averaging 3.67 instances per episode ($N = 209$, 24%), and sexual behavior with an average of 2 instances per episode ($N = 114$, 13%). Instances of loving nature dominate the space relative to that of sexual nature. 70% of the episodes ($N = 40$) had more instances of loving language and behavior than sexual language and behavior. Results also indicated that in the episodes, as well as total individual instances, language was more frequent than behavior. Further, 68% of the episodes ($N = 39$) had more instances of language (loving or sexual) than behavior (loving or sexual).

Table 7 addresses the frequencies of loving and sexual language in the sample. The most prominent loving language was talk about harming or ending a relationship ($N = 89$), followed by talk about liking or loving someone romantically ($N = 83$). Nearly two-thirds of the episodes had one or more instances of talk about harming or ending a relationship ($N = 36$, 63%) and liking or loving someone romantically ($N = 39$, 68%). Compared to talk about harming or ending a relationship, there was half as much talk about building or maintaining a relationship ($N = 44$), and the latter occurred in less than half of the episodes ($N = 26$, 46%), suggesting that viewers of teen programming on Netflix are likely to see twice as much content focused on ending relationships or unsuccessful romantic relationships than content about building or maintaining successful ones. The most prominent category of sexual language was talk about current new or

Table 7. Language.

	Number of instances	Number of episodes	Percentage of episodes containing instances
Talking about liking or loving a person romantically	83	39	68%
Talk about building or maintaining a romantic relationship	44	26	46%
Talk about harming or ending a romantic relationship	89	36	63%
Talk about relationship status or romantic spouse	70	32	56%
Talk about one's own or others' current, new, or future sexual actions or interests	77	33	58%
Talk about one's own or others' past sexual actions or interests	45	24	42%
Talk specifically about past sexual intercourse	25	14	25%
Talk toward sex	19	12	21%
Talk about sex-related crimes	16	9	16%
Expert advice	9	3	5%
Talk about physical or sex-related development	1	1	2%
Talk about waiting for sex until marriage	0	0	0%
Sex jokes or puns	31	15	26%

future sexual actions or interests, with 77 instances appearing in a majority of the episodes ($N = 51$, 89%), followed by talk about past sexual actions or interests at 45 instances among 49 episodes (86%). Approximately 91% (52 episodes) contained at least one instance of talk about sexual actions or interests.

Table 8 addresses the frequencies of loving and sexual behavior in the sample. The most prominent loving behavior was light kissing and touching, which accounted for over half of the 209 instances of loving behavior ($N = 118$, 56%) and occurred at least once in 33% of the episodes ($N = 19$). The most prominent sexual behavior was passionate kissing ($N = 74$), appearing in just over half of the episodes ($N = 33$, 58%). This far outnumbered other recorded categories of sexual behavior; the second most prominent was physical flirting at only 19 instances, occurring in approximately one-fifth of the episodes ($N = 12$, 21%). Twelve instances of implied intercourse were counted between 10 (18%) episodes, and there were only 4 instances of depicted sexual intercourse between 4 (7%) of the episodes in the sample. Implied and depicted sexual intercourse combined accounted for 14% of the total instances of sexual behavior in the sample.

While there were only two content ratings in the sample, TV-14 and TV-MA, we analyzed possible differences in the content between these two categories. Looking at our main coding categories, there were no significant correlations between show rating and any category of language or behavior that was examined. However, when looking at the average number of the instances-per episode by television rating, the average number of instances of sexual behavior per episode was greater for TV-MA shows (2.24) than for TV-14 shows (1.54).

Addressing RQ3, sexual health instances (see **Table 9**) were coded far less than loving and sexual language and behavior, accounting for only 38 of the total instances in the sample (4%). 25% of the episodes contained one or more instances related to sexual health ($N = 14$). Notably, there were zero recorded instances of characters rejecting condoms in the sample and 6 instances of condom endorsement among 4 episodes (7%). However, of the 10 episodes that had instances of implied intercourse, only one of those episodes had an endorsement of condoms (10%), and none of the episodes that depicted sexual intercourse had an endorsement of condoms within the episode.

Addressing RQ4, Spearman's rho correlations were calculated in an episode-based analysis between categories of loving language and behavior with sexual language and behavior. While few significant correlations emerged, there was a significantly positive correlation between instances of loving language and sexual language ($r_s = .34$, $p \leq .01$). The weakest correlation, just missing statistical significance, was between loving

Table 8. Behavior.

	Number of instances	Number of episodes	Percentage of episodes containing instances
Dating/courting	49	26	46%
Light kissing or touching	118	38	67%
Intimate touching	42	23	40%
Physical flirting	19	12	21%
Passionate kissing	67	32	56%
Masturbation	3	2	4%
Implied oral sex	0	0	0%
Depicted oral sex	2	2	4%
Implied intercourse	12	10	18%
Depicted intercourse	4	4	7%

Table 9. Sexual Health.

	Number of instances	Number of episodes	Percentage of episodes containing instances
Condoms – endorsement	6	4	7%
Condoms – rejection	0	0	0%
Mention or show of abstinence/refusal of sex	7	6	11%
Abortion – endorsement	2	1	2%
Abortion – rejection	1	1	2%
Mention or show of emotional harm	12	10	18%
Mention of HIV/AIDS or STI's	3	2	4%
Mention or show of unwanted pregnancy	4	4	7%
Mention or show of wanted or planned pregnancy	3	3	5%

language and sexual behavior ($r_s=.02$, $p > .05$). Correlations between instances of sexual health and the above categories were also tested. However, most of these did not have strong or statistically significant correlations. A significant correlation did emerge between overall instances of loving behavior and instances of sexual health ($r_s=.38$, $p \leq .01$), indicating a potential relationship between sexual health conversations with intimate versus sexual partners.

Addressing RQ5, data suggests an overall equal distribution between genders regarding who initiates and receives loving and sexual language and behavior. This data is also largely within the binary of male and female, as only one nonbinary character was found within the sample (*they/them* pronouns were used in reference to the character). The only category where there was an association between gender and being an initiator or receiver was *loving behavior*, $\chi^2(1, N = 421) = 10.2$, $p < .01$. This category had the greatest margin of difference, where there were more male initiators ($N = 141$) than female initiators ($N = 106$), and more female receivers ($N = 101$) than male receivers ($N = 71$). Loving language and sexual language both had a very slight margin of difference for male and female initiators (see Table 10), but a more significant difference in receivers, in part because of conversations that would happen in groups. For loving language, female receivers ($N = 175$) were slightly more common than male receivers ($N = 163$); while for sexual language, male receivers ($N = 145$) were more prominent than female receivers ($N = 129$), suggesting that overall, in these shows, female characters are more likely to have discussions falling under the category of loving content, while male characters are more likely to be seen having discussions that fall under the category of sexual content.

Table 10. Gender of language/behavior initiator and receiver.

	Female initiator	Male initiator	Nonbinary initiator	Female receiver	Male receiver	Nonbinary receiver
Loving language	149	144	0	175	163	0
Sexual language	112	114	0	129	145	0
Loving behavior	106	141	1	101	71	1
Sexual behavior	82	79	0	31	33	0
Sexual health	26	13	0	21	14	0

Similarly, female ($N = 82$) and male ($N = 79$) characters were almost equally measured as initiators of sexual behavior, showing that no gender was a primary or more aggressive initiator of sexual content. Numbers were almost equal among male ($N = 33$) and female ($N = 31$) receivers as well. This does not speak to the prominence of heterosexual couples as opposed to queer or same-sex couples. However, there were more than twice as many initiators as there were receivers of sexual behavior in the data set, illustrating a significant amount of instances where the behavior was mutually initiated. Regarding talk of sexual health, females were the primary participants in such dialogue, with there being twice as many female initiators ($N = 26$) as there were male initiators ($N = 13$), and similarly, a greater number of female receivers ($N = 21$) than male receivers ($N = 14$).

Discussion

Although research has comprehensively analyzed the loving and sexual material shown on network and cable television, streaming services are a driving force of entertainment consumption among teenagers. Given the convenient nature of streaming services and increasing platform curation, research on adolescent programming can reveal the prominent scripts across teen shows. With the “teen tag,” Netflix positions its program to be appropriate for those under 18. Streaming services, through self-regulation that operates outside of traditional networks and systems, have greater flexibility in the content they distribute, including content on romantic relationships. This study found that though explicit intercourse remains limited in teen programming, intense moments of loving and sexual content are present, implying teens have a high rate of loving and sexual relationships. As such, it is critical to understand the nature of these streaming services’ original content targeted at teenagers, especially since cultural scripts may be more impactful during adolescent development (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). Scripts serve as an informational tool for sexual and romantic relationships (Coyne et al., 2013; Finnerty-Myers, 2011; Rousseau et al., 2018), further impacting teens’ parasocial and emotional connections to characters, and by consequence their own romantic expectations (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). We address the limited work on streaming by specifically focusing on instances of loving and sexual language and behavior, as well as content related to sexual health. Data from this analysis also further reaffirms the boundaries of the often culturally dominant heterosexual script (Terán et al., 2021).

Every episode in the sample contained instances of loving and/or sexual content, which is in line with recent findings (Maes & Vandenbosch, 2021), and the high rate of depictions illustrate a greater prevalence than in previous studies (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017; Rousseau et al., 2018). However, instances of language, both loving and sexual, were more prevalent than instances of behavior. While the self-regulating environment of these streaming platforms may cause concern about the potential of increasing or dominating physical content, this study suggests that explicit behavioral material is second to language surrounding love and sex. Particularly notable within the loving language content was the prevalence of dialogue focused on the harming or ending of a relationship was far more prevalent than dialogue focused on building or maintaining a relationship.

Our data suggests viewers of Netflix teen programming will see twice as much content about harming or ending a relationship than building a relationship, potentially skewing

scripts towards rejection outcomes versus illustrating the tools needed to maintain a healthy relationship, in line with broadcast programming (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017). Mentions of emotional harm remain the most prevalent in the health content category, further illustrating more negative sexual messaging. This suggests producers are more inclined towards conflict scenarios as a way to enhance the dramatic effect. Further research may illustrate the communicative tendencies of negotiating deal breakers versus resolving conflicts in a relationship. While there were no statistically significant correlations in our data that would suggest a trend in instances of sexual talk or behavior co-occurring with talk of ending versus building a relationship, future research would benefit from further investigation of associations that could potentially exist. These scripts are particularly influential given the targeted messaging towards teens through the tagging process. No matter the genre of the programming, the depictions of intimate scripts are transferable towards more “real” life scenarios, giving young viewers content with conflict versus solutions.

Among the five categories of language and behavior recorded, sexual health was by far the least prevalent within the sample. This aligned with previous research that similarly found a lack of sexual health messaging in entertainment television (see Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017). However, like with loving and sexual language and behavior, this finding should be viewed within the context of the affordances unique to streaming platforms that produce original content, meaning Netflix programs chose to avoid health depictions. Among the many potential implications, this is a missed opportunity for content creators to promote safe sex practices (such as showing suggestions of condom use) and related sexual health messaging through the characters’ narratives. Nevertheless, when condoms were suggested, it was overwhelmingly an endorsement signaling a shift in narrative towards positive sexual health education even if it is limited, aligning with other research on Netflix programming (Aruah, 2021).

Finally, a significant finding is the largely equal distribution of gender initiators and receivers of loving and sexual language and behavior. By incorporating gender directly into the analysis, sexual script theory can be further contextualized within mediated gender roles. The sample had a small margin of difference between male and female characters on all counts, showing female characters are just as likely as male characters to be active initiators, and that one gender is not positioned as more aggressive than the other, indicating a shifting environment (Fedele & Masanet, 2021). However, women are more likely to be receivers of loving behavior, while men are likely to be initiators, interestingly since other research found men to prioritize sex over commitment (Dajches et al., 2021). These findings are largely aligned with those of Dajches et al. (2021) in their recent study of heterosexual scripts in youth television programs. Though this study coded gendered communication by prominent initiators or receivers of language and behavior, future research would also need to code for sexual orientation and context to further understand romantic representations on screen. Nevertheless, this offers evidence of a changing entertainment environment regarding a more equalized basis where women and girls are viewed as in control of their relationships.

Further, the numbers suggest that a significant amount of loving and sexual behaviors had mutual initiators (as opposed to an initiator and a receiver), positioning characters as central and active participants in their relationship. These results project a transition in sexual scripts in the rapidly and continuously dynamic streaming industry with the

intention of maintaining engagement and profitability. As such, the indicated trends have the potential to set the tone and standard for young viewers' expectations of sexual and romantic relationships. Yet, depicted queer relationships were few, and comparative analysis would help to determine the quality of screen time given to queer versus heterosexual couples. Future research should incorporate an expansive sample across streaming platforms to corroborate loving and sexual depictions in addition to the gendered representation.

Limitations

While this study aims to identify loving and sexual content and gendered interactions, the data collection and analysis did not separate couples by sexual orientation. Specifically, gender initiation coding accounted for mutual behavior or language. This allowed a look into the dynamics of relationships on screen; however, while this portrays the gender of those involved collectively, it doesn't provide detailed information on the relational aspects, such as sexual orientation or differences in behaviors observed in same-sex pairs. Similarly, it does not illustrate group interactions that could identify heteronormative intercommunication. Though this study utilized the recommended randomized 3-episode sample, these episodes may not be representative of each series as a whole. Further, it should be understood that teenagers could interpret the material differently or miss certain implications that researchers have been trained to identify.

Conclusion

Through this study, we sought to understand better the interplay between loving and sexual language and behavior in teen-oriented original programming on a leading streaming service. The investigation into streaming content is even more critical as it is a self-regulatory organization that operates outside traditional regulatory systems, such as the MPAA. While the results of this study suggest that instances of loving or sexual language still outnumber instances of loving or sexual behavior, we cannot underestimate the influence such dialogue will have on young viewers. A glaring example from this sample was dialogue about ending a relationship vastly outnumbered that about building a relationship, which could impact viewers' perceptions and understandings of these relationships. While explicit sexual content may not be as frequent as discussion about sex, such sexual dialogue can also greatly influence viewers' perceptions of relationship scripts.

Finally, the lack of even brief sexual health messaging could impact viewers' understanding of, or undermine the importance of, positive sexual health behaviors. Given existing research on cultural scripts, media effects, and adolescents' use of media as a primary source of information on love and sex, the evolving nature of teen-targeted streaming content is massively consequential. Health practitioners, parents, and educators should remain aware of current portrayals of love and sex in teen-targeted television not simply as a potential influence but as an unintended learning source for teenagers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A: Sample

Title	Date	Rating	Approximate Length	Episodes Per Season
<i>13 Reasons Why</i>	2017 – 2020	TVMA	Hour	13
<i>Atypical</i>	2017 – 2021	TV14	Half-Hour	10
<i>Between</i>	2015 – 2016	TV14	Hour	6
<i>Chilling Adventures of Sabrina</i>	2018 – 2020	TV14	Hour	8
<i>Derry Girls</i>	2018 –	TVMA	Half-Hour	6
<i>I Am Not Okay with This</i>	2020	TVMA	Half-Hour	7
<i>Insatiable</i>	2018 – 2019	TVMA	Hour	10
<i>Locke & Key</i>	2020 – 2022	TV14	Hour	10
<i>October Faction</i>	2020	TVMA	Hour	10
<i>On My Block</i>	2018 – 2021	TV14	Half-Hour	10
<i>Never Have I Ever</i>	2020 –	TV14	Half-Hour	10
<i>Sex Education</i>	2019 –	TVMA	Hour	8
<i>Stranger Things</i>	2016 –	TV14	Hour	9
<i>The End of the F***ing World</i>	2017 – 2019	TVMA	Half-Hour	8
<i>The Order</i>	2019 – 2020	TVMA	Hour	10
<i>The Politician</i>	2019 – 2020	TV14	Hour	7
<i>The Society</i>	2019	TVMA	Hour	10
<i>Trinkets</i>	2019 – 2020	TVMA	Half-Hour	10
<i>Outer Banks</i>	2020 –	TVMA	Hour	10