

Full Length Research Paper

"Sexual representations in gossip girl and one tree hill: A textual analysis"

L. Meghan Peirce

9 South College Street, Athens, Ohio 45701, USA. E-mail: LMegs84@hotmail.com. Tel: (302) 299-8475.

Accepted 12 December, 2010

This study explores the construction of adolescent sexuality through a textual analysis of two popular teen television programs broadcast on the CW, "One Tree Hill and Gossip Girl". A comparative textual analysis suggests that the older program, "One Tree Hill" (first broadcast in 2003) contains fewer portrayals of high-risk sexual activity than the CW's newer teen program, "Gossip Girl" (first broadcast in 2007). This is consistent with media research that tells us how programs increase the amount of sexual content to attract new audiences. It is unfortunate that storylines are filled with high-risk sexual behavior and harmful stereotypes regarding the role of women in American society. Television holds promise as an outlet to influence teenagers and their decisions concerning sex and more needs to be done to understand the balance of entertainment and education.

Key words: Sexual representations, textual analysis, sexual health, teen television drama.

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2008, news media flooded the small town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, hoping to shed light on an alleged 'pregnancy pact' at Gloucester High School. Many wondered why 17 teenagers would vow to become pregnant before their high school graduations. This is more than four times the number of pregnancies the 1,200-student school had in the previous year (Kingsbury, 2008). There were many speculations concerning the genesis of the alleged pact, but many social critics blamed the teenagers' decisions on the recent glamorization of teenage pregnancy within popular media.

Many critics surrounding the pregnancy pact indicted a December 2007 issue of "OK! Magazine" that featured a primp image of pregnant teenage actress Jamie Lynn Spears (Hilton, 2007). Still others blamed blockbuster movies such as "Juno and Knocked Up", both of which featured young, unwed and beautiful pregnant females as the lead protagonists.

This pilot study explores and compares the depictions of sexual activity within the popular teenage television programming, "Gossip Girl" and "One Tree Hill" through a textual analysis. This study is important, as it is necessary to understand how educational, true-to-life, and abundant sexual portrayals on teen television prove.

Moreover, this comparative study will allow a glimpse into whether teen television is becoming more or less responsible with its newest narratives.

Media content influencing how individuals construct their sexual identities is not a new concept in media studies. Previous research has examined the amount of sexual content in television, magazines, music, and movies (Hust et al., 2008; Sapolsky and Tabarlet, 1991; Kunkel et al., 1999). Other research examines media portrayals of sexual activity in television, magazines, movies, music, and the Internet (Brown, 2002; Orkis and Gurman, 2006). This study turns attention towards television messages specifically. A recent content analysis of television programs found that more than half of the programs included portrayals of sexual behaviors (Hust et al., 2008). This becomes increasingly clear with hit MTV shows "16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom" gaining rapid popularity.

Television remains a popular media outlet for teenagers. Exposure to a form of television screen accounts for more than half of all young people's electronic media exposure (Roberts and Foehr, 2004). It is important to note that the trend of these statistics is increasing, as Nielsen Media Research has reported a 3% increase in television viewing among teens 12 to 17,

the target age group for both "Gossip Girl and One Tree Hill" (Nielsen, 2006). Notably, this increase was driven primarily by teenage girls.

The information that teenage girls receive through television concerning safe sex greatly influences their formulation of sexual identities. Byrd-Bredbenner and Grasso (1999) found that television is the primary source of health information for Americans of all ages. For many girls, television programs may be their only source of information regarding sex-related issues. Pinkerton et al. (2008, 462) observes, "Media literacy has promise as part of a sex education program by providing adolescents with a cognitive framework necessary to understand and resist the influence of media on their decision making concerning sex". Messages found in television play an important role regarding the decision making process of real-life situations. "Television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history. It is the mainstream of the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives" (Bryant and Zillmann, 2002, 43). Though academic and popular literature debates the power of media effects, it has become clear that entertainment media does contribute to the way many viewers construct their own reality.

Television viewers share the belief that there is a constant interplay between what is happening on their television screens and what is happening in reality (Mitroff and Stephenson, 2006). People expect that what they are watching on television is a genuine reflection of their culture. Audiences expect to see elements of their own lives portrayed in the lives of television characters that they are watching. "We can thus call television an essentially realistic medium because of its ability to carry a socially convincing sense of the real...Television is seen either as a transparent window on the world or as a mirror reflecting our own reality back to us" (Fiske, 1982: 21).

SEXUAL REPRESENTATIONS ON TELEVISION

There is a common assumption in the television industry that sex sells. An analysis of "TV Guide" program advertisements demonstrates how networks have presented sex as "bait" to attract viewers (Shidler and Lowry, 1995). Research also suggests that three major networks significantly increased the amount of sexuality in their programming during a fall sweeps period with hopes of competing with the 1992 Winter Olympic Games. Bartlett found that the use of sexual imagery is a significantly above-average technique in communicating. Signorielli (2000) determined that sex is included in a storyline as a way to attract viewers. These viewers respond in a positive manner to programs with more sexuality. For this reason, it is important to examine how depictions of

sexual activity are presented in "Gossip Girl" and "One Tree Hill".

Dozier and others completed an analysis across six broadcast networks during the 2003 to 2004 prime-time season. Their results indicate that characters in their 20s enjoy an extended adolescence and participate in more leisure and sexual activities than any other age cohort. It is not just the age of characters that proves important for understanding televised sexuality. Reese (2001) explains that the manner in which a social problem is contextualized in a television program greatly influences how a view responds to it. If the antagonist of a program is constantly engaging in sexually promiscuous behavior, then viewers may not be as influenced as they would if it were the protagonist engaging in those same behaviors. For this reason, in order to better understand how TV viewing influences the sexuality of adolescent girls, it is important to examine the sexual activities of the protagonists in "Gossip Girl" and "One Tree Hill".

Sampling

This study explores the most dominant and salient messages concerning sexual activity and safe sex messages in teenage television through a close analysis of two of the most popular programs among teenage girls, "Gossip Girl" and "One Tree Hill". The CW's Gossip Girl is the top-rated television program among teens 12 to 17, averaging a 2.5 rating (Fitzgerald, 2007). The show centers on a group of popular, fast-living Manhattan teens (Serena, Blair, Chuck and Nate) whose social lives are chronicled by an anonymous blogger. During October 2007, Gossip Girl was in its first season of production. The sample for this analysis is 10 episodes of Gossip Girl season one, consisting of 430 min of programming. Gossip Girl is broadcast on the same network, during the back-to-back time slots, targeting the same audience as the CW's popular older program, "One Tree Hill".

"One Tree Hill" (originally broadcast in 2003) follows the lives of five teenage friends (Lucas, Nathan, Haley, Brooke and Peyton) in a small North Carolina town, and airs just after Gossip Girl. Both of these programs target audience includes teens aged 12 to 17. The sample for this analysis includes 10 episodes of "One Tree Hill" season one, consisting of 430 min of programming.

As an older series, One Tree Hill began as a show aimed at the female 12 to 24 age group broadcast through the WB network. During its fourth season, it was moved to the newly-created CW network. Gossip Girl is a CW originally produced show that targets 18 to 34 year old males and females. The first season of Gossip Girl is sold as a part of a combination pack with the sixth season of One Tree Hill. This is possibly an attempt by the CW to attract its loyal One Tree Hill fans to their hit newer television show Gossip Girl. These samples are

used to identify the frequency of sexual activity and identify themes concerning high-risk sexual activity that arise through a qualitative textual analysis. Based on the research outlined above, this textual analysis examines how latent depictions of sexual activity are presented in *Gossip Girl* and *One Tree Hill*, the role of characters engaging in sexual activity, and any consequence messages such as teenage pregnancy or sexual transmitted diseases. 'Sexual activity' includes any various degrees of sexual behaviors, including kissing, suggestive dialogue, and depicted sexual intercourse.

METHODOLOGY

Almost all empirical research in this area has been conducted through the use of quantitative methods, particularly content analysis. Quantitative content analysis is useful to describe the frequency of visual elements in television in an objective, systematic, and quantitative manner (Byrd-Bredbenner and Grasso, 1999). This type of research suggests a more direct-effects causation. However, it may prove more useful to uncover rich, detailed, specific, deductive data through a textual analysis. This will help us better understand how users construct their own lives through these programs. Textual analysis will allow us to examine the most likely interpretations that teenagers make regarding their favorite television programs.

For example, it is important that any reference to 'contraception' or 'abstinence' is accounted for in a content analysis; but these safe sex messages may be trumped by a larger number of sexual behaviors without protection that do not result in a pregnancy or STD and escape inclusion in a content analysis. The message here is that some teenagers practice safe sex, but it is unlikely that there will be consequences for those who do not. Teenagers make sense of the world around them through messages that they see on television. For this reason, it is important that we examine any consequence messages presented in *Gossip Girl* or *One Tree Hill*, such as teenage pregnancy or sexual transmitted diseases.

Throughout the years, textual analysis has become a favored method for many cultural scholars who are interested in investigating media content (Fursich, 2007). Bernard (2000) described textual analysis as the process of identifying potential themes that arise within a text, and then considering how those categories link together. Messages in texts can be found through a dominant reading, which positions the reader in relation to the text (Curtin, 1995: 4). Fursich (2007: 3) explains that "only independent textual analysis can elucidate the narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential of media content". Curtin (1995: 12) explains that what is "of interest is not the text itself but what the text signifies".

A textual analysis is appropriate for this research because it is not looking at audience reception, but rather context about the themes and underlying messages in media content. Numerous other studies have examined television messages through the use of a textual analysis. Merskin (2007) explored Latina stereotypes in the television series, "Desperate Housewives". Sciappa (2007) examined the portrayal of two gay men in the television show "Will and Grace". Compton (2007) used textual analysis to understand health-related content of late-night comedy television.

RESULTS

Characters in *Gossip Girl* engage in more sex and regard

sex as a recreational activity. They would throw "Kiss on the Lips" parties, and masquerade balls, where the sole intent of these parties would be to 'hook up' with others in attendance, whether they knew the person or not. In fact, the only characters that did not end the evening with a new sexual partner were also the only characters involved in a long-term relationship. The character Blair explained this to her boyfriend Dan by saying, "You did not find me by midnight. No happy ending for you" (Ziegesar and Buckley, 2007).

A likely interpretation of this storyline is that sex is a fun, carefree activity, of little consequence. Absolutely no feelings were involved with these 'hook ups'. None of the characters in *Gossip Girl* who engaged in sexual activity were married. They often switched partners within their social group. While most members of the party were enjoying themselves, Blair was miserable as she waited for her boyfriend to arrive. The message being sent to viewers is that she would have been better off if her feelings were not invested in a long-term relationship, and she had spent the evening with multiple strange men at this lavish over-the-top party.

Romantic relationships among the teenage characters in *One Tree Hill* were presented much differently. The character Haley has a long-term boyfriend, Nathan. She expressed several times throughout the course of their relationship that she wished to remain a virgin until marriage. Each time, this declaration was met with positive reception from her friends. Her best friend, Lucas, walked in on them one day seemingly having sexual intercourse. This occurred in the first part of a cliff-hanger episode. While the importance of sexual intercourse is downplayed in *Gossip Girl*, it is used as a life altering change for characters in *One Tree Hill*. During the next episode, Haley explained to Lucas that she and Nathan were married earlier that day. She indeed had kept her virginity until marriage, as promised. Not only did she remain true to her values, but her decision to lose her virginity was well thought out and carefully planned.

In a similar storyline, Blair and Nate of *Gossip Girl* also considered getting married before engaging in sexual intercourse. Eventually, Nate realizes that he does not want to get married so young and breaks up with Blair. Blair 'fixes' the situation by having sexual intercourse with his best friend. This causes Nate to become very jealous, and he ultimately decides that he wants to be with Blair after all. This is an incredibly problematic message for young female viewers. A possible interpretation of this message is that if you want to capture the attention of someone you like, you should have meaningless sex with someone who is close with them. That way, they will hear that you are sexually promiscuous and will consequently want to be with you after all.

The importance of sexual activity in the characters' lives were also evident by the 'hooks' producers used to introduce the show. Each of these programs begins with

a recap of the previous storylines before the new program began. These hooks were almost always a recap of the 'sexual activity' portrayals that had been coded in the previous episode. These were the portions of the show that the producers felt were important to the plot, or would entice viewers to stick around and watch the episode. Sexual activity was almost always used as an opening or closing of a scene, and several times, particularly in *One Tree Hill*, used as a cliffhanger for the next episode. This presents sexual activity as one of the most important elements in these characters' lives.

The hooks used in *Gossip Girl* were also filled with sexual activity. However, the plot of the program did not revolve around character dynamics or relationships. The sexual activity presented was possibly used to illustrate how glamorized the lives of *Gossip Girl* teens are. Sexual activity clips were often mixed with laughter, alcohol and drug use. They are young, beautiful, and surrounded by money. This is an unrealistic representation of what life as an average teenager in America is like. Though some of the dialogue in *Gossip Girl* may be seen as 'tongue-in-cheek', it is possible that younger teenage audiences may not capture the irony. They may only see that this is how beautiful, young, rich teenagers have fun.

Brooke, a character on *One Tree Hill*, is particularly sexually active. She is constantly courting Lucas and using sexual innuendos to attract his attention. He repeatedly tells her, "You know Brooke, you do not have to act like this" ("Are You True?"). At first Lucas shows no interest in her. Once she stops 'throwing herself' at him, and the two get to know each other, he asks her to be his girlfriend. Throughout the show, Brooke constantly refers to herself as a "brainless slut", and Lucas is always reassuring her that she has more to offer than just her good looks. A possible message that this sends young viewers is a positive one. Men are not just interested in meaningless sex, and are actually turned off by this type of promiscuous behavior. They are more interested in having meaningful conversations and developing substantial relationships with women.

The lead female character in *One Tree Hill* is Peyton, a cynical cheerleader. She is constantly having revelations about 'the big picture' of life. "What difference does it make if you sleep with the popular guy, or go to the right party, or you know the right moves to a lame ass cheer?" (Hamilton and Carson, 2004). Peyton's character is above all of the petty meaningless relationship crises that Brooke and Lucas are constantly having. She also draws comics for a newspaper. One in particular is seemingly a caricature of Brooke. Underneath the picture reads: "High school cheerleader: Brush perfect hair, Get straight A's, Have meaningless sex with faceless jock, Do not forget to smile" (Perry and Carson, 2004). This shows viewers that there are more important things in life than sexual relationships. It also pokes fun at those girls who engage in meaningless sex. Peyton is a very well rounded

character with many talents and goals. Throughout the series we learn that there is a similar side to Brooke. While she initially comes across as a character constantly throwing herself at men, she eventually grows up and learns that is not appropriate or attractive behavior.

The roles that the female characters of *One Tree Hill* play are dynamic and crucial to the storyline. This is not the case for the female characters of *Gossip Girl*. Almost all conversation between male-female characters in *Gossip Girl* included sexual innuendos. There were absolutely no male-female platonic relationships portrayed in the program. Sexual activity with strangers was presented as much more appealing, perhaps even a fun game, because it led to fewer complications.

Women in this world were easily bought off, consistently using their sexuality to get out of situations. Female characters would also change into skimpy clothing before meeting with the male character that they were interested in. They were repeatedly portrayed wearing identical scantily clad clothing. While I as a researcher may have been particularly sensitive to these types of portrayals, these objectifications never seemed to be an intricate part of the storyline. Women were presented as 'accessories' to men at parties. Aside from the two main female characters, females never spoke, but were constantly hanging around in the background. Characters, both male and female, consistently referred to female characters as 'whores', 'sluts', and 'bitches'. This was extremely evident in the dialogue between male friends. "Look, it is easy Socrates – what we are entitled to is a trust fund, maybe a house in the Hamptons, an addiction to a prescription drug problem, but happiness does not seem to be on the menu. So smoke up, and seal the deal with Blair because you're also entitled to tap that ass" (Ziegesar and Buckley, 2007).

These representations are important to the construction of reality for young female viewers after watching *Gossip Girl*. They themselves may feel as though they are objects to look at and nothing more. Furthermore, men are entitled to use them however they see fit. The world illustrated in *Gossip Girl* presents a male-dominated society, where women should not be included in intellectual conversation or friendships. If women have nothing to offer other than their bodies, then why go to college or pursue an education? The most distressing pattern of this constructed world is that the female characters are seemingly happy and do not question the inferior role that they hold.

Throughout the ten episodes of *Gossip Girl* there was not one safe-sex or abstinence message. The closest representation that I found was when Dan's father told his son to change his sheets before Serena came over, and advised "do not do anything she is not prepared to do" (Ziegesar and Buckley, 2007). The only character presented on *Gossip Girl* who did not engage in sexual intercourse was Dan's 14 year-old little sister. However,

she still attended the “Kiss on the Lips” party and the masquerade ball. She is also willing to kiss a married stranger at a bar to prove herself as a member of their group, suggesting that with time she will grow into the lifestyle of the older female characters.

The premise of *One Tree Hill* is unique in the context of safe-sex messages. The two male lead characters, Lucas and Nathan, are brothers who have different mothers. Their father had left Lucas’ mom while she was pregnant and then married Nathan’s pregnant mother. Lucas’ family has always struggled to make ends meet while Nathan grew up in a very comfortable suburban house. Throughout the series, viewers are able to see the struggle that Lucas’ mother has keeping a single income family afloat.

During a party, Peyton asks Brooke if she is ever worried that they will end up like Lucas’ mom. Brooke replies “Not with proper birth control we will not” (Perry and Carson). There are many other instances of birth control references presented throughout the series. Lucas is considering having sex with his girlfriend Brooke, and goes to the pharmacy to buy condoms. While there, he runs into Nathan’s mom. She sees the condoms and calls Lucas’ uncle and warns him of the “big mistake” Lucas is about to make. “I guess you could take comfort in that he’s being safe, but you know, mistakes happen. I am a walking poster child for it” (Kelley and Samples, 2004).

People also assume that Haley and Nathan only got married because she was pregnant, so during a school dance, she gets on stage and shows everyone her birth control patch to prove that she is being safe. Peyton also dates a 17 year-old boy who has to take care of his infant daughter. His girlfriend abandoned their baby and left because raising a child was too much work for her to handle. Throughout the course of the series you see him struggle to stay awake in class, quit the basketball team, and try to find a job. Perhaps the strongest storyline of *One Tree Hill* was when Brooke told Lucas that she thought she was pregnant. They two had used protection, but because it was not 100% effective, it was still a possibility. Audience members were able to view what it would be like to be faced with these types of decisions. Brooke went to meetings and learned about adoption, abortion, and life with an infant. Lucas sat his mother down and told her the news. She responded by slapping him in the face for his bad judgment. Brooke does not end up being pregnant, but it forces the couple to evaluate their risky behavior.

Safe sex themes throughout both shows remained consistent. In *Gossip Girl*, teenagers frequently engaged in sexual behaviors and never second guessed the decisions that they made. Recreational sex was normal in their social world, and consequences were never presented. This pattern would not be so troubling if there was some dialogue between characters concerning

contraceptives. As previously discussed, Byrd-Bredbenner and Grasso (1999) found that television is the primary source of health information for Americans of all ages. If this holds true for viewers of *Gossip Girl*, then teenagers would walk away with zero information regarding safe sex or abstinence.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the construction of adolescent sexuality through popular mass media. Through a textual analysis of two popular teen television programs broadcast on the CW, *One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl*, a comparative textual analysis was completed. Results indicate that the older program, *One Tree Hill*, contains much less risky portrayals of high-risk sexual activity than the CW’s newest teen program, *Gossip Girl*.

Characters in *Gossip Girl* engaged in higher instances of sex and regarded sex as a recreational activity, where sex was portrayed as a fun, carefree activity, with little consequence. While sexual intercourse is presented as not a big deal in *Gossip Girl*, it is used as a life altering change for characters in *One Tree Hill*. Throughout the ten episodes of *Gossip Girl* there was not one safe-sex or abstinence message. Recreational sex was normal in the *Gossip Girl* social world, and consequences were never presented. There were several instances of birth control references presented throughout the *One Tree Hill* series, but none regarding sexually transmitted diseases. The roles that the female characters of *One Tree Hill* played were dynamic and crucial to the storyline. This is not the case for the female characters of *Gossip Girl*. Women in this world were easily bought off, consistently using their sexuality to get out of situations. A large amount of research exists on ‘safe sex’ representations within television media. This research has overwhelmingly found a high amount of promiscuity among teenage characters, and a low amount of concern regarding the practice of safe sex. However, knowing the frequency of these messages is not enough. It is also imperative that we understand possible interpretations of narratives and how audiences may socially construct their own lived reality accordingly.

This study supports the notion that there are alarming narratives regarding sexual activity representations in television. The differences between the CW’s older program, *One Tree Hill*, and their newer program, *Gossip Girl*, is evident. These two programs share the same time slot and are being sold as a combination DVD pack, attracting loyal viewers of *One Tree Hill* to their hit new television series *Gossip Girl*. This is consistent with media research that tells us how programs increase the amount of sexual content to attract new audiences.

What is most problematic about these findings is the popularity with young teen audiences. Having teens

identify with hyper sexualized characters proves much more influential than these same depictions in adult roles. It is unlikely that the amount of sex in these narratives will diminish, as sex is being used to boost ratings. The more sexually responsible narrative of *One Tree Hill* holds roots in the WB network, which closed because of poor ratings. The CW has responded by increasing the amount of sex portrayed in their programming.

Through a close examination of these narratives, many differences were discovered regarding the two programs. *One Tree Hill* presents a seemingly much more accurate representation of teenage angst regarding sexual activity. However, there was still little to no conversation concerning sexually transmitted diseases. It is extremely troubling to see that the hyper sexualization in *Gossip Girl* is the direction that the CW has taken.

Producers are capable of creating storylines filled with accurate health information regarding sexual activity, rather than those filled with harmful stereotypes regarding the roles of women. Television influences teenagers and their decisions concerning sex, and this responsibility should not be taken lightly. Future research should focus on more holistic audience reception studies. Particularly through the use of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and survey research. This will bring to light connections between the way audiences interpret storylines, identify with characters and learn about sexual health matters.

Through more studies like these, audiences may begin to realize the pedantic promotion efforts of producers. Much more can be done to attract viewers than increasing the amount of sexual encounters per episode. It is possible to include the same dramatic storylines (if not more-so) filled with relationships and sexual encounters, but framed them an entirely different manner. By showing consequences of practicing unsafe sex, providing narratives for teens to use when feeling sexual pressure and creating positive role models that engage in less risky behaviors, teen television could actually become an educational form of entertainment. More needs to be done to understand the balance between entertainment and education.

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