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The content of series books for young women is an understudied area. With the growing young adult market and its influence on contemporary culture, the sexual content of series books should be examined to gather a better understanding of what kinds of messages these books are sending to the young adult women reading them. By analyzing the sexual and romantic content in series books from the last ten years, in conjunction with previous romantic and sexual scripting research done with magazines and romance novels, this study found evidence that supported existing theories and identified additional themes.

Headings:

Young adults and mass media  
Young women—Books and reading  
Young adult literature—Series  
Sexual behavior—bibliography

SEX & THE SERIES: SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC SCRIPTING IN YOUNG ADULT  
SERIES LITERATURE

by  
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## **Introduction**

Series fiction has been a mainstay of popular children's literature since well before the dime novels and story sheets of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ross, 1995). Louisa May Alcott released *Little Women* as two separate books, with follow-ups *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*. *Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll, has a sequel and *The Wizard of Oz* series, by Frank Baum, is made up of 14 books in total. After its initial success, even the literary classic *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain had two more books that featured the character in the title (Clark, 2003). The very nature of the children's book audiences lends itself to sequels. It seems that children and adolescents stay interested in characters well after the initial book ends (Ross, 1995). The popularity of series fiction can attest to that. Simultaneously called the "anathema to librarians," and the "uncontested favorite of beginning readers for almost a hundred years" (Ross, 1995, p. 202), series books have earned their place in library collections and readers' hearts.

Although series fiction for children and adolescents is popular with both male and female readers, it is of particular interest to look at how series books affect young adult female readers. The teenage population will likely hit 42 million by 2010, the second largest generation of teens since the baby boomers, and adolescent girls are one of this country's biggest consumers of media (Bhatia, 2001; Maughan, 2007; Weinraub, 1998). The young women from this generation, a generation dubbed the echo boomers (Campbell, 2006), are single handedly responsible for the success of new book series like *The A-List* and *Gossip Girl*. As of 2007, the *Gossip Girl* books have sold over 4.5 million

copies total, with books appearing on the total, with books appearing on the New York Times bestseller list (Maughan, 2007). Adolescent girls' buying power is so strong that *Gossip Girl* has recently been turned into a successful television show. The young adult series market continues to be a growth industry. At Barnes and Noble in 2005, the separation of the Young Adult section from the Children's section saw a double-digit increase in sales (Campbell, 2006). The recent re-imagining of popular 80s series *Sweet Valley High* also points to the continued popularity of series books with female adolescent readers.

Some theorists have dubbed the books, magazines and television shows that girls consume, "girl cultural artifacts," indicating that these types of media reflect the time period in which they are created (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007; McRobbie, 1991). While multiple studies have looked at how young women interact with television, music and magazines (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005; Durham, 1999; L'Engle, Brown & Kenneavy, 2006; McRobbie, 1991), this researcher has found none that have looked at how the books young adult females are reading affect their self-perception, romantic outlooks, and sexual decision-making skills. If teenage girls are consuming series fiction in the quantities suggested by publishers, then these artifacts deserve some research focused on the messages they are potentially sending to young adult readers, particularly the messages regarding love, sex and relationships. Identity formation is a key stage of adolescence (Downs & Hillje, 1993; Erikson & Coles, 2000; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Young adults use their understanding of love, sex, and relationships to help form who they will be as young adults and it is during this time that gender roles in relationships are

enforced (Arnet, 1995; Hazler & Mellin, 2004; Miller, Christopherson, & King, 1993; Nielsen, 1996; Tolman, 2002).

The overall research question for this study is: how are the romantic and sexual behaviors of characters in young adult series fiction for young women depicted in the contemporary series? Young adults are socialized by the media they consume to a greater extent than family and school (Arnet, 1995; Brown et al., 2005; L'Engle et al., 2006; L'Engle & Jackson, 2008). By analyzing the specific types of sexual and romantic behavior and themes depicted in series books for young women, this researcher hopes to provide a better understanding of the messages sent by contemporary works to young female readers. In understanding the themes present in these popular novels, other researchers, educators and librarians can begin to better understand these works' affect on and popularity with this age group.

## **Literature Review**

### **A Brief History of the Series Book**

The history of what we call the contemporary series book can be traced back to Edward Stratemeyer, a writer turned series book impresario, responsible for the creation of *Nancy Drew*, *The Hardy Boys* and countless other series from the early 1900s (Billman, 1986). Stratemeyer started the Syndicate after demand for his quickly produced series books for children became too much for him to handle on his own. The Syndicate consisted of teams of ghost writers, creating stories around brief outlines generated by Stratemeyer, and published under pseudonyms that could be tied to a specific series (Ross, 1995). Ross (1995) wrote about the Stratemeyer books, noting that they were criticized for their sensational nature and their lack of intellectual stimulation. Librarians

and educators frequently derided the popular storytelling structure for being more about financial gain than the betterment of children's minds (Ross, 1995).

In general, children's fiction has had a poor reputation since long before the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Children's books and stories have been considered lower class literature from the time when *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was published in 1885 (Clark, 2003). Books now considered classics, like *Little Women* or *Tom Sawyer* were initially disregarded by contemporaries. Despite some critical success, the literary elite all but ignored them until they gained financial success. According to Clark (1995), When Louisa May Alcott transitioned from writing adult fantasy novels to focusing on children's literature, she ceased being considered a relevant author by critics, even though her work was second only to Dickens in library circulation shortly after her death in 1888. Many literature historians had written off Frank Baum's Oz series, a series with a lasting cultural significance because of both the print series and the film adaptations, for lacking literary merit (Clark, 1995). The lasting popularity of these works should say something about the content but popular seems to connote "bad" to past generations of librarians and critics.

Another factor in the devaluing of the popular reading format came from the relative inexpensiveness of the dime novels of the 1880s. Librarians and critics looked down on this format for "dumbing down" the mostly working class adults and youth that read them (Ross, 1995). Because of the Industrial Revolution and lax copyright laws, these books, usually centered on a working class girl finding love or an outlaw gang fighting Indian tribes, were easy to produce and ship throughout the United States (Ross, 1995). But because of their racy content and mass production, they were seen as painting

unrealistic depictions of the world and essentially doing more harm than good to those reading them. Some news sources even went so far as to claim that the reading of dime novels caused mental torment and derangement to impressionable young readers (Ross, 1995). This mentality has carried over into our culture's current evaluation of series books. Although they may no longer claim series books cause suicidal hallucinations, many librarians still bemoan the popularity of horror series like *Goosebumps* by R. L. Stine and romance young adult fare like *Sweet Valley High*, created by Francine Pascal (Ross, 1995).

Diversification of series titles has also contributed to the current popularity of the series. Where once, there was simply *Nancy Drew Cases* (the original mysteries), there are multiple story imprints under the *Nancy Drew* banner. For instance, there are *The Nancy Drew Files*, which are more romance based, *Nancy Drew Notebooks*, for younger readers, *Nancy Drew on Campus*, which portrays Nancy and her friends in college, and the *Nancy Drew* graphic novels. The *Nancy Drew* franchise went from only publishing one or two new books a year to over 40 published in 1997 (Pecora, 1999). This type of marketing is evident in most longer-lasting series, where spin-offs and sequels are the norm to keep audiences interested.

### **The Argument for Series Books**

Very little has been written about the positive or negative effects of series book reading on children and young adults, although one researcher has attempted to find some correlation between readers who favored series books as children and adult readers who continue to do so for pleasure. Ross (1995) conducted a study that attempted to determine the effect childhood series reading had on adults who identified themselves as pleasure



readers. Ross informally interviewed a small group of users on a popular materials listserv and asked them how they felt about three series—*Tom Swift*, *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys*. The overwhelming majority of respondents had a positive association between their current love of reading and their childhood obsessions with series mystery and adventure books (Ross, 1995). The researcher then went on to conduct interviews with 142 self-identified leisure readers about their reading habits as children. Over 60% stated they read popular series books as children and that this reading led to an increased love of literature later in life (Ross, 1995).

Some writers argue that popular media, such as Spanish language soap operas, or *telenovelas*, the popular cable show, *Sex and the City*, and teen films, like the *American Pie* franchise, can and should be used to teach moral reasoning to their watchers (Ashcraft, 2003; Cramer, 2007; Slade, 2000). Slade (2000), for example, argues that escapism is not the only reason for watching soap operas or television dramas. She believes both provide viewers with a chance to use their moral compass. Ashcraft (2003) feels that films like *American Pie*, for all of its awkward sexual situations and gross out humor, can be used to effectively educate teens on the emotional aspects of sex education. Cramer (2007), likewise, argues that the television shows an individual watches helps form an individual's moral understanding. Perhaps series books, too, could and are being used to do more than entertain.

## **Female Adolescent Sexual Socialization and the Mass Media**

### **Female Sexual Socialization**

Female physical maturation is indicated by the menarche, the first menstrual period. The average age of menarche in Western countries occurs around 13 years of age

(Dyk, 1993). An individual's biological sex determines if this will happen, thus issuing in, at least physically, the label of woman. However, it is not so much the biological distinctions of being female that interests this researcher as it is the cultural connotations of femininity and how feminine behavior is learned.

Modern theorists believe that gender roles are largely learned through socialization. Concepts of gender identification, of being a boy or a girl and understanding that there is a difference, usually emerge when a child is three years old (Dyke, 1993). Researchers have found evidence to suggest that the self-esteem of adolescent girls tends to drop during their middle school years (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Hazler & Mellin, 2004; Nielsen, 1996). Hazler and Mellin (2004) argue that the cultural adjustments young women make during this time, like navigating the new sexual and emotional interactions they encounter in their daily lives and the stress they experience to become more conventionally "feminine," have a potentially damaging affect on the adolescent female's self worth.

The emergence of romantic relationships contributes enormously to the assignment of conventional gender roles (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Adolescents will likely act in a ways that will make them more desirable to the gender they want to date. Because identity formation is such an important step in adolescent development (Arnet, 1995; Dyk, 1993; Erikson & Coles, 2000; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), interactions that occur in sexual and emotional relationships help define an adolescent's sense of self. It is believed by some that even the order in which adolescents initiate sexual behavior, kissing, then petting, then intercourse, is at least partially defined socially (Miller, Christopherson, & King, 1993).

Because early developing girls are considered to be women before their later maturing counterparts, early maturing females typically experience sexual activity and sexual socialization at an earlier age (Brown, 2005; Dyke, 1993). Girls that start going on dates at 14 are more likely to be in a serious relationship within two years, which means they are more likely to be sexually active. Conversely, girls that do not date until they are 16 or older are not as likely to have been in a serious relationship within the next two years (Miller, Christopherson, & King, 1993).

The assumption that girls do not experience the same levels of desire as their male counterparts has been refuted by many researchers (Durham, 1999; Miller, Christopherson, & King, 1993; Tolman, 2002). Statistics from a 2002 study indicated that the percentage of 15-17 year olds who had reported having heterosexual sex was virtually even between genders (30% of females and 31% of males). Sixty-nine percent of 18-19 year old females reported having had heterosexual sex compared to 64% of 18-19 year old males reporting the same (Considine, 2006). In addition to these statistics, Furman and Shaffer (2003) found that 75% of the girls polled had sex most recently with someone at least one year older; 22% with someone four or more years older. In contrast, 46% of boys most recent sexual partner was at least one year younger (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

### **Magazines & the Female Experience**

Since adolescent girls have long been the driving force behind most major media markets (Weinraub, 1998), many researchers have looked at the impact multiple types of mass media have had on these young consumers. Magazines have been studied in particular to see what kind of messages the format is sending young women and whether

these messages have a significant influence on their attitudes and behaviors. Carpenter looked at the sexual scripting of the popular young adult women's magazine, *Seventeen*, to see how it instructed women on sexual and romantic matters (1998). Carpenter's study spanned 1974 to 1994 and her findings suggest an increased openness on the topic of sexuality, in that homosexuality and masturbation were discussed. Carpenter looked closely at magazines that came from three specific time frames: 1974, the year after *Roe vs. Wade*; 1984, pre-AIDS epidemic and the year when Reagan was elected to 2<sup>nd</sup> term in office as President; and 1994, which featured strong media coverage of abstinence campaigns like *True Love Waits*. One of the prominent themes in the magazine was that of women's fear. In 1974 and 1984, Carpenter's research indicated that 62% of items studied in *Seventeen* magazine showed women being victimized by men in some way, and 45% of the items studied were about morality in regards to women's sexuality (1998).

Durham (1998) conducted a similar study that looked at all issues of *Seventeen* and *YM* magazines from 1997. Although Carpenter focused primarily on the written messages while Durham factored in the visual and written cues sent in both the magazine's content and advertising, both researchers found evidence to support a sexual dichotomy in the magazines' messages of hallowed virginity and sexual experimentation and expression (Carpenter, 1998; Durham, 1998). Durham (1998), in particular, found consistent messages of chastity and virtue in the writing of the magazines coupled with visual and written images of female sensuality and submissiveness. For example, the February 1996 issue of *YM* featured advice on waiting to have sex and refusing to be pressured into sexual situations, coupled with images of a girl in her bra and underwear

posed provocatively on a bed (Durham, 1998). Durham in addition found images and contextual clues that reinforced the female role as being sexually subservient. In a fashion spread entitled, "Sweet Sweaters," half of the females in the photographs are off balance, being caught or "rescued" by the males in the picture, and one third of the photographs feature women in physically subservient positions to standing men (Durham, 1998). In *Seventeen* and *YM*, girls were meant to be looked at and desired. Consumerism was encouraged, especially when the products purchased made the female more desirable to males (Brown, 1995; Durham, 1998; McRobbie, 1991). Additionally, Durham (1998) also found a running theme of keeping female sexuality hidden, with articles that stressed the secret aspect of women discussing sex. Multiple articles featured the word "secret" in the title, like the *YM* article (October 1996) called "Top-secret sex stuff: Your questions answered," and "Love secrets: How he wants to be kissed" from the August 1996 cover of *YM*. The magazine frequently included sections that were sealed, further enforcing the message that women's sexuality should remain under wraps (Durham, 1998).

Although Carpenter (1998) found a shift from *Seventeen* portraying women as sexual objects and victims to depicting them as sexually capable women with individual sexual wants, both magazines repeatedly stressed the importance of the female maintaining her "virtue." Good girls were not tempted by sex, and if they were, they found ways to rid themselves of that temptation, while still appearing to be interested in boys (Carpenter, 1998; Durham, 1998). That said, she also noted that even in an article stressing that girls make informed and cautious decisions about sex, the accompanying images were of girls on beds, presumably the objects of the male gaze (Durham, 1998).

Carpenter and Durham's research suggests that teen magazines encourage confusing contradictions of fear and objectified female sexuality.

In 1999, Durham conducted another study with adolescent girls from two high schools of differing racial and socio-economic backgrounds to see what effect media consumption had on their self-perceptions, sexual attitudes, and peer group relations. She was interested in understanding to what extent peer group association affected teenage girls' media consumption. The study noted that although social groups at both schools discussed media often, the students from the less affluent school did so less frequently, preferring to discuss their families and community. In contrast, Durham noted that the girls from the more affluent school consistently spoke in references to movies, music and celebrities (Durham, 1999, p. 199). She also noted in her interviews and observations, that none of the girls from either school made references that had to do with *news* media sources. The bulk of their "media talk" was of popular culture, particularly non-news related magazines, television and movies. Durham's study argues that the media these girls consumed are largely responsible for the heterosocial messages the girls communicated to each other. The study also reinforced theories of female socialization towards beauty and romance, with girls in both social groups typically choosing popular icons as role models that embodied an ideal of femininity (Durham, 1999).

### **Romantic and Sexual Scripting**

Both Carpenter and Durham acknowledge that their research owes a good deal in part to Angela McRobbie's mid-1970's analysis of the British girls' magazine *Jackie* (McRobbie, 1991). McRobbie theorized that this magazine served as a "map," or script, for adolescent girls and helped socialize them about notions of femininity. In the mid-

1970's, much of *Jackie's* content featured romantic scenarios, with comic book style stories talking about various romantic situations (1991). McRobbie argued that these stories reinforced notions of female competitiveness and the immediate effects of romance, rather than the long-term realities of relationships. Frequently, the young women in the stories, all older and more physically mature than the magazine's 10-14 year old target audience, would have to fight to keep their boyfriends away from other women (McRobbie, 1991). The characters were all archetypes, either good and kind or fun loving and untrustworthy in the case of the women, or falling into various degrees of stereotypical attractiveness in regards to the men. The male love interests ranged from flirtatious, irresistible, but ultimately worthy young man to sexy juvenile delinquent who yearned to change for the right girl (McRobbie, 1991). McRobbie noted that any character that did not factor immediately into a love scenario was generally without personality or defining characteristics (1991).

The trends McRobbie found in her magazine studies are also evident in romance fiction, in general. Linda Christian-Smith's theories on romance scripting outline the general concepts a young woman must adhere to in order to achieve romantic adulthood (1988). In studying romance novels for girls, published between 1942 and 1982, Christian-Smith established a "code of romance" that broke down the messages in these novels very clearly. First, romance exists as a means of exchanging status between a male and a female. By having a boyfriend, specifically a socially desirable boyfriend, a girl receives a bump in her status among her friend group. In return, a girl provides her boyfriend with loyalty and faithfulness (Christian-Smith, 1988). Another message was that boys could only express sexual desire properly if the boys went through the

conventions of romance. Any sexual act not occurring after utterances of love is an affront to a young woman. In addition, most sexual acts are merely tolerated, not enjoyed by the female partners until men initiate women into the world of sexual desire.

Christian-Smith's research also explored ideas of the individual experience of romance. Many of the references in the books Christian-Smith studied detailed how singular and personal the romance experience was and that those around the characters could not understand their feelings (1988). Christian-Smith argues that by keeping romance as a private experience, misunderstood and not to be shared with those outside the relationship, it hinders young female readers from realizing the socializing aspect of romance stories. Keeping their love a secret stops young women from comparing experiences with other girls to learn that what they are feeling and experiencing might, in some way, be a product of a romantic construct (1988).

Research about adolescent females reinforces both McRobbie's and Christian-Smith's theories on romantic scripting. Furman and Shaffer (2003) noted the marketable nature of having or not having a relationship, indicating that dating the "right" person can elevate one's status in their peer group, while dating the "wrong" person can cause an individual to lose status. This is largely dependent on the values of the social group. In some situations, where one's peers do not value monogamous romantic relationships, having a boyfriend or girlfriend can negatively affect one's standing (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Perceived sexual activity can also change an adolescent's social status. It is still, albeit to a lesser degree than in the past, more likely that a boy's perceived sexual activity will elevate his status while a girl's perceived sexual activity will lower her status (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).



In Tolman's interviews with adolescent girls about their own sexual desire (2002), her participants frequently expressed fear that by acting on, or even discussing their desire, they would be seen as promiscuous or abnormal. Tolman had to repeatedly reassure some of her subjects that their discussions were confidential because the girls were so terrified of others finding out their sexual histories and admitted reactions to desire (2002). The participants Tolman interviewed typically had to negotiate their feelings of desire with the perceived consequences of that desire. Tolman heard many stories from girls about how they had to check themselves in order to maintain "good" and "moral" reputations. There was also the element of harm that could come to a girl for exploring her desire, whether it is from actual physical violence or loss of future goals because of pregnancy. Even girls that rejected the sexual double standard for themselves, acknowledged that the fear that they could be labeled as sluts or easy. A prevailing theme was that the danger that came with expressing sexual desire stemmed from the girls personal sexuality, not the environments around them. As a result of these discussions, Tolman's research would indicate that during adolescence, girls are forced to choose between their own legitimate feelings and thoughts and the feminine ideals modeled for them. Although the expressions and opinions are still concretely belonging to the individual girl, they have to be skewed through a feminine lens.

Tolman noted in her study that girls are portrayed in media as being focused almost entirely on relationships rather than sexual desire. This did not coincide with her interviews with the girls she studied. Many of her subjects expressed sexual desire independent of relationships, although they acknowledged correlations between sex and romantic relationships (2002). Tolman's interviewees expressed their sexual desire as

being intense and powerful. By letting sexual experience “just happen” to them, or by denying the existence of sexual desire, many girls were able to better deal with the perceived sexual intrusions they felt occurred around them.

### **Sexual Media Diet**

Children and adolescents are as heavily influenced by the media culture around them as they are by their families, friends, teachers and community leaders (Arnet, 1995; Brown et al., 2005; L’Engle et al., 2006; L’Engle & Jackson, 2008). Some researchers have found that young adults say they learn the majority of their knowledge about sex from media sources (Arnet, 1995; Brown, 2005). The amount of media they consume seems to have a direct influence on sexual practices and intentions (L’Engle et al., 2006) as well as on basic issues of self-awareness and self-esteem (Durham, 1999).

One group of researchers, Pardun, L’Engle, and Brown (2005), studied a large group of adolescents over a five-year period of time. The study was unique in two ways. First, because the researchers followed the same group of adolescents, ages 12-14, over a relatively long period of time which they were able to follow their changes in perception during adolescence. Second, unlike in other studies, the researchers examined the most popular media sources identified *by* the teens they were studying. These included television shows, movies, internet sites, magazines, newspapers and music. Previous studies typically used the Nielsen ratings or sales statistics, rather than interviewing adolescents for their preferences. As a result of their work, Pardun and her colleagues coined the phrase “Sexual Media Diet”, meaning the total amount of sexual media one consumes on an average day.

Overall, Pardun et al. (2005) found that 11% of the time seventh and eighth graders spent interacting with media, their media was of a sexualized nature, and that 94% of television shows this age group watched contained at least some sexual content. Their definition of sexual content was “any portrayals or references to pubertal development, romantic relationships, body exposure or nudity, sexual innuendo, touch and kissing, and sexual intercourse” (Pardun, et al., 2005, p. 78). The inclusion of sexual innuendo and the emphasis on body parts as sexual behavior is important because other studies often only looked at overt sexual content, rather than factoring in more subtle types of sexual material. Additionally, they included specific coding to determine if the sexual content was violent in nature or if it advocated safe sex practices (Pardun, et al., 2005).

An additional component of their study, one used by the same researchers in other studies, was to attempt to determine if a correlation existed between the amount of sexual media an adolescent consumed and that adolescent’s future sexual intentions. By allowing the students to use personal interviewing software, the researchers found evidence to suggest that high exposure to sexual media content led to a higher likelihood the student would want to engage in sexual behavior in the near future (Pardun, et al., 2005). When analyzing for correlations between specific types of sexual behavior the students were exposed to and future sexual intention, the researchers found evidence to suggest that it did not matter what type of sexual content an adolescent was exposed to, but rather how much of it. In another study conducted in 2006, L’Engle, Brown, and Kenneavy reported the same results, despite the influence of family, religion, school and peers (2006).

In additional studies these and others looked at the specific kinds of messages young adults were being presented in their media diets. Hust, Brown and L'Engle (2008) looked at the sexual health messages in the mass media students consume. They examined television, music, magazines and movies. Their research suggested there was little in the way of sexual health messages in any of the four types of media examined. The researchers also found evidence that supported their hypothesis that many of the media sources used humor that inevitably undermined the sexual health messages presented.

Brown (2005) looked at media choice in relation to pubertal development. While previous research found a link between early physical maturation in females and earlier sexual activity, Brown wanted to see if the kinds of media girls of various ages and pubertal development stages enjoyed was linked to physical maturation and interest in sexualized media. Overall, Brown found that girls who began menstruating earlier expressed more interest in media content that talked about sex and relationships than girls who started menstruating later. A particularly interesting facet of the study took part in their interview process. Using a five point Likert-type scale, Brown measured "perceived sexual permissions from the media," asking if the participants felt that different forms of media told them it was okay to have intercourse at their age (Brown, 2005, p. 423). Brown found evidence to support the hypothesis that earlier pubertal timing (the age at which girls start menstruating) had a positive association with perceived sexual permission from media sources. Age in and of itself was not as much of a factor, as perceived sexual permissiveness from media sources was lower for 12 year old girls that had only recently started menstruating versus 12 year old girls that had been menstruating

for three years. This research plays into the idea of popular media actually encouraging teens to become sexually active.

## **Method**

This study used content analysis to look at the sexual behavior of characters in a random sample of young adult series books intended for young women. According to Babbie, content analysis lends itself best to the analysis of books and other print literature over a long period of time (2007). By studying a random sample of series and titles, the researcher hopes to see what an average reader would encounter if he or she picked up one of these series books. Some books in a series deal heavily with sex or love, while others do not. For example, the book *Almost Alice* in the *Alice* series by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor deals with teen pregnancy, while most of the books in the *Luna Bay* series are more sports and family oriented than romantically focused. Randomly selecting the books to be books analyzed, increases the likelihood that the researcher will see the average types of sexual and romantic situations a young adult might encounter when reading these particular series.

## **Sample Selection**

### **Selection Criteria**

The series selection process began by establishing criteria for including a series in the study. *Series* was defined as a grouping of books with at least four works that follow a connected set of characters, although not necessarily a continuing story. By making the series at least four books in length, fledgling series, ones that did not sustain popularity to continue for very long, and stories that were meant to act as trilogies were omitted.

The researcher also decided to omit any series not rooted in the contemporary time period in which it was published. A semblance of realism was deemed necessary in order to use the findings to draw conclusions on the sexual messages the characters are sending to contemporary teens. This would eliminate any series that was considered historical fiction, science fiction or fantasy. Television and movie tie-ins were also omitted from the study.

The final criterion was the age of the series' intended audience. Since this study aimed to investigate the messages that young adult female readers are encountering in series books, this researcher determined that studying the sexual behavior of characters not yet in high school would not be useful. Typically, young readers prefer to read about characters that are older, rather than younger than they are (McRobbie, 1991). Also, books with protagonists not yet in high school are typically shelved with juvenile books rather than in a young adult collection.

### Series Selection

After the criteria were established, the researcher created a master list of potential series to study. The website Novelist K-8 (<http://www.ebscohost.com/novelist/>) was used to compile a list of the series fiction published since 2000. A blank search was performed on "teen" and "series" to locate as many series as possible. The titles of the series were exported to a spreadsheet and the researcher did a preliminary examination of the titles using the basic information provided in Novelist K-8 to eliminate the series that obviously did not fit the criteria established for inclusion. After this initial weeding process, the researcher re-evaluated each series. This further examination of each series reduced the list by almost half.

The next stage of the selection process involved randomly selecting the series to be studied. To begin this process, a two to four alphanumeric series code, based on the title of the series, was assigned to each remaining series. In some instances, books within a series were published before 2000. Depending on how many books were published in this decade, the series was either included without the earlier published books eligible, or omitted entirely from the study. In the case of *The President's Daughter* series, for example, three of the four books in the series were published in the 1980's with the latest one being published in 2007. This leaves very little by way of random sampling for this series. In addition, because of the large gap between the newest installment and the previous one, 2007 title functions more as either an individual novel or the beginning of a new series. This type of decision was made on an individual basis, resulting in series with fewer than three books published since 2000 being eliminated from the study. Please see Appendix A for the master list of potential series.

After the master list was compiled, the researcher used the random number generator at Random.org to randomly choose numbers to represent the series that would be studied. The numbers generated corresponded to the line placement of the series titles on an Excel spreadsheet. The series spreadsheet was sorted alphabetically by series title. There were 58 total series on the spreadsheet. The researcher had determined she would look at 20% of the series. Using Random.org's integer generator, the researcher created a list of 12 series to be studied. Repeated integers for the same series were ignored. These series chosen for the study can be found in Appendix B.

### Title Selection

Once the series were selected, the researcher created complete lists of the books contained in each series. These lists were created so the researcher could randomly choose which specific titles within each series would be studied. The researcher decided to look at one random book from each series.

The books in each series were assigned an individual book code, based on the series code and a two-digit number. This two-digit number usually reflected the placement of a book within its series. For example, the series *Sweet Valley High: Senior Year* has 48 books total, numbered from 1-48 by the publisher. The titles were assigned a series code of SVS-XX, depending on what their story number was. Book 13 in the series, called *All About Love*, has a series code of SVS-13. The first 11 were published before 2000, so they were omitted. This left books 12-48 available for inclusion in the study.

In the circumstances of books with non-continuous numbering, the researcher assigned the numbers based on publication date. For example, the series *Gossip Girl* has a prequel, *It Had to Be You*, which was published in 2007, after the 11<sup>th</sup> book, *Don't You Forget About Me*, in the series was published. Rather than establish a numerical code for a pre-1 book, the researcher opted to assign two digit codes according to publishing date. This meant that book number 11, *Don't You Forget About Me*, has a book code of GG-11, the prequel to book 1, *It Had to Be You*, has a book code of GG-12, and the 12<sup>th</sup> book, *I Will Always Love You*, has a book code of GG-13. For the most part, this did not interrupt the logical numbering of the series.

Before the final title selection began, the researcher examined the titles to make sure each individual book met the study's selection criteria. For example, three books in



the *Alice* series are considered prequels to the current storyline and take place when the main character is in elementary school. While still considered part of the series, and published in 2000, they were excluded from the list because the character is not in high school.

Once the final list was compiled, the random number generator was used to select numbers based on the book code assigned to each title. The random number generator was used individually per series. The 12 books selected for study can be found in Table 1.

<b>Assigned Book Code</b>	<b>Series Title</b>	<b>Series #</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Pub Date</b>
<b>DV-04</b>	Divine Series	4	Thomas	Divine Match Up	2008
<b>EW-04</b>	Emily Williams	4	Maxwell	Taming of the Dru, The	2004
<b>GEN-11</b>	Generation Girl	11	Stewart	First Crush	2000
<b>GG-03</b>	Gossip Girl	3	Von Ziegesar	All I Want Is Everything	2003
<b>IO-01</b>	In or Out	1	Gabel	In or Out	2007
<b>LB-07</b>	Luna Bay	7	Dubowski	Board Games	2004
<b>NAN-02</b>	Nannies	2	Mayer	Friends with Benefits	2006
<b>PH-11</b>	Pine Hollow	11	Bryant	Cross-Ties	2000
<b>PLO-06</b>	Principles of Love	6	Franklin	Labor of Love	2007
<b>PRV-10</b>	Private	9	Brian	Paradise Lost	2009
<b>SVS-13</b>	SVH Senior Year	13	Pascal	All About Love	2000
<b>SVN-06</b>	Sweet Valley High (New)	6	Pascal	Dangerous Love	2008

Table 1: Study Sample

## **Content Analysis of Series Books**

### Codes

The researcher borrowed from other studies to determine what themes and behavior to look for within the books. The first level of coding was for obvious sexual and romantic interaction between characters. Adapted from Pardun, L'Engle, and Brown's 2005 study, "Linking Exposure to Outcomes: Early Adolescents' Consumption of Sexual Content in Six Media," this researcher looked for any mention or allusion to love, sexuality, or romance in the series books. This included:

- romantic and sexual wording and tone
- touching between potentially romantic characters
- kissing
- nudity (implied or depicted)
- sexual innuendo
- reference to sexual intercourse
- actual sexual intercourse
- references to promiscuity
- masturbation or reference to masturbation
- pregnancy and adolescent parenting
- emotional and physical consequences of a sexual activity
- STDs
- abortion
- unwanted sexual advances
- explicit use of the statement "I love you"

Although this study did not adapt all of L'Engle, et al.'s coding structure, omitting sections on planned pregnancy and pubertal development and altering some to include references to sexual behavior, this researcher found their previous work with television, magazines and music useful in looking at latent content in series books. A few additional latent codes emerged during the process. They were:

- physical appraisals by characters or narrator
- physical reaction to romantic partner
- homosexual characters or references

The researcher also compiled a list of potential themes to look for gleaned from research by Christian-Smith (1988) and McRobbie (1991) in their work on romance scripting and Tolman's (2002) research on adolescent female desire. This included:

- romantic competition (McRobbie, 1991)
- relationships as status signifier (Christian-Smith, 1988; Cramer, 2007; Furman & Shaffer, 2003)
- romance as a commodity (Christian-Smith, 1988; McRobbie, 1991)
- negative female attitudes towards expressing sexual desire (Tolman, 2002)
- female introduction to sexual desire through romance (Christian-Smith, 1988)
- romance as a private experience (Christian-Smith, 1988; McRobbie, 1991)

Two additional themes emerged during the coding process:

- the perfect or predatory male
- romantic manipulation

The books were coded individually and extensive notes were taken about the content. Books were then cross-referenced to find potential patterns and themes.

## **Findings**

### **Love vs. Sex**

All of the twelve series studied included romance language of some sort. Only one series, *Luna Bay*, did not feature romance as central to the plot development. Series that spoke frequently about love and emotional relationships, using terms like "boyfriend" and "girlfriend" often, were *Divine*, *Emily Williams*, *In or Out* (using "like" rather than "love"), *The Nannies*, *Principles of Love*, *Sweet Valley High Senior Year*, and the new *Sweet Valley High*. Some series featured romance and dating as central plot points, but used the words "love," "boyfriend," and "girlfriend" sparingly. *Generation Girl* featured a secret admirer storyline, but only spoke of love in adult relationships. *Luna Bay* used the three words, "love," "boyfriend," and "girlfriend" once each at

different times. *Pine Hollow* also used those terms sparingly, focusing more on characters' other, non-romantic relationships. However, it was repeatedly referenced that all of the main characters in *Pine Hollow* were romantically attached or infatuated in some way. Of these series, five had characters explicitly saying, "I love you" to one another (*Divine*, *Emily Williams*, *Gossip Girl*, *Sweet Valley High Senior Year*, and the new *Sweet Valley High*) and two featured the male character saying it to the female character (*Principles of Love* and *Private*). In these series, the female character feels love, but does not express it. *Gossip Girl* also features a female character saying, "I love you" and the male character saying it back, but not meaning it.

*Gossip Girl*, *The Nannies*, and *Private* had romance based plots, but the language used was not as romantically focused as the other series. *Gossip Girl* used heavy romance language for half the characters' stories and mostly sexualized language for the other half of the characters' stories. The three characters that identify themselves as "in love" in *Gossip Girl* are treated with comic disdain by the narrator, who intimates that Dan and Vanessa are an old married couple and that Jenny is a foolish child for being in love. It is not until these characters are hurt by love that they gain the respect of the narrator. Meanwhile *Private* and *The Nannies* mostly avoided using relationship identifiers like "boyfriend" and "girlfriend" altogether and used the word love sparingly. *Private* and *Gossip Girl* called the romantic interactions depicted "flings" and identified them as short term relationships, whenever possible.

All but three of the series studied, *Pine Hollow*, *Generation Girl*, and *Luna Bay*, spoke about sex in some way. Many of the books depicted characters involved in sexual activity beyond hugging and kissing or made reference to sexuality in some context. *The*

*Nannies* book, *Friends with Benefits*, is the only one in this study that features sexual intercourse between two characters in the present-tense. Other books confirm that characters have been sexually active in the past, either by a character remembering sex (*Gossip Girl*, *Principles of Love*) or by a character dealing with the consequences of sex (*Divine*, *Private*). *Divine*, *Gossip Girl*, *Principles of Love*, and *Private* all have scenes of heavy sexual activity that goes beyond prolonged kissing. A few series have scenes where the full extent of what transpired between characters is left in question (*In or Out*, *Sweet Valley High Senior Year*, the new *Sweet Valley High*). The book in the *Emily Williams* series was an anomaly in that the character spoke heavily in sexual terms, including being the only book to mention masturbation, but the main characters did not participate in sexual activity beyond hugging and kissing.

Sexual flirting and innuendo were heavily evident in some of the books studied. *Gossip Girl* had female characters that would frequently flirt with males around them out of boredom or to make others jealous. Marnie, a 13-year-old character in *In or Out*, tries multiple tactics to get Dane's attention; including bending over in front of him and adjusting her arms to better showcase her breasts. A slightly older Lydia in *The Nannies* book speaks at least three times about purchasing expensive clothes so that her boyfriend can remove them from her. Other books feature little to no sexually charged flirtations or innuendo. *Luna Bay* and *Generation Girl* contain zero instances of sexual flirtation and *Pine Hollow* and *Divine* feature romantic, rather than sexual, flirtation.

Some books also featured characters contemplating losing their virginity through the course of the story. *Gossip Girl*, *Nannies*, and *Principles of Love* all feature characters who want to have sex, but either do not because their partner wants to wait or because

they are interrupted before the act is completed. *Divine*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Principles of Love* also feature characters who struggle with their thoughts on losing their virginity. However, none of the characters in these books actually do so.

Touching, hugging and kissing were the most common forms of sexual behavior exhibited by characters in the books studied. Most of the book looked at featured heavy kissing, hugging and touching. This researcher would categorize the amount of physical contact, excluding sex, to be heavy in all of the series studied except *Generation Girl* (one hug and no kissing), *Luna Bay* (an alluded to kiss, a romantic hug, and some hand holding), and *Pine Hollow* (a few kisses and hugs, but little to no detail provided about them). The different types of kissing in the other nine books ranged from light, quick or brief kisses to heavier, physically disorienting kisses. The female characters in these other nine books thought about kissing, dreamed about kissing and planned ways to kiss.

Another way the books featured sexual content was through physical descriptions of characters deemed attractive by either the narrator or main characters. Physical appraisals for others ranged from heavy (frequent and sexualized) to mild (occasional and non-sexualized). Series that fell into the heavy category were *Emily Williams*, *Gossip Girl*, *In or Out*, *The Nannies*, *Private*, and *Sweet Valley High Senior Year*. The series that contained mild and non-sexualized physical appraisals were *Generation Girl*, *Luna Bay*, and *Pine Hollow*. Some series fell between these two categories. The *Divine* series and the new *Sweet Valley High* had frequent, yet non-sexually descriptive characterizations, referring to characters and each other as “fine” and sometimes “hot” in the case of *Divine*, and “gorgeous” and “breath-taking” in the new *Sweet Valley High*. *Principles of Love* fell in the middle for the same reasons, with mostly non-sexual

character descriptions. However, the main character in *Principles of Love* thinks about sex more frequently than she sexually appraises others.

Additionally, these books acknowledged sexual desire through the physical reaction characters felt when either thinking about or being near their object of desire. Some series only featured physical reactions in mild terms. For example, the main characters in *Generation Girl*, *Luna Bay*, and *Pine Hollow* mostly blushed and had overwhelming feelings of happiness or awkwardness when near their crushes. The characters in the other books studied felt strong physical reactions constantly throughout. They ranged from romantic, non-sexual, like the butterflies and heart pangs in the new *Sweet Valley High* and the *Divine* series, to more sexually graphic and physically overpowering in other books. The girls in *In or Out* have near epileptic fits and actual loss of feeling in body parts when near their new crushes. Likewise, Reed in *Private* cannot go near her paramour, Upton, without note of her body temperature rising.

Nudity depicted in these books also skewed towards the sexual. Many characters are naked or near naked in a sexual context in *Gossip Girl*, *The Nannies*, *Principles of Love* and *Private*. Nudity is used as a joke in these four novels as well as in *Emily Williams*, *In or Out*, and the new *Sweet Valley High*. Divine has her shirt off while kissing her boyfriend in the book from the *Divine* series, but she quickly feels ashamed and puts it back on. The other books studied do not feature nudity of any kind, even in note.

### **Marriage**

Five of the twelve series feature either engagements or fantasies about marriage in some respect. *Generation Girl* depicted a short sequence where a male character sadly

daydreams about the girl he likes marrying someone else. *Principles of Love* had a similar sequence where a young man jokes with the female character about their future husbands or wives, although that female character is quick to point out her disinterest in marriage at least twice in the book. However, this discussion leads her to think about marriage in a detailed way, making it a significant reference. *Gossip Girl* also had a character daydream about marriage, in addition to a rumor about another character being engaged. The rumor is untrue, but repeated frequently throughout the book.

Two of the series studied presented engagement or marriage as a main or secondary plot. In the *Emily Williams* book, Emily's best friend Dru gets engaged at 17 to her older boyfriend. It is a secret engagement and the obstacles and reactions they face in their plan to marry are primarily used for comedic effect. The couple does not wed in this book, but their plans to do so are set up for the next book. The particular book studied in the *Divine* series opens with the narrator/main character saying she got married the night before. What the reader quickly learns is that it was an internet marriage role playing game, but the fake marriage works as the central plot as Divine sorts out her feelings on sex, marriage, and faith.

Another prevalent topic in these series is that of infidelity in romantic relationships. In *The Nannies*, one of the main characters is cheating on her boyfriend. *Principles of Love* features a secondary story where a character is the 'other man' in a relationship. *Sweet Valley High Senior Year* sets up the next book in the series by ending *All About Love* with Tia's veiled admission that she cheated on her long-term boyfriend. There are also many references to infidelity: parent's infidelity (*Divine*, *The Nannies*, *Private*), jokes about infidelity (*Emily Williams*, *The Nannies*), untrue rumors or



perceptions of infidelity (*Gossip Girl*, *Principles of Love*, *Private*), and descriptions or references to past infidelities (*Pine Hollow*, *Principles of Love*, *Private*, *Sweet Valley High Senior Year*)

Some books feature characters grappling with their own desire to be unfaithful or their fear that they will seem unfaithful, while others deal with a character's worries that his or her partner will stray romantically. *Pine Hollow*'s Lisa attempts to see an old romantic interest without making her boyfriend Alex jealous, meanwhile Alex's sister worries that Alex will cheat while Lisa is away. *Principles of Love*'s main character, Love, is concerned that she will act on her feelings for her good friend Jacob, despite her relationship with Charlie. Elizabeth in the new *Sweet Valley High* is worried throughout the entirety of the book that her boyfriend Todd will leave her for another girl who can ride on his motorcycle, since Elizabeth is not allowed to.

### **Parenting**

Few books mention the possibility of adolescent parenting beyond jokes made to friends and parents (*Gossip Girl*, *In or Out*). Two series studied attempted to show the reality of teen pregnancy through observation and secondary characters. Esme, in *The Nannies*, rides with her boyfriend, an EMT, in the poor Latino neighborhood she grew up in. One of the calls is for a fourteen year old girl who has gone into labor. This gives Esme the opportunity to think about the girls she knows, some as young as twelve, who are parents.

Some of them were proud of it, treating the baby like a little doll they could dress up... When the friends stopped oohing and aahing and they realized they could never go out, never have fun, and that their high-tailed fine little body wasn't quite as fine anymore, that was when *Mama* or *Tia* or *Abuela* would stop in and the little girl got to pretend she was a little girl again. (p. 68)

*Divine*, likewise, offers a commentary about teen pregnancy, but with mixed messages. The main character's cousin, Chase, and friend, Trina, have a baby together and there are frequent exchanges in which Trina talks about the difficulties in parenting and being a student using realistic detail. However, the baby's father is rewarded by those around him for doing minimal tasks as a father, like "babysitting" so Trina can go to the movies with her friends, and there is little indication that Chase is suffering as much as Trina by being a parent and a student. In addition to this, babies are frequently described as cute and adorable, but getting pregnant is stressed as the obvious result of sex before marriage.

Birth control goes unreferenced in these books, except for the *Divine* series, where it is looked down on as "an excuse to have sex." Abortion is only referenced twice in the twelve books studied, in *Divine* and *The Nannies*. Both books depict it as something wrong and "unthinkable," seemingly for religious reasons. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are also not an issue in these books, with only one mention of herpes used as a joke (*Emily Williams*).

### **Homosexuality, Masturbation and Promiscuity**

None of the books studied featured homosexuals as main characters, but a few contained secondary and off-screen gay characters. Chris, one of Love's best friends in *Principles of Love* is openly gay and starting a Gay Straight Alliance at their school. In the book studied, Chris is involved in a secret relationship with another gay friend who has a boyfriend. These characters are shown flirting and kissing once. Lydia's Aunt is in a lesbian relationship with two children conceived by artificial insemination in *The Nannies*. Lydia's friend and co-worker X is also openly gay. Blair's father, in *Gossip*

*Girl*, is homosexual and living with his partner in France. These characters are relatively free from judgment regarding their sexuality, however *The Nannies* sets up questions about one of the aunt's sexuality for a later book.

Unfortunately, the majority of messages about homosexuality in these books are mixed at best. "Lesbian" and "gay" are frequently used as insults (*Divine*, *Gossip Girl*, *The Nannies*, *Private*). Homosexuality is also used as a punch line on more than one occasion (*Divine*, *Emily Williams*, *Gossip Girl*, *Private*), including transsexual secondary characters in *The Nannies* and *Gossip Girl*. If not being used as an insult or joke, being gay is treated flippantly by Lydia in *The Nannies*. She quickly jumps to the belief that other characters are gay and using girls as a front for heterosexuality. She also states the belief, while talking to her boyfriend, that attractive men should try homosexual sex at least once because gay men are so beautiful (p. 219).

Many of the books also feature references to promiscuity as insults lobbed at female characters. *Divine*, *Gossip Girl*, *The Nannies*, *Private*, and *Sweet Valley High Senior Year* all feature outright accusations like "slut," "whore," "slags," and rumors about sexual activity that are unfounded. In *Gossip Girl*, the character Dan writes a poem about his perception of his sister and his girlfriend called "Sluts." Other books suggest a character is promiscuous without calling them such outright. *Pine Hollow*'s Stevie thinks Nicole is overly flirtatious with Alex and that Nicole's pants are too tight. A character in the new *Sweet Valley High* says most boys have a "great time" with Jessica, insinuating Jessica engages in sexual behavior with a lot of guys. The characters in several of the books use euphemisms for "slutty" to describe clothing. *In or Out* and *Private* make

assessments that their clothes are sexy, not slutty and the new *Sweet Valley High* substitutes “sophisticated” for slutty to achieve the same meaning.

The only series to mention masturbation was *Emily Williams*. Emily taunts her sister, Bess, on two occasions, threatening to tell Bess’s boyfriend about Bess’s “battery-operated-boyfriend.” This is used for comedic effect and while what Bess is doing is not explicitly explained, it is portrayed as something unnaturally sexual.

### **Romantic Competition**

All novels except for one, *Luna Bay*, featured romantic competition as integral to characters and plot. However, the portrayals of this competition varied between some series. Many stories contained romantic competition for males between females: *Divine*, *Emily Williams*, *Gossip Girl*, *The Nannies*, *Private*, and *Sweet Valley High Senior Year*. These competitions were literal. The main storyline in the book from *Private* revolves around a game the girls on vacation play where the winner is the person who “hooks up” with the most attractive guy on the island first. Likewise in the book from the *Emily Williams* series, through a plot contrivance, the main character challenges her romantic rival to an actual sword fight. In *Divine*, although not engaging in game like behavior, the main character is still fighting to keep her boyfriend away from an ex-girlfriend who is claiming to be pregnant with his baby.

Some series showcase male competition for females, but frequently at least one of the participants is unaware he or she is in rivalry. *Generation Girl*, *Gossip Girl*, *The Nannies*, *Principles of Love*, and *Sweet Valley High Senior Year* all feature girls choosing between two love interests. Their decisions usually involve intense personal struggle. In the book from *The Nannies* series, Esme is being unfaithful to her boyfriend and battles

her decision to go with the other man instead of her boyfriend. Love, in *Principles of Love*, is devoted to her boyfriend Charlie, but still fights with herself over her feelings for old flame Jacob.

### **Relationships as Status Signifier**

Many of the books studied also reinforce theories about romance and relationships as symbols of female status. Since the majority of these stories are about being in or achieving romantic relationships, the boyfriend acts as a status boost in some way. Many books feature the majority of characters in romantic relationships. All of the supporting characters in *Divine*, *Emily Williams*, *Generation Girl*, *Pine Hollow*, and the new *Sweet Valley High* have boyfriends or girlfriends. Scenes in these novels show the main characters that are romantically unattached feeling left out from their partnered friends and working to change that. In *Divine*, not having a boyfriend is the biggest insult girls throw at one another. In *Generation Girl*, all of the other girls shown have dates to the upcoming dance except for the main character, Lara.

Beyond simply having a relationship acting as status boost, the right guy is frequently shown as elevating a girl's status in these series. *Gossip Girl*, *In or Out*, *The Nannies*, *Pine Hollow*, *Principles of Love*, *Private*, *Sweet Valley High Senior Year*, and the new *Sweet Valley High* all contain some mention of this. Some series have famous men as the object of desire, allowing girls to be famous by association. Kiley relishes that she is dating a supermodel in *The Nannies*. Serena, from *Gossip Girl*, continues to allow Flow to court her, despite her irritation with him, because he is a rock star and exceptionally handsome. Simply having an older boyfriend, like in *Gossip Girl*, *In or Out*, and the new *Sweet Valley High*, means girls will be better respected by their peers.

Two of the series show the choice not to have relationships as a status indicator. In *Gossip Girl* and *Private*, the most popular and attractive girls are the ones that can refuse attractive boys' advances. Because *Gossip Girl*'s Serena can reject Flow, it further cements her reputation as the "it girl" of New York City. Likewise, Noelle, the queen bee in *Private*, holds out on reuniting with her boyfriend because it shows her power in the friend group.

Just as the right guy can elevate a girl's status, the wrong one can bring a girl down. Marnie warns Nola in *In or Out*, that dating Matt is not going to help Nola gain popularity. In the new *Sweet Valley High* series, Jessica breaks up with her boyfriend, despite his really nice car, because he backs down from a fight. He lowers her worth, despite the status his material goods provide.

### **Romance as a Commodity**

Some series featured commodification of love and sex heavily. Many characters feel that if they provide certain things, they will be given benefits of being in a relationship. In some ways, the exchange is superficial. Jessica, in the new *Sweet Valley High*, provides her beauty and companionship in exchange for the status of dating a college man or riding around in someone's nice car. By winning the affections of Upton in *Private*, Reed will get back at Paige for her rudeness. In other cases, the exchange is emotional for at least one of parties involved. Although Nate, from *Gossip Girl*, knows he and Jenny have a limited future, she is physically appealing and provides him a sense of comfort in her quietness and devotion. In exchange, Jenny has her first feelings of love through romance. Those around Nate and Jenny falsely assume that Jenny keeps Nate because she is having sex with him. Two series talk explicitly about how being with their

partner makes them feel good in ways others do not. Both Reed from *Private* and Marnie from *In or Out* have feelings of euphoria and strong sexual desire when with their love interests and do things in order to keep those feelings coming, including using their physical attractiveness.

In some instances, characters are angry for not receiving something back in their relationships. In *The Nannies*, Esme is angry with herself for having sex with Jonathon outside a committed, monogamous relationship and Lydia is angry with Billy because he does not have sex with her, despite her sexual availability. Likewise, Will in *Sweet Valley High Senior Year* is angry with Jessica for not committing to alone time with him, which he feels is owed in a romantic relationship. Other examples of characters feeling short changed by their relationships can be found in *Divine*, *Gossip Girl*, *Private*, and the new *Sweet Valley High*.

### **Negative Female Attitudes Towards Expressing Sexual Desire**

Embarrassment, disgust, and shame are the most common negative reactions exhibited by female characters in these books. Divine, in the *Divine Series*, feels shame and guilt for taking her shirt off and temporarily losing herself in passion with her boyfriend Madison. Carole is filled with embarrassment and shame when she remembers kissing Ben in *Pine Hollow*. The character of Reed in *Private* is frequently taunted by references to video footage that circulated their school of her and a friend's boyfriend being sexual while unknowingly dosed on Ecstasy. A video of sexual behavior makes the rounds in *Gossip Girl* as well, but Jenny does not feel guilt about it because she knows the video looks more sexual than it was in reality.

The characters' attitudes towards sex vary depending on the series. Some books that talk about sex show it as something shameful and manipulative. *Divine's* overall message is that boys are consumed by sex and will try anything to get a girl to consent. Divine states multiple times that boys are only interested in sex and that girls need to say no. *Principles of Love*, on the other hand, has a positive outlook that sex is a part of the developmental process and that female desire should be exhibited to the right, understanding person. Esme in *The Nannies* has a complex relationship with her desire. She feels it and expresses it with Jonathon, but spends the majority of the book angry with herself for being unfaithful to her boyfriend and falling prey to her rich boss's son.

Although the young women in the series have mixed feelings about their own desire, the other characters have a typically negative attitude towards female desire. Many female characters are punished in some way for their sexuality. Beyond the release of sex tapes in *Private* and *Gossip Girl*, the girls in these series are heavily punished for being sexual. Dan is angry with Vanessa in *Gossip Girl* for having sexual experience that he does not have and for attempting to seduce him by wearing sexy underwear. He is also disgusted with his sister for her part in the video circulating the internet. In his anger, he writes a poem called "Sluts" and emails it to Vanessa. Reed is publicly humiliated when she is walked in on very nearly having sex with Upton in *Private*. Because *Private* is also written as a murder mystery, someone tries to kill Reed frequently because of her relationship with Upton, giving the literal punishment for sexuality a whole new dimension.



### **Female Introduction to Sexual Desire Through Romance**

Half of the series show female characters experiencing desire for the first time because of the male characters in these series. One theme was that the males that inspire desire are older than their female counterparts. There is a heavy emphasis in *Gossip Girl* on 14-year-old Jenny's smallness and child-like behavior in the eyes of her 17-year-old boyfriend Nate. Other characters refer to her in derogatory terms, like kindergartner and preschooler, because of her age. Nate himself ruminates on her small hands and "baby soft" arms, juxtaposed with her very large, womanly chest. He also purchases a thong for Jenny for Christmas and does not understand her discomfort at the gift. The female characters in the *Emily Williams* series all feel strong emotional and physical desire for their older male counterparts.

*Divine*, *In or Out*, *The Nannies*, *Principles of Love*, and *Private* have female characters that are experiencing desire for the first time towards the men in their lives. This frequently results in the girls being more sexually forward with the boys. Reed is sexually aggressive, to her own amazement, with Upton in *Private* and Blair "boldly" kisses and undresses in front of Miles in *Gossip Girl*. Although Esme from *The Nannies* is already sexually active with her long-term boyfriend, she experiences intense sexual desire for Jonathon, which occurs at the slightest provocation. Similarly, Love in *Principles of Love* thinks she is ready to have sex with her boyfriend Charlie because she has never wanted someone sexually as much as she wants him.

### **Romance as Private Experience**

The books in this study, for the most part, did not emphasize the private nature of romance in an obvious way. *Divine*, *Gossip Girl*, and the new *Sweet Valley High* had main characters that believed their love was different and more special than others' love,

so they kept aspects of it secret. *Gossip Girl* and the new *Sweet Valley High* featured some characters keeping their emotional and sexual relationships secret because of the intense gossip they would experience. Other series, like *The Nannies* and *Pine Hollow* contained characters that kept their romances private out of shame or guilt. Although this supports McRobbie (1991) and Christian-Smith's (1988) romance code, these were not major plot points in the novels.

### **The Perfect or Predatory Male**

Many books in this study depicted male characters as one-dimensional: either utterly perfect or predatory. The three series guiltiest of this are *Divine*, *Luna Bay* and the new *Sweet Valley High*. *Divine* starts out thinking her boyfriend Madison is perfect and knows her entirely. It is revealed that Madison is attempting to manipulate Madison into having sex with him and he is lying about his sexual past with Brittany. This comes to a head when Brittany confirms she is pregnant with Madison's child. Juxtaposed with that, is TJ, who is a good, Christian boy with whom Divine goes to prom at the end of the novel. He stresses repeatedly that he wants to take things slow with Divine and get to know her as a friend before a romance starts. *Luna Bay* features a similar structure with Rae's boyfriend Drew acting as the perfect, sensitive, "almost" boyfriend against the aggressive, threatening male surfers trying to scare Rae out of a surf competition. Elizabeth in the new *Sweet Valley High* worries that her boyfriend Todd, who is described as perfect by the supporting characters on multiple occasions, might be less than when he starts giving girls rides on his motorcycle. Three separate sequences are written where Elizabeth is reassured by Todd's fidelity and emotional respect, making him

the perfect boyfriend all over again. Similarly, the barely seen Josh is perfect and “always does the right thing” to Upton’s emotionally dangerous playboy ways in *Private*.

Female characters frequently think their boyfriend or love interest is perfect, only to be shown that their guy is actually despicable. Male characters are also stereotypically negative or positive in *Emily Williams*, *Generation Girl*, *In or Out*, and *The Nannies*. The two boys Jessica is choosing between in *Sweet Valley High Senior Year* fall into the good boyfriend/bad boyfriend schema. In addition, Elizabeth’s boyfriend seems like a bad boy, but through his point of view, he subconsciously wants to be tamed, making him perfect.

Only a few series showed the male characters with both positive and negative attributes. The two male love interests in *Principles of Love* are realistically drawn, with personalities and histories with the main character, Love, that make her romantic debate between the two believably difficult. The three male characters, whose insight the reader is privy to in *Gossip Girl* do not fall strictly into a good boy/bad boy paradigm. The flaws in Dan and Nate are not because they are bad boy stereotypes, but because they experience things superficially, like most of the *Gossip Girl* characters do. Although they do objectionable things, their intentions are not necessarily horrible. Because *Gossip Girl* delves into the minds of these characters through an omniscient narrator, this researcher felt that it was harder to lump them into good or bad categories.

### **Romantic Manipulation**

The final theme that emerged during the research was one of romantic and sexual manipulation. All but two of the series, *Luna Bay* and *Pine Hollow*, had characters attempting to manipulate their romantic partners. In some cases it was accidental (*Generation Girl*, *The Nannies*). In five series, *Emily Williams*, *Gossip Girl*, *In or Out*,

*The Nannies*, *Private* and the new *Sweet Valley High*, girls plot to use their bodies to garner male attention. In other series, the manipulation is a little more serious than that. In *Principles of Love*, Haverford uses Chris's crush on him to boost his own self-esteem. Characters frequently try to make their exes jealous in *Gossip Girl* and *Private. Divine*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Sweet Valley High Senior Year* all feature characters attempting to manipulate their romantic partners for their own gain. Divine's boyfriend tries multiple tactics to try and convince Divine it is okay to have sex, despite her religious beliefs. Dan from *Gossip Girl* succeeds in making Vanessa feel badly about her sexual desires by sending her a poem he'd written called "Sluts." In *Sweet Valley High Senior Year*, Will also attempts to make Jessica feel guilty about her "lack of commitment" to their relationship. Conversely, both Elizabeth and Jessica emotionally manipulate their partners into getting their own way, with Jessica knowingly doing so.

## **Discussion**

The series books for young women examined in this study appear to reinforce existing stereotypes about women, love and sex and to support McRobbie (1991) and Christian-Smith's (1988) theories about romance and sexual scripting in popular magazines and romance novels. In the majority of the books, women are portrayed as obsessed with romance and being in love, romance is seen as a commodity, and having a boyfriend is considered a status signifier. Girls receive the attention of boys, not for being smart or funny, but because they are beautiful. Competition between girls for the attention of boys is seen as natural. Finally, female desire is depicted as shameful or disgusting and female characters are shown being punished, either literally or metaphorically by exhibiting desire.

Two additional themes were also noted which serve to act as emotional and romantic scripts for young women—the perfect “good guy” versus the predatory male and romantic/sexual manipulation. The perfect “good guy” versus the predatory male dichotomy sets young women up to believe that the only type of relationship that is “good” is one with a perfect, non-threatening, attractive, completely understanding male. By demanding perfection of the “good guys,” these books do not account for the diversity of human beings and seem to be setting girls up for romantic disappointment—no one is perfect. The predatory males are portrayed as manipulative, sex crazed bad boys who while not “relationship material”, are more sexually stimulating than the good boys. The message to girls seems to be that they have to choose between emotional availability with “good guys” or sexual excitement with “bad boys”. The two are mutually exclusive.

An additional theme that is only alluded to in McRobbie (1991) and Christian-Smith’s (1988) research is that of romantic/sexual manipulation. The message sent in the series studied was that romantic/sexual manipulation is integral to heterosexual relationships. Some characters used manipulation against their current or ex-partners to get what they wanted or to illicit a response. In others romantic/sexual manipulation is used against the main characters to nefarious ends. Either way, romantic/sexual manipulation is shown as a natural part of a relationship. The fact that series books are culturally indoctrinating young female readers into a world of sexual and romantic manipulation is unsettling.

Because of the popularity of the series format, the potential impact of the romance and sexual scripting provided by these books should be taken as seriously as the affect television and magazines have on female sexual development. To adult readers, highly

sexual and romanticized content may be entertainment, but to younger readers, it can act as a misguided map for their emotional and sexual growth. There are exceptions, whether within a series or simply within a book, however, it is discouraging that these exceptions are so few and far between that they stand out.

## **Conclusion**

Sexuality in media is not a new topic. The rising levels of sexual content in television and movies have been, and will continue to be, a hot button issue for some time. In a sexually obsessed adult culture, the depictions in series books of romantically obsessed young women and sexually exciting bad boys may be meant to serve as entertainment. But when read by their intended audiences, young adults, these series function as potential blueprints for emotional and sexual choices down the line. Because young adults glean so much of their knowledge about sex and identity from media sources (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005; Durham, 1999; L'Engle, Brown & Kenneavy, 2006; McRobbie, 1991), series books have a responsibility to avoid gender stereotyping and depict realistic characters and sexual situations. Not doing so, sets young women up for, at best, future relationship or sexual disappointment. Even worse, they may be laying the groundwork for viewing manipulative relationships as healthy.

Youth services librarians can use the results of this study to begin conversations with their teen patrons about the messages conveyed in these books. As Pattee (2007) reminds us, one of our responsibilities as youth services librarians is to encourage critical-reading practices among young readers. Rather than removing these books from collections or even discouraging teens from reading them, youth services librarians might

consider including these titles in book discussion programs, thus providing an opportunity for teens to discuss the realities of romantic and sexual health.

Finally, future research should be conducted on this subject to see how these books affect the readers consuming them. By associating various demographics with the genre of books they read and then focusing on that genre, like Christian Inspirational Fiction or Rich Lit, a researcher could help determine if these books have an effect on sexual intention or perception. Because of the wide range of genres covered in this study, it would be more beneficial for future researchers to focus on specific genres to gather further ideas.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Series Master List

<b>Series Code</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Publish Date</b>
ALC	Alice Series 00's	Naylor	2000 to present
ALS	A-List	Dean	2003 to present
AP	Au-Pairs	De la Cruz	2004 to present
BEK	Becoming Beka	Sumpolec	2003-2005
BB	Black Book (Diary of a Teenage Stud)	Black, Jonah	2001-2002
BLU	Bluford Series	Multiple	2001-2007
CD	California Diaries 00'S	Martin	2000
CAL	Calypso Chronicles	O'Connell	2004-2006
CB	Carmen Browne Series	Perry-Moore	2005 to present
CC	Clearwater Crossing 00's	Page, C	2000-2001
CL	Clique/Clique Summer Series	Harrison	2004 to present
GN	Confessions of Georgia Nicolson (Angus, Thongs & Full Frontal Snogging)	Rennison	2000 to present
DAT	Dating game	Cooney, L	2005-2007
DRB	Del Rio Bay clique novels	Keene, C	2007-present
DGC	Diary of a teenage girl: Caitlin	Carlson, M	2000-2004
DGCH	Diary of a teenage girl: Chloe	Carlson, M	2002-2004
DGK	Diary of a teenage girl: Kim	Carlson, M	2005-2006
DV	Divine series	Thomas, J	2006-present
DC	Drama Club	Lerangis, P.	2007-present
DRA	Drama High Series	Divine	2006 to present
DR	Drama!	Ruditis, P	2007-present
EZ	Elizabeth	John, L	2001
EW	Emily Williams series	Maxwell, K	2003-2005
FCL	First comes love	Baker, J	1993
FL	Flirt	Clarke, N	2006-2007
GEN	Generation girl 00's	Stewart, M	2000
GG	Gossip Girl	Von Ziegesar	2002-2007
HN	Hollywood Nobody series	Samson, L	2007-present

IO	In or out	Gabel, C	2007-present
IN	Inside Girl	Minter, J	2004-present
IT	It Girl	Von Ziegesar	2005 to present
JJ	Jess Jordan series	Limb, S	2004-present
JD	Jessica Darling novels	McCafferty, M	2001-present
LB	Luna Bay, a roxy girl series	Lantz, F	2003-2004
MO	Making out 00's	Applegate, K	2000
MW	Making waves 00's	Applegate, K	2000-2001
MD	Mates, dates series	Hopkins, C	2003-2006
MP	Mob princess	Strasser, T	2007
NAN	Nannies novels	Mayer, M	2005-present
NS	Nikki Sheridan series 00's	Brinkerhoff, S.	2000
NBD	Nothing but drama series	Billingsley, R	2007-present
OT	On tour	Huff, B	2003-2004
PS	Payton Skky series 00's	Moore, S.	2000-2001
PH	Pine Hollow 00's	Bryant, B.	2000-2001
PL	Pretty little liars	Shepard, S	2006-present
PD	Princess Diaries	Cabot, M.	2000 to present
PLO	Principles of Love	Franklin, E	2005-present
PRV	Private	Brian, K	2006-present
SVS	S V H senior year	Pascal, F.	2000-2003
SDS	Seven deadly sins	Wasserman, R	2005-2007
SEV	Sevens	Wallens, S.	2002
SB	Shelby Belgarden mysteries	Sherrard, V.	2002-2008
STP	Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants	Brashares	2001-2007
SVN	Sweet Valley High (New)	Pascal	2008 to present
SVU	Sweet Valley University 00's	Pascal, F.	2000
TG	Three Girls in the City	Betancourt	2003-2004
TD	Truth or dare	Hopkins, C.	2002-2007
UH	University hospital 00's	Bennett, C.	2000-2002

**Appendix B: Series Studied**

<b>Series Code</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Publish Date</b>	<b># in Series</b>
DV	Divine series	Thomas, J	2006-present	4
EW	Emily Williams series	Maxwell, K	2003-2005	5
GEN	Generation girl 00's	Stewart, M	2000	3 Of 12
GG	Gossip Girl	Von Ziegesar	2002-2007	12
IO	In or out	Gabel, C	2007-present	4
LB	Luna Bay, a roxy girl series	Lantz, F	2003-2004	7
NAN	Nannies novels	Mayer, M	2005-present	6
PH	Pine Hollow 00's	Bryant, B.	2000-2001	8 Of 18
PLO	Principles of Love	Franklin, E	2005-present	7
PRV	Private	Brian, K	2006-present	11
SVS	S V H senior year	Pascal, F.	2000-2003	48
SVN	Sweet Valley High (New)	Pascal	2008 to present	6