“Puppy Love”
An Analysis of the Representation of Adolescent Relationships in Fictional Television Programs

by

Arielle Hixson
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This study analyzed the portrayals of heterosexual relationships in fictional, teen-targeted television shows within the past 10 years. The analysis was based off of Albert Bandura’s social learning theory and the influences of modeling and imitation on human social development. Observations of television shows used in this study mainly focused on the portrayals of teenage girls in heterosexual relationships. Using qualitative observations, this study asked: how are heterosexual relationships represented in American teen television? The sample used for this study included 40 episodes of 20 teen-targeted television shows, featuring over 88 heterosexual relationships. The analysis was based off a qualitative coding scheme specifically designed to observe the positive, negative and neutral social results in television episodes attained from portrayals of individuals in heterosexual relationships. The results indicate that teenagers are learning specific messages about socially unacceptable, sexually active and socially acceptable relationships from actively watching fictional episodes, which could easily influence their behavior in relationships. This study suggests the need for parental guidance and adult supervision while teenagers watch television shows to increase the comprehension of the disparities between fictional television and reality.
INTRODUCTION

On January 19th, 2011, the MTV show *Skins* premiered on national television. *Skins* was a fictional drama about the growing pains of young American teenagers. The series was a spin-off of the British televised version of *Skins* that first aired in 2007 (Johns, 2007). The British version of *Skins* was notorious for its racy scenes, which included teens dealing with illegal drugs and sex. Although the original British show hosted controversial topics, it was never fully brought off air for its programming. The program was eventually nominated for Best Drama Series at the 2008 British Academy Television Awards (http://www.bafta.org).

Once the American version of *Skins* aired on national television, viewers immediately expressed concern. The new teen series was quickly labeled as a dramatic show “about a group of hard-partying, drug-taking, sexually active teenagers (Bentley, 2011).” Parents of young teenagers who watched the show were horrified. The extreme images of sex and child nudity led critics to believe that *Skins* was a subtle version of child pornography since those who were nude on screen were under the age of eighteen (Bentley, 2011). As a reaction to the controversy with *Skins* inducing child pornography, lead corporations, such as Taco Bell, pulled its advertisements for the show’s commercials (http://www.foxnews.com). Although many parents, corporations and critics were expressing their negative thoughts about the show, the opinions of teenagers, the target viewers for *Skins*, were silent.
There was one underlying question about *Skins*: How realistic is the material (Poniewozik, 2011)? Several viewers wanted to learn what *Skins* was trying to communicate to the public. Are producers trying to state that sexually active, drug-taking teenagers is a form of reality? Within *Skins* there was a question about the difference between fictional media and real-life (Poniewozik, 2011). Parents were anxiously curious. Although they wanted to believe that the representation of teen reality of the television series was skewed, they wanted honest answers about the teenage lifestyle. In response, actress on the show Camille Cresencia-Millis “Daisy Valero” explained, “The reason that it’s dangerous, it’s scary is because it is the unknown and people are scared of things that they don’t know (Bentley, 2011).”

The only way that parents could get an accurate perception of teenage life and how it compares to *Skins* would be to ask their own children, yet it can never be confirmed that their teen would give an accurate answer about their lifestyles. Teenagers commented about the show, stating that it was “lacking in authenticity (Murphy, 2011).” In reaction to the show’s criticisms, MTV defended the series, stating that it, “addresses ‘real-world issues confronting teens in a frank way (http://www.foxnews.com).’” After the Parents Television Council (PTC) declared it “the most dangerous show for teens,” the teenage cast of *Skins* defended the series themselves (Bentley, 2011). Danny Flaherty, the teen actor who plays “Stanley” on the show, discussed the racy content. Flaherty’s statement ironically conflicted with the opinions of teenage viewers. Flaherty explained:
I mean it’s been shown in films, it’s been talked about in literature, so why not bring it to cable television? There already are shows like this and just because they aren’t as edgy doesn’t mean that this is going to be the most dangerous thing ever. It’s actually good that it’s this edgy because it’s more real and it’s showing what teenagers actually do do. I think that they’ll enjoy it because it does show consequences for bad actions as well (Bentley, 2011).

According to interviews conducted with teenage viewers about Skins, many teenagers disagree with Danny Flaherty’s statement, believing that the show is overly dramatized and that it doesn’t display an accurate perception of what teenagers typically do. Several teens refrained from confirming that Skins is indeed a reality of teen life, explaining that it is solely a dramatic portrayal of teenage relationships used for entertainment (Murphy, 2011). As the first series of the Skins continued, ratings started to decline. Despite the lack of viewers, MTV strived to air all 10 episodes of the first season (Murphy, 2011). Interestingly, MTV continued to present a controversial, flawed, racy show even though it started to flounder in success.

The media clearly has a large impact on the lives of people today. With advancing technology, television is becoming a primary form of entertainment. Some scholars have claimed that television has, “forever changed our families and the way we elect our leaders, set social policy, judge the accused, and view ourselves in relation to others (O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997, p. 278).” In 2009, Nielsen’s Television Audio Report confirmed that the Average American home had 2.83 television sets, which was 18% higher than the year 2000 (http://www.nielson.com). The number of TV sets per home are only expected to rise within the coming years until there are more TV sets in the house than
number of people living there (http://www.nielson.com). Researchers have found that the average person watches about 15 hours of television per week, which makes up almost half of one’s free time (Robinson & Godbey, 1997; Zavodny, 2006). Albert Bandura, a prominent psychologist responsible for the development of social learning theory once hypothesized that people learn through observation (Bandura, 1971; Bandura, 1969; Estes, 1970; Mares, Palmer, & Sullivan, 2011). If observation includes the entertaining form of watching television than many individuals can learn specific forms of behavior through observing modeled behavior on television (Anderson & Hanson, 2010).

Through Skins one could observe that the portrayals of young teenagers on fictional television can have a profound effect on an individual’s mental representation of actual teenage life. After watching fictional television it is often difficult for an individual to tell the difference between fiction and reality. Interestingly enough, television often supplies viewers with images, storylines and events that seldom occur in everyday life (Altheide & Snow, 1979; O’Guinn & Faber, 1991; Richins 1995, O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997). With pop media today, there are many parallels between television and behavior in real-life that has an individual question the power of images on the media. Childhood stars have publicly demonstrated that adult behavior, such as sex, are present within the teenage community today. For example: In 2007, Jamie-Lynn Spears, the lead character of the teen-targeted show Zoey 101, experienced a pregnancy at the age of sixteen. This pregnancy brought controversy to the public as critics stated that she was in some ways glorifying teen pregnancy and therefore not being an
adequate role model for other teens today (Kliff, 2008). What does celebrity teenage-pregnancy communicate to teens? With the influence of television and leading role models, society is effectively sending messages to youth that may have a negative affect on their personal development.

Many television shows that target young audiences tend to depict children in a manner that promotes overly mature behavior. In television shows, young children are often seen wearing more “adult” clothes than the average child in real life. With these clothing, children are seen practicing more mischievous behavior such as drinking and smoking throughout adolescence as well as engaging in sexual activity. Some psychologists state that there is a good, logical reason to believe that TV may be a strong influence for early sexual activity in adolescence. Television tends to habituate young viewers to mature behavior; thus making them believe that lewd acts and mature wardrobe are natural and accepted by society. As Collins (2004) explains, “Sexual activity is strongly influenced by culture, and TV is an integral part of US teen culture (Collins et al., 2004, p. 280).”

This study suggests that the influence of television can easily impact the social development of an adolescent; thus implicitly affecting his/her personality and how he/she dresses or behaves. Within this impact, young teenage girls appear to be especially vulnerable to media effects. In society, women are expected to value and attain a certain degree of beauty that is labeled as “ideal.” Within the media, images of the “perfect” woman further develop the pressures of attaining beauty or social status in society. McArthy (1990) explains:
Women, having a very finely tuned idea about what is an acceptable body, rapidly internalize the current standard of female beauty. In western cultures women, especially those in the higher socioeconomic classes, try to emulate the standard of beauty presented in the fashion media (McArthy, 1990, p. 205; Streigel-Moore et al., 1986).

Women appear to be victims to the hypothetical standards of society (Hsu, 1990; Striegel-Moore, 1995). One of the strongest sociocultural influences of the pressure to attain an ideal physical appearance is the mass media (Stice et al., 1994). Though the media has been analyzed repeatedly about certain influences, such as physical attraction, an analysis of the representations of heterosexuality is fairly new. Through watching television and observing heterosexual relationships, young women can discover which relationships are socially acceptable or obtainable in society. Young women may therefore equate these hypothetical relationships to relationships in reality and attempt to pursue a similar heterosexual relationship that was socially successful on television.

This thesis will specifically analyze the representation of teenage women in heterosexual relationships within 21st century fictional television shows. While analyzing the portrayals of young women in a total of 20 shows, I will focus on the prevalence of promiscuous behavior within the opposite sex and its degree of significance within social status in society. This thesis will serve to analyze the representation of heterosexual relationships in fictional television. My research stems from literature surrounding the impact of the social learning theory and its influence on learning social behavior (Bandura, 1971; Bandura, 1969; Estes 1970, Collins, 2004). I will implement the theories grasped from
earlier literature into my research, seeking to prove how these social learning theories could possibly affect hypothetical teenage viewers today.

Ultimately, my thesis will seek to discover what messages the media communicates to teenage girls about the relationship between heterosexual intimacy and social development. Through my thesis I hope ultimately answer one question: what are the representations of teenage girls in heterosexual relationships on television? This thesis serves to act as a platform for future research on the influence of television on teenage behavior and attitudes. Through this research, people will be more aware of the prominent images of teenage women in heterosexual relationships within fictional television and how it could possibly affect the youth today.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

People tend to learn from observation. This is a common theory that has characterized the development of several individuals today (Nangel et al., 2010). One of the most important skills learned by observation is social interaction. A person learns how to interpret emotions and communicate with others by means of social experience (Bandura, 1969; Bandura, 1971). The most intimate and prominent form of social interaction with others is engendered in sexual activity. Each society has a socially accepted standard of behavior regarding sexuality. This standard is judged by certain variables such as appropriate age to engage in sexual intercourse, accepted clothing to promote sexuality and respectable relationships with socially accepted people. People tend to approach sexual behavior according to the observed standards that are accepted in society (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002). One of the most influential ways to observe society’s interpretation of sexual behavior is the media (Fisher et al., 2009). Exposure to certain forms of the media can influence one’s viewpoints about premarital sex as well as concepts of traditional gender norms (Zhang, Jeong, & Fishbein, 2010).

The media is defined as a form of communication that can reach a variety of people. Media can include newspapers, magazines, radio and most importantly television. Television contains a visual array of messages that people tend to observe and interpret within their behavior. Livingstone (2009) explains:
The quintessential image of the television audience is of the family viewing at home—children and parents sitting together comfortably in front of the lively set. Accompanying this happy image is its negative—a child viewing alone, square-eyed and trancelike, while life goes on elsewhere. The former image was quickly popularized by broadcasting industries in many Western country after the Second World War. It represents the hope of shared pleasure that motivated the public to purchase and install this new technology as quickly as they could afford to do so (Livingstone, 2009, p. 2; Butsch, 2000; Spigel, 1992).

Social science researchers only had an implicit theory about how viewers watched television until the 1980’s. Most analysts believed that watching television was a cognitively passive activity (Kirkorian, Wartella & Anderson, 2008). Social activities on television can easily influence the behavior of viewers in reality. Since television is an influential medium, it can subtly show viewers what type of sexual activity is socially desirable or accepted in society (Fisher et al., 2009). Teenagers may be the most vulnerable to the televised images of sexual behavior. As DeLamater and Friedrich (2002) explain, “Youth ages 10 to 15 most frequently name the mass media, including movies, TV, magazines, and music, as their source of information about sex and intimacy (Delamater & Friedrich, 2002).” Young teenagers want to be accepted within their social groups and therefore they try to conform to what is deemed socially desirable. Through their years, teenagers often deal with the issue of finding their own identity vs. having a sense of role confusion within society (Erikson, 1968; DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002).

Teenagers in the United States watch an average of three hours of television per day, which easily increases their tolerance of accepted sexual behavior (Martino et al., 2009). Through the constant viewing of sexualized
media, teenagers may believe that the majority of their peers are engaging in sexual intercourse. Therefore, teenagers may feel pressured to conform to the TV's modeled forms of sexuality by participating in sexual activity. Zhang, Miller and Harrison (2008) explain, "In a study of 1043 teenagers, Howard (1985) found that television programs were indicated as the greatest source of pressure to become sexually engaged (Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008, p. 12; Howard, 1985)." This is extremely interesting as images of sexuality in the media are often inaccurate as they are distorted to appeal entertaining to viewers (Martino et al., 2009). The hypothetical images of the media can shape young people's perceptions of the real world and thus influence their behavior. As Zhang, Miller & Harrison (2008) explain, “In other words, the more time people spend watching television, the more their normative beliefs and attitudes reflect the world portrayed (Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008, p. 5).”

Through this review I will summarize literature found on the influence on television on sexual behavior and relationships. I will analyze literature that debates whether television portrays human behavior to positively influence social development. I will start my summary of research by discussing the origins of social learning theory that frame research today. After the introduction of the foundation of social learning theory, I will introduce several social experiments conducted in the past ten years that focus on the influence of television and child behavior. Within the past 10 years, fictional television shows have grown more sexual. Television corporations have refrained from cancelling these sexually suggestive shows and have continued to have them on air for
potential viewers of all ages. Through this literature review I will demonstrate how television has a significant influence on an individual’s social behavior and development.

**Concepts of Social Learning Theory**

The basic notion of social learning theory is that behavior is learned by the influence of the social environment and the consequences of those social events. Douglas W. Nangle (2010) theorizes that cognitive processes are crucial in the development of social learning. Nangle further explains the way an individual processes environmental information may be even more important than the environment per se (Nangle et al., 2010). As psychologist William K. Estes explains, “At a conceptual level, learning is represented by the formation of associations between representations of behavioral events which have occurred in temporal contiguity. By *behavioral event* I denote the organism’s reaction to any stimulus input, including both perceptual and motor aspects (Estes, 1970, p. 8).” Social learning is believed to involve interactions between cognitive, behavioral and environmental variables (Nangle et al., 2008). There are two forms of learning that are either direct or indirect. Direct learning concerns operant learning while indirect learning involves modeling and imitation (Nangle et al., 2010). This literature review will mainly focus on the indirect forms of learning, specifically modeling and imitation, in order to get a more comprehensive account of the influence of environmental factors on social development.
**Imitation**

Albert Bandura, an influential psychologist responsible for social learning theory, believed that one could learn by the observation of the behavior of others. Nangle (2010) defines imitation as, “a special instance of instrumental conditioning in which social cues served as discriminative stimuli, and imitated responses were rewarded or not based upon the degree to which they matched that of the model (Nangle et al., 2010, p. 38).” Psychologists Neal E. Miller and John Dollard (1941) believed that during the process of imitation, an individual learns his/her behavior while duplicating the original model’s response during the process of acquisition; or the first stage of learning in which a response is constructed (Miller & Dollard, 1941). Imitation is completed once the model’s response is positively reinforced in social behavior (Nangle et al., 2010).

Therefore, through Bandura’s theory, most young children who are learning social behavior tend to develop a habit of imitating the behaviors of individuals who they observed were socially successful in an environment (Nangle et al., 2010). William K. Estes further explains, “The principal theoretical concepts drawn from learning theory are reinforcement value and expectation. The primary assumption is that the tendency for behavior to occur in any given situation is a function of the individual’s expectation of reinforcement in that situation and of the value of the reinforcement (Estes, 1970, p. 126).” People tend to learn their most prevalent behavior through the powerful, yet repetitive task of positive social reinforcement of desired outcomes.
Although people may simply imitate a socially successful model, they are not passive responders to their environment. After forming a mental construct of their former experiences with observational learning, their constructs impact their future behavior. People consciously choose what behavioral responses, or rewards, they seek from others, such as a beneficial form of attention or respect. One chooses the model they wish to imitate in order to achieve his/her desired social outcome (Nangle et al., 2010). Through observational learning by watching models, two interesting effects can occur. The observer can perform his imitated behavior more habitually due to frequent exposure to the model or the individual can choose to become desensitized to the frequent exposure; thus developing different behavior from the model.

Bandura (1971) theorized that an observer’s interaction with the model can depend on “observer’s perceived similarity to the model (e.g., age, sex), likeability of the model, consequences to the model for skill enactment, and the observer’s own learning history for skill enactment (Nangle et al., 2010; Bandura, 1961; Bandura, 1971).” An individual sharpens his/her behavior through the confirmation of desired social rewards from his/her environment. When a behavior produces a positive result it has a higher chance of reoccurring in the future and being modified to produce even greater results (Nangle et al., 2010). As Nangle (2010) states, “An individual will be more likely to use a skill if he or she believes that it will be effective in a given situation (Nangle et al., p. 42).”
Modeling

Modeling, or learning through imitation, is a revolutionary concept devised by Albert Bandura. Bandura (1969) theorized that people imitate from individuals known as social “models.” These models may include parents, peers or even famous celebrities. Individuals can easily inhibit social influences and response patterns by the observation of powerful models; thus learning to eventually accept a particular response behavior as their own. The modeling theory states that emotional, fearful and avoidant behaviors can be regulated by the constant conditioning and regulation of observing human responses to adverse situations (Bandura, 1969). Bandura explains, “Modeling procedures are, therefore, ideally suited for effecting diverse outcomes including elimination of behavioral deficits, reduction of excessive fears and inhibitions, transmissions of self-regulating systems, and social facilitation of behavioral patterns on a group-wide scale (Bandura, 1969, p. 118).”

Bandura further explains that exposure to modeling influences can have three distinct effects on the observer. Primarily, the observer may develop new response patterns to social reactions that didn’t exist prior to social observation. This “observational learning effect” generally occurs when the model displays novel responses to social situations, which the observer has yet to experience. After he/she has observed these responses, he/she will almost identically replicate the model’s response pattern in a similar social situation (Bandura, 1969). Secondly, the effects of observed behavior may strengthen or weaken the natural social responses in the individual. These “inhibitory and disinhibitory
effects” tend to occur once the imitated behavior is intensified and repeated; thus suggesting that the behavior produced positive outcomes for the original model. An adverse affect may occur if the observer’s behavior is no longer repeated, implying that the model experienced negative outcomes for his/her behavior (Bandura, 1969).

Lastly, through the “response facilitation effect”, the observer critically distinguishes between his/her previously learned behavior and other behaviors that have produced dissimilar results. For example, if the individual has observationally learned a behavior that produced positive results, he/she has no need to acquire additional response behaviors. This is because the newly learned internalized behavior has never produced any negative outcomes for the original model (Bandura, 1969). Although the modeling theory is highly influential, Bandura states that most individuals are reluctant to change their behavior and practices to match the model until they have observed that the model’s behavior has gained significant social success (Bandura, 1969).

Remarkably, modeling plays a prominent role on impacting social changes throughout society. After novel behaviors and practices have been applied over time, several people tend to respect and develop the behaviors themselves. As a society, a culture won’t fully accept and practice a new form of behavior until that specific behavior has been proven successful in social situations (Nangel et al., 2010). Bandura explains that, “new cultural practices are most readily accepted when they produce immediate inspectional benefits and the casual relationship between new behavior and advantageous outcomes
can be easily verified (Bandura, 1969, p. 200).” Once an individual conceptually learns to associate a social behavior with a positive or negative outcome, he/she has successfully learned the importance of that behavior.

Media may be a new platform of ways to display socially accepted behaviors and beliefs to a vast majority of individuals. This powerful form of communication can be both positive and negative for the evolution of society; thus helping or harming observers. For example, a young child may watch a model on television displaying forms of aggression. He/she may primarily learn that hitting is bad, yet he/she may also implicitly learn that hitting helps one gain control in a situation; thus sometimes helping an individual easily get what he/she wants. As Mares, Palmer and Sullivan (2011) explain, “Children are more likely to imitate the behaviors modeled by an attractive (rather than an unattractive) character and to imitate models that are rewarded (rather than punished) for their actions (Mares, Palmer & Sullivan, 2011).” One may question: how much power do television producers really have on shaping social behavior in society? Observers should be conscious of the visual impact of television and how it can dramatically shape a person’s subconscious thought process.

**Television in Childhood**

When a television is playing in a room it will undoubtedly obtain an infant’s attention. Most programming tends to include, “salient visual and auditory formal features designed to elicit orienting and to cue the viewer about content (Courage & Setliff, 2010, p. 220; Anderson & Kikorian, 2006, Huston &
Wright, 1983).” Scientists have discovered that by 6 months of age, young infants have the cognitive abilities to encode observed information, store their observations in memory and then produce an imitative action based on their stored representation of the observed behavior. Infants are social and a large amount of their cognitive development is grounded in a social context (Courage and Setliff, 2010). Television and/or video entertainment can easily become a subconscious platform for social learning.

In a psychological experiment, scientists Daniel R. Anderson and Katherine G. Hanson (2010) discovered the abilities of young children to comprehend television. Television has often been theorized as a “mindless activity,” yet Anderson and Hanson used prior psychological studies to disprove this notion. Through their article, “From blooming, buzzing confusion to media literacy: The early development of television viewing,” Anderson and Hanson argue that television is primarily confusing to infants; yet with frequent exposure to television young children tend to grasp and comprehend modeled social activities.

Anderson and Hanson further explain that young children must initially recognize the particular codes and conventions that define the medium of television; thus helping them comprehend not only how television is processed but also what social aspects can be learned from the medium (Anderson & Hanson, 2010). Through comprehending social codes, children learn distinct forms of behavior. For example, children can develop emotional attachments to
story-like characters. Some children develop an attachment to the kind nature of the televised childhood figure Barney (Anderson & Hanson, 2010).

One of the most intriguing ages of development, in terms of television exposure, is age two. Once a child reaches age two, he/she is able to distinguish characters, objects and actions viewed on screen and he/she is also particularly susceptible to the conception of dialogue. At age three, the television becomes a specific tool that influences cognitive learning. This generally occurs because children are more frequently exposed to broadcasting programs so they are more easily able to recognize common social actions displayed on TV (Anderson & Hanson, 2010).

Anderson and Hanson give an example of televised learning by explaining a longitudinal study conducted by Wright et al. (2001). Wright et al.’s study focused on the relationship between early television viewing and school readiness and vocabulary growth in low-income communities. The experiment discovered that actively viewing Sesame Street, an educational childhood program, had a significantly positive affect on language and cognitive development when viewed between the ages of two and three. Once a child reached age five, the amount of time spent watching an educational television show predicted future high school grades and adolescent behavior. Children who spent time watching educational television had higher high school grades and better adolescent behavior than those who did not watch educational television (Wright et al., 2001). Through Wright et al.’s study, Anderson and Hanson
demonstrate that “television content becomes a powerful educator, for both good and ill (Anderson and Hanson, 2010, p. 252; Wright et al., 2001).”

As children mature and develop, their primary viewing content changes. Anderson and Hanson explain, “As children grow older, they are more likely to view programs made primarily for adult audiences (Anderson & Hanson, 2010, p. 251).” This generally occurs because adolescents are more able to easily comprehend adult content due to prior life experience. Adolescents are also able to understand emotional states of televised characters as well as relationships between temporally linked events throughout a program (Anderson & Hanson, 2010; Collins & Wellman, 1982). Anderson and Hanson further explain that although most regard television as a “mindless” activity, television viewing is actually a “sophisticated behavior that is acquired over time with maturation and experience (Anderson & Hanson, 2010, p. 255).” It is clear that one must not doubt the powerful effect of television and the influence it has on learning capabilities within social and mental development.

**Theory of Mind**

As individuals develop throughout childhood they tend to construct mental processes that become imperative to the comprehension of social functions. Theory of mind is the ability for an individual to attribute mental beliefs and desires to his/herself and others. Some children can develop their theory of mind through observing social behaviors on television programs. Through the article “Exposure to media and theory-of-mind development in preschoolers,” Raymond A. Mar, Jennifer L. Tackett, and Chris Moore (2010)
discovered if there is an existing relationship between various forms of media (children’s storybooks, television and movies) and theory-of-mind development (Mar, Tackett & Moore, 2010). Psychologists examined 4-6-year-olds’ conditional exposure to media forms with the hope of discovering the impact of media on theory-of-mind. In the study participants were asked to look at a list of names and recall which names they recognized as belonging to an author. These measures were based on the Author Recognition Test (ART), which was designed by Stanovich and West (Mar, Tackett & Moore, 2010). Through analyzing name recognition, researchers could demonstrate which forms of the media have the greatest influence on theory of mind development.

Results indicated that movies and storybooks heavily influence the rapid development of theory of mind. Movies and storybooks can easily facilitate social learning and thus help an individual more easily comprehend social behaviors. Mar, Tackett and Moore (2010) explain that participants may have been heavily influenced by movies and storybooks due to the power of social conversation. Children and parents who converse about literary figures or movie characters may promote the acquisition of theory-of-mind; thus instilling the ability for children to have advanced social comprehension of typical human behavior. As Mar, Tackett and Moore state, “Talking about story characters and their desires, beliefs, and emotions appears to guide a child’s growing understanding that people possess mental states (Mar, Tackett & Moore, 2010, p. 75; Symons et al., 2005).”
In another study, Courage and Setliff (2010) analyzed the process of imitation while two-year-olds watched television (Courage & Setliff, 2010). Results indicated that for two-year-olds, the presence of parents or narration throughout a program has a positive influence on the retention of social behavior and comprehension of videos (Courage & Setliff, 2010). Social interactions while viewing entertainment has an overall positive effect on the retention of learned material. One of the most fascinating elements of this study is the fact that the prediction of theory of mind abilities did not extend to television programming. Mar, Tackett and Moore (2010) examined the differences between movies and television programs and attributed the theory-of-mind differences to the length of presentations.

Psychologists explain that television shows are frequently interrupted by commercials and only run about 22 minutes in length while films are not interrupted and run for a longer period of time. The long length of films may incite more parent-child conversations about mental behavior and states while parents may frequently let their children watch short television programs alone. Psychologists also theorize that movies allow for more mental stimulation than films. Unfortunately Mar, Tackett and Moore (2010) have not yet confirmed these theories for why film is more influential than television; yet this study has been interpreted as a gateway for future research (Mar, Tackett, & Moore, 2010).

**Influences of Dating and Sexuality**

As earlier stated, imitation and modeling can have a profound effect on the development of young children. People learn some of their behavior from
what they view and they learn to behave in ways that will bring them social rewards. Once an individual reaches his/her teen years, he/she will begin to value the meaning of relationships (Erikson, 1968; DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002). One’s perception of an ideal relationship is often governed by what models he/she observes in real life, including relationships on television. Within the aspect of modeling, a teenager will learn his/her preferred relationship style by what he/she interprets as most rewarding in society. These perceptions may have a dramatic influence on a teenager's current relationship as well as his/her relationships in the future. In several studies it has been discovered that television programs may have a significant influence on teenagers’ perception of “appropriate” sexual behavior in society.

Rocio Rivadeneyra and Melanie J. Lebo (2008) conducted a study focusing on the association between television-viewing behaviors and adolescent dating role attitudes and behaviors. The study primarily examined the relation between television use and dating role attitudes within adolescents. The method included testing 250 students through administering a questionnaire that correlated viewing amounts of major primetime networks (including ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, UPN, and WB) with perceptions of dating roles. Viewing amounts were calculated by multiplying the length of the program by the frequency that the specific program was viewed alone. Other variables tested included demographic information, perceived reality and identification with TV characters.
Results indicated that there was no major gender difference in dating role attitudes, yet there was a significant difference in the age of first dating experience (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008). Also, there was a significant relationship between watching romantic reality programming and having more traditional dating role attitudes. Rivadeneyra & Lebo explain, “These dramas, such as The OC, also place emphasis on romantic relationships and dating and thus may be a place where adolescents learn about the expected gender roles in these situations (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008, p. 301).” Those who watched more non-romantic television programming held less traditional dating role attitudes. Within the study, those who watched dramas such as Law & Order had more egalitarian gender role and dating role attitudes. Also, those individuals who perceived television to be more realistic tended to have less traditional dating role attitudes. One of the most interesting findings of this study was the influence of watching more amounts of television.

Rivadeneyra and Lebo (2008) found that those who watched more television, specifically soap operas, tended to start dating at a younger age as well as have more dating partners. Researchers further explain that those who watch soap opera programming may be significantly impacted by these images; thus being persuaded to date earlier and more frequently. The authors also state that those who have frequent dating experiences may self-select soap operas as it relates more to their life. Either way, there is a significant relationship between soap opera viewing and frequency and initiation of relationships. The study concludes by suggesting that television programs may be a model for
learning socially appropriate relationships in society. Rivadeneyra and Lebo (2008) explain, “Along with their own experiences in dating, adolescents may be learning from television programs that dating is a gendered process with prescribed roles for males and females and that it should occur early and often, all potential factors for sexual risk (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008, p. 303).” Researchers suggest that the media presents a skewed view of romantic relationships and that adolescents should consult other models, including the voices of parents, practitioners, and educators, in order to have a more accurate perception of appropriate dating attitudes and sexuality (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008).

Another study further illustrates that adolescents need to be more accurately informed about relationships and sexual behaviors with dating. Martino et al. (2009) conducted an experiment inspired by the fact that two-thirds of sexually experienced teenagers in the United States state that they were frustrated with the timing of their primary experience with sex. Most teenagers wish that they had waited longer to have sex for the first time. Martino et al. (2009) explain that regret is a cognitive situation in which one realizes that an experience could have been better if they acted differently in the past. Sometimes, regret occurs once expectations on which a decision or actions were based are disproved. Adolescents may regret their first sexual act if the experience falls short of their expectations. Martino et al. state that television has a significant influence on adolescent’s perception of sexual intercourse and therefore creates unrealistic expectations of sex.
Earlier studies have found that teenagers watch at least three hours of television per day. Within these television programs, there are an average of seven scenes of sexual content. These scenes tend to have biased models of sexuality focusing on the possible positive aspects of sex (Martino et al., 2009). Teenagers who view these models of sex are thus provoked to desire the same sexual experiences, thus influencing their desire to have sex at a younger age. Following their first sexual act, teenagers compare their experience with the modeled televised versions and regret their experience; thus feeling displeased. Televised models of sex often portray women finding the “perfect” man with an adequate emotional connection. Men are often portrayed as aggressive sexual initiators who continuously desire to have sexual interactions. Martino et al. further explain, “Exposure to these portrayals may lead male youth to expect that sex is desirable under any circumstances and female youth to expect that sex will lead to love and commitment; if these expectations are not met, regret may result (Martino et al., 2009, p. 93).” These expectations of sex may be inflated due to the sex-focused culture of the United States.

In order to explore more about the relationship between sex and regret, researchers conducted a national television survey of individuals between the ages of 12-17. Measures included intercourse experience, sexual initiation regret, television viewing, exposure to sexual content and sexual outcome expectancies. Results indicated that 46% of respondents wished they had waited to have sex. This included 61% of females and 39% of males. Regrets included beliefs that they had not been ready to have sex, that their relationship was not
at the right point or that they had not been with the right person (Martino et al., 2009).

Remarkably, the study found that television had a large influence on regret following first sexual experience, especially in males. Males who were exposed to higher levels of sexual programming before having their first sexual experience were more likely to regret their first sexual experience than those who watched less sexual content. This is interesting as on television there are more negative perceptions of sexual experiences for women than men. Researchers explain that regret for females may be influenced by other factors, which may be more important than television viewing. Martino et al. (2009) state, “We had reasoned that television portrayals of sexuality, which typically stress the positive possibilities of sex rather than its potential problems and consequences, build high expectations that are unlikely to be met by the actual experience (Martino et al., 2009, p. 97).” Negative portrayals of sex are often rare on television, which is the reason why sexual content on TV is often biased. Researchers state that their finding about the correlations of regret following first sexual experience indicate a need for intervention.

Similarly to Rivadeneyra & Lebo (2008), Martino et al. suggest that parents should discuss sexual messages of television with their teenagers, thus offering a wider perspective on sexual relations than the biased sexual content on television. As Martino et al. (2009) illustrate, “Understanding the conditions under which youth feel they had sex too soon may provide guidance in helping
them make more carefully considered decisions about sexual debut. Such decisions should be less likely to end in regret (Martino et al., 2009, p. 98).”

**Influences of the Media on Teenage Girls**

The majority of literature exploring the relationship between teen girls and the media has focused on the relationship between the media and the prevalence of eating disorders. Within society, women are pressured much more often than men to focus on standards of physical appearance (Hsu, 1990; Striegel-Moore, 1995; Scheibe, 2000). In response to these pressures, women are also more likely than men to develop eating disorders. For example, researchers discovered that women’s magazines had 10.5 times more advertisements promoting weight loss than men’s magazines (Anderson & DiDomenico, 1992). The rise of eating disorders can be accounted for by images of the “ideal” body weight for women portrayed in the media, increases in weight-loss diets in women’s magazines, and frequent exposure to thin models (Stice et al., 1994). Walsh-Childers (2003) states, “First—and almost without exception in mainstream media—sexy women are thin. Whereas slenderness may be healthier than being over weight, the thinness portrayed as sexy almost always goes well below healthy body weight (Walsh-Childers, 2003).” Many young women are endlessly trying to attain the image of the “perfect” girl, who is only “perfect” according to the standards of the media. Stice et al. (1994) explains that one of the strongest pressures to attain “perfection” is the media (Stice et al., 1994).
While viewing the media, teenage girls often look towards magazines and other media programming for advice. Kettrey & Emery (2010) explain, “Research indicates that young women are willing to trust teen magazines with the role of advisor regarding relations with the other sex (i.e., heterosexual romance) (Kettrey & Emery, 2010, p. 1271).” The magazine, another powerful form of media, “has claimed a position as counselor to the adolescent girlfriend (Kettrey & Emery, 2010, p. 1271).” Through this quest for guidance, young women sometimes neglect to notice the difference between views in the media and views in society. Therefore teenage girls tend to fail to notice how media views can be skewed and how “advice” from magazines could actually be harmful for the future.

Stice et al. (2004) conducted a study in which 238 college-aged women completed a 10-page questionnaire. In the questionnaire, participants reported the number of health and fitness, beauty and fashion, entertainment arts, and gossip magazines they had read as well as the number of hours of comedy, drama and game show television series they had watched in the past month. Results indicated that there were significant effects of the media on gender role endorsement and eating disorder symptoms (Stice et al., 2004). Another study by Harrison (2000) measured the effects of media exposure with body satisfaction among male and female adolescents. Participants filled out a questionnaire focusing on their interest in the media. Results indicated that females were much more interested in body-improvement magazine and television topics than males. Female participants were also exposed more
frequently to, “thin-ideal television and magazine content, fat-character television content, anorexia, bulimia, drive for thinness, and body dissatisfaction (Harrison, 2000, p. 130).”

Young women are very much influenced and pressured by the media to attain a specific physical image. This is also illustrated in women's perceptions of heterosexual relationships. Kettrey and Emery (2010) conducted a study that evaluated the effects of magazines on young women's concepts of heterosexual relationships. Results indicated that teen magazines could have a significant influence on a young girl's perception of a heterosexual relationship. This tends to occur more frequently for those who access teen magazines for educational advice on relationships and sexuality (Kettrey & Emery, 2010). In accordance with Rivadeneyra & Lebo (2008), Kettrey and Emery suggest the need for parental guidance through the comprehension of magazine literature. Kettrey and Emery explain:

This is important information for professionals working with adolescents. Such individuals should be aware that teens often are not comfortable approaching adults for help regarding relationships. As a result, adolescent girls may turn to magazines as a resource. Therefore, it is essential that educators, counselors, coaches, and other professionals who work with adolescents understand this and be prepared to deal with the content of those articles so that they can help adolescents construct more accurate meanings around the physical and sexual violence they may encounter in their dating relationships (Kettrey & Emery, 2010, p. 1290).

**Conclusion**

In summary, the media can have a significant influence on one's perception of appropriate or socially accepted behavior. Through this literature review I initially went through the early stages of development to demonstrate
how television can influence people at the youngest ages, including infancy. Interestingly, the influence of television can be positive during the early stages of development. For example, when young children are enhancing their cognitive abilities, social reinforcement of academics can be beneficial (Anderson & Hanson, 2010; Wright et al., 2001). Once young children reach adolescence they tend to watch more adult media that focuses on intimacy and relationships (Anderson & Hanson, 2010). Although the media can positively influence academic development in school age children, it can negatively influence adolescents’ perceptions of sexual activity and relationships (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009).

The act of sex can be distorted on television, making young adolescents and teenagers have a flawed perception of sexual intimacy. This perception can further influence teenagers to engage in sexual behavior, thus believing that there may be little negative consequences of having sexual intercourse at a young age (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009). Teenage girls are often vulnerable to the perceptions of idealized social behaviors on television. Young women tend to be pressured to attain standards of physical beauty, while men are valued for their achievements rather than their physical attractiveness (Hsu, 1990; Striegel-Moore, 1995; Scheibe, 2000; Stice et al., 1994; Harrison, 2000). In order to attain these social standards, young women often look towards the media for “advice”. Young women may look towards the media and find idealized images of sexual intimacy and heterosexual relationships;
therefore they may practice those relationships they deem socially successful on television in reality (Kettrey & Emery, 2010).

The essential problem with the youth and sexualized content is that adolescents may not consciously believe that television programs are only hypothetical models of society. In order to improve research, psychologists should discover efficient ways to educate the youth about understanding media (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). Teenagers should not necessarily relate sexual behavior to socially accepted models on television. Martino et al. state:

Through media education, youth could be made aware of the ways in which sex is depicted and perhaps distorted on television, which may help them develop skills for thinking about television’s sexual content more critically. Finally, the television industry could be made aware of the potential harm of providing imbalanced portrayals of sexuality (Martino, et al., 2009, p. 98).

To reduce the flawed concepts of sexual behavior and heterosexual relationships parents should actively inform their children about the disparities between the media and reality. More people should specifically understand the flawed representations of relationships that are depicted on the media and the influence it has on the minds of adolescents; especially teenage girls (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). The literature found on the influence of the media and sexuality will act as a basis for my evaluation of fictional television programs on the major American televised networks. It will beneficial to observe how these findings will relate to the resulting discoveries within my data. My study will analyze the representations of young women in heterosexual relationships in fictional television shows
between the years 2000-2010. Ultimately this study will display how heterosexual relationships are portrayed in fictional television.
METHODS

Participants

When selecting the specific media to observe, I chose television shows. TV shows were chosen over movies as the United States is significantly influenced by TV. TV is viewed on a regular basis, yet people cannot always control what’s on the television. In contrast, people can control what movie they decide to watch. Also, TV shows tend to be shorter in length (Martino et al., 2009). For the interest of time, television would be the best medium as I could watch numerous episodes of different types of shows. I searched for the highest rated programs by looking up Nielson Ratings, which are audience measurement systems devised by Nielson Media Research. The statistical Nielson Ratings demonstrate which shows are the most popular by compiling a measurement of the most watched shows per night (http://www.nielson.com). Although these ratings were widely respected, the information was unfortunately unavailable to the public. I then went to TV.com to find the most popular television shows for teens. After searching through TV.com, I found their ratings interesting and beneficial, yet not adequately sourced to support my research.

I ultimately researched the most popular networks in the U.S. The idea of studying the most popular networks in the U.S was modeled after Rivadeneyra & Lebo’s (2008) study on the relationship between television use and dating role attitudes within adolescents. I focused on the major networks ABC, FOX, the CW, and NBC; some of which were also used in Rivadeneyra & Lebo’s study (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008). From these networks I would pull all teen targeted

I viewed two episodes each of 20 fictional television shows. This included an overall amount of 40 television episodes to include in my data sample. While gathering the data from my fictional television shows I decided that I would not watch reality TV. Although reality television is an interesting form of media, the information is curbed in some way as it is set up to portray an “illusion” of reality that doesn’t actually occur. Fictional television appeared the most interesting and insightful as the network creates the scenario which is subconsciously influenced by actual events that may occur in society. Society thus shapes what the network believes is appropriate and popular. An interesting concept of fictional television is that fictional television is not reality, yet most individuals watch it as if it is reality; thus distorting their perception of people’s actual behavior within society (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Altheide & Snow, 1979; O’Guinn & Faber, 1991; Richins 1995, O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997).
I wanted the main focus of my study to be on programs that feature representations of teenage girls. I've noticed that teenage girls are portrayed in a much more specific way than men (Walsh-Childers, 2003). Through this study, I wanted to observe how girls are portrayed on television; thus discovering how young girls may modify their behavior in reality to model the portrayal of young girls on fictional television. Teenage girls are at the prime age in which they are trying to secure their identity in society (Erikson, 1968; DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002). Within social development, girls tend to face more sexual pressures to fit a certain prototype and change their appearance to become socially accepted in society (Scheibe, 2000; Hsu, 1990; Striegel-Moore, 1995; McArthy, 1990). I believed that analyzing the representation of teenage girls would be an interesting and possibly groundbreaking focus for my study.

**Procedure**

Prior to making any biased judgments before observing my data, I planned to read my sources and produce my literature review of earlier studies. After reading earlier sources focusing on sexual intimacy and imitation, I generated hypothetical codes that I believed I could use for my observations. In order to test these codes, I viewed preliminary episodes of television shows that were currently broadcasted on television. This included shows such as Glee, Vampire Diaries, and Gossip Girl. While watching these shows I tested my hypothetical codes to see if they would function well for future television shows in my data. After researching previous studies and testing the a few episodes I had created up to 20 codes focusing on the perceptions of young women in
television. The codes focused on five main categories: clothing, sexual behavior, explicit language, violence and drug activity. These categories together were going to be used to answer one question: What is the depiction of teenage women in fictional television?

Within the next three months, I watched 40 episodes of fictional television and implemented my coding into my observations. In order to gain an adequate representation of the perception of girls in fictional television, I decided that I needed to view a variety of shows. Once I had viewed at least two episodes of each show, I understood the plotline and characterization of each character. For each show I generally watched the most recent episodes of every season. In terms of convenience, I thought that the most recent television shows would be the most easily accessible. By “most recent” I specifically focused on television shows created from 2000-2010. I could easily receive television episodes online on the respective network websites as well as on DVD on Netflix. I believed that the television shows created in the last 10 years were the most relevant to research for children and adolescents today.

While viewing the television episodes, I noticed key observations that further streamlined the focus of my study. I observed that relationships between men and women were a common factor in every fictional television show I viewed. I thought that an analysis of relationships would be much more specific than an analysis of only promiscuous behavior viewed on television. I then decided to re-work my codes so that I could specifically focus on the perceptions of teenage women in heterosexual relationships in fictional television. These
edited codes incorporated my first codes into analyzing perceptions of relationships. I therefore created codes so that I could analyze the potentially promiscuous perception of young women in heterosexual relationships.

**Analysis**

After collecting my data I qualitatively analyzed my observations. I based my analysis on Glaser and Strauss’ Grounded Theory. I primarily viewed my data while devising possible codes from my observations. I then used these codes to create three main themes that would outline the observations in my data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The three main themes included Socially unacceptable relationships, sexually active relationships and socially acceptable relationships.

Within these themes I discovered two to three subcategories that specifically focused on common events found in my data. In Socially unacceptable relationships there were three subcategories: (A) Teacher and Student relationships, (B) Boyfriend/Girlfriend cheating and (C) Interracial dating. In sexually active relationships I found two subcategories: (A) Relationships based on sex and (B) Promiscuous women in sexual relationships. Theme three, socially acceptable relationships, also had two subcategories: (A) Faithful boyfriends/girlfriends and (B) Male/Female platonic friends. All of my themes initially had three to five subcategories, yet some of the themes were cut due to lack of substantial appearance in the episodes or failure to relate to my targeted age group. Through all of my themes I analyzed the underlying appearances of promiscuity with teenage girls in heterosexual relationships.
I based most of my analysis on Albert Bandura's social learning theory in which individuals will mimic another person’s modeled behavior if the person being observed gains positive results from society and/or social approval (Bandura, 1969; Bandura, 1971; Estes, 1970; Nangle et al., 2010). I decided to implement this theory into all of my observations in order to predict how the hypothetical viewer would react to the observed behavior on television. I observed the main female character's behavior in heterosexual relationships within every fictional television show and analyzed if her behavior received positive, negative, or neutral results from society. Positive results would mean that she faced approval from her family and peers and also faced no negative consequences, such as losing her job or popularity, for her actions. Negative results would indicate that she faced disapproval from her family and peers and also endured negative consequences from her actions. Neutral results would mean that she faced no sign of approval or disapproval as well as no consequences for her actions.

Through analyzing the positive, negative and neutral results of the protagonist, I could uncover what lessons the media is attempting to communicate to viewers about the diverse forms of heterosexual relationships. I could thus discover what lessons teenage girls in particular may be learning from fictional television and predict how they may implement these observations into their every-day life. Through my analysis I would calculate how many times positive, negative and neutral results occurred for each category within my total of 40 episodes viewed. In my calculations I could
discover which of results occurred the most in each category. I could therefore find out which results each theme (socially unacceptable relationships, sexually active relationships, socially acceptable relationships) tends to present the most to viewers.

Within the outcome of the amount of positive, negative and neutral results I was able to explore what the media is communicating to the public about the success of socially unacceptable, sexually active and socially acceptable relationships. Analyzing the protagonist’s results from a fictional relationship would make my findings more accurate. I thought this analysis would establish more of a connection to the hypothetical viewer who may implement their televised observations into their real life. At the end of each analysis for each theme, I aspired to analyze the representations of young women in heterosexual relationships. Through my analysis of heterosexual relationships on fictional television I believed I could create a platform for further research.
ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

Within my analysis of observations I discovered there were several representations of socially acceptable, sexually active and socially unacceptable relationships. I coded heterosexual relationships as socially unacceptable if they were disliked by the couple’s peers, family members and authority figures. Socially unacceptable relationships may be illegal, such as statutory rape or infidelity. Other socially unacceptable relationships may be legal, such as interracial dating. The majority of socially unacceptable relationships tend to be kept in secret because they go against the American social standard of normalcy.

Sexually active relationships are those that are based off of sexual intimacy between the couple. Sexually active relationships may present issues such as separation or pregnancy that could ultimately harm the strength of the relationship or success of each individual’s life. The sexually active relationships are not necessarily negative, or socially unacceptable, yet they have the potential to become socially unacceptable in the future. Socially acceptable relationships are those that are positively valued in society. These relationships may include happily married couples, faithful boyfriends and girlfriends as well as male/female platonic friends. People in these relationships tend to get positive praise from the public and support from their family, peers and authority figures. Socially acceptable relationships are rarely held in secret, as they tend to be the epitome of normalcy within American relationships in society.
Messages Sent to Teenage Girls

It is very significant that the majority of media corporations are presenting these three specific types of heterosexual relationships to the public. Through viewing several different portrayals of socially unacceptable, sexually active and socially acceptable relationships, one can uncover what the media is trying to communicate and educate to our youth about heterosexual relationships. Although there are many underlying messages to each portrayal of a relationship, the wide assortment of portrayals can make one confused about what is valued in society. For example: portrayals of socially unacceptable relationships with negative social results illustrate what teenage girls should not desire to attain in a relationship. In contrast, portrayals of socially unacceptable relationships with positive social results illustrate that socially unacceptable relationships have the ability to become valued within society with potentially positive appraisal. What should teenage girls believe is more accurate?

Analyzing each of these portrayals of relationships will explain not only what the media thinks is appropriate for heterosexual relationships, yet also what teenage girls may be learning is appropriate and valued for their age group. Teenage girls may relate these lessons learned from television to actual experiences in their real-life; thus giving them a reference point on the dynamic relationship between promiscuity, heterosexual intimacy and popularity (Kettrey & Emery, 2010). For teenagers, these three relationships styles displayed on television serve as a blueprint for actual relationships in every day life (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009). Through analyzing these
three relationship styles and discovering what the majority of fictional television is communicating to our youth about heterosexual relationships, one may uncover what possible lessons teens are applying to their everyday life. In response, psychologists may yearn to discover effective ways to educate our youth on the difference between fiction and reality. As Bandura (1969) once theorized: we learn through observation (Bandura, 1969; Estes, 1970; Nangel et al., 2010). If fictional television shows are a part of everyday life, why can’t they be an influence within social learning?

I hypothesize that by constantly viewing these three relationship themes, a young viewer may believe that the fictional portrayals of teenage relationships are accurate and replicable in real life. Through my analysis I will discuss the two most prominent appearances in each of these themes. While discussing the themes displayed, I will relate my findings to earlier readings focusing on social learning theory as well as other studies that were previously mentioned in my literature review. In my analysis, I discuss how the portrayals of relationships viewed in my data will ultimately affect young teenage girls’ perception of heterosexual relationships.

**Socially Unacceptable Relationships**

Aria Montgomery and Ezra Fitz  
Pretty Little Liars (2010)  
© ABC Family

Navid Shirazi and Erin Silver  
90210 (2008)  
© The CW

Caroline Forbes and Tyler Lockwood  
Vampire Diaries (2009)  
© The CW
People who are in a socially unacceptable relationship tend to fear displaying their affection in public. Once the secret of a forbidden relationship is released, the couple may face immediate social disapproval. Generally there are consequences if the public discovers a socially disapproved relationship. One may lose his/her career, family ties and popularity within his/her peers. The one question within a socially acceptable relationship is: how much is a couple willing to risk? Within socially disapproved relationships I found three main subcategories that could be classified as socially unacceptable. Category (A) Teacher/student relationships occurred 12/40 times (30%), category (B) Unfaithful boyfriend/girlfriend relationships occurred 8/40 times (20%) and category (C) Interracial dating occurred 2/40 times (5%). There were a total of 22 cases of my data (55%) that featured socially unacceptable relationships in the 40 episodes that I viewed. In my analysis I will discuss two of the most significant examples of these categories found in my data.

**Positive, Negative and Neutral Results**

Through the television episodes, I found that the portrayal of relationships could yield positive, negative or neutral results for the couples depending on the storyline. If a relationship had positive results, individuals would display their once secretive affection to the public and face no criticism or harm. They would face no social consequences and receive approval from their peers, family and authoritative figures. If the show contained negative results, the individuals would display their affection and face hatred or criticism from the public. Consequences would include alienation from family and peers as well
as a possible loss of occupation. If the relationship had neutral results, the characters refrained from displaying their affection to the public. Through this decision, the relationship would continue to flourish as long as the couple kept their relationships secret.

The models of positive, negative or neutral relationships can influence a viewer’s interest in pursuing a similar relationship in their lifestyle. According to modeling theory by Bandura (1971), if viewers use these fictional relationships as models for relationships in their life they will tend to mimic the modeled relationships on television that yield the most positive results (Bandura, 1971; Estes, 1970; Nangel et al., 2010). Interestingly, models of relationships with neutral results may also have a higher probability to be mimicked as no negative consequences are displayed for the possibly socially unacceptable behavior. Therefore in the case of socially unacceptable relationships, neutral relationships may be implicitly a form of positive results. I have found that the majority of shows in my data depicting socially unacceptable relationships yielded neutral followed by negative results. Within my 22/40 depictions of socially acceptable relationships there were 14/22 neutral cases (64%) and 8/22 negative cases (36%). There were no positive results stemming from socially unacceptable relationships in my data.

**Lessons from the Media**

“I was a student having an affair with a faculty member. Stupid, cliché.” *(Hellcats, 2010)*

The analysis of socially unacceptable relationships is significant because it illustrates what the media believes is inappropriate within heterosexual
relationships in society. The portrayals of young women in socially disapproved relationships are created to demonstrate to viewers what relationships should not attain or wish to attain in the future. Through displaying what society deems inappropriate, episodes also explain what lessons our youth is learning about socially unacceptable relationships. Through my observations I have found that fictional television series effectively state that in the public eye, socially unacceptable relationships are “bad” and will receive negative results from society. However, if a socially unacceptable relationship is kept private it will be positive for the people in the relationship, thus producing positive results for the couple’s personal intentions and desires.

People who keep a socially unacceptable relationship secret will face neutral results as no one will be aware of their forbidden relationship. Therefore, the media communicates that one can engage in whichever kind of relationship he/she wishes, no matter how hazardous it is to his/her lifestyle, as long as it is kept secret. This further illustrates that having the ability to sneak around and lie about one’s behavior can be personally valued in a forbidden relationship. Through my observations the media also effectively communicates that interracial dating, unless kept secret, is still socially unacceptable in society. In a period in which society is moving towards more liberal thought this is a particularly disturbing finding. According to the social learning theory, through viewing depictions of socially unacceptable relationships, teenage girls may be implicitly guided to secretly pursue a forbidden relationship as, if kept quiet, it will give them personally positive results. This will further communicate to
teenage girls that in order to effectively engage in a relationship that is socially unacceptable, one must avoid society altogether by keeping their relationship a secret.

In my observations there were also images of forbidden relationships that are displayed negatively, which effectively communicate how one will face negative results from society if he/she pursues a socially unacceptable relationship. Teenage girls may thus be persuaded not to engage in a socially unacceptable relationship out of fear of attaining negative results from society. However, the majority of my data displayed neutral results. This leads me to believe that the majority of fictional television targeting teenagers displaying socially unacceptable relationships tends to display no consequences for engaging in a forbidden relationship or tends to glorify secretive forbidden relationships. Young women are therefore learning two options: to face negative consequences, or face no consequences at all by keeping a potentially hazardous secret.

Through my examples of (A) Teacher/Student relationships, (B) Unfaithful boyfriend/girlfriend relationships and (C) Interracial dating, I will first describe and analyze a relationship with a negative result and then a relationship with a neutral result. Within my descriptions I will explain what underlying messages young women will possibly learn from the episode about socially unacceptable relationships. I will thus further illustrate how the depictions of relationships on television will affect young girls’ perception about socially unacceptable relationships in society.
(A) Teacher/Student Relationships

In *Degrassi*, Season 4, Episode 1: “Neutron Dance” (2004), we are presented with a teacher/student relationship. Paige Michalchuk, the popular cheerleader from Degrassi, develops a crush on her gym teacher Matt Oleander (Mr. O). The crush begins when Mr. O calls Paige his “favorite yoga student” and Paige immediately feels inclined to date him. Paige purposely disregards the problem of a teacher/student relationship and frequently pursues Mr. O. She then decides to break the law by using a fake ID to see Mr. O at a bar. Although Paige successfully gets admitted and finds her crush, she also discovers that he has a girlfriend. At the end of the episode, Mr. O puts Paige in her place by commenting on her young age and suggesting that she get a non-alcoholic drink and leave the bar (Moore, Schuyler, & Earnshaw, 2004).

In this particular episode, Paige faces the negative results for pursuing a socially unacceptable relationship. Her best friend, Hazel Aden, lectures Paige when she discusses her pursuit of Mr. O. At the bar Mr. O also rejects her due to her young age. Paige’s unsuccessful pursuit of Mr. O demonstrates to viewers that one should not go through great lengths, such as breaking the law, to attain a socially unacceptable relationship. Negative consequences, such as being punished for using a fake id, could possibly occur. Also, the romantic interest (Mr. O) may fail to find the pursuing individual (Paige) attractive due to her illegal behavior.

According to Bandura, the majority of people are reluctant to change their behavior and practices to match a social model unless they’ve noticed that the
model’s behavior has gained noteworthy social success (Bandura, 1969; Estes, 1970; Nangel et al., 2010). In this particular episode, with Paige as the social model, viewers would observe that Paige’s pursuit of her teacher did not achieve significant social success. While watching this episode, one may not be influenced to pursue a teacher/student relationship out of fear for going through negative social consequences. For example, after watching this episode, a young teenage girl may fear pursuing a relationship with her teacher out of fear of social disapproval from her best friend, rejection from her teacher (crush), and consequences from breaking the law.

*Pretty Little Liars* (2010) follows the continuous affair of English teacher Ezra Fitz and popular student Aria Montgomery. In Episode 1, Season 1: “Pilot”, Aria first meets Ezra at a bar. Aria appears physically attractive. She accentuates her looks by displaying her skin and wearing a short pink dress with seductive boots. Once she meets Ezra he states that he would “like to get to know her.” From then there is an abrupt scene change to the bathroom setting of the bar where Ezra and Aria are passionately kissing. After their passionate love scene, viewers see Aria attending her first day of class with a surprise; Ezra Fitz is her new English teacher. Even though the couple is aware of the consequences of an illegal teacher/student relationship, they agree to meet in secret. In episode 2: “The Jenna Thing”, Aria debates switching out of her English class to avoid sexual tension with Ezra, yet she ends up staying in the class (King & Glatter, 2010; King & Friedlander, 2010).
Ezra and Aria yield neutral results from their relationship, as they face no consequences for their behavior because it is secretive and no one is aware. In the second episode Aria considers the possible negative consequences of giving up her education for an illegal affair, yet she still prioritizes her relationship with Ezra and doesn’t get punished. With Aria as the teenage model, viewers would observe that through her behavior she attained her personal goals and gained social success without any immediate consequences. This episode illustrates that as long as kept secret, teacher/student affairs can remain successful and could not have any immediate consequences for one’s social or educational career.

The fact that Aria is popular may implicitly communicate that popular girls tend to attract older, seemingly unavailable men. Messages from this episode imply that unavailable men are still attainable in reality if kept secret. After viewing the neutral yet socially positive outcome of this relationship, viewers may believe that a teacher/student relationship is forbidden, yet overall successful. This is directly in line with the earlier studies on the influence of the media on perceptions of ideal body image. When a situation is presented as ideal in the media, one may be more inclined to aspire to attain it in reality (Stice et al., 2004; Harrison, 2000; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). Messages like these may inspire viewers to mimic Aria’s behavior with Ezra to attain the social success of popularity.

(B) Unfaithful Boyfriend/Girlfriend Relationships

_Glee_, Season 2, Episode 9: “Special Education” (2010), displays an affair between Rachel Berry and Puck Puckerman. Rachel, the high school nerd, is in a
serious relationship with the high school quarterback, Finn Hudson. After learning that Finn had a sexual experience with cheerleader Santana Lopez, Rachel immediately gets jealous. In order to spite Finn, Rachel has an intimate session with high school bully Puck Puckerman. When Rachel finally tells Finn about her episode with Puck, Finn is heartbroken and immediately breaks up with her. Rachel is upset over her past actions and begins her quest to win him back (Falchuk & Barclay, 2010).

In this episode, Rachel faces the negative results of cheating on her boyfriend. After she tells Finn the truth, she gets dumped and Finn believes that he can never trust her again. Rachel's goal in the scene was to get revenge on Finn, yet by attaining her goal she did not yield social success. Viewers watching this scene would believe that the model, Rachel, was unsuccessful in her efforts. According to Bandura (1969, 1971), individuals are less likely to imitate a model's behavior if it yields negative social results (Bandura, 1969; Bandura, 1971; Estes, 1970; Nangel et al., 2010). This episode may communicate the lesson that cheating on one's boyfriend will have negative consequences as one risks the chance of eventually losing him forever.

In the television series 90210, Season 3, Episode 2: “Holiday Madness” (2010), we are presented with an unfaithful boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. Annie Wilson, a young teenage girl, is dating Evan Ross, yet she had an earlier relationship with Liam Court. When Liam is injured after a fight, Annie takes care of him. She soon realizes that she is in love with Liam and responds by kissing and then sleeping with him. Annie recognizes her unacceptable behavior, and is
aware that it may disrupt her relationship, yet she only wishes to be with Liam after the sexual intimacy. The sex scene with Liam was spontaneous, yet it displayed Annie’s real feelings (Kirshner & Smith, 2010).

Annie and Liam receive neutral results from this particular scene. No one is aware of their cheating episode, so if they keep the incident secret they will face no immediate consequences. Since Annie and Liam faced no immediate consequences, viewers may learn that it is acceptable to re-kindle a relationship in the past, even if an individual is committed to another person. This episode also communicates that dialogue and emotional connection are important factors in sexual intimacy. This supports Martino et al.’s (2009) theory about the glorified perceptions of intimacy on television that are often skewed. Martino et al. would theorize that through observing this episode, teenage girls may be more likely to search for emotional intimacy before sexual intimacy and following sex may feel regret for their actions (Martino et al., 2009).

This finding about the importance of dialogue and communication is also in contrast with Fisher et al.’s earlier study on the relationship between exposure to sexual activity and increased likelihood in engaging in sexual activity (Fisher et al., 2009). This episode effectively reveals that factors other than sexuality easily attract the opposite sex. Although viewers may learn that dialogue is more powerful than showing skin, they may ultimately learn that engaging in a secret socially unacceptable relationship yields no negative consequences.
(C) Interracial Dating

Interracial dating occurred in *Lincoln Heights*, Season 4, Episode 10: “Lucky” (2009). Lizzie Sutton, a young black teenage girl, works on a play with Andrew Ortega, a white teenager. Lizzie and Andrew are the leads in a school play and through their rehearsals develop a crush on one another. While practicing for the play, Lizzie and Andrew share a kiss on stage. Immediately after the kiss they are heavily criticized. White teenage boys get upset with Andrew, stating that Andrew and Lizzie, “can’t kiss one of their own.” Due to the controversy surrounding the theme of the play (Romeo and Juliet) and interracial dating, the school decides to cancel the play. Although the school initially supported the play, the principal wants to avoid a social uprising because of the controversy of interracial dating (McGhee-Anderson & Inch, 2009).

Through their relationship, Lizzie and Andrew received negative results for their behavior. After they displayed their affection to the public they were criticized heavily and even asked to step down from performing in the play. Although Lizzie attains her goal of attracting Andrew, she faces public disapproval for her actions. Lizzie’s disapproval was based on public opinion since she personally believed that her pursuit of Andrew would not be controversial. Interestingly, social opinion still triumphed, taking away her lead role in the play due to her actions. Through this episode, viewers may find that the model faced negative consequences for her behavior. This episode effectively communicates the disturbing message that interracial dating is still not
approved in society. It demonstrates that pursuing an interracial relationship is socially unacceptable and may have the negative consequences of losing peers, family approval and possible job occupations, such as the lead role in a school play.

*Vampire Diaries* displays a different category of an interracial relationship. In *Vampire Diaries, Season 2, Episode 8: "Rose"* (2008), two different species have an attraction towards each other. Caroline Forbes, a young vampire, and Tyler Lockwood, a young werewolf, develop crushes on one another. Caroline is aware that vampires cannot befriend werewolves because werewolves can kill vampires. She still befriends Tyler and feels compassion for him as he develops his new paranormal identity. Although she supports Tyler, she feels guilty for not supporting her vampires and being against him. In order to continue seeing Tyler, Caroline keeps her friendly relationship secret from her vampire peers (Young & Friedlander, 2010).

Caroline’s relationship with Tyler receives neutral results as it is kept secret and no one is aware of it. Her relationship fails to yield negative consequences and she continues to pursue Tyler. Overall, Caroline achieves her goal of friendship, yet viewers can notice that sexual tension is developing that may occur in the future episodes. Through this episode, viewers may discover that interracial dating is possible as long as kept secret. According to Bandura, since the model, Caroline, received no negative results, viewers may be more inclined to mimic her behavior (Bandura, 1969; Estes, 1970; Nangel et al., 2010). Viewers may also learn that it isn’t crucial to stand up for one’s beliefs and
display one’s affection like Lizzie in *Lincoln Heights*. Interestingly, viewers may learn that in an interracial relationship, hiding one’s affection from the public is the best way to avoid confrontation. This episode ultimately communicates that interracial dating will continuously yield negative results from society.

**Sexually Active Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blair</th>
<th>The Cast of Skins</th>
<th>Nikita</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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Those who find themselves in a sexually active relationship tend to focus all of their energy on attempting to achieve sexual intimacy with their partner. In a sexually active relationship, a boyfriend or girlfriend may prioritize physical attraction before emotional connection and disregard discovering one’s personal interest in order to achieve a form of physical intimacy. Within a sexually active relationship there appears to be more of a careless attitude towards sex. Sex is not regarded as an intimate form of behavior practiced with only one individual. While evaluating episodes that displayed sexually active relationships, I noticed that women are often portrayed as weak, emotional and vulnerable to the male character. Female characters in relationships also tended to be the individuals who were heart broken more often that the male characters. Through the depiction of the vulnerable, heartbroken women in a sexually active relationship,
young female viewers are often presented with a negative outcome of sexual behavior.

Sexually active relationships are socially acceptable if the couple is in a committed relationship, such as monogamously dating or being engaged or married. When sexually active relationships are not socially acceptable, individuals are engaging in sexual behavior without commitment or they are engaging in sexual behavior while being unfaithful to their partner. Within sexually focused relationships I discovered two subcategories. Category (A) Relationships based on sex occurred occurred 14/40 times (35%) and category (B) Promiscuous women in sexual relationships occurred 16/40 times (40%). There were a total of 30 cases of my data (75%) that featured sexually active relationships in the 40 episodes that I viewed. In my analysis I will discuss two of the strongest examples of these categories that was found in my data.

**Positive, Negative and Neutral Results**

Similarly to my analysis of socially acceptable relationships, I discovered that the portrayal of sexually active relationships yielded positive, negative and neutral results based on the storyline. Positive results created scenarios in which relationships based on sex would enhance one’s lifestyle. For example, one who yields positive results from a sexually active relationship would likely find joy in their relationship’s intimacy. Positive results would also occur if the relationship would be approved by peers and family. Sexual intimacy in the relationship would also not affect anyone’s career or education. When there were neutral results, the couple would face no reaction from peers or family and no negative
consequences that would affect their career and education. The intimacy of the relationship would continue as it began without any changes or disturbances. If the sexually active relationship yielded negative results, the couple would not find pleasure in the intimacy and they may also face criticism from their families and friends. The couple may also risk unemployment with a career. The majority of shows in my data depicting sexually active relationships yielded positive and negative results. Within my 30/40 depictions of sexually active relationships there were 11/30 positive cases (37%), 10/30 negative cases (33%) and 9/40 neutral cases (23%).

**Lessons from the Media**

“How girls are held to an impossible social standard. How a girl can be called a slut while a guy is applauded for his conquest.”

*(Greek, 2010)*

Analyzing sexually active relationships is important because sexually active relationships on television depict how society views sexual intimacy. Through viewing sexually active relationships, one could deduce if sex is glorified or frowned upon in society. Therefore, through watching the portrayals of sexually active relationships, one can easily view the lessons our youth is learning about sexual intimacy. It has been discovered that viewers learn a lot about relationships and sexual intimacy from the media. Fisher et al. (2009) state, “In a national survey, 70% of teens aged 15 to 17 reported having learned ‘a lot’ or ‘some’ about relationships and sexual health issues from the media. With sexual issues often presented in a positive, compelling, and explicit manner, sexual portrayals on television may capture the interest and attention of youth
more effectively than other socializing agents (Fisher et al., 2009, p. 123; Hoff, Greene, & Davis, 2003).” Young female viewers are learning important facts about sexual intimacy that could easily influence their sexual behavior in the future. For example: young girls can easily be learning when to engage in sex, when to pursue sex, and who they should usually pursue sex with. These young women are getting this information from consciously analyzing the positive, negative or neutral results the modeled characters on T.V receive after they've engaged in a sexually intimate relationship.

Interestingly the results from the sexually active relationships were equally positive and negative, suggesting that society views sexually active relationships as both good and bad for different reasons. There were no distinct sexually active relationships in my data that produced consistently negative, positive or neutral results. This is in contrast with Fisher et al.’s (2009) statement that the portrayals of sex tend to be mostly favorable, or tend to yield mostly positive results. Fisher et al. explained that the media tends to focus on more of the positive elements of sex rather than the negative when I found there were equal depictions of both the good and bad (Fisher et al., 2009). Therefore, my data ultimately suggests that sexually active relationships depicted on television are communicating confusing messages to our youth about the pursuit of sexual intimacy.

Teenagers may not effectively know when to engage in a sexual relationship or when to act promiscuous in order to attain a sexual relationship. If a teenage girl constantly views fictional episodes of sexually active
relationship and learns contradictory messages about sex, she may have to rely on her own judgment in the pursuit of a sexually intimate relationship. This could easily explain why 46% of the teenage respondents in Martino et al.’s study stated that they wish they had waited to have sex (Martino et. al, 2009). My data and analysis effectively communicates that teenagers are getting inconsistent messages about sex, which may fuel into why a substantial percentage of teens (61% of females and 39% of males) regret their first sexual experience (Martino et al., 2009).

The second category in sexually active relationships, Promiscuous Women in Sexual Relationships, communicated that women who dress promiscuously to attract the opposite sex may gain simultaneously positive and negative results. Once again, this is a contradictory message sent to teens that may confuse their overall analysis of sex. For example: a young teenage girl will grasp that sexually active relationships are pleasing to men, yet not pleasing to women. Teenage girls may ultimately conclude that dressing promiscuously will attain male attention and male popularity, yet it will not attain popularity among the female population. This was illustrated in both of my examples of promiscuous women in relationships in which the main character in the episodes received two different social reactions from society. Within Bandura’s social learning theory (1969), one may conclude that teenage girls may engage in sexually active relationships depending on the situation she faces in life (Bandura, 1969). This can only be beneficial if young girls completely
understand the pros and cons of engaging in sexual behavior, which is not
guaranteed with all viewers today.

These results support the argument that teenagers should have adult
supervision while watching television (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al.,
2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). Parents could easily explain certain messages
more clearly to teens so they have a more concrete understanding of how the
perceptions of sexually active relationships relate to actual relationships in real
life. Within my examples of (A) Relationships Based on Sex and (B) Promiscuous
Women in Sexual Relationships, I will first describe and analyze a relationship
with a positive result and then a relationship with a negative result. Within my
descriptions I will explain what underlying messages young women will possibly
learn from the episode about sexually active relationships. I will thus further
illustrate how the depictions of relationships will affect young girls’ perception
about sexually active relationships in society.

(A) Relationships Based on Sex

In Degrassi, Season 2, Episode 11: “Voices Carrey: Part 1” (2004), viewers
are presented with a relationship that relies heavily on sex. Craig Manning and
Ashley Kerwin are young teenagers in a serious relationship. In order to
strengthen their relationship, Craig purchases a hotel room for a night during
Ashley’s father’s wedding. Once Ashley is brought to the hotel room, she
immediately accepts the implied context of sexual behavior, asking if Craig
brought condoms. After they engage in sex, Ashley cries, stating that she feels,
“overwhelmed.” Immediately after the sexual encounter, Craig goes through a
manic attack and impulsively asks Ashley to marry him. After Ashley denies his request, he has another manic episode and destroys the hotel room (Reycraft & Earnshaw, 2004).

Within this episode, Ashley and Craig experience personally positive results of pursuing a sexual relationship at a young age. Ashley and Craig are satisfied with their experience, and although emotional, Ashley feels confident that she lost her virginity to Craig. Ashley and Craig are satisfied with the emotional strength of the relationship, yet their intimate relationship ultimately displays how immature and ill-prepared they were for the maturity associated with the relationship. Craig’s impulse to destroy the hotel room in a manic fit after not getting what he wanted demonstrates how unstable he was. In some ways, this episode shows how sexual intimacy can produce a degree of uncertainty that many individuals could not be prepared for. Interestingly, this particular episode supports Martino et al. (2009), Fisher et al. (2009) and Rivadeneyra & Lebo’s (2008) theory that television tends to display more of the positive aspects of sex (Martino et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2009; Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008).

Ashley and Craig’s actions suggest to viewers that sexual intimacy is a glorified emotional experience. Through this episode, Ashley and Craig faced no immediate negative consequences for their actions. There is an underlying message that sexual intimacy at a young age is a feasible option. According to Martino et al.’s (2009) study this episode solely exposed the positive effects of sexual intimacy (Martino et al., 2009). As Rivadeneyra & Lebo explain, “Taken as
a whole, the messages represented in television may give adolescents the idea that sexual activity is common, casual, and trouble-free, with specific gender roles to fulfill—all of which are potential factors in sexual risk (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008, p. 293).” This was an example of a sexual experience that led to love and commitment, which may not frequently occur in teenage relationships in reality.

The Secret Life of the American Teenager, Season 3, Episode 14: “Rules of Engagement” (2010), focuses on the sexual aspirations of Ashley Juergens. Within the first few minutes of the episode, viewers see Ashley lying in Ricky Underwood’s bed with little clothing (a bra and underwear). Ricky recently got Amy, Ashley’s sister, pregnant; so Ashley logically decides that she would like to have her first sexual experience with Ricky. Ricky is unaware that Ashley broke into his apartment and immediately orders her to leave the apartment. In response Ashley asks, “If you’re sleeping around why not sleep with me?” Once Amy arrives, it is clear to viewers that Ashley is hopelessly attempting to follow in Amy’s footsteps. Amy, a teenager who has already experienced the consequences of teenage pregnancy gives some noteworthy advice to Ashley. Amy explains, “Newsflash. Not every teenager is having sex.” In regards to sex, Ashley explains, “I really want to do this...I really just want to get it over with.” In response to Ashley’s desire to have sex, Amy states, “So do a lot of girls Ashley. They want to have sex to be like everyone else (Hampton & Truesdell, 2010).”

Through this episode, Ashley experiences the negative consequences of trying to pursue a sexual relationship. Ashley’s desire to engage in sexual
intimacy is solely physical as there is no obvious emotional connection between herself and Ricky. Her quest for sexual intimacy is built on her curiosity and desire to lose her virginity. Ashley’s behavior communicates to viewers that an individual should not pursue sex just for the sole interest of having the experience. Ashley’s failed, sexually aggressive attempts of attracting Ricky indicate that the more subtle, classy ways of attracting the opposite sex for an intimate relationship are more socially successful. This conflicts with Walsh-Childers account of women as sex partners in the media (Walsh-Childers, 2003). Through the dialogue between Ashley and Amy, one may comprehend the possible negative consequences of sexual intimacy and thus discover that one must be careful before pursuing sexual activity. In contrast with Martino et al.’s study this episode demonstrates that some television shows have the ability to not glorify sex and display the negative effects of pursuing sexual intimacy (Martino et al., 2009).

(B) Promiscuous Women in Sexual Relationships

Skins, Season 1, Episode 1: “Tony” (2011), displays several relationships that are solely based on sexual intimacy. Tony Snyder, a popular, sexually active teenager wants to help “pop Stanley’s cherry” so that he could be sexually active. Stanley has a crush on Michelle Richardson, so Tony asks Michelle if she could be Stanley’s first sexual experience. Interestingly, Tony has frequent sexual encounters with Michelle and even commonly refers to her as “nips” because of her seemingly impressive nipples. Throughout the episode Tony and Michelle publically kiss each other and display their intimacy, hinting that they are in an
exclusive relationship, yet they are both apparently “single” and can have intimate relationships with anyone they like. Michelle also dresses extremely suggestive, constantly displaying cleavage, a short dress and high-heeled shoes. Throughout the episode Michelle is constantly used as a sexual object (Elsey & Smith, 2011).

Michelle attains positive results with her promiscuous behavior as she gains social success from her peers and continuously attracts the opposite sex. She blatantly uses her promiscuity as a means for attracting the opposite sex and persuading men to work on her behalf. Michelle is not concerned with acting as a sexual object in order to grant favors for Tony and she advertises her sexual nature by showing her skin, cleavage and accentuating her legs with high-heeled shoes. Michelle’s actions effectively communicate that in order to attract the opposite sex one must dress promiscuously. In contrast with the character Ashley in *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, this episodes confirms Walsh-Childers theory about the perception of women as successful sexual objects. As Walsh-Childers states:

> These are the mainstream media’s images of women as sex partners. They are available—one might even say inescapable—at the local bookstore, grocery store, discount store, or library. In significant ways, they create expectations about how women should be as sex partners, instructing men and women, boys and girls how females should look to be considered desirable sex partners and how women can be expected to respond to men’s sexual initiatives. Two types of stereotypes seem to exist, one primarily focused on how sexy women look and the other focused on what might be called sexual response (Walsh-Childers, 2003).

Michelle may be one of the core examples of models on television that persuade young women to engage in sexual activity and intimacy at younger
Skins is a fictional television show, yet it strongly correlates with Rivadenya and Lebo (2008)’s study about soap operas. Rivadenya and Lebo discovered that those teenagers who watched soap operas had a higher tendency to engage in sexual activities at a younger age (Rivadenya & Lebo, 2008). Those who watch fictional television shows depicting casual sexual intimacy and promiscuous behavior, such as Skins, may be more likely to view sex as more common and therefore engage in sexual activity at a younger age.

Zoey 101, Season 4, Episode 6: “Quinn Misses the Mark” (2008) demonstrates the consequences of promiscuous behavior. Quinn Penskey, a nerd in high school, changes her appearance to attempt to win her ex-boyfriend back. Quinn’s ex-boyfriend, Mark Del Figgalo, falls for another girl who is apparently more attractive than Quinn because of her suggestive clothing. Quinn actively tries to dress sexier by wearing a short skirt with makeup and showing her cleavage. In response to her choice of clothing, Quinn gets a lot of attention from other guys and suddenly gets asked out for dates. She ultimately enjoys the attention and states, “If looking like this is what get’s Mark’s attention then here I am.” Logan Reese, one of the most popular guys in school, approaches Quinn and asks why she changed her appearance. He then tells her not to dress suggestively because she is great the way she is naturally. After Quinn listens to him, she puts on her glasses and Logan kisses her (Christiansen, 2008).

This particular episode demonstrates the negative aspects of dressing promiscuously. It implicitly states that just because one dresses attractive doesn’t necessarily mean that he/she attracts others. Although Quinn gains
social attention and approval through her suggestive clothing, her close friends disapprove of her behavior. There is a subtle lesson in this episode about the negative stereotypes associated with promiscuous behaviors and attitudes. It’s refreshing to view models of teenagers who are aware of the messages that promiscuous clothing entails and who consciously decide to dismiss those messages because of the negative stereotypes. For example, the most popular guy in the school disregards Quinn’s suggestive behavior and expresses his desire for her original style. Viewers may ultimately learn that looks and promiscuity are not the key for successfully attracting a member of the opposite sex. According to Bandura, teenagers would view the natural appearance of Quinn more socially rewarding than her promiscuous appearance because of the attention she attained from the most popular guy in school (Bandura, 1969). While watching this episode, young women may be more inclined to embrace their differences and look for other aspects of themselves, such as intelligence and personality, to bond with another guy.

Socially Acceptable Relationships

Melissa Burke and Joe Longo
Melissa and Joey (2010)

Cassie Sutton and Charles
Lincoln Heights (2006)

Amy Juergens and Ricky Underwood
Socially acceptable relationships include relationships between couples that are positively viewed by society. When relationships are positively viewed by society, individuals tend to put socially acceptable relationships on a pedestal and regard them as ideal. Socially acceptable relationships may be relationships that people aspire to attain in their lifetime because of the suggestive successful social lifestyles associated with these relationships. Relationships that are socially acceptable include happily married couples, faithful boyfriends and girlfriends and male/female platonic friends. Although not everyone attains a socially acceptable relationship there is an implicit belief that socially acceptable relationships are the epitome of normalcy within the American culture and so everyone should aspire to have a socially approved relationship in his/her lifetime.

The romanticizing of socially acceptable relationships may occur due to the positive traits associated with a socially approved relationship. This generally happens because society wants viewers to thoroughly accept the glorified ideal of relationships. Since the majority of individuals believe that socially acceptable relationships are ideal, the media will attempt to communicate what the hypothetical public believes is correct in their fictional episodes. For example, in society a married couple is expected to be happy, in love, and settled with their lifestyles. Boyfriends and girlfriends are expected to be in love, committed and happy with each other’s company. Those who are in platonic relationships are expected to have healthy, emotionally close relationships with no need for physical intimacy. If one is engaged in a socially
acceptable relationship, his/her social life, career or personal aspirations should not be affected. In contrast with socially unacceptable or sexually active relationships, society does not expect negative outcomes or hazardous risks from engaging in a socially acceptable relationship.

In socially acceptable relationships I found two main categories that could classify as socially acceptable. Category (A) Faithful boyfriends and girlfriends occurred 23/40 times in my data (57.5%) and category (B) Male/Female platonic friends occurred in 12/40 times in my data (30%). I originally included another category, married couples, yet I noticed that the majority of the relationships featured in married couples included people who were twenty one and older. This didn't fit in with my targeted sample age group of teenage girls. Through my analysis of socially acceptable relationships I will discuss the most significant examples of these subcategories found in my data.

**Positive, Negative and Neutral Results**

In the majority of the episodes with socially acceptable relationships, the protagonists received positive results from society. In the episodes, the main characters displayed their affection to the public and never faced any criticism or harm. Neutral results were also common in socially acceptable relationships. There were several episodes in which the heterosexual couple faced no reactions from their peers or family and/or any consequences from their careers. Negative results were rare for socially acceptable relationships. Most portrayals of socially acceptable relationships in the media never had instances of individuals who would face alienation from family and friends as a result of their socially
acceptable relationships. Overall, the most common result was positive. Within my 32/40 (80%) depictions of socially acceptable relationships there were 21/32 positive cases (65.6%), 5/32 negative cases (15.6%) and 5/32 neutral cases (15.6%). In contrast with socially unacceptable relationships, negative results were the least likely to occur.

Lessons from the Media

“I’m not dating Brook because she’s hot, I’m dating her because we’re connected.” (Zoey 101, 2005).

Socially acceptable relationships depicted on television effectively communicate what types of relationships are valued in society. Through analyzing socially acceptable relationships, one could discover how the media views relationships that should be ideal in society. This portrayal of young women in socially acceptable relationships effectively communicates what relationships viewers should desire to attain in the future. These depictions ultimately illustrate what lessons young women are learning from actively observing socially acceptable relationships on fictional television. My data indicated that the majority of the television shows viewed displayed positive social approval toward socially acceptable relationships. Therefore, the portrayal of socially acceptable relationships on television illustrates one concrete lesson: socially acceptable relationships are positive and ideal for young women in society. Within the two categories: faithful boyfriends and girlfriends and male/female platonic friends there were mostly positive results.

Although each category effectively communicated the positive associations with socially approved relationships, there were two new concepts
communicated through the episodes as well. Data from the faithful boyfriends and girlfriends category effectively state that long-term relationships are valued in society. Data also implies that relationships within faithful boyfriends and girlfriends, sexual intimacy is approved and often encouraged. This ultimately validates boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, communicating to viewers that if one were to stay in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, anything a person does in that relationship, including sex, would be considered ideal in society. Therefore, teenage viewers may deduce that sexual relationships are okay within a faithful boyfriend/girlfriend relationship and actively pursue a committed relationship to engage in socially approved sexual intimacy.

Although this message may be displayed in some teenage relationship in real-life, it presents a skewed, idealized portrayal of relationships that some teenagers may never have the chance to attain. This is in accordance with earlier studies that analyzed the portrayals of sexual intimacy and heterosexual relationships on television as ideal (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). Rivadeneyra & Lebo explain, “Messages about dating and relationships are abundant on television, yet they are often limited in their portrayals. Sex is casual and consequences are few, and talk about contraception and sexual risk are in short supply (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008, p. 293; Ward, 1995).” Even though a relationship on TV is presented as socially acceptable, it still presents messages that can be hazardous for a teenage girl’s comprehension of the success of heterosexual relationships in reality.
Male/Female platonic friends communicate another message. Within portrayals of platonic friends in relationships there appears to always be sexual tension between the two protagonists. The individuals in the relationship attempt to function platonically, yet there is always this aspiration to get together and create a substantial relationship. This effectively communicates to viewers that platonic relationships cannot exist unless there is some sexual tension that will eventually evolve into a relationship. Within heterosexual relationships on television women and men are ascribed certain stereotypes (Walsh-Childers, 2003). Women are depicted as sweet yet sexual individuals with a deep focus on their physical appearance and youth (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Signorielli, 1989). Men, in contrast, are depicted as strong, powerful individuals who use sex as a definition of their masculinity (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Seidman, 1992; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995; Ward, 1995). As a whole, “the gender roles portrayed in relationships of television character are limiting and may promote roles that have been found to be risk factors for sexual behavior (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008, p. 293; Gómez & Martin, 1996).”

Through observing the portrayals of male/female platonic friends a viewer may ultimately ask: can men and women be friends without a desire for a romantic relationship or sexual intimacy? The majority of my observations conclude that male/female platonic friends are not possible unless there is another tie in the relationship that prevents them from engaging in sexual intimacy. This “tie” may include being related, working in a professional environment, or having to be platonic friends for life survival. Through watching
the majority platonic friendships with sexual tension, teenage girls may learn that platonic friendships are not possible unless there is an inherent desire for a future relationship or engaging in sexual intimacy.

Young women may fail to pursue a platonic relationship without the expectation that it will turn into something more, which may set them up for disappointment, heartbreak, and/or regret. This supports Martino et al.’s study focusing on regret following sexual intimacy within adolescence (Martino et al., 2009). Through my examples of (A) Faithful boyfriends and girlfriends and (B) Male/Female platonic friends, I will explain what underlying messages young women will possibly learn from the episode about socially acceptable relationships. I will thus further illustrate how the depictions of relationships will affect young girls’ perception about socially acceptable relationships in society.

**(A) Faithful Boyfriends and Girlfriends**

*Lincoln Heights*, Season 4, Episode 10: “Lucky” (2009) follows the relationship of Cassie Sutton and Charles. Cassie and Charles have been dating seriously for a long period of time until they reach a crossroads in their relationship: graduation. Cassie wants to go to New York City to pursue art studies at Pratt Institute of the Arts, yet Charles doesn’t believe he would be able to afford New York, let alone get admitted into a competitive University. In response, Charles decides to enlist in the army. Cassie becomes upset as she is well aware that they both want to continue their relationship after high school. In order to solve this problem, Charles proposes to Cassie as they wish to remain
in a serious relationship. Cassie’s parents and Charles’s mother immediately disapprove of the idea. In rebellion, Charles and Cassie attempt to get married at town hall. While walking down the aisle, Cassie feels that something isn’t right without having her family present at the wedding. The couple responsibly decides to not get married and have a ceremony at Cassie’s house where they share their vows for engagement. Fortunately, Charles also discovers that he no longer needs to enlist in the army (McGhee-Anderson & Inch, 2009).

In this episode, Cassie and Charles immediately face negative results for their planned marriage. Their families both disapprove of their marriage because of the rushed aspect of commitment. This is interesting as they have had a serious committed relationship, which was approved by their families for many years. The idea that they are too young for marriage was a prime factor in their disapproval. Although the two decided to get married regardless of their parents’ views, they decided last minute to cancel the marriage and commit to a prolonged engagement. The role of family in Cassie and Charles lives illustrate to viewers how parents can possibly have positive influences on one’s choices as a young teenager in love. Ultimately it was the parent’s disapproval and absence during the wedding that stopped the teenagers from following through on marriage. Although this faithful couple was socially acceptable, they still almost made a large mistake by rushing into marriage.

Since the couple faced negative results and then immediately changed their actions, young viewers may learn that parents can often have a beneficial influence on one’s life choices. Young teenage girls may be more inclined to take
their time in relationships and really be careful with possibly permanent changes they can make to their lifestyle; such as engaging in a committed relationship, moving to be with a significant other, or even getting pregnant.

According to Bandura (1969, 1971), through a modeled relationship pair such as Cassie and Charles, young viewers may learn to pace themselves in their relationships and value the opinions and expectations of their families (Bandura, 1969; Bandura, 1971). This episode strikingly supports the idea of the benefits of having parental guidance while watching TV (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010; Fisher et al., 2010). Through watching this episode, teenage girls may be more inclined to seek advice from their parents or other adults regarding heterosexual relationships in the future.

In *Secret Life of the American Teenager*, Season 3, Episode 13: “Up All Night” (2010), viewers are presented with a very sexually active committed couple. Alex Valko and Henry Miller have been dating for long period of time and are in a serious relationship. Through this episode they briefly discuss how sex is a significant aspect of their relationship. Henry is concerned with how sex has become the central focus of the relationship while Alice is pleased. Alice enjoys the idea of having sex with her committed boyfriend. Although they may have differing opinions about the importance of sex, they both agree that they are in love. Within this relationship the viewers get a sense of long-term commitment that Alice and Henry wish to continuously pursue (Hampton & Williams, 2010).

Interestingly, Alice and Henry’s relationship yield positive results as their family and friends both approve of their relationship. Also, their relationship is
personally positive as they enjoy being in love with each other and the level of commitment they continue to have for each other. This relationship is particularly interesting because of the role-reversal in which Alice is more interested in the sexual aspects of their relationship than Henry. Alice’s drive to talk about sexual intimacy gives a refreshing twist to society's expectations about male sex drive. This is in contrast with the majority of earlier literature that clarifies that in the media men are portrayed as aggressive sexual initiators who often aspire to have sex (Martino et. al, 2009; Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Seidman, 1992; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995; Ward, 1995). Alice’s aggressive drive defies the norm of most fictional television shows, thus demonstrating that young women can have sexual desires as well. This is in accordance with Walsh-Childers analysis of women being portrayed as sexualized objects (Walsh-Childers, 2003). Alex's comfort with sexuality also interestingly defies Martino et al's finding that the majority of women wish they had waited to have sex (Martino et. al, 2009).

Through depictions like the modeled couple of Alice and Henry, teenage girls may learn that sexual intimacy is valued in a stable, committed relationship. While observing Alice and Henry’s behavior, young viewers may also develop a romanticized viewpoint of sexual relationships. If their future relationships fall short of the expectations developed from this episode, viewers may feel regret following their first sexual experience. The viewers’ reactions to this episode may be in agreement with the previous literature analyzing television shows
that demonstrated that most relationships on television are portrayed positively (Martino et al., 2009; Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008).

**(B) Male/Female Platonic Friends**

In *90210*, Season 3, Episode 11: “Holiday Madness” (2010), viewers are shown the platonic relationship between Navid Shirazi and Erin Silver. Navid’s girlfriend, Adrianna Tate-Duncan, is best friends with Erin. Although Navid and Erin work hard to preserve their platonic friendship, there is a large degree of sexual tension between the couple. Navid and Erin show obvious attraction towards each and find it hard to avoid the fact that they wish to be together. In order to hide their feelings towards each other from Adrianna, Navid and Erin often discuss their intimacy once they are alone. Navid and Erin are aware that their actions are morally wrong, yet they continue to pursue their tension-filled relationship out of love for one another. As the episode continues they get closer and closer to one another. At the end of the episode, Erin and Navid kiss. Interestingly, the platonic couple does not tell others about their attraction towards one another. Their platonic relationship is obvious to the public, yet their intimate attraction and admiration is kept private (Kirshner & Smith, 2010).

The relationship between Navid and Erin yields positive results from the public as Adrianna trusts and accepts them as her closest friends. Navid and Erin’s family and friends also approve of the platonic relationship as no one would suspect that they would develop an attraction for one another. Although this relationship is regarded as positive to the public it is negative for the couple.
Navid and Erin continuously have to hide their feelings for one another, which induces a significant amount of stress for the couple. In some ways this relationship can be classified as a socially unacceptable relationship, as the couple violated Navid’s commitment to Adrianna once they kissed. The couple is also violating the emotional and mental commitment in Navid’s relationship with Adrianna, yet that is still a private aspect of Navid and Erin’s relationship, which could not be broadcasted to the public. Due to the lack of physical intimacy this relationship is emotionally focused.

Viewers may have a skewed perception on platonic relationships. Young teenage women may believe that platonic relationships between men and women tend to always have sexual tension that cannot be avoided. They may comprehend that although individuals in platonic relationships could successfully hide their attraction towards one another, it is ultimately hurtful and not personally rewarding for one’s emotional satisfaction. This is in accordance with Rivadenya and Lebo’s (2008) theory that through viewing television programs teenagers may believe that dating should occur early and often (Rivadenya & Lebo, 2008). The sexual tension between couples like Navid and Erin confirms that men and women cannot successfully establish a platonic relationship and that it is inevitable that they will date. According to Bandura’s social learning theory, young teenagers would not find this relationship personally rewarding due to the consequences of high stress and may not be inclined to pursue a platonic friendship without the expectation that it may grow
into a full blown intimate relationship (Bandura, 1969; Estes, 1970; Nangle et al., 2010).
CONCLUSION

Television, although a form of entertainment, acts as a platform for observational learning. Scholars have theorized that “across diverse theoretical formulations, television is widely acknowledged as a powerful agent of socialization (O’Guinn & Shrum, 2007, p. 278).” While watching television one subconsciously views and analyzes the behavior of fictional characters portrayed on television shows. Through Bandura’s social learning theory (1969), television acts as a medium to observe models of human behavior (Bandura, 1969, Bandura, 1971; Estes, 1970; Nangle et al., 2010). While watching TV, viewers often mimic or imitate behaviors that they deem socially successful. For example, a person watching TV would be more likely to practice a modeled behavior that received social appraisal, such as a hug, rather than a modeled behavior that received social disapproval, like as a punch in a face. Through watching TV, one can learn which social behaviors are appropriate for successfully functioning in society. Of all viewers, children are possibly the most interesting group of individuals who actively watch television as they are just beginning to implement social learning theory into their everyday life (Malres, Palmer & Sullivan, 2011; Courage and Setliff, 2010; Anderson & Hanson, 2010). Once children reach their teen years, they have learned to pick and choose which behaviors would benefit them the most for their social status in society.

According to Erickson’s theory on the stages of development (1968), teenagers are actively trying to find their role in their society. In the teen years, “one is resolving the conflict between identity and role confusion, developing a
stable sense of who one is in the midst of conflicting social influences (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002, p. 11; Erikson, 1968).” Although they are still developing mental concepts of social behavior, teenagers actively deal with adult concerns, such as heterosexual relationships. While watching television, teenagers have the ability to view modeled portrayals of heterosexual relationships that could possibly influence the relationships they pursue in reality. The modeled portrayals of teenage relationships in fictional television not only show what teenagers may attempt to mimic in reality, but what the media perceives is accurate about social relationships within society.

Within adolescents, teenage girls are often the most susceptible to views about appearance and status within society as women in Western cultures are often pressured from the media to focus on outward appearances rather than personal beliefs (Hsu, 1990; Striegel-Moore, 1995; Scheibe, 2000; Stice et al., 1994; Harrison, 2000). Through watching fictional television shows teenage girls can easily observe which heterosexual relationships in the media are deemed socially acceptable and/or personally gratifying. Therefore, through Bandura’s social learning theory (1969), teenage girls can learn which heterosexual relationships on television should be imitated to achieve social approval and personal gratification in real life (Bandura, 1969, Bandura, 1971; Estes, 1970; Nangle et al., 2010). After analyzing 40 episodes of 20 television shows I discovered that television can effectively communicate three distinct lessons about socially unacceptable, sexually active and socially acceptable relationships to teenage girls. While watching fictional television, teenage girls
can perceive what types of relationships yield positive, negative and neutral social results from others. Ultimately teenage girls will learn which type of heterosexual relationships they would most likely aspire to attain in their everyday life.

**Socially Unacceptable Relationships**

Socially unacceptable relationships are those that face social disapproval from the public. Those who engage in a socially unacceptable relationship may face negative consequences, thereby losing family and friends and/or future educational or career opportunities because of pursuing the unacceptable relationship. While analyzing the portrayal of socially unacceptable relationships on television I discovered that most portrayals of socially unacceptable relationships value secrecy. The media effectively communicates to young viewers that if kept secret, a relationship that is not accepted in society could easily function. The media also disturbingly illustrates that interracial couples, unless kept secret, are *still* socially unacceptable in society. This was a particularly disturbing finding as society today is striving to favor more socially liberal beliefs.

On television, couples in socially unacceptable relationships strive to enhance their own personal satisfaction without regard to other’s opinions about their relationship. Socially unacceptable relationships on television place value on pleasing the self without regard to the possible consequences a hazardous relationship could have on one’s social life, education or future goals. Through social learning and observation, teenage girls watching a fictional
television series may believe that socially unacceptable relationships, although rejected by society, can function if kept secret. A young teenage girl may be inclined to secretly pursue a socially unacceptable relationship due to prior observations of success with secretive socially unacceptable relationships on television.

The majority of protagonists in television episodes depicting socially unacceptable relationships received neutral reactions for pursuing their relationship in society. Couples in socially unacceptable relationships received neither praise nor hatred for their relationship. Therefore, socially unacceptable relationships tended to yield positive results as the majority of protagonists faced no negative consequences for their secretive actions. This further convinces young women that secretive socially unacceptable relationships are positive and possible to attain in reality. The results from this study indicate that women may be learning skewed concepts about socially unacceptable relationships; that socially unacceptable relationships are actually positive and obtainable in reality. This finding supports earlier studies that analyzed the potential harmful risks of the media and its skewed portrayals of reality on adolescent development (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). Through continuously watching secret socially unacceptable relationships that yield neutral results, teenage girls may be more inclined to pursue potentially hazardous relationships in reality.
Sexually Active Relationships

Sexually active relationships are those that prioritize sexual intimacy before emotional connectivity within a heterosexual relationship. Individuals who are in a sexually active relationship focus a lot of their energy on attempting to secure sexual intimacy with their partner. Sexuality in fictional television is a sensitive topic as it tends to have a prominent affect on one's views of sexual relationships in society throughout real life (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2010; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). While analyzing the portrayals of sexually active relationships, I discovered that there are potentially confusing messages presented to viewers about the benefits and consequences of sexual intimacy. My data from observations displayed an almost equal number of positive and negative results for the protagonists in television who engaged in sexually active relationships. Therefore, there is no clear message that is constantly presented to teenagers about sexually active relationships (Fisher et al., 2010).

Young teenage girls may be confused about whether to pursue sexually active relationships as there is no clear distinction as to whether they would be beneficial or hazardous to their lives in reality. This ultimately suggests that young teenage girls may, although inexperienced, have to rely on their own judgment within sexual relationships. This finding supports Kettrey & Emery (2010)’s finding that young women often rely on the media for advice about sexual relationships and intimacy (Kettrey & Emery, 2010). If young women are
reluctant to talk to their parents for advice, they may always have to rely on the skewed and confusing portrayals of sexual intimacy in the media for guidance.

At a young age, it may be difficult for a young teenage girl to judge whether she should engage in a sexual relationship. This finding supports Martino et. al’s study that almost half of teenagers (46%) regret their first sexual experience (Martino et. al, 2009). Young girls could more effectively judge and absorb depictions of sexuality on television with experience and/or guidance from older adults (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010).

**Socially Acceptable Relationships**

Depictions of socially acceptable relationships on television suggest to viewers which relationships are valued in society and which should be actively pursued for the future. Through my analysis of the portrayals of socially acceptable relationships I found that the majority of my data yielded positive results, thus communicating that protagonists in socially acceptable relationships tended to gain social approval for their relationship. Within my observations I discovered two significant lessons that are constantly communicated to young viewers. The first lesson is that sexually intimate relationships are positive and beneficial if in a committed, socially acceptable relationship. The second lesson is that a platonic relationship between a heterosexual pair tends to *always* develop sexual tension. A platonic friendship between a heterosexual pair does not really exist.
After viewing sexuality within a socially acceptable teen relationship, young teenage girls may feel more inclined to engage in a committed relationship with the hope of having a hypothetically great sexual experience. Young women may therefore have skewed interpretations of sexual intimacy within socially acceptable relationships and may set themselves up for false expectations when pursuing a relationship in reality (Martino et al., 2009). In contrast young women may be less inclined to pursue a platonic friendship without the expectation that it will eventually evolve into an intimate relationship. Teenage girls may be grappling with the question: Can heterosexual men and women be friends without the expectation for intimacy? Teenage girls may fail to see the possibility for a platonic friendship in the future and therefore believe that men and women cannot be friends unless they are in a position when they need to reject any possibility intimacy; such as a workplace environment.

**Messages from Relationships**

The portrayals of heterosexual relationships on fictional television communicate confusing messages to teenage girls that may influence their decisions regarding their pursuit of relationships in reality. Through constantly watching television and using female protagonists as models for relationships in reality, young women are learning what is accepted and disregarded in society. Overall, teenage girls are learning that socially unacceptable relationships can still be pursued in secrecy, sexually active relationships do not have guaranteed satisfaction but can still be attained, and that platonic friendships between
heterosexual men and women do not exist. This study ultimately suggests a need for guidance while young viewers watch television.

This analysis thoroughly supports earlier literature on the influence of media’s suggestion that teenagers should be educated about sexual intimacy and relationships prior to watching fictional television (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). With a firm understanding about the difference between fictional television and reality, teenagers could more adequately compare television to their actual lives and correctly use their judgment whether or not to imitate models of fictional relationships on television. If teenagers were to talk to adults and/or watch their favorite television series with their parents, they may have a more thorough understanding television’s potentially skewed relationship lessons (Fisher et al., 2010; Mar, Tackett & Moore, 2010). For example, through guidance from adults, a young teenage girl may thoroughly understand why socially unacceptable relationships pursued in secrecy can have negative consequences, why sexual intimacy isn’t always as glorified as it seems on television and also why relationships between men and women do not always have to incite sexual tension.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

Further research should examine the actual opinions of young teenage girls today and how the media influences their perceptions of relationships in reality. Through devising a well-crafted study, psychologists could possibly have a better understanding on the influence of the media on perceptions of
heterosexual relationships. Research on teenage girls’ perceptions of the influence of media may confirm earlier literature’s findings as well as show young women the potentially harmful effects of the media. After learning about this study, teenage girls may be less inclined to look towards the media for guidance on what is socially acceptable throughout society.

Another study could examine the effects of parental guidance on the perceptions of heterosexual relationships on television. Psychologists could discover if parental guidance enhances the ability for a teenager to adequately distinguish between relationships on television and relationships in reality. Ultimately, researchers could discover if parental guidance could be beneficial for social learning through viewing television. In order to learn even more about the influence of teen targeted television, researchers should study the depictions of young adults in reality series. Through this research, psychologists could find out what lessons reality series are communicating to young adults about heterosexual relationships. Researchers could eventually compare their results to this particular analysis of potential lessons about heterosexual relationships from fictional television.

It is clear that fictional television can easily influence our behavior in reality. Through advancing technology, the youth today is becoming more and more reliant on fictional entertainment to guide perceptions about social relationships. Parents must be more careful about what they let their children watch by themselves without guidance. In the crucial years in which a young teen is grappling with issues of identity, television can become a source of
guidance that is often skewed. For example, young girls who are often pressured to focus on issues of beauty and perceptions are especially vulnerable to the messages displayed on fictional television (Kettrey & Emery, 2010; Scheibe, 2000).

Researchers must advance to find more ways to educate parents about the harmful affects of television as well as ways to educate our teenagers about the disparities between television and reality (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Martino et al., 2009; Kettrey & Emery, 2010). At the end of the day, the environment has a significant influence on one’s personal behavior and development. Television is slowly becoming a large component of our environment. Heterosexual relationships may be depicted on television, but they are always influenced by social behavior observed in reality. In the end we must always remember one key fact: in the beginning society created television, television did not create society.
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