

Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire? Reality Dating Television Programs, Attitudes Toward Sex, and Sexual Behaviors

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Past research has revealed associations between television viewing and sexual attitudes and behaviors. We examined a burgeoning new television genre, reality dating programs (RDPs). Undergraduate students (ages 18–24) reported their overall television viewing, their RDP viewing, and their involvement with RDPs (watching in order to learn and watching in order to be entertained). They also completed measures of attitudes toward sex, dating, and relationships, and answered questions about sexual behavior. Most participants were occasional or frequent viewers of at least one RDP. Men reported using RDPs for learning more than did women; there was no gender difference in use of RDPs for entertainment. Total amount of RDP viewing was positively correlated, for both men and women, with adversarial sexual beliefs, endorsement of a sexual double standard, and the beliefs that men are sex-driven, that appearance is important in dating, and that dating is a game. In all cases, however, these relationships were partially or totally mediated through viewer involvement. Men and women who watched RDPs tended to be less sexually experienced; there were few other correlations with sexual behaviors.

KEY WORDS: reality dating television programs; viewer involvement; attitudes toward sex; sexual behaviors; entertainment and learning motives.

Exploring one's sexual identity and learning how to manage physical and emotional intimacy in relationships with others are fundamental developmental tasks for adolescents and young adults (Arnett, 2000; Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Although such exploration offers emerging adults a platform from which to form healthy intimate relationships, the development of sexual values and attitudes toward sex is subject to many social influences. Adolescents are exposed to numerous messages about sexuality, from a variety of sources. These messages impact adolescents' attitudes toward and beliefs about dating

and sexuality, which in turn affect behavioral choices such as timing and relative safety of sexual activity (MacCorquodale, 1984; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993).

Parents, friends, and schools are frequently cited as the top sources of cultural messages about sexuality (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000; Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002), but television also plays a major role in young people's acquisition of sexual information (Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Brown & Steele, 1995; Ward, 2003). Sexual references, jokes, and innuendoes are prevalent in television programs (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999), which often cover topics (e.g., sexual pleasure) that parents and schools typically do not address (Strasburger, 1995). Thus, it would not be surprising to see associations between television viewing and attitudes toward sex and sexual behaviors; in fact, such associations have been found for a variety of sexually-oriented genres including

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soap operas and prime-time situation comedies [for reviews, see Gruber and Grube (2000) and Ward (2003)]. However, the specific attitudinal associations differ from genre to genre and are often distinct from associations with overall television viewing (Calvin, Carroll, & Shmidt, 1993; Haferkamp, 1999; Ward, 2003). Due to the differential effects that various genres may have on attitudes and behaviors, it is important to study new genres that arise, especially those with high sexual content. One such genre is the prolific, but as yet unexamined, realm of reality dating programs.

Reality Dating Programs

With the recent influx of reality television programming, the number of reality dating programs (RDPs) has swelled from three in 1997 to over 30 in 2004. Currently, reality dating television includes numerous and diverse programs, which range from those that follow couples on light-hearted sexually-driven blind dates to semiserious competitions for marriage proposals. Researchers have yet to explore or consider the effects of viewing RDPs; however, the past popularity and continued proliferation of these programs suggest that reality dating television constitutes its own genre, which is worthy of serious and focused attention.

Several unique aspects of RDPs prompted us to explore the relationships between these programs and the attitudes and behaviors of the young adults who watch them. Because the content of RDPs is specifically and often explicitly sexual, it is possible that dating programs may have a similar or potentially greater impact on both attitudes toward sex and sexual behaviors than genres in which sexual relationships are not the primary focus. Although no systematic content analyses of RDPs have been published, the premises of these programs are often derived from gender stereotypical concepts of sexuality and dating, which suggests not only that the programs are sexually oriented, but that they provide constricting and often negative messages about dating and relationships. In addition, these programs profess to depict "reality" and to involve "real people" instead of actors. Because viewers who perceive television portrayals as realistic are more likely to be affected by them (Potter, 1986), "reality" programs such as RDPs might have stronger effects than more scripted programs such as situation comedies or soap operas. For these reasons, investigations of this new

genre should add useful information to the growing database of knowledge about sexual socialization, adolescence, and the media.

Associations Between Viewing Sexually-Oriented Television and Attitudes Toward Sex

Previous research on the role of television in sexual socialization has shown that greater regular exposure to sexually-oriented programs is associated with gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex (Walsh-Childers & Brown, 1993; Ward, 2002), including acceptance of recreational sexual intercourse (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999), endorsement of dysfunctional beliefs about relationships (Haferkamp, 1999), and endorsement (by girls) of the importance of appearance (Borzekowski, Robinson, & Killen, 2000). Experimental studies have shown similar changes in gender stereotypic attitudes toward sex following exposure to sexually-oriented media, including endorsement of adversarial sexual beliefs (the belief that men and women are inherently in opposition to one another in heterosexual romantic relationships; Kalof, 1999), and endorsement of the beliefs that men are sex-driven, that dating is a game, and that women are sex objects (Ward, 2002).

Associations Between Viewing Sexually-Oriented Television and Sexual Behaviors

Evidence also suggests that greater exposure to sexually-oriented television is sometimes linked to viewers' sexual behavior. For example, among young women, frequent music video viewing has been linked with both a greater number of sexual partners and with more sexual permissiveness (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987; Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995; Wingood et al., 2003). In addition, in a longitudinal study of sexual activity and media habits, adolescents who viewed higher proportions of television with sexual content were more likely to become sexually active over the course of the study than were adolescents who watched lower proportions (Brown & Newcomer, 1991). Despite these examples of positive correlations between exposure to sexually-oriented television and sexual experience, studies have generally shown no connection between overall television viewing and sexual behaviors (Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987), which suggests that the

relationship between television viewing and sexual behavior is conditional and complex.

Role of Gender and Ethnicity in Sexual Socialization Through Television Viewing

Research on the relationship between television viewing and attitudes toward sex has established that gender is an important moderator variable. Ward (2002) found that, although amount of prime time viewing was positively associated with women's endorsement of traditional gender roles, viewing men as sex-driven, and believing dating to be a game, there was no association for men between these attitudes and prime time viewing. Moreover, although music video viewing was positively associated, for men, with endorsement of traditional gender roles and believing dating to be a game, these relationships were not present for women. Experimental research has revealed that girls exposed to sexist, but nonviolent, rap videos were more accepting of dating violence than were girls without such exposure, whereas boys' attitudes did not differ between conditions (Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995).

Research on television viewing and attitudes toward sex has shown that ethnicity is also an important demographic variable to consider. African American and European American participants report different attitudes toward sex (Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) and also differ in their level of sexual experience (Day, 1992; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Several studies have shown that Latino/a and African American youth watch more television than European American youth (Blosser, 1988; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 2004; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Previous researchers have also found that the role of television in sexual socialization differs between ethnic populations. For example, a longitudinal study by Walsh-Childers and Brown (1993) showed that greater total viewing of sexually-oriented television programming predicted increased acceptance of relationship gender stereotypes among African American youth and decreased acceptance among European American youth.

Role of Viewer Involvement in Sexual Socialization Through Television Viewing

A focus on the amount of television viewing is consistent with theoretical models based on

cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, M. Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). This theory proposes that television constructs a portrait of reality that is vivid, but often very different from reality. As viewers watch more and more television, they gradually come to cultivate or adopt beliefs about the world that coincide with this portrait. The important predictor is the amount of television viewing that takes place, rather than the psychological state of the viewer.

Although cultivation theory has received some support (M. Morgan & Shanahan, 1997; Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003; Segrin & Nabi, 2002) many researchers have instead begun to take a constructivist approach that focuses more on the role of the individual and suggests that the viewer's level of involvement with television programming is important to consider. This approach is based in part on uses and gratification theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), which emphasizes the importance of understanding the variety of purposes for which consumers use media and the different gratifications they derive from consumption. For example, Rubin (1984) identified several motivations for (or gratifications from) television viewing, including entertainment, relaxation, and information.

The underlying assumption of constructivist theories is that viewers' perceptions of and engagement with the television programs they watch are likely to be more important in the socialization process than is the sheer amount of television they view (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Furthermore, viewer involvement may mediate the effects of television viewing on attitudes and behaviors. In assessing the contribution of viewer involvement, researchers have found that viewers who identify more strongly with the characters (Fabes & Strouse, 1987), who find the programs to be more realistic (Potter, 1986), and who view television for specific purposes (Kim & Rubin, 1997) are more likely to be affected by the content they view. For example, in Ward's (2002) study, women who used television for entertainment and to learn about the world expressed greater acceptance of traditional gender roles and gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex (e.g., men are sex-driven, women are sex objects, and dating is a game). Again, however, effects of viewer involvement seem to vary according to background characteristics such as gender. Past studies have shown that women report higher perceived realism of television shows (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) and that viewer involvement predicts greater acceptance of recreational attitudes

toward sex for women, but not for men (Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). However, in some cases, correlations between involvement and other variables are stronger in men. For example, Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, and Yellin (2003) found that only men showed a relationship between involvement and sexual expectations.

The Present Study

We had several goals in conducting this research. Given that RDPs have not been previously studied, our first goal was to assess the extent of viewing. We wanted to determine how often young adults watch RDPs and what specific programs they watch. Based on the prevalence and apparent popularity of RDPs, we hypothesized that many young adults would report watching RDPs occasionally or frequently.

Because ethnic and gender differences have been found in previous studies (e.g., Ward, 2002), our second research goal was to explore associations between these two demographic variables and RDP viewing and involvement, attitudes toward sex, and sexual behaviors. We hypothesized that women would watch more RDPs, report more involvement with the programs, and have more or stronger relationships between RDP viewing and involvement and attitudes toward sex and sexual behaviors. Based on past studies (Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999), we also anticipated that ethnic minority populations would watch more television and endorse more gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex.

Our third goal was to examine whether amount of RDP viewing would correlate with sexual behavior and with gender stereotypical attitudes toward dating and sex. Based on the predictions of cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) and on findings from previous studies on other television genres (e.g., Romer et al., 2003) we expected that, as viewing of RDPs increased, there would also be increases in the amount of sexual experience and in the endorsement of gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex.

In contrast to the focus on viewing amount that is inherent in cultivation theory, other theoretical perspectives (e.g., uses and gratifications theory, Katz et al., 1974) emphasize the importance of viewers' engagement with the television programs they watch. Recent studies (Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005; Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) have also found that viewer involvement is important in un-

derstanding television's influence. Accordingly, our fourth research goal was to explore viewer involvement with RDPs. We predicted that higher viewer involvement would be associated with more gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex and with more sexual experience. In addition, we hypothesized that any effects of RDP viewing amount would be partially or totally mediated through viewer involvement with RDPs.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 334 undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Because sexual development is one of the fundamental tasks of late adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Collins & Sroufe, 1999) and sexual socialization is especially relevant to this developmental period, we limited our sample to students between the ages of 18 and 24. A majority of the participants ($n = 249$) received course credit toward a lower-division psychology course in exchange for their participation in the study. Twenty-five percent ($n = 85$) of participants were enrolled in an upper-division psychology course and were recruited separately.

Women comprised 67% ($n = 225$) and men comprised 33% ($n = 109$) of the sample. The mean age of the participants was 19.5 years ($SD = 1.46$). First-year students made up 45% of the sample; sophomores, juniors, and seniors made up 20%, 18%, and 17%, respectively. Fifty-four percent ($n = 179$) of participants identified as European American, 24% ($n = 78$) as Asian/Pacific Islander, 11% ($n = 35$) as Latina/Latino, 2% ($n = 8$) as African American, 7% ($n = 24$) as biracial, and 2% ($n = 7$) as Middle Eastern or other. Three people did not report their ethnicity. Most participants ($N = 309$, 92%) identified themselves as exclusively or predominantly heterosexual. Twelve participants (4%) identified as bisexual, seven (2%) as exclusively or predominantly homosexual, and six (2%) as "other."

Measures

Self-report questionnaires were used to gather information about demographics, sexual behaviors, attitudes toward dating and relationships, adversarial

sexual beliefs, television and RDP viewing, and viewer involvement with RDPs. Additional measures were also administered, but those data were not analyzed for the present study.

Sexual Behaviors

A set of five questions was used to assess various aspects of participants' sexual experience. To obtain an overall measure of sexual experience, we asked a question used by Ward (2002): "How would you describe your current level of experience with dating and sexual relationships?" Our 11-point response format was similar to that used by Ward. Four written labels were provided underneath the scale to guide responses: "just starting out" (0), "some dating" (2-3), "1-2 sexual relationships" (5-7), and "have had several sexual relationships" (9-10). Satisfaction with dating and sexual experience was assessed through the question: "How satisfied are you with your current level of experience with dating and sexual relationships?" (0 = very unsatisfied, 1 = unsatisfied, 2 = have no feelings either way, 3 = satisfied, 4 = very satisfied). Participants were prompted to report on consensual heterosexual intercourse experiences through the following three separate questions: 1) "Have you ever had sexual intercourse?"; 2) "Have you ever had a 'one-night stand' (i.e., had sex with someone you just met and didn't date after that)?"; and 3) "How frequently do you have sexual intercourse without using any form of protection or contraception?" (1 = never, 2 = only once, 3 = occasionally, 4 = about half the time, 5 = frequently). Only participants who answered "yes" to the first question answered questions 2 and 3. Each of these five items (experience, satisfaction, intercourse, one-night stand, and contraception) is used individually in subsequent analyses.

Attitudes Toward Dating and Relationships

Attitudes toward relationships were measured with a modified and abridged version of the Attitudes Toward Dating and Relationships Measure (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). The 25 questions we used comprised four separate subscales. The first subscale assessed endorsement of a traditional sexual double standard (e.g., "A woman who initiates sex is too aggressive," "A man should be more sexually expe-

rienced than his wife"; seven items; $\alpha = .63$). The second subscale assessed the importance of appearance (e.g., "In dating it is all about appearances," "Using her body and looks is the best way for a woman to attract a man"; five items; $\alpha = .80$). The third subscale assessed the attitude that men are sex-driven (e.g., "Men are mostly interested in women as potential sex partners and don't want to be 'just friends' with a woman," "Men think about sex all the time"; eight items; $\alpha = .77$). The fourth subscale assessed the attitude that dating is a game (e.g., "Men love a challenge and often choose to pursue the seemingly unattainable woman," "Women are flattered when two men fight over them"; five items; $\alpha = .71$). This final subscale was a later addition to the study and was administered to a subset of 111 participants (including all 85 recruited through the upper division course). (169) Participants responded to each statement on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 4 = *agree strongly*).

Adversarial Sexual Beliefs

We used the Adversarial Sexual Beliefs Scale (Burt, 1980) to assess the extent to which participants agreed with statements that suggest that men and women are inherently in opposition to one another in heterosexual romantic relationships. The scale consists of nine items related to gendered roles in relationships (e.g., "A lot of women seem to get pleasure in putting men down," "Men are out for only one thing"). Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*). The α coefficient in the present study was .85.

Overall Television and Reality Dating Program Viewing

Overall television viewing was assessed through the open-ended question: "How many hours of television do you watch a week?" Reality dating program viewing amount was assessed through responses to a comprehensive list of 27 different reality dating programs that aired at least one episode between September 2002 and June 2004. Participants were asked to indicate on a 6-point Likert scale how frequently they viewed each of these RDPs in the past year (0 = *never*; 1 = *seen it once or twice*; 2 = *once a month*; 3 = *every other week*; 4 = *pretty regularly, almost every week*; 5 = *every week*). The score derived from this question is referred to as RDP

viewing, which is the sum of the responses to the 27 listed programs.

Viewer Involvement With Reality Dating Programs

Because there was no preexisting scale to assess viewer involvement with RDPs, we developed a 14-item measure for this study. We drew from scales used in previous research on viewer involvement with prime-time and day-time television (e.g., Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) to develop items to measure the use of RDP programs for entertainment and learning. Sample items include: "Dating shows are entertaining and enjoyable," and "Dating shows help me learn from the mistakes of others." Participants responded to statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 2 = *disagree moderately*, 3 = *disagree mildly*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *agree mildly*, 6 = *agree moderately*, 7 = *agree strongly*). Additional information about the RDP viewer involvement scale, including factor analysis results, is presented in the Results section.

Procedure

One set of participants ($n = 249$) completed the questionnaires in groups of 1–8. Another set of participants ($n = 85$) completed the questionnaires during an initial class lecture for an upper division psychology course. No patterns of reliable differences other than age and year in school were found between the groups, which suggests that the size of the group in which the questionnaires were completed did not affect responses. After completing the questionnaires, participants in the first set received credit toward their introductory level psychology course and were given a list of community resources related to sexuality. The second set of participants took part in a discussion of study results later in the quarter.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Because no previous studies on reality dating programs have been published, we first provide basic descriptive information about RDP viewing and viewer involvement. Preliminary analyses also assessed gender and ethnic differences in the key variables.

Most Popular RDPs

All of the 27 programs on our list of RDPs had been seen at least once by at least two participants. Eighteen programs had at least one participant who reported watching it every week. The most popular program was *Elimidate*; 249 participants (77%) had viewed this program at least once. Following *Elimidate*, three other programs had been viewed at least once by over 50% of participants. These included *Blind Date* ($n = 233$, 72%), *Dismissed* ($n = 212$, 65%), and *Joe Millionaire* ($n = 178$, 55%). *Elimidate*, *Blind Date*, and *Dismissed* air several times a week (typically not in prime-time hours) and feature different women and men in each episode. Although the specific details vary across the three programs, in each case strangers engage in competitive and sexually-driven dates. *Joe Millionaire* was a prime-time series that aired once a week and followed women who were courting a man posing as a millionaire; he eliminated one woman from further consideration at the end of each episode. There were no gender differences in frequency of viewing the four programs (all t 's < 1.40 , all p 's $> .15$). Additional frequency data for the top 10 shows are presented in Table I.

Frequency of Overall Television and RDP Viewing

The next analyses assessed television viewing amount, which varied widely for this sample. The means and standard deviations for overall television and RDP viewing are reported in Table II. Participants reported watching television for an average of 10.0 hr per week; however, this figure ranged from 0 (4.9% of the sample) to 70 hr. Participants' RDP viewing scores, which were derived from the sum of responses to the list of 27 RDPs, ranged from 0 (5.2% of the sample) to 51. Overall television viewing and RDP viewing were correlated, $r = .27$, $p < .0001$.

Nine people did not complete the checklist measure of RDPs. Of the remaining 325 people, 17 (5.2%) had never seen any of the 27 programs, not even once or twice. Twelve (3.7%) had seen only one of the programs only once or twice. Forty-seven (14.5%) had seen more than one program, but had not seen any program more than once or twice. One hundred and fifty-eight (48.6%) had watched one or more programs on an occasional basis ("occasionally/once a month" or "every other week"). Ninety-one (28.0%) people watched at least one program

Table I. Percentages of Participants in Each Viewing Category for the 10 Most Frequently Viewed Reality Dating Programs

Program title	Never	Once or or twice	Once a month	Every other week	Pretty regularly	Every week
<i>Elimidate</i>	23.4	23.1	31.4	14.5	4.9	2.8
<i>Blind Date</i>	28.3	21.8	29.8	12.9	5.2	1.8
<i>Dismissed</i>	34.8	23.1	31.1	7.7	2.8	0.6
<i>Joe Millionaire</i>	45.2	27.7	10.2	7.7	6.5	2.8
<i>The Fifth Wheel</i>	50.5	25.5	17.5	4.3	1.5	0.6
<i>Tail Daters</i>	54.2	21.2	16.0	7.1	0.9	0.6
<i>The Bachelor</i>	62.0	26.5	6.8	1.9	2.2	0.6
<i>Temptation Island</i>	63.7	24.9	4.6	4.3	1.2	1.2
<i>Change of Heart</i>	65.8	20.9	10.8	1.2	0.6	0.6
<i>The Bachelorette</i>	69.8	19.4	4.3	3.1	1.5	1.8

Note. Participants were asked to report how often they had viewed each program in the past year.

on a regular basis (“pretty regularly, almost every week,” or “every week”). Thus, the majority (76.6%) of the participants were occasional or frequent viewers of at least one program on the list, and nearly everyone (94.8%) had seen at least one RDP at least once.

Viewer Involvement With RDPs

The third set of descriptive analyses examined responses to the RDP viewer involvement scale. For the 14 viewer involvement items, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .905, which

Table II. Descriptive Statistics and Tests of Gender Differences for Reality Dating Program (RDP) Viewing, Viewer Involvement, Attitudes Toward Sex, and Sexual Behaviors

Variable	Women			Men			<i>t</i> or χ^2
	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	
Viewing frequency							
TV hours (weekly)	220	9.62	9.63	107	10.81	8.62	−1.08
RDP viewing	218	13.44	9.75	107	11.64	8.99	1.61
Viewer involvement							
Entertainment	216	3.36	1.35	104	3.53	1.50	−1.02
Learning	216	1.89	0.97	104	2.26	1.16	−2.82**
Attitudes toward sex							
Adversarial sexual beliefs	215	2.51	0.88	106	3.12	1.14	−4.84***
Sexual double standard	224	1.57	0.40	108	1.72	0.45	−2.95**
Importance of appearance	224	2.08	0.63	109	2.44	0.66	−4.70***
Men as sex-driven	225	2.47	0.53	109	2.37	0.57	1.68†
Dating is a game	69	2.71	0.50	42	2.74	0.60	−0.29
Sexual behaviors							
Experience	222	5.88	2.49	109	5.95	2.36	−0.25
Satisfaction	221	2.76	1.02	108	2.39	1.03	3.08**
Intercourse (% yes)	224	75.9%	—	109	73.4%	—	0.24
One-night stand (% yes)	170	28.2%	—	79	38.0%	—	2.38
Contraception	170	2.06	1.30	79	1.92	1.16	0.79

Note. RDP viewing was computed by summing the Likert-style frequency scores for 27 reality dating programs. Responses for viewer involvement subscales ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Experience = level of experience with dating and relationships (0–10 scale), satisfaction = overall satisfaction with dating and sexual relationships (0–4 scale), intercourse = participation in consensual heterosexual intercourse (yes/no), one-night stand = consensual heterosexual intercourse with someone the participant had just met and did not subsequently date (yes/no), contraception = frequency of intercourse without using contraception (1 = *never*, 5 = *frequently*). The χ^2 (for intercourse and one-night stand) and *t* (for all other variables) statistics provide tests of the gender differences in frequencies and means, respectively.

p* < .01. *p* < .001. †*p* < .10.

Table III. Summary of Items and Standardized Factor Loadings for the Viewer Involvement Scale ($N = 316$)

	Factor Loading		Item	
	1	2	Mean	SD
Learning subscale				
Dating shows help me learn how I'm supposed to act in different situations and places.	.86	-.02	1.84	1.30
Dating shows help me learn how to do things I've never done before.	.85	.06	1.94	1.28
I feel that the people on dating shows are similar to me.	.72	.05	1.71	1.17
Watching dating shows makes me want to be in a serious relationship or get married.	.71	-.10	2.06	1.47
Sometimes after I watch dating shows, the people on them seem like they are my friends.	.68	-.03	1.69	1.23
I learn about the opposite sex from watching dating shows.	.59	.32	2.21	1.57
Dating shows help me learn from the mistakes of others.	.53	.30	2.64	1.71
Entertainment subscale				
Dating shows are entertaining and enjoyable.	-.19	.96	4.23	1.83
Dating shows help me when I want to forget about work or school.	-.04	.84	3.51	1.92
I talk about dating shows in conversations with others.	.03	.72	3.03	1.88
Dating shows are a waste of time.	-.08	-.69	5.00	1.68
I enjoy the sexual content of dating shows.	.16	.55	3.33	1.81
Not included in either subscale				
Dating shows give the wrong messages about relationships.	-.03	-.42	5.20	1.66
I would like to be on a dating show.	.24	.35	2.10	1.67

Note. Response scale for items ranged from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*.

suggested that the data were suitable for factor analysis. Accordingly, we conducted several exploratory factor analyses to investigate the underlying structure of the viewer involvement scale. An examination of the scree plot suggested that a two-factor solution was most appropriate; the eigenvalues for the first two factors were 6.08 and 1.46, respectively. Orthogonal rotations produced loadings for several items that were high on both factors. Our final analysis, therefore, consisted of a two-factor solution using principal components extraction and oblimin rotation. Item means, standard deviations, and standardized factor loadings are presented in Table III.

The first factor was comprised of items related to learning (e.g., "Dating shows help me learn how I'm supposed to act in different situations and places"). This factor accounted for 43.4% of the overall variance. The second factor was comprised of items related to entertainment (e.g., "Dating shows are entertaining and enjoyable"). This factor accounted for 10.5% of the overall variance. The correlation between the factors was .54.

A learning subscale variable was created by averaging the seven items that loaded above .50 on the learning factor. Coefficient α for this subscale was .87. An entertainment subscale variable was created by averaging the five items that loaded above .50 on the entertainment factor; coefficient α was .83. The item "Dating shows are a waste of time" was re-

verse coded before being averaged into the entertainment subscale. Two items did not load highly on either factor and were dropped from the analysis. The subscale variables were correlated, $r = .61$, $N = 320$, $p < .0001$.

Gender and Ethnic Differences

We conducted analyses (independent samples t -tests and χ^2 analyses, as appropriate) to test for gender differences in mean levels of viewing amount, viewer involvement, attitudes toward sex, and sexual behaviors. Results are presented in Table II.

Several differences emerged for viewer involvement. Men's scores on the learning subscale of the viewer involvement measure were higher than women's scores; however, men's scores on the entertainment subscale were not reliably different than women's scores. Men also had higher scores for adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual double standard, and the importance of appearance in dating. Women expressed higher levels of overall sexual satisfaction than did men. No reliable gender differences emerged for overall television viewing or for RDP viewing.

Sample sizes for most ethnic groups were too small to allow for quantitative comparisons; however, we were able to conduct analyses to compare European American and Asian American

Table IV. Correlations Between Television and Reality Dating Program (RDP) Viewing, Viewer Involvement, and Attitudes Toward Sex

Variable	Adversarial sexual beliefs	Sexual double standard	Importance of appearance	Men as sex-driven	Dating is a game
<i>Women</i>					
Viewing amount					
TV hours (weekly)	.02	-.04	.06	.03	.13
RDP viewing	.21**	.17*	.21**	.22**	.46***
Viewer involvement					
Entertainment	.22**	.14*	.26***	.30***	.41***
Learning	.29***	.29***	.33***	.18**	.20†
<i>Men</i>					
Viewing amount					
TV hours (weekly)	.18†	.22*	.09	.17†	.22
RDP viewing	.17†	.27**	.20*	.21*	.43**
Viewer involvement					
Entertainment	.32**	.34***	.28**	.30**	.52***
Learning	.32**	.41***	.27**	.31**	.38*

Note. RDP viewing was computed by summing the Likert-style frequency scores for 27 reality dating programs. Responses for viewer involvement subscales ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. *N*'s vary slightly due to missing data. For dating is a game, *N* = 68–69 for women and *N* = 39–41 for men. For other attitudes, *N* = 210–220 for women and *N* = 102–107 for men.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001. †*p* < .10.

participants. Independent samples *t*-tests were performed to examine potential differences in mean levels of overall television viewing, RDP viewing, learning, entertainment, and attitudes toward sex. No reliable differences emerged (all *t*'s < 1.50, all *p*'s > .15). However, several ethnic differences emerged for sexual behaviors. European American participants (*M* = 6.24) were more sexually experienced than Asian American participants (*M* = 4.82), $t(118) = -3.93, p < .001$, were more likely (83% vs. 60%) to have had intercourse, $\chi^2(1) = 15.44, N = 256, p < .001$, and were more likely (37% vs. 17%) to have had intercourse with someone whom they just met and were not dating, $\chi^2(1) = 6.01, N = 193, p = .01$. There was a marginally reliable difference between European American (*M* = 2.68) and Asian American (*M* = 2.42) students' reports of satisfaction with dating and relationships, $t(251) = -1.85, p = .07$, and a marginally reliable difference between European American (*M* = 1.86) and Asian American (*M* = 2.30) students' reports of contraception use, such that Asian American participants were less likely to use contraception, $t(63) = 1.92, p = .06$.

Associations Between Viewing Amount, Viewer Involvement, and Attitudes Toward Sex

To assess the relationship between viewing amount, viewer involvement, and attitudes toward

sex, we computed bivariate correlations separately for men and women. Results are summarized in Table IV. For both genders, there was a greater number of statistically reliable correlations between attitudes and RDP viewing than between attitudes and overall television viewing. Among the women, overall viewing was not reliably correlated with any attitude variable (all *p*'s > .25). Among the men, overall viewing was reliably correlated only with sexual double standard, $r = .22, p = .02$; there were also marginally reliable correlations with adversarial sexual beliefs, $r = .18, p = .06$, and men as sex-driven, $r = .17, p = .07$. In contrast, for both women and men, RDP viewing was correlated with all five attitudes toward sex. Participants who watched more reality dating programs were more likely to endorse a sexual double standard and to believe that relations between the sexes are adversarial, that physical appearance is important in dating, that men are sex-driven, and that dating is a game.

Bivariate correlations between viewer involvement and attitudes toward sex were also computed (see Table IV). For men, all five attitude variables had reliable positive correlations with entertainment and with learning. For women, nine of these correlations were reliable; the tenth (between learning and dating is a game) was marginally reliable, $r = .20, N = 68, p = .10$. For all participants, then, increased involvement with reality dating

programs was associated with higher scores on these gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex; this was true whether the viewer was involved with the program in order to be entertained and distracted or was involved with the program in order to learn about dating and sex.

To examine further the relative importance of viewing amount and viewer involvement in predicting attitudes toward sex, we conducted a series of five hierarchical regression analyses. In each analysis, a different attitude (adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual double standard, importance of appearance, men as sex-driven, dating is a game) was regressed on the same set of predictors. In the first block of each regression, we included gender, amount of overall television viewing, and amount of RDP viewing. In the second block, we added the viewer involvement variables (entertainment and learning). Because there were no reliable interactions between gender and RDP viewing (all t 's < 1.2; all p 's > .25) or between gender and viewer involvement (all t 's < 1.3, all p 's > .20), we collapsed across gender in these analyses. Results are reported in Table V.

The main results were consistent across all five attitudes toward sex. When gender and overall television viewing were controlled, RDP viewing was a reliable predictor of all attitudes; β 's ranged from .18 for adversarial sexual beliefs to .48 for dating is a game. In all cases, viewing reality dating programs was associated with holding more gender stereotypical beliefs about dating and about the other sex. However, for four of five attitudes, the relationship between RDP viewing and the outcome variable disappeared once the viewer involvement variables

were entered into the model. Only for the belief that dating is a game was RDP viewing still a reliable predictor, $\beta = .28, p = .02$.

For all five attitudes, the combined effect of the two viewer involvement subscales (entertainment and learning) was reliable. The amount of additional variance explained by these two variables (over and above the variance explained by gender, overall television viewing, and RDP viewing) ranged from 4.1% (for men as sex-driven) to 7.3% (for sexual double standard). In each case, however, only one subscale was a reliable predictor. Learning reliably predicted adversarial sexual beliefs, $\beta = .21, p = 0.002$, sexual double standard, $\beta = .32, p < 0.0001$, and importance of appearance, $\beta = .21, p = 0.002$. Entertainment reliably predicted men as sex-driven, $\beta = .24, p = 0.005$, and dating is a game, $\beta = .33, p = 0.01$.

Sobel tests (Sobel, 1982; also see Baron & Kenny, 1986) were conducted in order to determine whether the indirect paths from RDP viewing through learning or entertainment to the attitude variables were reliably different from zero. For adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual double standard, and importance of appearance, the indirect path through learning was reliable, z 's = 2.84, 3.90, and 2.93; p 's = .005, .00009, and .003, respectively. For men as sex-driven and dating is a game, the indirect path through entertainment was reliable, z 's = 2.80 and 2.42; p 's = .005 and .02., respectively. In all cases, then, the effect of RDP viewing on attitudes toward sex was totally or partially mediated through viewer involvement. These mediational models are depicted in Fig. 1.

Table V. Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Attitudes Toward Sex From Gender, Overall Television Viewing, Reality Dating Program (RDP) Viewing, and Viewer Involvement

Predictor	Adversarial sexual beliefs ($N = 310$)		Sexual double standard ($N = 316$)		Importance of appearance ($N = 317$)		Men as sex-driven ($N = 318$)		Dating is a game ($N = 105$)	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Control variables										
Gender	.31***	.25***	.17**	.11*	.27***	.21***	-.08	-.12*	.12	.06
Overall viewing	.04	.03	-.02	-.02	.02	.01	.02	.00	-.05	-.08
RDP viewing	.18**	.02	.20***	.09	.19***	.04	.21***	.03	.48***	.28*
Viewer involvement										
Entertainment		.10		-.03		.09		.24**		.33*
Learning		.21**		.32***		.21**		.06		-.01
ΔR^2		.052***		.073***		.053***		.041***		.062*
Total R^2	.125***	.177***	.061***	.134***	.103***	.156***	.056***	.098***	.210***	.272***

Note. Control variables (gender and overall television viewing) and RDP viewing were entered in the first block; viewer involvement variables were added in the second block. Standardized partial regression coefficients (β 's) are reported.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

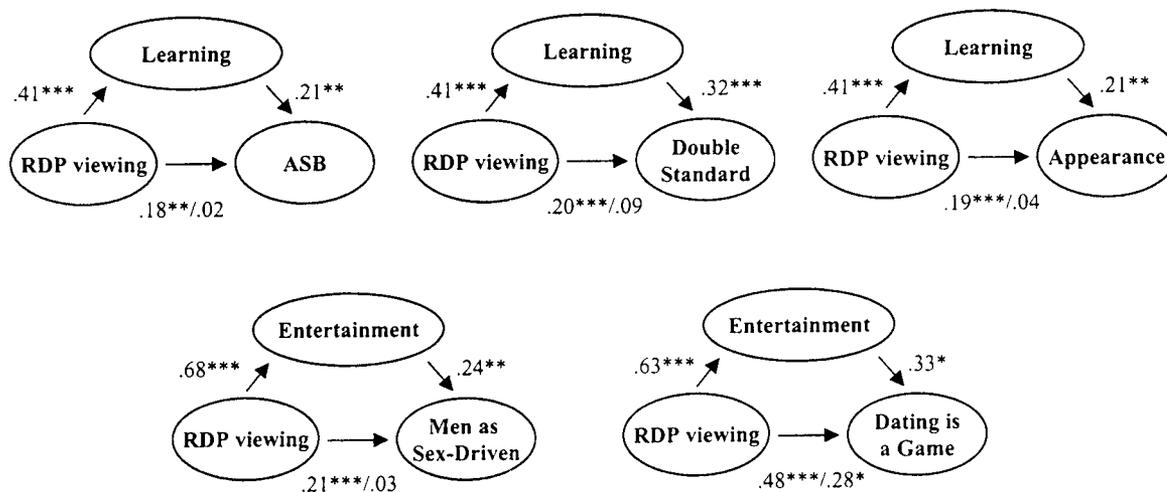


Fig. 1. Relationships between Reality Dating Program (RDP) viewing and adversarial sexual beliefs (ASB; $N = 310$), sexual double standard (Double Standard, $N = 316$), importance of appearance (Appearance, $N = 317$), men as sex-driven ($N = 318$), and dating is a game ($N = 105$), as mediated by viewer involvement. Standardized partial regression coefficients (β 's) are reported. For the direct paths from RDP viewing to attitudes toward sex, coefficients from unmediated models are presented first, followed by coefficients from mediated models. Mediated models also include gender and overall television viewing as control variables. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Associations Between Viewing Amount, Viewer Involvement, and Sexual Behaviors

We conducted a final series of correlational analyses to explore associations between viewing and sexual behaviors (see Table VI). In general, there were few statistically reliable associations. For both men and women, viewing RDPs for learning was associated with not having participated in heterosexual intercourse. In addition, for women, higher use of RDPs for learning was negatively correlated with reported level of sexual experience. Women’s total weekly hours of overall television viewing was also positively associated with having had sexual intercourse.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate associations between young adults’ viewing of reality dating television programs and their sexual behaviors and attitudes toward sex. We found that most of our sample of 18–24-year-old college students had watched reality dating programs and thus were exposed to the gender stereotypical attitudes that are prevalent on these programs. We also found positive correlations between both men’s and women’s RDP viewing and their endorsement of gender stereotypical attitudes toward and beliefs about dating

and relationships. Viewer involvement with RDPs (watching for learning purposes or watching for entertainment purposes) mediated the relationship between viewing amount and attitudes, which lends support to constructivist rather than to strict cultivation theories. In addition, several sexual behavior variables were associated with viewer involvement with RDPs.

A central question in research on television’s role in sexual socialization is whether increased viewing is problematic. Results from this study suggest that higher viewing of RDPs is associated with more traditional and adversarial attitudes toward dating and relationships; this is consistent with earlier correlational and experimental findings on other genres of television programs (e.g. Kalof, 1999; Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Moreover, in contrast to some previous studies of other television genres (Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999), we found that RDP viewing was predictive of attitudes for men as well as for women.

We also found that the relationship between attitudes toward sex and amount of RDP viewing was mediated by viewer involvement. In one case (dating is a game) RDP viewing was still a reliable predictor after viewer involvement (learning and entertainment) had been entered into the regression equation; therefore, there was only partial mediation for this attitude variable. For the other four attitudes, total

Table VI. Correlations Between Television and Reality Dating Program (RDP) Viewing, Viewer Involvement, and Sexual Behaviors

Variable	Experience	Satisfaction	Intercourse	One-night stand	Contraception
<i>Women</i>					
Viewing amount					
TV hours (weekly)	.05	-.03	.17*	.06	-.03
RDP viewing	-.08	-.03	-.04	.01	.07
Viewer involvement					
Entertainment	.03	-.01	.09	-.01	.10
Learning	-.12*	-.08	-.13 [†]	.04	-.09
<i>Men</i>					
Viewing amount					
TV hours (weekly)	-.13	-.16	-.12	-.09	-.18
RDP viewing	-.02	.00	-.07	-.19 [†]	.12
Viewer involvement					
Entertainment	-.04	-.03	-.08	-.12	.06
Learning	-.11	-.18 [†]	-.20*	-.16	.13

Note. RDP viewing was computed by summing the Likert-style frequency scores for 27 reality dating programs. Responses for viewer involvement subscales ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Experience = level of experience with dating and relationships (0–10 scale), satisfaction = overall satisfaction with dating and sexual relationships (0–4 scale), intercourse = participation in consensual heterosexual intercourse (0 = no, 1 = yes), one-night stand = consensual heterosexual intercourse with someone the participant had just met and did not subsequently date (1 = yes, 2 = no), contraception = frequency of intercourse without using contraception (1 = *never*, 5 = *frequently*). Pearson correlations are reported for experience, satisfaction, and contraception. Point biserial correlations are reported for intercourse and one-night stand. Only participants who had heterosexual intercourse answered questions for one-night stand and contraception. *Ns* vary slightly due to missing data. For one-night stand and contraception, $N = 161$ – 165 for women and $N = 76$ – 78 for men. For other behaviors, $N = 212$ – 219 for women and $N = 103$ – 107 for men.

* $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$.

mediation was present. A strict cultivation model (Gerbner et al., 1994), focused solely on the amount of media intake, could not explain these findings. Instead, they are consistent with more constructivist approaches that emphasize the active role played by the viewer; for example, in identifying with particular characters and judging how realistic a television program is (Fabes & Strouse, 1987; Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003; Potter, 1986; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) or in watching television with the goal of learning or being entertained (Aubrey et al., 2003; Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999).

Regression results further revealed interesting similarities and differences between the two types of viewer involvement. Although one might expect that viewer involvement focused on learning would be more strongly related to attitudes than viewer involvement focused on entertainment, we found that both learning and entertainment were important predictors of attitudes. It does not seem surprising that individuals who watch RDPs in order to learn how to behave in the real world would come to hold beliefs similar to those represented in the programs viewed. If they are learning from the programs, their

attitudes should change accordingly. In contrast, it seems less obvious that people who watch RDPs for entertainment purposes would be similarly affected by the programs. One might assume that watching for entertainment would go hand-in-hand with the ability to distance from the programs and recognize that they are fictional representations that do not represent reality. Such critical distancing would presumably mitigate any effect on attitudes or behaviors that the programs might have. That we did not see such a mitigating effect suggests either that distancing did not occur, or that it did not affect the relationship between viewing and attitudes. Perhaps people who are strongly motivated by escapist or entertainment motives turn off their critical faculties while viewing, thus opening the way for the programs to have a greater impact. Whatever the explanation, our findings argue against what has become a standard industry defense for violent or other controversial programming—that it is “for entertainment purposes only” and therefore innocuous. Our results, as well as those of previous studies (Ward, 2002), suggest that even people who are watching “just for fun” may be affected in important ways by the content they are viewing.

In addition to similarities in findings for the two types of viewer involvement, there were also important differences. For each attitude, only one type of viewer involvement was a reliable predictor after we controlled for gender, overall television viewing, RDP viewing, and the other involvement variable. "Learning" predicted adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual double standard, and importance of appearance, and "entertainment" predicted men as sex-driven and dating is a game. It may be that viewers who watch RDPs in order to be entertained have a more hedonistic and voyeuristic attitude toward dating. This orientation would seem to mesh well with the belief that dating is a game (and perhaps also with the belief that men are sex-driven). In contrast, our data show that viewers who watch RDPs in order to learn from them tend to be less experienced sexually. They may also have a more conservative orientation toward sex. Such an orientation would overlap with attitudes such as adversarial sexual beliefs and sexual double standard. More research on this topic is needed in order to replicate these findings and shed further light on their meaning. Longitudinal and experimental research would be particularly helpful in determining the direction of causality for these interesting correlational relationships.

The overall picture that emerges from our findings is, however, relatively clear. Whether one is motivated by a desire to learn or by a desire to be entertained, viewing RDPs is associated with holding gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex. In combination with the finding that most participants watched RDPs at least occasionally, this picture is disquieting. Gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex such as those measured in this study have been associated with a host of problematic behaviors and sexual experiences. For example, holding adversarial sexual beliefs has been associated with greater acceptance of and participation in sexually aggressive behaviors (Spence, Losoff, & Robbins, 1991; Yost & Zurbriggen (in press). In addition, holding traditional attitudes toward gender roles is associated with earlier age of sexual activity and less contraceptive use (MacCorquodale, 1984; Pleck et al., 1993). Some of the more specific attitude measures that we used in the present study have not been widely used in previous research; however, it seems likely that they also would be linked with risky sexual behaviors. For example, the belief that dating is a game suggests that dating and sex are light-hearted activities with few negative consequences. Such an attitude is to some extent incompatible with concerns about

sexually transmitted disease and may correlate negatively with condom use and other "safer sex" practices. Similarly, holding the belief that men are sex-driven gives men tacit approval to pursue casual sex with many different partners, a practice that can put them and their partners at risk for contracting STDs. This belief, which stresses the urgency of men's sexual needs, may also validate a practice of proceeding quickly to intercourse without taking the time to communicate about sexual history. Such a practice would further increase the risk of disease transmission.

Gender and Ethnic Differences

Previous researchers have generally found that ethnic minority populations report watching more television overall and being more frequent viewers of sexually-oriented genres (Greenberg, 1993; Greenberg, Linsangan, & Soderman, 1993; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) than European American participants. In contrast to results of previous studies, we found no ethnic differences in viewing amounts (overall or RDP viewing), viewer involvement (learning or entertainment), or attitudes toward sex. Many of the differences in prior studies have been found between European American and African American (Greenberg, 1993; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) or between European American and Latino/a participants (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Because of sample size considerations, we were unable to look individually at those two ethnic groups. Instead, we contrasted European American and Asian American participants. Our focus on a different ethnic group may explain the lack of ethnic differences in our data. Further research on RDP viewing among diverse populations would be useful.

Our findings concerning gender were also dissimilar to those reported in previous studies. In these studies, women had stronger associations between viewership and attitude variables (Walsh-Childers & Brown, 1993; Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999), reported more active viewing (Ward, 2002) and higher perceived realism of television programs and characters (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999), and seemed to be more affected by exposure to sexually-oriented media (Calvin et al., 1993; Johnson et al., 1995). In contrast to the results of those studies, we found no striking gender differences in the number or size of correlations between

attitudes and behaviors and RDP viewing and involvement.

We did, however, find that men reported using RDPs for learning about dating and the other sex more than did women. We suspect that this gender difference, as well as the gender similarities that were more prevalent in our study, may both be due to the same underlying phenomenon. Ward (2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) has speculated that well-researched genres such as soap operas and prime-time programming may be less interesting to male than to female viewers. She has recommended that researchers begin to investigate other genres (e.g., music videos) that presumably are more engaging for men. We suspect that RDPs may be a genre that captures male adolescents' attention in a way that most other television programs do not. RDPs are unambiguously oriented toward sexuality. They feature individuals talking about highly explicit sexual preferences or activities and frequently show individuals engaged in sexual activities such as kissing, groping, stripping, or highly suggestive dancing. Men (especially young men) may be drawn to, and thus engage with, this form of programming more than they do with other forms of programming that have been investigated in previous studies. If so, this could explain why we found consistent correlations between viewing and attitudes among men when other researchers (e.g., Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) have not.

Sexual Behavior

Research on the relationship between television viewing and sexual behavior has focused mostly on the effectiveness of televised public service announcements in promoting "safer sex" behaviors such as the use of condoms (for a review, see Keller & Brown, 2002). Relatively few researchers have looked for associations between sexual behavior and overall viewing or between sexual behavior and viewing particular genres or types of programming. However, the few studies that have been conducted suggest that television viewing is linked with specific sexual behaviors. For example, Brown and Newcomer (1991) found a link between viewing sexually-oriented television programs and becoming sexually active. Other researchers have found negative correlations between media consumption and sexual satisfaction (Baran, 1976), and have shown that frequent viewing of music videos is associated with a greater number of sexual partners and

higher overall levels of sexual experience (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987). In our study, however, we found few statistically reliable associations between sexual behaviors and RDP viewing or viewer involvement. Young men and women who watched RDPs in order to learn were less sexually experienced, but there were no reliable associations with contraception use or sexual satisfaction.

We can think of several possible reasons why we found relatively few correlations between RDP viewing and sexual behavior. Several of the studies on sexual behavior and television viewing were conducted more than 10 years ago. Perhaps modern adolescent viewers are different in some important ways from previous generations, such that their sexual behavior is less affected by the programs they view. This explanation is undermined, however, by recent studies that show correlations between television viewing and behavior-relevant attitudes toward sex (e.g., Ward, 2002), as well as by recent studies that have shown connections in adolescents between television viewing and other kinds of behavior such as drug use and delinquency (Krcmar & Greene, 2000; Wingood et al., 2003). Similarly, the argument that our results might be due to institutional, geographic, or class-based idiosyncrasies of our sample seems flawed. If our participants were noticeably different from those who took part in previous studies, we would expect these differences to be visible in both the behavioral and the attitudinal data. To a large extent, however, our attitudinal data were consistent with previous findings.

A more plausible explanation for the weak relationship between RDP viewing and sexual behavior rests upon the recency of this genre of television programming and the specific types of sexual behaviors about which we inquired. Most of our behavior questions referred to the sexual past rather than the sexual present. To answer the questions "Have you ever had sexual intercourse?," "Have you ever had a one-night-stand?," "How would you describe your current level of experience with dating and sexual relationships?," and "How satisfied are you with your current level of experience with dating and sexual relationships?," participants must reflect back on their entire history of sexual behaviors. Many participants, especially those who are more experienced, may have sexual histories that include events that occurred months or years before they first viewed an RDP. Indeed, the genre may not yet have existed when many participants first became sexually active. It would obviously be impossible for current

viewing of RDPs to affect sexual behaviors that occurred months or years before. Further research, especially longitudinal research and studies of younger adolescents, will help to clarify the relationship between RDP viewing and “initiation” sexual behaviors such as timing of first intercourse.

The one behavior variable that does not fit this explanation is contraceptive use. We asked participants “How frequently do you have sexual intercourse without using any form of protection or contraception?,” which implies a focus on the present and the immediate past, time periods that presumably are contemporaneous with their viewing of RDPs. It would have been theoretically possible for RDP viewing to affect current contraceptive use, but apparently it did not. This is not inconsistent with previous findings; we are aware of no studies that link the viewing of entertainment television programming with reduced contraceptive use. However, given that RDPs feature a great deal of sexual activity but rarely or never mention contraception, it seemed plausible that viewing RDPs would be associated with reduced use of condoms and other forms of contraception. This relationship did not emerge in our data. It may be that contraception decision-making is so multifaceted and influenced by so many diverse psychosocial factors (Sheeran, Abraham, & Orbell, 1999) that the (perhaps small) effect of television viewing would be difficult to detect in a correlational design. Carefully controlled experimental studies that incorporated extensive exposure to RDPs might be more likely to uncover their effect (if any) on contraceptive decision-making. It may also be the case that the presence of televised information about contraception would affect subsequent behavior but the absence of such information would not. Again, experimental studies could help to clarify these potentially complex relationships.

Caveats and Future Directions

The data reported here are cross-sectional and correlational. They are, therefore, unable to differentiate between competing causal hypotheses regarding the associations that were found. Adolescents who hold gender stereotypical attitudes toward sex may actively seek out RDPs; conversely, RDP viewing may cause increases in these attitudes. Both could be true; we suspect that this is the case. Future research with longitudinal and experimental designs can help to answer questions about the direction of

causality of the relationships we found in the present study.

Future research could also expand the demographic diversity of the participants, so that the unique contributions of age, ethnic membership, class, and sexual orientation could be more thoroughly assessed. Content analyses of RDPs should also be conducted in order to determine the messages that are consistently present in these programs as well as to assess any differences between prime-time series (that follow the same characters from week to week) and episodic programs (that introduce new characters each week). Qualitative research that allows young adults to provide detailed accounts of their engagement with RDPs and their motives for viewing may simultaneously complicate and clarify the effect of RDPs. In addition, longitudinal studies or studies of younger participants might better address connections between RDP viewing and “initiation” sexual behaviors (such as timing of first intercourse).

Conclusion

Most young adults in our study were occasional to frequent viewers of reality dating programs. We found correlations between viewing RDPs and several problematic attitudes toward sex, which suggests that adolescents who watch RDPs may model their attitudes toward dating, sex, and relationships on those that are featured in the programs. Thus, ironically, reality dating programs that purport to show “real” people in dating situations may actually be an impediment to viewers who hope to create healthy intimacy in their own relationships and to make intelligent decisions about sexuality.

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