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How much sex is there in soap operas on British TV?

Abstract: Sexual depictions were analyzed in 139 episodes of seven drama serials on British mainstream television over a four-week period in November–December 2006. Scenes that depicted sexual behavior and talk about sexual matters were counted separately. Further distinctions were made on the basis of the levels of intimacy and the graphic nature of portrayals. A total of 506 sexual scenes were found that occurred at the rate of 6.5 per hour across the seven soaps, but this figure was inflated by one late-night serial that averaged 16.0 scenes per hourly episode. Nearly two-thirds of these scenes were restricted to talk about sexual matters, while the others contained overt depictions of sexual behavior. Sexual intercourse was relatively rare and restricted in terms of overt depictions to the late-night serial. Passionate kissing was far more prevalent throughout these programs regardless of the time of day the program was transmitted. When sexual intercourse was featured, this was generally in the context of loss of virginity or of infidelity.

Keywords: sexual themes, soap operas, television, United Kingdom

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Introduction

Serialized dramas or ‘soap operas’ are often criticized for containing ‘too much sex’ and for frequently featuring storylines that deal with sexuality and sexual relationships. Furthermore, some studies identified the main concern about soap operas as being their ability to “‘fan the fire’ of antisocial and sexually explicit behaviors amongst young people” (Ofcom, 2005, p. 5). This paper reports a study of sexual representations in the most widely viewed drama serials on British television.

Effects of mediated sex

The importance of investigating the representation of sex in the media stems from past empirical evidence that mediated sexual content (and particularly that shown on television) can influence children, teenagers and young adults in a variety of ways as they begin to show an interest in sexual relations and become sexually active (Brown, Greenberg, and Buerkel-Ruthfuss, 1993; Brown and Newcomer, 1991; Wingood and DiClemente, 1998). Watching sex on television has been linked to the early onset of sexual behavior among teenagers, to the propensity to engage in unsafe sexual practices, to distorted attitudes towards sex (Collins et al., 2003; Collins et al., 2004; Ward and Rivadeneyra, 1999) and undesirable attitudes and beliefs concerning extreme and violent sexual practices (e.g., Linz and Malamuth, 1993; Peter and Valkenburg, 2008, 2010). More specifically, soap operas have been linked to early interest in sex and teenage pregnancies (Brown and Newcomer, 1991; Peterson, Moore, and Furstenberg, 1991).

Theories of influence of mediated sex

A number of theories have been invoked to explain the potential influences of sex on television on viewers. Social learning theory posits that viewers may learn directly from on-screen portrayals especially when the depicted behaviors receive rewards or reinforcements. In a modified form of this theory, social cognitive theory acknowledges that on-screen behavior-reinforcement sequences can be internalized, with observers reaching personal judgments about the values of perceived rewards (Bandura, 2002).

In a further elaboration of the social cognitive model, script theory proposes that observers learn more extended behavioral sequences rather than solus acts which join memorized behavioral repertoires that can be called upon subsequently to guide appropriate courses of action in different social settings (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, and Yellin, 2003). These cognitive-behavioral models have been used to explain observers' reactions to televised sexual portrayals. Adolescents who were exposed to television scenes that showed people talking about sex or engaged in sexual activity displayed greater safe-sex efficacy (Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott, and Berry, 2005). Further evidence indicated that reported exposure to televised sex predicted teen pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008).

Longer-term exposure to repeated and narrowly-defined patterns of portrayal or representations of sex (including explicit mediated sexual content) has

been hypothesized to have the ability to condition stereotyped beliefs among television viewers which, in the context of sex, can influence perceptions of the sexual arousal preferences of women, sexual fidelity values, sexual uncertainty, promiscuity and satisfaction with one's own sex life (see Brown and L'Engle, 2009; Linz and Malamuth, 1993; Peter and Valkenburg, 2008, 2010; Zillmann, 1994; Zillmann and Bryant, 1982, 1984).

Further evidence has emerged to support a selective exposure hypothesis whereby adolescents who are already sexually active seek out sexual content in the media (Brown and L'Engle, 2009; Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, and Jordan, 2009).

Opportunities for exposure to mediated sex

Descriptive accounts of the prevalence and representational nature of sexual behavior on television cannot by themselves provide evidence of audience effects. They can, however, identify opportunities for viewers' exposure to mediated sexual depictions with different kinds of impact potential.

Research using standard content analysis methodologies has revealed that sexual depictions have formed a prevalent and consistent presence on mainstream television in developed countries such as the United States and United Kingdom from the 1970s onwards (see BSC, 1999; Cumberbatch, Gauntlett, Littlejohns, and Collie, 2003; Franzblau, Sprafkin, and Rubinstein, 1977; Greenberg, Graef, Fernandez-Collado, Korzenny, and Atkin, 1980; Lowry, Love, and Kirby, 1981; Millwood-Hargrave, 1992). Over time, evidence emerged that sexual content on television increased in its presence, although depictions of an extremely intimate or graphic nature tended to be rare (Greenberg and Busselle, 1994; Heinz-Knowles, 1996; Kunkel, Cope, and Colvin, 1996; Olson, 1994; Sprafkin and Silverman, 1981).

Among the most popular and widely viewed types of program on mainstream television are serialized dramas or 'soap operas'. For health professionals, this genre is believed to have the potential to exert significant influence over young people's sex-related attitudes and beliefs because sexual relations are not only prevalent but also placed center stage in their dramatic narratives, and these serials provide opportunities for viewers to develop powerful parasocial relationships with the characters (American Academy of Pediatrics: Committee on Public Education, 2001).

Research on sex in soap operas has revealed a number of recurrent patterns of portrayal. Although the sex is seldom explicit, it is more between unmarried than married partners (Greenberg, Abelman, and Neuendorf, 1981; Greenberg

and D'Alessio, 1985; Greenberg, Stanley, Siemiki, Soderman, and Linsangan, 1993; Sapolsky and Tabarlet, 1991). Explicit depictions of sexual behavior were confined to late-night broadcasts (BSC, 1999; Cumberbatch et al., 2003; Millwood-Hargrave, 1992). Over time, however, depictions of implied or depicted sexual intercourse increased (BSC, 1999; Cumberbatch et al., 2003).

One of the chief concerns about depictions of explicit sexual content on mainstream television relates to its impact on young people. In this regard, sexual depictions that involve young characters with whom young audience members might identify could be particularly potent. Further research into media representations of sex in the UK reported that while programs broadcast on television in late afternoon or early evening slots, when audiences are populated by significant numbers of young people, rarely depicted overtly sexual behavior, they often contained talk about sexual matters (Batchelor and Kit-zinger, 1999; Batchelor, Kit-zinger, and Burtney, 2004).

The research reported here comprises a content analysis of seven serialized dramas ('soap operas') broadcast on four of the main television channels in the UK (BBC1, Channel 4, Channel Five, ITV1). This analysis focuses on the prevalence of sexual activity, and its nature and explicitness. The methodology describes those measures on which data are reported here. The main objectives were to measure how much sex was shown in soap operas on British television and in which ways it was depicted. The findings, however, are examined in the broader context of the potential effects of sexual depictions upon viewers, drawing on international research into media effects on sex-related attitudes and behavior.

Method

1. Sample

The program sample comprised 124 half-hour long episodes of six soap operas, *Coronation Street* (ITV1; 22 episodes), *EastEnders* (BBC1; 17 episodes), *Emmerdale* (ITV1; 25 episodes), *Hollyoaks* (Channel 4; 20 episodes), *Home and Away* (Channel Five; 20 episodes), and *Neighbours* (Channel 4; 20 episodes) and 15 one-hour episodes of a further serial called *Hollyoaks in the City* (Channel 4). Two of these serials, *Home and Away* and *Neighbours*, were Australian productions, and the others were all made in the UK. Six of these serials were broadcast before the 9 p.m. watershed when programs are expected to be suitable for children. *Hollyoaks in the City* was transmitted after 9 p.m. The sample com-

prised 77 hours of program output. These programs were video-recorded between 27th November and 24th December 2006.

2. Coder reliability

Reliability tests were conducted on the coding frame. Two coders were trained to use the codebook over eight one-hour sessions. Double coding was conducted on a 10 % sub-sample of the total population with respect to sexual scenes extracted from 15 episodes of four of the serialized dramas. The outcomes of dual coding were checked by the first author. Only six out of the total of 35 code measures scored agreement below 90 % (none of which are reported in this paper), and only two were below 80 % (negative outcomes of sexual activity [78 %] and motivation for engaging in sexual activity [79 %]). Further training was offered to improve performance on these measures before full coding proceeded.

3. Units of analysis

The basic unit of analysis was the ‘scene’. A scene was broadly defined as a sequence in which both the place and time held constant. A shift in time or place signaled the beginning or end of a scene. Scenes could also be considered as a passage in a story; a soap opera scene ended when the cameras shifted from one distinct setting/locale in time to another new and different one, interrupting the flow of the ongoing action. Scene counts and their duration (in seconds of program-running time) were the two base-level quantitative measures.

4. Content definition

Sexual content was defined as any depiction or portrayal of talk/behavior that involves sexuality, sexual suggestiveness and sexual activities/relationships. Sexual content within a scene was classified either as Sexual Talk or Sexual Behavior; and both were evaluated or measured separately. Specifically, the following examples were included in the definition of sex:

- Verbal depictions/discussions of any aspect of sexuality;
- Invitations or solicitations: Actions or words that are clearly, but not necessarily directly, intended to suggest, promote, or/and pursue sexual activity either immediately or in the future;

- Seductive display of the body, when there is clear intent to attract sexual behavior as a response from others;
- Explicit or implied references to sexual behavior or sexual/sensual body parts and organs;
- Explicit or implied depictions of overt sexual behaviors.

For sexual behavior, affection that implied potential or likely sexual intimacy was considered as sexual. Thus, a friend kissing another friend goodbye or a parent kissing his/her child goodnight was not deemed to be sexual and was not coded.

For sexual talk, any references to sexual activity (descriptions of sexual activity) or its consequences (e.g., abortion, pregnancy, sexual diseases) were included.

Types of sexual talk

Sexual talk encompassed a range of different types of sexual conversations that were classified into 14 categories: Comments about one's own or others' sexual interests/intentions/acts; Talk about sexual intercourse; Talk about oral sex; Talk toward sex (intimate/seductive); Talk toward sex (coercive); Expert advice or technical information; Talk about pregnancy/abortion; Direct talk about risk and responsibility; Talk about rape/attempted rape; Talk about incest; Talk about prostitution; Sexual innuendos; Talk about sex-related crimes; Other.

Portrayal of sexual behavior

Sexual behavior was measured using ten categories. Scenes were coded here only when visually exhibiting physical sexual intimacy, as defined above, and when sexual behavior comprised a reasonably substantial part of the scene. Thus, sexual behavior included: Sexual intercourse (depicted and implied); Oral sex (depicted and implied); Passionate kissing; Intimate touching; Physical flirting; separately coded were scenes of Sexual violence; Rape; and Attempted rape.

Explicitness of sexual scenes

The level of explicitness (visual sexual explicitness) in all scenes with sexual content was assessed by using the six categories below, which captured the physical appearance of the characters involved in the sexual behavior or talk:

0. No explicitness.
1. Provocative or suggestive dress or appearance: Clothes alone that reflect a strong and clear intent to flaunt one's sexuality; an example would be a female character trying to seduce her boyfriend by wearing tight sexy fetish clothes and performing sexual moves.
2. Characters begin disrobing: The removing of clothes to reveal parts of the body was identified only when in a sexual setting indicating that sexual behavior was imminent and/or occurring.
3. Partial but high level of nudity: characters wandering around in underwear, or wearing very little clothing.
4. Discreet nudity: Characters are understood to be nude, yet explicit full nudity is not shown – private parts of the body are not shown on the screen. For instance, a character could be covered by a sheet or other item, yet it was clear that the character was otherwise nude, or a character could be completely nude but private parts were not shown because of the careful selection of camera angles and editing.
5. Nudity: the baring and revealing of normally private parts of the anatomy, such as men's/women's genitals and buttocks, and women's breasts.

Finally, themes of sexual intercourse were coded that differentiated between general scenes of such behavior, scenes of first-time sexual intercourse, and finally scenes involving cheating or infidelity.

Results

Prevalence and amount of sexual content

All seven soap operas were found to contain sexual content of some sort, though not in every episode. Of the 139 episodes, 108 (78 %) contained any sexual content.

The sexual content occurred in a total of 506 scenes. *Hollyoaks in the City*, the only post-9-p.m. watershed serial drama in the sample, contained 242 (48 %) of these scenes. Together, the other six remaining soap operas accounted for just over half (52 %) of the scenes containing sexual content.

These soap operas displayed an average of 6.5 scenes per hour – taking into account the entire sample including *Hollyoaks in the City*, whose episodes were hour-long. Scenes with sexual content reached just over 16 per hour for the late-night *Hollyoaks in the City*. Excluding this serial, the sex-scene average for the six peak-time soap operas was 4.2 scenes per hour.

Nature of sexual content

Two main types of portrayals were coded: [1] Sexual talk, which encompassed references to or discussions of any aspects of sexual relationships and sex and sexuality in general; [2] Sexual behavior, which encompassed any physically overt interactions and scenes that implied sexual intimacy. Dialogue or talk of a sexual nature embedded within scenes catalogued as displaying sexual behavior was not coded again as sexual talk, to avoid double coding and therefore inflated findings.

Sexual talk scenes (62 % of all sexual scenes) were more prevalent than sexual behavior scenes (38 %). On average, there were 2.5 scenes per hour featuring sexual behavior and four scenes per hour of sexual talk. The overall average figures here were inflated by *Hollyoaks in the City* (10 scenes per hour of sexual talk and six scenes per hour of sexual behavior). When this serial was excluded, the averages for the remaining soaps shrank to 1.6 scenes and 2.6 scenes per hour for talk and behavior, respectively.

Inter-serial comparisons indicated that there were significant differences in the extent to which sexual talk and sexual behavior occurred in each soap opera ($X^2 = 15.36$, $df = 6$, $p < .02$). The percentage of sexual behavior scenes did not exceed 47 % in each of the six main soap operas with the exception of *Neighbours* (60 %). In the other soaps, most of the sex-containing scenes comprised only talk about sex: *Coronation Street* (75 %), *EastEnders* (75 %), *Emmerdale* (66 %), *Hollyoaks in the City* (62 %), *Home and Away* (60 %), and *Hollyoaks* (53 %).

Sexual activity: Duration of portrayals

The duration of each sexual scene was measured in seconds to see whether or not there were differences in the amount of screen time occupied by portrayals of sexual behavior and sexual talk, as well as differences in the time allocated to different sexual themes and storylines across the seven soap operas.

The total amount of running time occupied by scenes of both sexual talk and behavior in soap operas was just over 9 hours (540 minutes precisely). This time accounted for almost 12 % of the entire 77 hours of soap opera output analyzed in this study. The average length of a sex-containing scene was just over 64 seconds, ranging from as few as three seconds to a maximum of 480 seconds. The longest sex-containing scenes occurred in *EastEnders* ($M = 80$ seconds) and the shortest occurred in *Home and Away* ($M = 58$ seconds). The other five soap operas had average sex-containing scene durations that varied

between 62 and 67 seconds. Overall, sexual talk scenes ($M = 70$ seconds) were significantly longer on average than were scenes with sexual behavior ($M = 54$ seconds) ($t(504) = 4.05, p < .001$). Further analysis examined the frequencies of occurrence of different types of sexual talk and sexual behavior in the various soap operas.

Types of sexual talk

A number of types of sexual talk emerged. Of the total of 315 scenes containing only sexual talk, 84 of these scenes (27 %) were ‘comments about own or others’ sexual interests, acts and intentions’. These were followed by ‘talk about sexual intercourse’ (61 scenes; 19.5 %). These two categories combined accounted for nearly half of the sexual talk scenes in the entire sample, and were clearly by far the most common types of sexual talk. The next most frequently occurring categories were talk of an intimate/seductive kind (10.5 %), talk about prostitution (10.5 %), talk about sex-related crimes (9.5 %), and then talk about the risks and responsibilities associated with sex (9 %). Sexual innuendo (7 %) and talk about incest (6 %) were less frequent.

The frequencies of sexual talk categories varied significantly across the seven soap operas ($X^2 = 3.495, df = 66, p < .001$). Comments about own and others’ sexual interests and actions, which was the most commonly occurring type overall, occurred least frequently in *Coronation Street* (only 7.5 %)¹, *Home and Away* (9 %) and *EastEnders* (10 %), and most frequently in *Hollyoaks in the City* (39 %), *Emmerdale* (37 %), *Neighbours* (20 %), and *Hollyoaks* (19 %). *Hollyoaks in the City* contributed seven in ten instances (70 %) of this type of talk over the seven serials. Talk about sexual intercourse was also distributed unevenly over the seven soaps: *EastEnders*: 32 %, *Hollyoaks in the City*: 22 %, *Emmerdale*: 21 %, *Neighbours*: 20 %, *Hollyoaks*: 18 %, *Home and Away*: 9 %, and *Coronation Street*: 5 %.

Types of sexual behaviors

The distribution of different types of sexual behavior varied greatly across the seven soap operas. Passionate kissing (22 %; 114 scenes) was the most frequently occurring type of sexual behavior. This was followed by implied sexual

¹ Percentages mentioned here are just those of the sexual talk categories within each individual soap opera, not the overall sexual talk scenes reported across the entire sample.

intercourse (18 %). Actual visual depictions of sexual intercourse were much rarer (5 %). Three scenes (less than 2 %) of oral sex behavior, one implied and two depicted, were identified and found to be of a quite explicit and controversial nature. Both physical suggestiveness and intimate touching accounted for less than one in ten (9 %) of depicted sexual behaviors, and scenes of rape or sexual assault were very rare (2 %).

Major disparities were found in terms of each soap opera's share of sexual behavior, as well as in the distribution of different types of sexual behaviors across each of the seven soaps operas ($X^2 = 69.564$, $df = 54$, $p < .02$). Once again, *Hollyoaks in the City* and *Hollyoaks* were found to contain many more sexual behaviors (almost two-thirds, 67 %, of all the 191 sexual behavior scenes) than the rest of the soaps put together. *Hollyoaks in the City*, alone, accounted for nearly half of these scenes (91; 48 %) and *Hollyoaks* for nearly one in five of them (37; 19 %). The three most watched mainstream soaps collectively accounted for only 17 % of sexual behavior scenes (*Coronation Street*, 7 %; *East-Enders*, 5 %; and *Emmerdale*, 5 %). The two Australian productions, *Home and Away* and *Neighbours*, accounted for fewer than one in ten of these scenes each (8 %).

Levels of visual sexual explicitness

Eight out of ten scenes with sexual content (80 %; 401) were coded zero in terms of explicitness. Meanwhile, the remaining 105 scenes (nearly 20 %) were found to contain varying degrees of explicitness. The three highest levels of explicitness were most prevalent in the majority of these 105 scenes, with full nudity found in 12 scenes, discreet nudity in 34 scenes, and a partial but high level of nudity in 34 scenes. Provocative or suggestive appearance and disrobing were also found in 25 scenes. The extent of different levels of explicitness displayed varied significantly across the seven soap operas ($X^2 = 68.56$, $df = 30$, $p < .001$).

The variation in the distribution of sexual behavior between soap operas in terms of their explicitness was statistically significant ($X^2 = 75.43$, $df = 30$, $p < .001$). Scenes of full nudity were wholly contained within episodes of the post-9-p.m. watershed soap opera, *Hollyoaks in the City*.

Themes of sexual intercourse

Just over one in five of all scenes containing sex (21 %; 105 scenes) either depicted or discussed sexual intercourse. Some soaps contained relatively high

percentages of sexual scenes involving intercourse (*Hollyoaks in the City*, 26 %; *EastEnders*, 24 %; *Hollyoaks*, 19 %); in others, such scenes had much lower rates of occurrence (*Coronation Street*, 9 %; *Home and Away*, 11 %; *Neighbours*, 12 %; *Emmerdale*, 14 %).

Over half of all scenes that contained depictions of or talk about sexual intercourse (52 %; 55 scenes) made references to first-time sexual intercourse or loss of virginity (25 scenes) or to cheating/infidelity themes (30 scenes). The distribution of sexual intercourse themes varied significantly across the soaps examined here ($X^2 = 26.78$, $df = 12$, $p < .001$). *Hollyoaks* (six scenes) and its late-night spin-off, *Hollyoaks in the City* (19 scenes), both aimed at younger adult and teenage audiences, were more likely than any other soap opera to portray and discuss first-time sexual intercourse/loss of virginity.

During the coding process it was noted that in the six pre-9-p.m. watershed soap operas the overwhelming majority of sexual intercourse portrayals, regardless of the themes involved, occurred as part of clear and coherent storylines which dealt with sexual relationships rather than as isolated incidents. This observation was especially true of the three most-watched soaps, *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders*, and *Emmerdale*. In contrast, the post-9-p.m. watershed serial, *Hollyoaks in the City*, portrayed numerous sexual intercourse incidents that were outside distinct storylines and could therefore be regarded as somewhat gratuitous in nature. This serial presented patterns of sexual portrayal in which 'casual sex' was treated as unproblematic and accepted as the norm.

Discussion

Sex was found to form a prevalent aspect of the dramatic narratives played out in soap operas on British television. Given the popularity of these peak-viewing time serials, they presented plentiful opportunities for teenagers and young adults to learn lessons about sexual conduct at a time in their development when they are starting to become sexually active. In light of the previous evidence indicating the potential influences of televised depictions of sex on young people's sex-related attitudes and beliefs and propensities to engage in indiscriminate sexual couplings (Aubrey et al., 2003; Chandra et al., 2008; Martino et al., 2005), it is important to know whether sexual portrayals or themes were present in these programs.

The Australian- and British-produced serials studied here exhibited comparable levels of sexual content as revealed for mainstream television dramas in Ireland and the United States in terms of scene frequencies and duration of running time occupied by sexual material (Greenberg and Busselle, 1994;

Heinz-Knowles, 1996; Kunkel et al., 2005; MacKeogh, 2005). Soap operas on UK television were more likely to portray sexual *talk* than sexual *behavior*, again in line with other studies (Greenberg and Busselle, 1994; Kunkel et al., 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005; MacKeogh, 2005).

What is more important in considering the implications of these findings for how sex on soaps might influence members of their audiences is the nature of sexual portrayals. Although overt depictions of sexual activity might be hypothesized to have greater significance for social learning effects (Bandura, 2002), talk about sex can establish specific themes that could inform the developing sexual scripts of young viewers (Aubrey et al., 2003). Here, the findings indicated a clear dominance of sexual-intercourse-related themes as the focal points of discussions about sex between on-screen characters. Cheating and infidelity themes were also frequently present in relation to these conversations about sex. The prevalence of such conversational themes in soaps such as *Hollyoaks in the City* and *Hollyoaks*, in which nearly all the lead characters were aged in their twenties, projects the message that sex is a preoccupation of young people and forms the basis of most social interactions and relationships. Furthermore, narratives that presented cheating, if not as normative, then certainly as commonplace, could encourage young people to regard such behavior as acceptable (see Brown et al., 1993; Collins et al., 2003).

Most policy concerns regarding the depiction of sex on television have centered on portrayals or narratives that might encourage young people to engage in sexually risky or extreme practices that might be dangerous for themselves or for others. Risky sexual practices accounted for around one in ten of scenes in which soap characters talked about sexual matters (10 %). Much of the talk, however, failed to draw attention to risk avoidance or to behaving responsibly such as by following safe sex practices, confirming findings from the United States (Kunkel et al., 2005).

Turning to overt sexual portrayals, scenes of sexual intercourse, whether implied or depicted, accounted for more than one in five (23 %) of sexual behaviors in the soaps studied here. Implied sexual intercourse, however, was four times as prevalent as overt depictions. Further, all eight instances of depicted sexual intercourse occurred in the late-night soap, *Hollyoaks in the City*. The prevalence of sexual intercourse observed here matched fairly closely the findings of previous studies for Ireland, the US and UK (Greenberg and Busselle, 1994; MacKeogh, 2005; Millwood-Hargrave, 1992).

In general, these soap operas shown on British television were, like those shown on US television, more likely to portray sexual behaviors of low rather than high levels of intimacy and explicitness (see Greenberg and Busselle, 1994; Kunkel et al., 2005). Although the sample contained scenes involving sexual

intercourse, most of those cases were concentrated within one soap opera that was broadcast late at night. The more widely viewed soaps shown earlier in the television schedules deal with sexual intercourse as an issue in a sensitive and subtle way.

Highly explicit sexual depictions were absent from mainstream network soaps shown during the day or in the early evening. There was some explicit discussion of sexual matters, and this was more prevalent than explicit depictions of sexual behavior. This finding reflected more general observations that soaps often comprise storylines frequently pre-occupied with sexual themes (Buckingham, 1987; Hobson, 2003).

More generally, when overt sexual activity was depicted it often occurred in relation to themes of infidelity or in relationships that had not been established for very long. Only in two soaps, *Hollyoaks* and *Hollyoaks in the City*, did sexual behavior occur in the context of an incestuous relationship or as part of a theme featuring prostitution. Perhaps of greater significance is that over half (52 %) of all sexual intercourse portrayals (both talk and behavior) involved the depiction or discussion of first-time sexual intercourse/loss of virginity or cheating/infidelity themes. The latter themes occurred mostly in *Hollyoaks* and *Hollyoaks in the City*, in which the lead characters were mostly very young adults and teens. Hence, the soaps studied here – and especially those with characters inviting the closest identification from young members of the audience – were populated by themes that focused on loss of virginity. The presence of this theme is important given previous findings showing the role that televised sex might play in early onset of sexual behavior and teen pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008; Ward and Rivadeneyra, 1999).

The portrayal of sexual intercourse cases in all the six peak-time soap operas – unlike the portrayal of a substantial number of cases in *Hollyoaks in the City* – was integral to the development of storylines, and the themes involved indicated the genre's reliance on tackling controversies and cultural taboos. Assumptions that, for example, soap operas 'include very little explicit or visual sexual activity in their storylines' and 'there is little evidence of the sexual activity taking place' in soap operas (Hobson, 2003, p. 129), while holding true of the nature and to some extent of the amount of sexual portrayal, tend to be overshadowed by the salience of the themes of controversial sexual activities.

The evidence here indicated that soap operas did not shy away from tackling controversial sexual themes (e.g., incest, prostitution, cheating) and that sometimes, such themes would temporarily at least dominate plot-lines. Sex is an integral part of soap operas, but is generally treated cautiously during peak-viewing hours. Late at night, however, boundaries of popular taste and toler-

ance are being tested with more frequently occurring sexual portrayals of an explicit nature. In terms of attitudinal and behavioral influences, the most prevalent sexual themes in soap operas in general place more emphasis on risk than responsibility and sex outside rather than inside established relationships.

Bionotes

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