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Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Content on Television: A Quantitative Analysis Across Two Seasons

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Abstract

Two annual content analyses of programming from the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 television seasons ($n = 1,276$ and $1,439$ programs, respectively) were conducted to assess the presence of behaviors and verbal messages related to the sexuality of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Sexual content associated with nonheterosexuals was found in about 15% of programs overall; however, rates of occurrence within episodes were low. Of 14 genres, only movies and variety/comedy shows had substantial percentages of programs that contained nonheterosexual content. Programs on commercial broadcast networks were less likely to have nonheterosexual content than those on cable networks, especially those on premium cable movie networks. Implications of the continued lack of attention to sexual minorities are discussed for both heterosexual and nonheterosexual viewers.

Keywords

Content analyses; gays and lesbians; homosexuality; mass media; television; sexuality

Introduction

Sexual content of programming on American television has changed substantially since the medium was first invented more than 50 years ago. At its inception, television rarely presented sexual themes, and throughout the early decades of television, topics such as pregnancy, contraception, and other aspects of characters' sexuality were considered too sensitive to be portrayed or discussed in television shows. One theme that has been especially ignored is the portrayal of sexual issues related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. Despite the lifting of some longstanding taboos over the last several decades, television programming has been called "compulsory heterosexual" (Wolf & Kielwasser, 1991), and depictions of the sexual issues associated with nonheterosexuals¹ may remain relatively rare (Brown, 2002).

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¹For ease of presentation, we use the term "nonheterosexual" to refer collectively to all individuals whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual, including gay males, lesbians, and bisexuals of either sex.

Little quantitative research has been conducted to document gay issues and characters on television. Currently, most of what has been published about television and its portrayals of sexual minority themes and characters comes from qualitative writings. The purpose of this paper is to present quantitative data on sexual behavior and sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals across the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 television seasons. The findings from this study provide empirical data about the prevalence of nonheterosexual sexual content across a broad range of television programming, as well as the frequency of such sexual content when it is presented.

Before 1970, almost no gay characters could be found on television, and their relative absence from the screen continued until the 1990s (Wyatt, 2002). In recent years, the number of shows with leading or recurring gay characters has varied from 16 in the 1997-1998 season to 29 in the 2000-2001 season (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, n.d.). Although these numbers represent an increase compared with the past, they are still quite small compared with the overall number of characters appearing on television shows broadcast each season.

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), one important way in which television influences viewers is by providing vicarious experiences on which to model beliefs, attitudes, and behavior when real-life experiences are more limited. A closely related idea is that the media—by depicting sexual scenarios that people might not be able to see anywhere else—provide scripts for enacting various sexual behaviors (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) such as people having sex with a new partner. Reliance on television shows for sexual scripts and television characters as models for behavior may be particularly strong among youth, who may not have much first-hand experience with sexuality, yet are starting to solidify their sexual identities and become interested in sexual relationships (Chapin, 2000). In fact, as many as one in five teens reports that “entertainment” is their most important source of sexual information (Gibbs, 1993 as cited in Brown & Steele, 1995).

Although television has been criticized for not providing good role models for adolescents—for example, abstinence among teens is rarely portrayed in a positive light (Committee on Communications, 1995)—the lack of positive role models on television is more extreme for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). Most lesbians and gay men grow up in a straight community with few gay role models; thus, they are particularly vulnerable to the portrayals of gay people in the mass media (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Yet, sexual minorities are often ignored by the mainstream media and treated as if they do not exist. This exclusion has been posited to contribute to keeping sexual minorities invisible and without power, a process which Gross refers to as “symbolic annihilation” (Gross, 1991; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Portrayals of gay people of any age have been rare and often negative (Gross, 1991, 1996; Moritz, 1994), and portrayals of young nonheterosexuals are even less common (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). Shows for adolescent audiences often portray an exclusively heterosexual environment, with only occasional brief appearances by adolescent characters who are confused about their sexuality (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). This is important because gay adolescents often cannot get information relevant to their sexual orientation from friends and family and may use television as a source of information about gay issues (Paroski, 1987). The small number of gay characters on television, and even smaller number of adolescent gay characters, is proposed to contribute to a feeling of isolation among nonheterosexual youth (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992).

Even when gay characters are portrayed on television, they are often shown in an asexual context (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Gross (1991) cites examples of gay characters who were rarely, if ever, shown in sexual or romantic contexts such as Sidney in *Love Sidney*, Steven Carrington in *Dynasty*, and Marilyn McGrath in *Heartbeat*. More recent examples include Matt Fielding in *Melrose Place*, whose sexual orientation was prominently featured in promotions before the

show's premiere, and then rarely included in storylines for the first several seasons (Wyatt, 2002). Until very recently, the two openly gay characters on NBC's currently popular prime-time series *Will and Grace*—Will and Jack—were rarely shown being physically affectionate with other men; however, the lead female character Grace, who is heterosexual, has often been shown in sexual situations with men. *Will and Grace* also has been criticized for reinforcing heterosexual norms and stereotypes about homosexual traits such as gay men being feminine, flamboyant, and promiscuous (Battles & Morrow-Hilton, 2002). Battles and Morrow-Hilton argue that the safer, more assimilated asexual character of Will is often contrasted with the more flamboyant Jack, who is made fun of for being campy and “queeny.”

Infrequent positive media portrayals of homosexuality may also influence the beliefs of heterosexuals. Cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002) suggests that watching television influences viewers' attitudes and beliefs through a process whereby the world as portrayed by the media comes to be perceived by viewers—particularly high-volume viewers—as an accurate reflection of reality. Regular television watching is proposed to create a shared set of conceptions and expectations about social reality among otherwise diverse viewers. Based on cultivation theory, some researchers have suggested that the lack of portrayals of homosexuality on television may influence the beliefs among heavy viewers that homosexuality is abnormal or extremely rare. According to Gross (1994), television is a major influence on the assumptions people have about members of minority groups such as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals because many viewers may have little personal experience with such individuals. In support of cultivation theory, Gross (1984) found that television viewing was related to stronger negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians, regardless of viewers' political beliefs.

Despite the overwhelming heterosexuality of mainstream media representations, portrayals of gay and lesbian individuals on television have become somewhat more common since 1997 when *Ellen* became the first television show to have a gay leading character. This increase can be seen in the introduction of gay characters on many shows such as *Spin City*, *ER*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as shows that focus on gay characters in leading roles such as *Will and Grace* and *It's All Relative*. In addition, cable stations have included shows such as *Queer as Folk*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Oz* that depict gay characters in more complex plot lines and with more explicit sexual behaviors.

Although the presence of gay and lesbian characters may have increased recently on both commercial broadcast and cable networks, it is unclear how frequently television addresses the sexual issues and concerns of sexual minorities. As noted earlier, when gay and lesbian characters have been included in programs, they have often been portrayed in asexual contexts. Additionally, most of what has been published to date about homosexuality and television has been qualitative (including single-show case studies), focusing on how specific programs have portrayed gay characters. Although numerous content analyses have assessed the amount of sexual content shown on television generally (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002; Greenberg et al., 1993; Kunkel et al., 1999, 2003; Kunkel, Cope-Farrar, Biely, Maynard-Farinola, & Donnerstein, 2001; Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991; Ward, 1995), none have reported on the prevalence of sexual portrayals and talk about sexual issues related to gays, lesbians, or bisexuals.

This paper focuses on variables assessing nonheterosexual content that were included as part of two larger content analyses examining sexual content more broadly on American television. Data from the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 television seasons are used to answer questions about the prevalence and frequency of sexual behavior and sexual talk relating to nonheterosexuals. Specifically, the data analyses address two broad research questions: (1) To what extent are nonheterosexual sexual themes, specifically sexual behavior and talk about sex, found in television programming overall and what patterns emerge across program genres, network

types, and prime-time versus nonprime-time programming? (2) When nonheterosexual sexual content does occur, what is its frequency and how does it vary across genres, type of network, and prime-time versus nonprime-time programming?

Method

Program Samples

A 3 composite week sampling plan was used to obtain two large annual random samples of television programs of greatest interest to adolescents and that were inclusive of most segments of the television industry. Programs were taped from 11 stations—6 commercial broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN, and WB) and 5 cable networks (BET, Cinemax, HBO, MTV, and Showtime). Because the content analyses were part of a larger research project on television exposure and adolescent sexuality, several networks were included because of their appeal to young audiences including UPN, which televises a substantial number of programs with young African American characters (e.g., *The Steve Harvey Show*, *Moesha*, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *One on One*); WB, which tailors its programming to white youth, with programs such as *Gilmore Girls*, *7th Heaven*, *Sabrina*, and *Smallville*; and MTV, which shows music videos and other programs (e.g., dating reality shows) watched by many teens and young adults.

Composite week sampling designs have been used in previous content analysis studies to obtain representative samples of television programming (Kunkel et al., 1999, 2001, 2003; Madden & Grube, 1994; Wallack, Grube, Madden, & Breed, 1990; Wilson et al., 1997). This sampling strategy involves randomly selecting days of the week or specific time slots for recording over several weeks to reduce potential bias that could be introduced if all taping were done within a single calendar week. Recording of the sample occurred primarily over a 7-week period in the fall each year. Because season premiere episodes are staggered throughout the month of September, we began taping once all nonsyndicated series were showing episodes from the current season. Each week, three different days of the week were randomly selected for taping from all 11 stations, with all seven days of the week represented three times in the sample. The 8-hour time block for taping extended from 3:00 p.m. (at which time most youth are out of school) to 11:00 p.m. (through prime-time). The process of recapturing missed episodes (such as those for which the satellite signal was lost or the show was pre-empted by sporting or other special events) continued throughout the winter months.

Not all material that was taped was coded. As our focus was on scripted programming, we excluded daily news broadcasts, game shows, sports shows and events, and paid programming, as well as all forms of commercials and other promotions (e.g., teasers for network shows). Although music videos were taped, they were coded and analyzed separately due to their unique characteristics and are not reported here. The analyses presented in this paper, however, do include the nonmusic video programming from cable music entertainment stations including talk shows, variety/comedy shows, and reality shows. In addition, shows that were incomplete because they started before 3:00 p.m. or ended after 11:00 p.m. were not coded. Finally, episode repeats were eliminated from the sample.

The final sample for the 2001-2002 season consisted of 1,276 unique program episodes, whereas the final sample for the 2002-2003 season included 1,439 unique program episodes. The sample for the second content analysis was somewhat larger than the first year's sample as we made a concerted effort in year 2 to ensure that we had three episodes of each nonsyndicated series. Despite strict adherence to the sampling plan, additional taping was required when, for example, new shows entered the fall lineup after the start of the new season to substitute for cancelled shows or when the day and time slot for a series was changed.

Measures

The codebook for the larger study was based substantially on the variables developed by Kunkel and colleagues (1999, 2001, 2003) in their content analyses conducted for the Kaiser Family Foundation. We created additional items, including those on same-sex sexual behavior and sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals. In contrast to Kunkel and colleagues, who used the scene as the primary unit of analysis, our content analyses involved coding for sexual content in 2-minute intervals of program time. Because scenes vary considerably in length and, thus, do not provide a constant unit of measure for making comparisons across programs, we used a standard coding unit based on time. Coding media programming in designated time intervals has been used frequently by other researchers conducting content analyses across various program genres including movies, soap operas, and music videos (Hazan, Lipton, & Glantz, 1994; Lowery, 1980; Roberts, Christenson, Henriksen, & Bandy, 2002; Roberts, Henriksen, & Christenson, 1999; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993; Stockwell & Glantz, 1997; Terre, Drabman, & Speer, 1991).

For purposes of this content analysis, sex was defined as any depiction of sexual activity, sexually suggestive behavior, or any talk about sexuality or sexual activity. To be conservative and avoid overcoding sexual content, messages about sex were differentiated from nonsexual messages related to romance and relationships, which were not coded. For example, a statement such as “I love my boyfriend” would not be coded whereas a statement such as “I made love to my boyfriend” would be coded.

Same-sex sexual behavior—Every 2-minute interval that had been coded as containing at least one type of sexual activity tracked in the main coding task—flirting, kissing, intimate touching, sexual intercourse implied, sexual intercourse depicted, and other sexual behavior²—was also assessed for the presence of same-sex sexual behavior. For this item, coders used a yes/no response format to indicate whether any of the sexual behavior depicted in the interval occurred between two people of the same sex.

Talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues—Each 2-minute interval that had been coded as containing at least one instance of talk from the sexual talk categories used in the main coding task (e.g., comments about own/others' sexual actions or interests, talk about sexual intercourse that has already occurred, talk about sex crimes) was also coded for whether any of the sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals. For this item, coders again used a yes/no response format to indicate whether any of the sexual talk reflected the sexual interests or concerns of nonheterosexual persons. Most often, such comments related to gays and lesbians, although occasionally they were associated with bisexuals.

Sexual comments involving gay and lesbian references can have purposes other than portraying the sexual concerns of these groups such as use by straight characters to reaffirm their heterosexuality or to tease another person. Thus, criteria were established to ensure that this item was coded “yes” for an interval only when talk about sex involving nonheterosexual references actually addressed sexual issues of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals; otherwise, the comments were coded in their appropriate sexual talk category but did not count toward a yes response for this item. For example, if a male character were to defend his current dating dry spell and lack of sex life by asserting, “Well, it's not like I'm gay; I just haven't met the right girl!” such a comment would have been coded in the main coding task in the sexual talk category “own/others' sexual interests or actions” because he made a reference to his sexual

²The other sexual behavior category was used to capture all other types of sexual activities that did not fall into the categories specified—flirting, kissing, intimate touching, sexual intercourse implied, and sexual intercourse depicted—including low-level sexual acts such as leering to high-level sexual acts such as masturbation and bondage and discipline.

interest in women, but the reference to not being gay would not have counted toward a positive response to the item on talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues.

Program Coding

Coder training—For the first year's content analysis, 16 students (10 females, 6 males) from local universities served as coders; in the second year, 13 coders (8 females, 5 males) who were either current college students or recent graduates conducted the content coding. Six of the coders worked on both content analyses. The phases of coder training included orientation to the coding task and codebook, large group coding of shows not in the sample with supervisors, and finally individual coding of practice shows where coders assessed shows individually and then discussed the results interval by interval in weekly group meetings. Preliminary reliability analyses were conducted on data collected during the individual practice phase of training to determine when coders could proceed with the actual coding task. The reliability analyses presented below, however, relate to assessments of coder agreement obtained from the coding of a subset of shows in the program samples.

Coding procedures—Coders watched sequential 2-minute intervals of program time and coded the presence or absence of sexual behavior and talk about sex related to nonheterosexuals. As the coding was confined to program content and excluded commercials and other promotions, coders used kitchen timers and the counters on the videocassette recorders to track 2-minute intervals of program time. Coders recorded data on scannable forms for each interval as they viewed it. Although coders were allowed to carry information forward (i.e., use information presented in prior intervals to understand the content in later ones), they were not permitted to code backwards (i.e., use information learned later in a program to go back and change the coding in an earlier interval). All opening credits and those closing credits accompanied by content from the current episode (i.e., a final scene) were coded.

Interrater Reliability Analyses

Approximately 11 to 12% of the shows in the program samples ($n = 157$ and $n = 154$ for the first and second content analyses, respectively) were randomly assigned to two coders for independent coding and reliability assessment. After both coders' data had been recorded and analyzed for reliability purposes, the coders then met to resolve any discrepancies in the two sets of ratings and produce a final set of ratings for the show that was used in data analyses of the entire program sample. Assessment of reliability was conducted on an ongoing basis throughout the 4 to 5 months it took coders to complete the entire program sample each year. Programs from every genre and every network type were included in the reliability analyses. Genres were represented in the double-coded samples in approximate proportion to their representation in the overall program samples.

For purposes of reliability assessment, the number of 2-minute intervals coded for each variable related to sexual minorities was summed across the intervals in an episode to gauge the frequency with which same-sex sexual behavior and talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues occurred within each program episode. This summing resulted in converting nominal data (i.e., presence/absence) at the 2-minute-interval level into frequency counts at the program level (number of intervals in which same-sex sexual behavior occurred in the episode). Therefore, the reliability analyses used the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC). The ICC is an assessment of the proportion of variance in the measures attributable to coder agreement corrected for chance. For interval data such as the frequency counts used here, the ICC is equivalent to Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff, 1980).

An ICC of .70 was used as the criterion for acceptable reliability. Both items used to assess the presence of nonheterosexual themes substantially exceeded this criterion. The ICC for

same-sex sexual behavior was .97 in year 1 and .99 in year 2. The ICC for talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues was .89 in year 1 and .95 in year 2.

Data Analyses

To answer the first set of research questions regarding the prevalence of nonheterosexual material on television, we used episode-level data (e.g., percentages of episodes containing same-sex sexual behavior and containing talk about sex related to nonheterosexuals) and chi-square analyses to examine between-group differences with these nominal data. For the second set of research questions, we used only those shows that contained nonheterosexual sexual content and assessed their frequency across 2-minute intervals (e.g., number of intervals per hour of program time with nonheterosexual sexual talk). For these analyses, we used *t*-tests or analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test group differences. Significant omnibus *F*-tests were followed up with post hoc comparisons using Tamhane's T2 test, which does not assume equal cell size or equal variance, to identify significant differences across groups.

Results

Prevalence of Nonheterosexual Sexual Content

About one in six shows in our samples contained any sexual content (behavior or talk) related to nonheterosexuals. The slight increase in nonheterosexual sexual content from the 2001-2002 season (14.5%) to the 2002-2003 season (17.4%) was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 2715) = 4.15, p < .05$. This difference was small, however, and the increases in the percentages of shows with same-sex sexual behavior (7.0% in year 1 vs. 7.8% in year 2) and with talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues (11.4% in year 1 and 12.9% in year 2) were not significant when considered separately.

Table 1 displays the percentage of shows that contained any same-sex sexual behavior and any sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals by program genres, by type of network, and by time of day aired. For network type, the 11 stations were classified into one of three categories: commercial broadcast (which included the three major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—as well as Fox, UPN, and WB), cable music entertainment (which included BET and MTV), and premium cable movie (which included Cinemax, HBO, and Showtime). With respect to time of day broadcast, shows airing between 3:00 and 8:00 p.m. were categorized as late afternoon/early evening and those shown between 8:00 and 11:00 p.m. were classified as prime-time.

Genre comparisons—For the overall samples as well as for most genres, talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues was more prevalent than same-sex sexual behavior (see Table 1). In most cases, there was a high degree of correspondence between a genre's relative rankings for same-sex sexual behavior and talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues. Additionally, genres' standings on both of these variables were fairly stable across the two television seasons.

Three genres were consistently low in both forms of nonheterosexual sexual content: Children's cartoons (none of which contained sexual behavior or sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals in either year), news magazines (0% for behavior and talk in year 1; 3.2% and 6.5%, respectively, for behavior and talk in year 2), and talk shows (0 and 3.0%, respectively, for behavior and talk in year 1; 2.2 and 8.9%, respectively, for behavior and talk for year 2).³ Genres that tended to have the highest proportions of programs with nonheterosexual content were variety/comedy and feature film. Made-for-TV movies and programs classified as “other”

³Because our program sample was collected between 3:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m., some talk shows, such as *Jerry Springer*, that may deal more frequently with sexual themes were not included because they were broadcast earlier in the day. The 12 talk shows in our sample included those broadcast in the afternoon and evening such as *Oprah*, *Rosie O'Donnell*, *Ricki Lake*, *The Other Half*, and *BET Tonight* as well as political talk shows (e.g., *Face the Nation*, *McLaughlin Group*, *The Chris Matthews Show*).

also had relatively high proportions with nonheterosexual sexual content; however, both of these categories contained only a small number of shows ($n = 7$), making it difficult to draw conclusions about them. Therefore, although we include these latter two genres in the tables, we do not highlight the findings associated with them.

Network-type comparisons—Across network types, we found similar patterns generally in nonheterosexual sexual content between the two television seasons, with consistently lower percentages of shows on commercial broadcast networks containing same-sex sexual behavior and sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals and the highest percentages of shows with both types of content on premium cable movie networks. Specifically, in both seasons, the percentages of shows with same-sex sexual behavior on commercial broadcast networks (3.9 and 4.5%, respectively in year 1 and year 2) were significantly lower than the percentages found in cable music entertainment networks (13.7% in year 1; $\chi^2(1, N = 1091) = 25.0, p < .001$ and 11.9% in year 2; $\chi^2(1, N = 1248) = 16.9, p < .001$) and premium cable movie networks (16.8% in year 1; $\chi^2(1, N = 1123) = 44.6, p < .001$ and 22.0% in year 2; $\chi^2(1, N = 1245) = 74.9, p < .001$). The difference between the two cable network types was not statistically significant in year 1; however, it did reach significance in year 2, $\chi^2(1, N = 385) = 7.0, p < .05$. Regarding non-heterosexual sexual talk, the percentages of shows on premium cable movie networks (23.8% in year 1 and 22.0% in year 2) were significantly higher than the percentages found on commercial broadcast networks (8.7% in year 1; $\chi^2(1, N = 1123) = 35.1, p < .001$ and 10.0% in year 2; $\chi^2(1, N = 1245) = 22.5, p < .001$). In year 1, the percentage on premium cable movie networks was also significantly higher than that on cable music entertainment networks (12.4%), $\chi^2(1, N = 338) = 7.1, p < .01$; however, in year 2, the difference between the two cable network types was not significant.

Time of broadcast comparisons—In year 1, the percentages of prime-time shows containing same-sex sexual behavior (9.6%) and nonheterosexual sexual talk (16.0%) were significantly higher than those for shows broadcast in late afternoon and early evening (5.6% for behavior; $\chi^2(1, N = 1276) = 7.1, p < .05$ and 8.9% for talk; $\chi^2(1, N = 1276) = 14.3, p < .001$). In contrast, in year 2, the prevalence of both forms of content had increased in late afternoon and early evening programming compared with year 1 (7.3% for behavior and 13.2% for talk) and decreased slightly in prime-time (8.7% for behavior and 12.5% for talk) so that comparisons between these two periods were not significantly different.

Frequency of Nonheterosexual Sexual Content

For the shows that contained any same-sex sexual behavior and those that contained any nonheterosexual sexual talk, the frequency of such content was assessed by computing the average number of 2-minute intervals per hour of program time.⁴ Table 2 presents these data for both content analyses. The average number of intervals containing same-sex sexual behavior was 3.7 in year 1 and dropped to 3.0 in year 2. This difference, however, was not statistically significant ($p = .23$). Similarly a t -test of the 331 episodes from year 1 and year 2 that contained non-heterosexual sexual talk indicated that the difference in the frequency of such content between the two television seasons (4.2 intervals in year 1 and 4.9 intervals for year 2) was not significant ($p = .18$).

Genre comparisons—Among episodes that contained either same-sex sexual behavior or talk about sex related to nonheterosexuals, about two-thirds were classified in three genres:

⁴Because our samples include programs from both commercial broadcast and cable networks, we used a standard unit—number of 2-minute intervals per hour of program time rather than number of 2-minute intervals per 1-hour show—to assess the frequency of sexual behavior and talk about sex related to nonheterosexuals. This accounts for the fact that commercials substantially reduce the amount of program content on broadcast networks to about 22 two-minute intervals in a one-hour program, whereas 1-hour cable shows typically have about 30 two-minute intervals.

Situation comedy, drama, and feature film. The average frequency of portrayals of same-sex sexual behavior ranged in year 1 from 1.3 intervals per hour of program time for feature films to 11.0 for reality programs (ignoring the other category because there was only a single show containing same-sex sexual behavior or nonheterosexual talk each year). Interestingly, the range was much smaller in year 2, from 1.1 intervals per hour for feature films to a high of only 4.9 intervals for the reality genre. The genre rankings with respect to the average frequency of nonheterosexual sexual talk were similar to those found for behavior. In year 1, the genre with the fewest intervals per hour of program time with talk related to nonheterosexuals was feature films (1.7), and the genres with the highest average number of intervals were talk shows (14.3, based on only 2 shows) and reality shows (10.8). In year 2, TV movies and feature films anchored the low end of the range with 1.0 and 1.5 intervals, respectively, and talk shows were at the high end with 8.4 intervals per hour of program time.

Network-type comparisons—ANOVAs on the average number of intervals per hour with same-sex sexual behavior and with nonheterosexual sexual talk were used to investigate differences across network types each year. A significant effect for network type emerged from the analysis conducted on the number of intervals per hour with same-sex sexual behavior in year 1, $F(2, 86) = 7.5, p < .001$. Comparisons using Tamhane's T2 showed that programs on the two cable music entertainment networks had more intervals per hour of program time containing same-sex sexual behavior on average ($M = 6.6$) than those on commercial broadcast networks ($M = 2.6$), $p < .05$. The premium cable movie networks ($M = 2.9$) were not significantly different from either the commercial broadcast or cable music entertainment networks. Although the one-way ANOVA on talk about nonheterosexual issues for the 2001-2002 season was significant, $F(2, 142) = 5.8, p < .01$, post hoc comparisons revealed no differences between the three network groups. ANOVAs conducted on the year 2 data revealed no significant effect for network type on either variable ($p = .49$ and $p = .27$ for number of intervals with same-sex sexual behavior and with talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues, respectively).

Time of broadcast comparisons—Although generally the average number of intervals with sexual behavior and with sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals was slightly higher in prime-time, *t-tests* revealed that none of the comparisons with late afternoon/early evening programming were significant.

Discussion

In our combined sample of more than 2,700 program episodes from two consecutive television seasons, we found that about 15% of shows contained at least one instance of sexual behavior or talk about sex related to gays, lesbians, or bisexuals. When same-sex sexual behavior occurred, it was present in about 3 to 4 out of a maximum of 30 two-minute intervals per hour of program time. The rate for talk about nonheterosexual sexual issues was slightly higher at 4 to 5 intervals per hour of program time for those episodes where it occurred. In interpreting these data, it is important to keep in mind that coding a show or a 2-minute interval positively for either variable could occur with as little as a single instance of such content. Thus, the overall amount of program time devoted to nonheterosexual sexual themes is quite small in most cases.

When we looked at patterns in the prevalence of nonheterosexual content across different types of television programs, we found generally that genres' rankings in terms of sexual behavior and talk about sex were similar within and stable across the two content analyses. In addition to children's cartoons, which contained no nonheterosexual content in either year, two nonfictional genres were consistently low in the proportion of shows with same-sex sexual behavior and percentage of shows with sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals—news

magazines and talk shows. At the other extreme, the two genres with the highest percentages of shows with nonheterosexual content were feature film and variety/comedy. Some divergent patterns, however, did emerge when we examined the frequency data. For example, although feature film was one of the genres with a high proportion of shows containing such content, it ranked among the lowest in terms of frequency across shows that contained nonheterosexual content. Similarly, the reality genre, which was in the midrange in terms of prevalence of sexual content related to gays, lesbians, or bisexuals ranked high in terms of frequency of nonheterosexual content in the subset of shows with such content present. These findings for nonheterosexual content in feature films and reality shows mirror the patterns we found in our main content analyses for sexual content in general (Fisher, Mill, Grube, & Gruber, in press). In the larger content analyses, feature films were characterized by a high prevalence of episodes containing sexual behavior and sexual talk (92.7 and 93.2%, respectively), but they were also among the lowest in terms of the rate of presentation of such content (5.3 intervals per hour for sexual behavior, 7.0 intervals per hour for sexual talk). Similarly, the reality genre was not at either extreme in terms of prevalence of sexual content (55.2% for sexual behavior and 64.7% for sexual talk), but it had the greatest number of intervals per hour with sexual behavior (13.8) and with sexual talk (16.5) among shows that contained sexual content. These data suggest that for some genres, sexual content overall as well as that related to sexual minorities is widely dispersed across episodes but typically not a central theme. For other genres, such content is confined to only a relatively small proportion of episodes, but when it appears it is a major focus of program content.

With respect to differences across the three network types, we found commercial broadcast networks to be consistently lower than premium cable movie channels regarding the prevalence of sexual behavior and sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals; most often, the comparisons of commercial broadcast networks to cable music entertainment networks—which fell in between—were also significant. Interestingly, few cross-network differences emerged from the frequency data suggesting that although a greater proportion of cable shows are likely to include some nonheterosexual sexual content, such material is still sparse throughout the television landscape.

With respect to time of day of broadcast, prime-time shows had significantly higher proportions of shows with sexual behavior and sexual talk related to nonheterosexuals in year 1. By year 2, however, the prime-time/nonprime-time differences were no longer significant as the proportion of shows with both types of nonheterosexual content increased somewhat in late afternoon/early evening and decreased slightly in prime-time. There are at least two possible explanations for the increase in nonheterosexual content during nonprime-time. One reason is that there was a greater proportion of reality shows in the afternoon/early evening time block in the year 2 sample (18.4%) compared with the year 1 sample (9.8%). Many of these afternoon/early evening reality shows such as *Blind Date*, *Ex-Treme Dating*, and *Road Rules* contained nonheterosexual content. A second reason is that the situation comedy *Will and Grace*, which almost always has nonheterosexual content, was broadcast only during prime-time in year 1, but it appeared as a syndicated afternoon/early evening show as well as a prime-time series in the year 2 sample.

Overall, the findings from this research suggest that portrayals or discussions of sexual situations related to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are still relatively infrequent, especially compared with the prevalence of sexual content on television associated with heterosexuals. Based on cultivation theory, television viewers may be more likely to believe that nonheterosexual behavior is extremely unusual or deviant. The relative infrequency of nonheterosexual content on television may be partially offset by the publicity received by the few shows with prominent gay characters (e.g., *Will and Grace*, *Ellen*, *Queer as Folk*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*). However, gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth still have few examples

of nonheterosexual characters, especially if they do not have access to cable or satellite television.

This study is one of the first to attempt to quantify the amount of sexual content on television relating to sexual minorities. Although it provides a gauge of how pervasive such content is, many questions remained unanswered. For example, we coded any sexual behavior that occurred between two people of the same sex, even though these individuals were not always gay, lesbian, or bisexual (e.g., two straight women flirting with each other to discourage the unwanted advances of men trying to hit on them). We chose to code simply based on the visual image because the sexual orientation of individuals shown on television engaging in sexual behavior is often unknown, especially to viewers who are not familiar with a show and its characters. Using this coding rule, however, may overstate the actual frequency with which sexual behaviors are portrayed between individuals belonging to sexual minorities. Second, we did not code the valence of the talk related to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Although we did use criteria to avoid coding comments that were irrelevant to nonheterosexuals' sexuality, we cannot assess with our data how often the nonheterosexual talk refers in a negative manner to the sexual desires, interests, or actions of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. We examined the quantity of talk about sex related to nonheterosexuals as a starting point for determining the extent to which gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth may have access to information and role models on television relevant to their sexual orientations. It is important to note, however, that the impact of such sexual talk on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of both sexual minority viewers and heterosexual viewers will rely heavily on the tone and manner in which such comments are presented. Thus, critical issues for future research will be to examine the qualitative nature of sexual talk (and sexual portrayals) related to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (e.g., negative and derisive, neutral, or positive and accepting) and the relative frequency with which such comments are made by heterosexuals and members of sexual minorities to better understand the potential effect of such content.

In terms of the sexual socialization of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, an important factor in addition to the volume of nonheterosexual content or gay characters and closely related to the quality of presentation of nonheterosexual material is the overall programmatic context—serious versus humorous—in which issues relating to sexual orientation are presented. As the literature review indicated, criticism has been leveled at portrayals of gay characters for reinforcing stereotypes, such as gay men as promiscuous. Our analyses indicate that a substantial portion of the sexual content related to gays, lesbian, and bisexuals occurs in various forms of comedies, which are likely to present such material in a humorous manner and may include stereotypical and negative portrayals. Among reality shows, a genre where nonheterosexual content occurs with a high frequency within shows that contain such content, issues surrounding sexuality often occur in very contrived dating situations, with little serious discussion. To the extent that nonheterosexual content occurs largely in such contexts—where gay characters and comments about gay sexual orientation appear primarily for comic value—young nonheterosexuals will continue to receive few media messages about healthy and responsible sexual relationships.

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Table 1
Percentage of Episodes with Same-Sex Sexual Behaviors and Sexual Talk Related to Nonheterosexuals

	N		Percentage Shows Same-Sex Behavior		Percentage Shows Nonheterosexual Talk	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
All episodes	1,276	1,439	7.0	7.8	11.4	12.9
Genre						
Situation comedy	344	380	5.2	4.5	12.5	13.7
Drama	154	186	7.8	11.3	10.4	12.9
Comedy drama	20	18	10.0	5.6	15.0	0.0
News magazine	31	31	0.0	0.0	3.2	6.5
Entertainment magazine	80	105	7.5	5.7	12.5	11.4
Reality	116	207	5.2	7.7	6.0	11.6
Talk show	67	90	0.0	2.2	3.0	8.9
Children's cartoon	121	58	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other animated	60	70	3.3	4.3	15.0	8.6
TV movie	7	15	28.6	0.0	42.9	26.7
Feature film	177	173	15.8	19.7	21.5	18.5
Variety/Comedy	43	56	18.6	10.7	23.3	28.6
Documentary/Historical	49	47	8.2	10.6	4.1	10.6
Other	7	3	14.3	33.3	14.3	33.3
Type of network						
Commercial broadcast	938	1054	3.9 _a	4.5 _a	8.7 _a	10.0 _a
Cable music entertainment	153	194	13.7 _b	11.9 _b	12.4 _a	20.1 _b
Premium cable movie	185	191	16.8 _b	22.0 _c	23.8 _b	22.0 _b
Time of day aired						
Late afternoon/Early evening	839	933	5.6 _a	7.3	8.9 _a	13.2
Primetime (8:00-11:00 p.m.)	437	506	9.6 _b	8.7	16.0 _b	12.5

Note: Within type of network and time of day aired, percentages in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ in chi-square analyses. Percentages without subscripts were not significantly different from other percentages in that column.

Table 2
Amount of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior and Talk Related to Nonheterosexuals per Hour of Program Time

	Number-of Episodes with Same-Sex Behavior		Average Intervals per Hour with Same-Sex Behavior		Number of Episodes with Nonheterosexual Talk		Average Intervals per Hour with Nonheterosexual Talk	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Overall	89	112	3.7	3.0	145	186	4.2	4.9
Genre								
Situation comedy	18	17	3.3	3.2	43	52	4.8	7.2
Drama	12	21	4.2	4.8	16	24	5.1	5.6
Comedy drama	2	1	3.0	1.4	3	0	5.6	0.0
News magazine	0	0	0.0	0.0	1	2	2.7	2.1
Entertainment magazine	6	6	2.8	2.9	10	12	3.0	4.1
Reality	6	16	11.0	4.9	7	24	10.8	6.2
Talk show	0	2	0.0	2.2	2	8	14.3	8.4
Children's cartoon	0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0	0.0	0.0
Other animated	2	3	2.7	2.7	9	6	3.6	3.3
TV movie	2	0	2.3	0.0	3	4	5.6	1.0
Feature film	28	34	1.3	1.1	38	32	1.7	1.5
Variety/Comedy	8	6	4.6	2.4	10	16	2.6	3.0
Documentary/Historical	4	5	7.6	2.8	2	5	4.1	2.8
Other	1	1	14.3	4.3	1	1	14.3	8.6
Type of network								
Commercial broadcast	37	47	2.6 _a	2.7	82	105	4.0	5.4
Cable music entertainment	21	23	6.6 _b	3.8	19	39	7.2	4.8
Premium cable movie	31	42	2.9	2.9	44	42	3.2	3.8
Time of day aired								
Late afternoon/Early evening	47	68	3.5	2.7	75	123	3.5	5.1
Primetime (8:00-11:00 p.m.)	42	44	3.8	3.5	70	63	4.9	4.5

Note: Within type of network and time of day aired, means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ in comparisons using Tamhane's T2 test and t -test, respectively. Means without subscripts were not significantly different from any of the other means in that column.