

A Longitudinal Investigation of Television Viewing in Adolescence and Sexual  
Perfectionism and Satisfaction in Adulthood

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## **Abstract**

This study examines associations between adolescents' exposure to two television genres that convey contradictory sexual messages and the expectation of sexual perfectionism over a period of 15 years ( $N = 161$ ). All respondents were in a romantic relationship in the final wave of this longitudinal study. Sitcom viewing during adolescence was related to more sexual perfectionism in adulthood, whereas youth drama viewing predicted less sexual perfectionism over the same period of more than a decade. These associations were not moderated by their motivation to learn about dating from television. Adolescents' sitcom viewing was indirectly related to lower levels of sexual and relational satisfaction in young adulthood, whereas youth drama viewing indirectly predicted more satisfaction through the association with sexual perfectionism.

*Keywords:* sexual perfectionism, sexual satisfaction, television, adolescence, positive and negative media effects

## **A Longitudinal Investigation of Television Viewing in Adolescence and Sexual Perfectionism and Satisfaction in Adulthood**

Numerous studies have examined whether popular media consumption shapes individuals' ideals and expectations about sex and relationships (Driesmans, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2016; Galloway, Engstrom, & Emmers-Sommer, 2015; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Given the idealized sexual portrayals in much of popular (televised) media content, viewers' expectations of their own romantic and sexual relationships may be affected by these examples (Galician, 2004; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). In turn, these idealized expectations may have an impact on how individuals experience their own relationships as well as their sex life (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). One category of idealized expectations about sex is sexual perfectionism, or the expectation that complete sexual attraction is expected and sex is always uncomplicated, problem-free, and completely satisfying (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Galician, 2004). When sexual problems or difficulties do occur, these are perceived as both a personal failure and a sign of a bad relationship. Few studies have examined associations between television, sexual perfectionism, and sexual satisfaction. The results of this scarce research have been mixed (Haferkamp, 1999; Holmes & Johnson, 2009). One possible limitation of these studies is that they approached media exposure by examining broad categories of media use only. As sexual messages vary widely across the television landscape (Gottfried, Vaala, Bleakley, Hennessy, & Jordan, 2013; Wright, 2009), it may be the case that only certain genres lead to effects. Another possible limitation is that there were personal attributes that were not analyzed but could help to elucidate how and why television viewing could influence sexual scripts related to perfectionism.

We aim to reinvestigate and further our understanding of the relation between television viewing and sexual perfectionism in three ways. First, we examine adolescents' exposure to two different television genres, which convey contrasting sexual messages.

Second, we investigate whether adolescents' motivation to learn about relationships from television strengthens the relation between television viewing and sexual perfectionism.

Third, although adolescents may be especially susceptible to the effects of media content on sexual beliefs (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011; Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2014), the impact of sexual perfectionism beliefs on relational and sexual satisfaction may be at its strongest for young adults, who are developing long-term romantic relationships and are starting to build a family (Shulman & Connolly, 2015). We aim to take into account the disparity between these two developmental phases by testing a long-term longitudinal design which spans approximately 15 years in five measurement waves. Television viewing and a learning motivation during television viewing were measured in the first three waves (with one-year intervals) during adolescence. In turn, sexual perfectionism was measured in wave 4, 13 years later, and relationship and sexual satisfaction were measured in wave 5, another year later. All respondents were in a romantic relationship at the time of the fifth wave.

### **The Role of Television in Sexual Script Processes**

Generally, adolescents are motivated to learn about sexuality in order to prepare for their first romantic and sexual experiences (Arnett, 2013; Chapin, 2000). Information about relationships and sex from various sources is stored in adolescents' memories as cognitive scripts that help them interpret sexual situations and inform them about which behaviors are expected (Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Wiederman, 2015). Television is one of the information sources that adolescents use to learn about romance and sexuality (Strasburger et al., 2014; Ward, 2003). The association between television viewing and expectations about relationships and sex (i.e., sexual scripts) can be hypothesized in terms of Wright's (2011) *script acquisition, activation, application model* (<sub>3</sub>AM). This model builds on the insights and scripting processes of Huesmann's (1986, 1988) information processing model, Simon and Gagnon's (1984) sexual script theory and other theoretical perspectives, to integrate the

mechanisms of cultivation and social cognitive theory with the concept of cognitive scripting and apply it to research on sexual media effects (Wright, 2011). The  $\text{}_3\text{AM}$  posits that exposure to sexual media content can lead viewers to *acquire* cognitive scripts about what to expect from sexual situations. In turn, already acquired scripts can be *activated* due to subsequent media exposure or social cues, and can be *applied* when the cognitive scripts guide judgments or behavior in a real sexual situation.

Although sex is seldom shown explicitly on television, implicit references to sex, conversations about sex, and other intimate behaviors such as passionate kissing are prevalent (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Eyal, Kunkel, Biely, & Finnerty, 2007). The  $\text{}_3\text{AM}$  posits that media portrayals are not only acquired as cognitive scripts that literally and exclusively reflect the situations shown in the media content (Wright, 2011). Specific televised scripts can give rise to higher order scripts which abstract those specific messages into more general rules about sexuality (Huesmann, 1986; Wright, 2011). For instance, televised portrayals of ideal partners in dating situations can be abstracted to inform adolescent viewers about how to act and what to expect during sexual intercourse. Additionally, the  $\text{}_3\text{AM}$  further integrates factors of the media content, viewer, and context that can facilitate or inhibit the effects of media exposure on cognitive scripts and behavior at each of the three steps in the model (i.e., acquisition, activation, and application) (Wright, 2011; Wright, Randall, & Arroyo, 2013).

### **The Relation between Television Viewing and Sexual Perfectionism**

Content analyses tend to agree that sex is generally portrayed in an overly simplistic and idealized way on television (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Wright, 2009). One way in which television can portray sex as idealized is through messages of sexual perfectionism (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Galician, 2004). For instance, Eyal and Finnerty (2009) found in a random sample of television programs that almost three in four emotional outcomes of sex were positively as opposed to negatively valenced. They concluded that television “presents a

rather simplistic picture of intercourse by ignoring the fact that this behavior can potentially result in multiple concurrent consequences” (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009, p. 163).

Only a few studies have examined the relation between television viewing and sexual perfectionism. Haferkamp (1999) found that young adults who watched more television reported higher levels of sexual perfectionism. Exposure to soap operas in particular, however, did not predict sexual perfectionism. In another survey study, a preference for romantic content in television programs, movies, and magazines did not predict sexual perfectionism among young adults (Holmes, 2007). Holmes and Johnson (2009) also did not find a significant association between young adults’ overall television viewing and sexual perfectionism. These results seem to contradict the expectation that television viewing would impact individuals’ beliefs about sexual perfectionism. However, these studies only offered a preliminary assessment of this possible association. In the current study, a script acquisition hypothesis which posits that television viewing can predict sexual perfectionism was re-examined. This hypothesis was approached from three new angles. In studying the relation between television viewing and sexual perfectionism, we (1) measured these concepts in a developmental context that is different from previous research, (2) took into account potential differences in the impact of different television genres, and (3) examined the potential role of viewers’ motivation to learn from television content.

The first distinct angle of the current study is its integration of two distinct developmental stages. Most studies examining the relation between media use and sexual perfectionism or other relationship beliefs have been conducted among university students (i.e., young adults) (Galloway et al., 2015; Holmes, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). This is an important age group for research on relationship beliefs due to young adults’ increasing engagement in committed romantic relationships (Shulman & Connolly, 2015). At this life stage, both the quality of their relationships and their general wellbeing may be damaged if

their initial, idealized, expectations about relationships are not met (Stackert & Bursik, 2003; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). However, individuals' scripts about relationships and sex might be more susceptible to the influence of media portrayals during the adolescent years, when a sexual identity is being developed (Arnett, 2013; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011; Strasburger et al., 2014). The  $\text{3AM}$  specifically focuses on sexual media effects among young viewers, including adolescents, for several reasons (Wright, 2011). First, adolescents are developmentally sensitive to sources of sexual socialization due to their increasing interest in sexuality (Arnett, 2013; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009). Second, media may have stronger effects on adolescents' sexual scripts due to their limited personal sexual experience (Huesmann, 1986; Sun, Wright, & Steffen, 2017; Wright, 2011). Third, script acquisition processes can be more impactful if no incompatible pre-existing sexual scripts from different sources are already part of the media users' view on sexuality (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001; Wright, 2011).

Thus, the acquisition of a sexual perfectionism script as a result of television viewing will likely start during adolescence, but this does not mean that the process also ends during this life stage. Huesmann's (1986, 1988) cognitive information-processing model, on which the  $\text{3AM}$  builds heavily, explicitly conceptualizes script acquisition as a long-term, cumulative process. Moreover, it is argued that, once acquired, sexual scripts can remain part of individuals' larger views on sexuality for many years (Wiederman, 2015). If individuals' sexual perfectionism scripts are influenced during adolescence it is important to gauge if they have a lasting impact until young adulthood, when they have become more sexually active and engage in more serious romantic relationships. In sum, television content can shape adolescents' views on sexuality, but effects on very specific sexual scripts such as sexual perfectionism may not become clear until later life stages, when more robust views on sexuality have been formed (Arnett, 2013; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010). In addition, it could

be argued that the script acquisition process during adolescence is only really impactful if adults' sexual (perfectionism) scripts can still be, in part, traced back to that process during adolescence. In the current study, we aim to take into account this disparity between the time at which sexual media effects are most likely to develop and the time at which sexual perfectionism will most likely impact individuals' relationships and well-being. Individuals' exposure to television will be examined during adolescence, whereas the expected outcome, sexual perfectionism, is measured several years later, in young adulthood.

**Differences between televised genres.** Many studies have been conducted under the assumption that most television programs convey similar messages and, thus, have similar effects on relational and sexual expectations (e.g., Hetsroni, 2012; Holmes, 2007). However, several scholars have warned against the assumption that all sexual media content features the same sexual scripts (Gottfried et al., 2013; Wright, 2009). Since different media genres differ in the contexts and underlying messages of their sexual portrayals, they have argued that different genres should be examined separately (Gottfried et al., 2013; Wright, 2009). As such, more and more scholars postulate that different media types and genres can have differently valenced effects on sexual scripts and behaviors (Gottfried et al., 2013; Leonhardt, Spencer, Butler, & Theobald, 2019). For instance, Gottfried and colleagues (2013) found that adolescents' exposure to televised comedies predicted more positive attitudes toward having sex in the next 12 months, whereas viewing dramas predicted more negative attitudes. Thus, only examining overall exposure to (sexual content on) television regardless of genre would be misleading as only a positive or a negative relation, or a non-significant relation, would be found, which could mask the complexity of the actual situation.

Up to this point, studies on the association between television viewing and sexual perfectionism have not examined genre differences and have found mixed results (Haferkamp, 1999; Holmes, 2007; Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Sitcoms in particular tend to



portray an idealized and simplistic image of sex with little attention to emotions or problems (Anderegg, Dale, & Fox, 2014; Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). More dramatic genres and particularly drama series aimed at youth are more concerned with emotional outcomes of sexuality and have more of an eye for potential sexual problems and responsibilities (Eyal et al., 2007; Gottfried et al., 2013; Ward, 2003). Furthermore, dramatic storylines tend to imbed sexuality in a context of commitment and emotional intimacy (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). An instance of a simplistic portrayal of sexuality that might occur in a sitcom could be a popular character bragging about his many sexual ‘conquests’ without showing the emotional or relational outcomes of those instances of sexual intercourse. An example of a more nuanced sexual portrayal could be a plotline in a youth drama in which one party of a young couple does not yet feel ready for sex, which results in the partners having a conversation about how to deal with their contrasting expectations.

The 3AM states that script acquisition relies on the specific sexual scripts that are portrayed in media content (Wright, 2011). Thus, from a scripting perspective, adolescents who frequently view sitcoms might learn that sex is supposed to be simple and that any physical or emotional complications are abnormal. On the other hand, adolescents may learn from youth drama series that it is not unusual for problems to arise in intimate and sexual relationships and that the resolution of such problems might even strengthen the partners’ relationship (Gottfried et al., 2013; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Ward, 2003). As such, we expected that adolescents’ exposure to sitcoms will be related to stronger expectations of sexual perfectionism, visible in young adulthood. On the other hand, exposure to youth dramas during adolescence may be related to less sexual perfectionism in young adulthood. The following hypotheses are suggested:

H1: Viewing of sitcoms during adolescence positively predicts sexual perfectionism in young adulthood.

H2: Viewing of youth dramas during adolescence negatively predicts sexual perfectionism in young adulthood.

**Motivation to learn from television.** The  $\text{3AM}$  outlines a number of audience factors that can enable, enhance, or counteract script acquisition processes (Wright, 2011). Inspired by the uses-and-gratifications perspective (Rubin, 2009), the  $\text{3AM}$  argues that individuals' motivations for viewing sexual media content may have an impact on the acquisition of sexual scripts. One of the motivations that are defined is information seeking, or the motivation to learn from media content (Rubin, 2009). This motivation is particularly relevant when studying the potential effects of sexual media during adolescence as many adolescents try to gain information and learn about relationships and sex (Arnett, 2013; Strasburger et al., 2014). Hefner and Wilson (2013) found that students with a stronger motivation to learn while watching romantic comedy movies endorsed more idealized romantic beliefs. Similarly, Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) found that viewing reality dating shows with a motivation to learn was a better predictor of sexual stereotypes (e.g., the sexual double standard) than the frequency of exposure to reality dating shows or overall television.

Such a motivation to learn can function as a moderator by strengthening the script acquisition processes elicited by viewers' exposure to specific genres (Wright, 2011; Wright, Sun, & Steffen, 2018). Although the  $\text{3AM}$  argues that media use can affect adolescents' scripts about sex regardless of their involvement with the content, adolescents who are motivated to gain information about what is expected in sexual situations will be more receptive to messages illustrating these expectations and are more likely to create new scripts or adapt their existing scripts. A motivation to learn is thus a situational condition that may strengthen the potential impact of sexual media messages. For example, in a survey study among German adults, the perception that sexual media are a valuable source of sexual information strengthened the association between exposure to sexual media and risky sex

(Wright et al., 2018). Thus, a stronger motivation to learn from television content during adolescence is proposed to strengthen the hypothesized positive or negative script acquisition effects of, respectively, sitcom or youth drama viewing:

H3a: The positive relation between viewing sitcoms during adolescence and sexual perfectionism in young adulthood is stronger for adolescents with a higher motivation to learn about dating from television.

H3b: The negative relation between viewing youth dramas during adolescence and sexual perfectionism in young adulthood is stronger for adolescents with a higher motivation to learn about dating from television.

### **Television, Sexual Perfectionism, and Sexual and Relational Satisfaction**

An important reason why scholars have studied the relation between media use and expectations about relationships and sex revolves around concerns about its implications for relationship quality and sexual satisfaction (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). It is well known that individuals' satisfaction with their relationship plays an important role in their general well-being and mental health (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Given the less than representative portrayal of sex and relationships on television (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Wright, 2009), some studies have examined whether media use can predict individuals' satisfaction with their relationships. Reizer and Hetsroni (2014) found that students who watched more television programs with relationship related content were less satisfied with their relationship. Holmes and Johnson (2009) conducted a survey and experimental study to investigate the association between media use and relationship satisfaction. In the survey study, more frequent television viewing was related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. However, in the experiment, undergraduate students who were in a relationship reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction after watching a romantic comedy movie than after watching a movie with no relationship related themes. These mixed results suggest

that television viewing may have both a positive and a negative impact on satisfaction. In response, the following research questions are studied:

RQ1: Does viewing sitcoms during adolescence predict relational and sexual satisfaction in young adulthood?

RQ2: Does viewing youth dramas during adolescence predict relational and sexual satisfaction in young adulthood?

One factor that may explain and clarify the potential relation between media use and individuals' satisfaction with their relationship and sex life is their endorsement of idealized expectations such as sexual perfectionism. Whether the endorsement of ideals leads to more or less satisfaction seems to depend on the attainability of those ideals. Idealized expectations may lead people to have a more positive outlook on their own relationships, but if internalized ideals are unmet the relationship and sexual quality will suffer (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). Since the high expectations of sexual perfectionism are unlikely to be met, a strong endorsement of sexual perfectionism may have a negative impact on young adults' sexual and relational satisfaction (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017). As such the following hypotheses are suggested:

H4a: Sexual perfectionism negatively predicts relationship satisfaction in young adulthood.

H4b: Sexual perfectionism negatively predicts sexual satisfaction in young adulthood.

In terms of the  $\text{3AM}$ , television viewing may have an impact on sexual perfectionism through a long-term script acquisition process commencing in adolescence (Wright, 2011). If this sexual perfectionism script is still present in individuals' memories when they start to engage in romantic relationships, this script may be activated during sexual situations. When this script is activated but the resulting expectations remain unmet, the individual may feel unfulfilled and dissatisfied with their current (sexual) relationship (Vannier & O'Sullivan,

2017). If sitcom viewing during adolescence is positively related to sexual perfectionism in adulthood and youth drama viewing is negatively related to sexual perfectionism, an indirect negative relation between sitcom viewing and satisfaction and an indirect positive relation between youth drama viewing and satisfaction might occur, mediated by sexual perfectionism. As was the case for sexual perfectionism, satisfaction may also already be affected by television viewing and sexual perfectionism during adolescence. However, the formation of committed, enduring relationships is more strongly related to the developmental goals of young adults and dissatisfaction with a (sexual) relationship will, in consequence, likely have a stronger impact on the lives of young adults than adolescents (Arnett, 2013; Shulman & Connolly, 2015). Television viewing during adolescence will thus be studied as a long-term predictor of satisfaction during young adulthood. The following hypotheses are suggested:

H5a: Viewing sitcoms during adolescence indirectly and negatively predicts relational and sexual satisfaction in young adulthood through sexual perfectionism.

H5b: Viewing youth dramas during adolescence indirectly and positively predicts relational and sexual satisfaction in young adulthood through sexual perfectionism.

The hypotheses are summarized in the model presented in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

## **Method**

### **Sample and Procedure**

For this study, data were used from a five-wave panel study conducted in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium) over a period of over 15 years. In 2002, a first wave of data (W1) was collected among adolescents in nine secondary schools in different parts of the country. All students in the seventh and 10<sup>th</sup> grade of each of the nine schools filled out a survey about their sexual and romantic development, and media use during class hours. The

respondents' mean age was 13.54 ( $SD = 1.70$ ). An initial three-wave panel study was conducted by administering the same survey among all eighth and 11<sup>th</sup> graders of the same schools one year later (W2) and all ninth and 12<sup>th</sup> graders two years later (W3). In total, 2270 adolescents filled out a survey in at least one of the three initial waves, of which 1534 participated in each of the three waves. The data collection of this initial three-wave panel study is described in more detail in previous publications (Eggermont, 2006b, 2006a).

In 2017, 13 years after W3, the second phase of this long-term panel study was started. With the help of the nine schools who participated in the original three-wave study, contact information of the respondents was gathered. Based on which contact information was available, the respondents of the original study were contacted to inform them about the follow-up study (W4 and 5) either by telephone or by mail. In response to these calls and letters, 442 respondents who participated in at least one wave of the initial three-wave study filled out an online survey in W4. One year later, in 2018, the fifth and final wave of the panel study (W5) was conducted. Respondents' e-mail addresses were asked in W4. Those who had shared their e-mail address received an e-mail which invited them to fill out an online survey for the last time.

The survey was filled out by 207 respondents in W5. Only the respondents who were in a committed romantic relationship at the time of W5 were included in the analyses for the present study. This group consisted of 161 respondents ( $M_{age} = 28.91$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ , range = 27-32), 90 (55.9%) of whom were women. The large majority (96.9%) of respondents identified as heterosexual and 90.6% of the final sample lived together with their partner. On average, they had been in a relationship with their current partner for 7.29 years ( $SD = 4.21$ ). All of the 161 respondents were sexually active. More than two in three respondents (68.3%) had graduated from or were enrolled in higher education and 90.7% was employed at the time of W5.

Of the 161 respondents in the final sample, 129 (80.1%) had participated in each of the three waves of the original study during adolescence. One respondent had only participated in one of the first three waves (W3). All other respondents had participated in W1, 12 respondents had not participated in W2, and 20 respondents had not participated in W3. To assess whether sample attrition had an effect on the composition of the sample in W5, a multivariate logistic regression analysis was conducted using the data of all respondents who had participated in W1. The analysis tested whether participation in W5 could be predicted by the respondents' age, sex, exposure to sitcoms and youth dramas, and motivation to learn from television in W1,  $\chi^2(5) = 16.18, p = .01$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .02$ . Only sex was a significant predictor,  $B = 0.48, SE = 0.16, p = .002$ , indicating that women were more likely than men to have participated in the follow-up.

## Measures

**Viewing of television genres.** In each of the first three waves, the respondents were asked to indicate how often they watched two genres of television series by choosing *never* (= 1), *seldom* (= 2), *sometimes* (= 3), or *often* (= 4). The two genres were “English sitcoms (such as *Friends*)”, and “youth dramas (such as *Dawson’s Creek*)”<sup>1</sup>.

**Learning motivation.** Adolescents' motivation to learn about dating and sexuality from television was measured in the first three waves using a scale created by Eggermont (2006c). Respondents indicated their agreement with four statements; for example, “When I watch TV, I sometimes hope I will learn things about relationships with girls/boys” and “When I watch TV, I sometimes hope I will learn something about love,” on a scale ranging from *totally disagree* (= 1) to *totally agree* (= 4). Cronbach's alpha for the scale ranged from .90 to .92 in the first three waves of the study (during adolescence). A CFA for the scale

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<sup>1</sup> Although these questions about genre viewing only included the stated example programs, a list of television programs that preceded these questions in the survey also included programs such as *Grounded for Life* and *My Wife and Kids* as examples of English sitcoms and *Popular* and *15/Love* as examples of youth dramas that were being aired at the time of the study.

measured in W1 showed that the four items loaded well on one latent factor. The measurement showed an acceptable fit,  $\chi^2(2) = 19.72, p < .001, CFI = .95, SRMR = .04, \chi^2/df = 9.86$ .

**Sexual perfectionism.** Sexual perfectionism was measured in W4 using a subscale of the Relationship Belief Inventory (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; James, Hunsley, & Hemsworth, 2002). Using a scale ranging from *totally disagree* (= 1) to *totally agree* (= 7), respondents indicated their agreement with six statements, such as “When I do not appear to be performing well sexually, I get upset” and “I can feel OK about my lovemaking even if my partner does not achieve orgasm” (reverse coded). The reliability and validity of this subscale has been validated in previous research (James et al., 2002). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) showed that one item of the sexual perfectionism scale had a low standardized factor loading (.23). After this item was removed, all other items loaded well on one latent factor and the measurement showed a good fit with the data,  $\chi^2(5) = 9.61, p = .09, CFI = .96, SRMR = .04, \chi^2/df = 1.92$ . Cronbach’s alpha increased from .68 to .70 after deletion of this item.

**Relationship satisfaction.** The Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) was used to measure respondents’ satisfaction with their relationship in W5. Respondents used a seven-point Likert scale to answer seven questions about their relationship, including “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” and “How good is your relationship compared to most?”. The reliability and validity of this scale have been validated in previous research (Hendrick, 1988; Vaughn & Matyastik Baier, 1999). Cronbach’s alpha was .91 and a CFA showed that the seven items loaded well on one latent factor. The measurement showed a good fit,  $\chi^2(14) = 31.43, p = .005, CFI = .98, SRMR = .03, \chi^2/df = 2.25$ .

**Sexual satisfaction.** In line with previous research (e.g., Morgan, 2011; Zurbriggen, Ramsey, & Jaworski, 2011), sexual satisfaction was measured in W5 using the question:



“How satisfied are you with the sexual part of your relationship?”. Respondents answered this question using a scale ranging from *totally unsatisfied* (= 1) to *totally satisfied* (= 7).

**Control variables.** Due to differences in sexual beliefs and behaviors between boys/men and girls/women (Petersen & Hyde, 2010), the respondents’ sex was examined as a control variable in the model (0 = female, 1 = male). Given age-based variations in sexual socialization and experience during adolescence (Arnett, 2013), the respondents’ age was also included as a control variable. The measures for sex and age were both recorded in W5. As viewing levels of different types of television content can be strongly correlated it is important to control for overall television viewing in order to cancel out spurious results that may be caused by the adolescents’ exposure to other types of television. In each of the first three waves, the respondents used time lines to indicate when they usually watched television on each day of the week. The number of hours marked in each of the seven timelines was averaged in each wave to create a measure of the respondents’ overall, daily television viewing (in hours).

## **Analysis**

The respondents’ viewing of sitcoms and youth dramas and their overall television viewing were measured in each of the first three waves (during adolescence). Aggregate scores were calculated across the three waves for each of these variables. As such, these variables represent the respondents’ average viewing over the course of the three years of adolescence in which the original three-wave study was conducted. If a respondent had not participated in one of the first three waves, this average was based only on the responses in the waves for which data were available. A similar procedure was used for the measure of the respondents’ motivation to learn about dating and sexuality from television. Scores of learning motivation in each of the first three waves were created by averaging the responses on the four statements in each wave. Subsequently, the average of these three means was

calculated. As a result, learning motivation was included in the analytical model as an observed/manifest variable despite the use of a four-item scale as the average across the three waves had to be calculated after the scale items had been combined in one variable.

The descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations were calculated using SPSS. The hypothesized model and CFAs were tested using structural equation modeling in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Since 19.9% of respondents had not participated in each of the initial three waves, some missing data occurred in the dataset. Mplus employs a full information maximum likelihood estimator that uses all available data for the estimation of each of the parameters, which is a trustworthy procedure under the assumptions of missing completely at random (MCAR) or missing at random (MAR) (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Little's MCAR test showed that the assumption of MCAR was not rejected in the current data,  $\chi^2(93) = 75.97, p = .90$ .

In the hypothesized model, sexual perfectionism and relationship satisfaction were entered as latent variables. Predictive paths were modeled from the two television genres to sexual perfectionism and the satisfaction variables, and from sexual perfectionism to the two satisfaction variables. Additionally, predictive paths were modeled from the control variables to sexual perfectionism and the two satisfaction variables. Covariances were modeled between the two television genres, learning motivation, and the control variables. The residual variances of the two satisfaction variables were also allowed to covary. To test the interaction effects, two interaction terms were added by multiplying each of the two television genres with the grand mean of the learning motivation variable. The statistical significance of the direct and indirect paths was assessed by calculating 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals for the unstandardized regression coefficients ( $b$ ) using 10,000 bootstrapped samples.

## Results

Table 1 shows descriptives and zero-order correlations for the variables in the model. The hypothesized model showed a good fit with the data,  $\chi^2(150) = 202.04, p = .003, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .05$  (90% CI [.028, .062]),  $\chi^2/df = 1.35$ . The model results are presented in Figure 2. In line with H1 and H2, viewing sitcoms in adolescence (W1-3) positively predicted sexual perfectionism in young adulthood (W4), whereas youth dramas (W1-3) negatively predicted sexual perfectionism. Additionally, the control variables sex and age did not significantly predict sexual perfectionism. The overall number of hours respondents watched television (W1-3), on the other hand, positively predicted sexual perfectionism,  $b^* = .20, b = 0.11, SE = 0.07, CI b [0.005, 0.270]$ .

[Insert Table 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

H3a and H3b predicted that the motivation to learn about dating from television (W1-3) would moderate the associations between the television genre variables and sexual perfectionism. No support was found for these hypotheses, however, as the interaction terms between sitcom viewing and learning motivation or between youth drama viewing and learning motivation were not significantly related to sexual perfectionism.

RQ1 asked whether sitcom viewing during adolescence directly predicted relationship and sexual satisfaction in young adulthood. Sitcom viewing did not directly predict relationship satisfaction or sexual satisfaction. Neither did youth drama viewing (RQ2) predict relationship satisfaction or sexual satisfaction. In line with H4a, sexual perfectionism (W4) negatively predicted relationship satisfaction (W5) and in line with H4b, sexual perfectionism negatively predicted sexual satisfaction (W5). The control variables sex and age did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. The overall number of hours respondents watched television did positively predict relationship

satisfaction,  $b^* = .22$ ,  $b = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $CI\ b [0.023, 0.212]$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $b^* = .17$ ,  $b = 0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $CI\ b [0.010, 0.321]$ .

In order to test H5a and H5b, the indirect relations between the two television genre variables and the two satisfaction variables through sexual satisfaction were assessed. In line with H5a, viewing sitcoms was a significant, negative indirect predictor of relationship satisfaction, unstandardized regression coefficient  $b = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $CI\ b [-0.276, -0.018]$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $b = -0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $CI\ b [-0.414, -0.013]$  through sexual perfectionism. Also in line with H5b, viewing youth dramas positively predicted relationship satisfaction,  $b = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $CI\ b [0.008, 0.247]$ , and sexual satisfaction,  $b = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $CI\ b [0.005, 0.388]$  indirectly via sexual perfectionism.

## Discussion

In the current study, a long-term longitudinal approach was taken to study whether individuals' television viewing habits during adolescence can predict the extent to which they believe that sexual perfectionism is expected as adults, more than 10 years later, when they are in a romantic relationship. Subsequently, we examined whether sexual perfectionism predicted their satisfaction with that relationship and its sexual component, which were measured another year later. Most importantly, the results showed that, as expected, more frequent sitcom viewing during adolescence predicted higher expectations about sexual perfectionism in young adulthood, but at the same time watching more youth dramas predicted less endorsement of sexual perfectionism. Moreover, through these associations with sexual perfectionism, sitcom viewing during adolescence was indirectly related to lower levels of adult relational and sexual satisfaction, whereas youth drama viewing was indirectly related to higher levels of both types of satisfaction in young adulthood.

## **Television, Sexual Perfectionism, and Satisfaction in Adolescence and Adulthood**

Several previous studies have shown that television and film viewing can predict individuals' beliefs in broad, idealized expectations that elevate relationships and sex to something mythical and perfect (Galloway et al., 2015; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). On the other hand, more specific relationship and sex expectations that supposedly signal relational problems if they are not met, such as sexual perfectionism, seemed less affected by media use (Galloway et al., 2015; Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Closer inspections in the current study revealed that relations between television viewing and sexual perfectionism can occur. In this study each concept was examined in its most relevant developmental context. If individuals are exposed to sitcoms or youth dramas during adolescence, when they are constructing a sexual identity and looking for information on relationships and sex (Arnett, 2013; Strasburger et al., 2014), their expectations about sexual perfectionism are higher or lower in young adulthood, when they have become sexually active in committed relationships. Although media consumption can affect attitudes and expectations about sex during adolescence, an effect on a very specific script like sexual perfectionism may not yet become evident at this stage due to adolescents' sexual uncertainty and lack of sexual and romantic experience (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010, 2011). The same can be said about the indirect relation between television viewing in adolescence and sexual and relational satisfaction in adulthood. Media portrayals of sex may affect adolescents' expectations during adolescence, but implications for their satisfaction are the most meaningful when they become clear in a later life stage in which they have engaged in committed relationships.

The current study indicated that these presumed implications of adolescents' media use on their adult sexual perfectionism and satisfaction may be both positive and negative. Following previous results and assumptions about the differing relations between different

media genres and sexual cognitions and behaviors (Gottfried et al., 2013; Wright, 2009), two popular television genres among adolescents were examined. In line with our expectations, sitcom viewing during adolescence predicted more sexual perfectionism in young adulthood and youth drama viewing was associated with less sexual perfectionism. These results are in contrast with previous studies that did not find associations between sexual perfectionism and broad categories of (romantic) media use (Holmes, 2007; Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Viewing frequencies of different genres are highly correlated so a positive or negative association might be suppressed if the influence of a different genre is not accounted for (Gottfried et al., 2013; Tzelgov & Henik, 1991). In fact, in the current study both sitcom and youth drama viewing were unrelated to sexual perfectionism and both types of satisfaction in the bivariate correlations. The striking differences between these bivariate results and those of the analytical model show the importance of distinguishing separate genres with contrasting contents and combining them in the same model to avoid suppression of potential associations.

The overall number of hours adolescents generally watched television regardless of genre was included in the model as a control variable. The significant results for sitcom and youth drama viewing despite controlling for overall television viewing lend additional support for this study's conclusions about the influence of specific genres. More unexpectedly, overall television viewing during adolescence also positively predicted sexual perfectionism and the two types of satisfaction in young adulthood. The positive association between overall TV viewing and sexual perfectionism is not entirely surprising as other genres than sitcoms or youth dramas may also affect this stereotypical belief and as, in general, most television content tends to portray simplistic, idealized messages toward relationships and sex (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Wright, 2009). More surprising are the positive associations between overall TV viewing and relationship and sexual satisfaction as prior

research suggests TV's portrayals of sexual interactions in general would rather have a negative overall impact. This finding suggests again that the potential effects of sexual media may differ in nature. An explanation for the positive associations between overall television viewing and sexual and relational satisfaction may be that when the positive association between television viewing and sexual perfectionism is already taken into account, an additional but contrasting influence of other televised messages may also be found. In other words, TV viewing may have negative implications for relational and sexual satisfaction through the development of sexual perfectionism but also positive implications through other, unexplored, mechanisms. This reasoning would be in line with findings that media use can be both negatively and positively related to relationship satisfaction (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). More research is needed to study which alternative mechanisms may explain the positive direct relation between overall TV viewing and satisfaction and for which types of content these associations occur, as sitcom and youth drama viewing were not directly related to relational or sexual satisfaction. New content analyses are recommended to study the messages that different television genres portray about sex and its role in relationships in more detail, as opposed to the existing literature that mainly focuses on the frequencies of sexual portrayals, risks or gender stereotypes (Aubrey, 2004; Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2014). In response to such content analyses, future research would be advised to compare more than just the current two genres in relation to sexual expectations and satisfaction.

### **Media and Sexual Scripts**

The current study was inspired by the 3AM which explains how media exposure can impact sexual scripts and, subsequently, behavior (Wright, 2011). If adolescents, who do not yet have very clear or stable cognitive scripts about sex (Arnett, 2013; Peter & Valkenburg, 2008), are exposed to media messages in which sex is portrayed as simple and perfect or as a

meaningful act that can have both positive and negative consequences for romantic relationships, they may adapt their cognitive scripts about sex to be either more or less in line with the stereotypical sexual perfectionism script. When they are repeatedly exposed to these similar messages throughout their formative years, these cognitive scripts are expected to become more strongly anchored and defining for their perspectives on sexuality (Ward, 2003; Wiederman, 2015). When they get older and become sexually active in romantic relationships, their expectations will be guided by this sexual script (Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Wiederman, 2015). If individuals endorse a sexual perfectionism script they may find that their actual sexual experiences do not fully meet these idealized standards, which can negatively impact their satisfaction.

Although sexual and relational satisfaction were strongly correlated and prior research has identified sexual satisfaction as an important indicator of relationship satisfaction, both were predicted by sexual perfectionism in the same model. This result resonates with the conceptualization of sexual perfectionism as a script that does not only propose idealized standards for couples' sexual experiences but also posits that unmet standards are a sign of a bad relationship (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Galician, 2004). As such, relationship satisfaction seems to be affected independently of sexual perfectionism's relation to individuals' sexual satisfaction.

### **The Motivation to Learn from Television**

As explained above, exposure to the potential sexual messages portrayed on television may lead adolescents to incorporate the expectations of sexual perfectionism more or less strongly in their sexual scripts. However, most adolescents watch both sitcoms and youth dramas (or other genres), which appear to convey contradictory messages. Several theoretical perspectives including the 3AM state that individual difference variables might explain why some adolescents are more affected by certain sexual messages and others more by different



messages (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Wright, 2011). Although it was expected that a learning motivation could have strengthened both the positive relation between sitcom viewing and sexual perfectionism and the negative relation between youth drama viewing and sexual perfectionism, it did not function as a moderator in either relation.

These null results are in contrast with studies of adults' sexually explicit media use, which have found that associations between more frequent viewing and sexual outcomes are contingent upon the degree to which sexual media are perceived as an important source of sexual information (Wright, Sun, & Miezan, 2019; Wright et al., 2018). Beyond genre differences in the two sets of studies (i.e., mainstream media vs. sexually explicit media), a potential explanatory factor could be the approach to measurement. The present study's items were more about love and relationships and less about sex specifically. On the other hand, the Wright et al. studies asked directly about the perception that sexually explicit media are an important source of *sexual* information. In order for learning motivations to emerge as a moderator of the relation between sexual media use and sexual outcomes, it may be important to assess learning motivations related to sexuality more directly.

In addition, some previous researchers have conceptualized motivations for media use as mediators instead of moderators (e.g., Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). The choice for a mediation would be more in line with the suggestions of Valkenburg and Peter (2013) in their differential susceptibility to media effects model (DSMM). They argue that "the extent to which media users selectively attend to and invest cognitive effort to comprehend media content" (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013, p. 228) should be viewed as a cognitive response state. As such, specific motivations for media use such as information seeking are regarded as responses to that media use which can function as a link in an indirect relation between media use and its outcomes. On the other hand, and in line with the role of motivations as proposed in the 3AM, the motivation to learn was conceptualized in the

current study as what the DSM-5 calls a “developmental susceptibility” variable (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013, p. 227). It was argued that having a motivation to learn about relationships and sexuality is a defining developmental trait during adolescence which can be present in varying degrees as a personal difference variance (Arnett, 2013; Chapin, 2000). As this drive to gain information about relationships and sex is a typical developmental aspect of adolescence, the variable was approached as a relatively stable, pre-existing trait rather than a response to media use (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). This conceptualization was also reflected in the choice to measure the motivation to learn as an average of the participants’ responses across the three measurement waves during adolescence (similar to how television viewing was measured). Nevertheless, given the null results in the current study, it remains important to acknowledge that motivations for media use might also function as potentially mediating response states to media use.

### **Limitations**

A number of points may limit the conclusions that can be drawn from this study. First, it is possible that viewers’ preexisting scripts or personality traits guide their adolescent media choices and their sexual perfectionism as adults. This alternative explanation fits with the uses-and-gratifications perspective, as individuals base their media choices on their interests and needs (Rubin, 2009). As Segrin and Nabi (2002) explain, it is likely that selective exposure processes and socialization forces (which also include other media, family, peers, etc.) shape and reinforce sexual and romantic expectations over time. A second, related point is that sexual perfectionism and relational and sexual satisfaction were only measured in the final two waves in young adulthood, but not in the first three waves during adolescence. As such, the possibility of a reverse effect in which sexual perfectionism predicts television viewing could not be tested. Additionally, it was not possible to test whether the associations between television viewing and sexual perfectionism would already

occur over a shorter time frame during adolescence or to study additional mechanisms in this association during adolescence.

Third, due to the long-term design, the television content that the adolescents in the current study watched may not be entirely comparable to today's television landscape. Although formal comparisons of sexual television content over longer periods of time are limited, several content analytical studies that compared their results with those of earlier studies have concluded that, aside from some fluctuations, the nature, frequency, and consequences of sex remained relatively similar in the television content of the past two decades, however (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Eyal et al., 2007; Kunkel et al., 2007; Malacane & Martins, 2017). Only adolescents' overall exposure to sitcoms and youth dramas was studied so no information was available on the specific sexual messages they may or may not have seen. A fourth limitation is the attrition in the sample over the period of more than 15 years in which the study was conducted. Because only respondents who participated in the final wave of the study and who were in a relationship at that time were included, the sample consisted of 161 respondents of the group of more than 2000 who had participated in at least one of the initial three waves. Although the attrition is substantial, analyses showed that it only resulted in an overrepresentation of women in the final sample but that there was no bias as a result of attrition in the other variables in the model that were already measured in W1.

## **Conclusion**

This study was the first to take a long-term approach at examining the relations between adolescents' television viewing and their sexual and relational expectations and satisfaction as young adults. The results showed that young adults' expectations about sexual perfectionism and satisfaction with their relationship and sex life were related to their television viewing habits as adolescents and that the results differ based on which genres they watched. Although exposure to sitcoms and youth drama series only represents a small part

of individuals' sexual socialization this study indicates that adults' expectations and experience of relationships and sex can be, in part, predicted by such socializing agents at least 15 years earlier.

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Table 1

*Zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics for the variables in the model (N = 161).*

	Age	Sex	Overall TV	Sitcoms	Youth drama	Learning motivation	Sexual perfectionism	Relationship satisfaction	Sexual satisfaction
Age (W5)	-								
Sex (W5)	.18*	-							
Overall TV (W1-3)	.00	.14	-						
Sitcoms (W1-3)	.09	-.02	.12	-					
Youth drama (W1-3)	-.03	-.23**	.17*	.56***	-				
Learning motivation (W1-3)	-.11	.07	.24**	-.06	.10	-			
Sexual perfectionism (W4)	-.08	.00	.19*	.12	-.01	.19*	-		
Relationship satisfaction (W5)	.02	-.10	.12	.00	.10	-.08	-.27***	-	
Sexual satisfaction (W5)	-.04	-.09	.09	-.01	.05	-.07	-.19*	.58***	-
<i>M</i>	28.91	55.9%	3.29	2.95	2.29	2.36	3.37	5.99	5.31
<i>(SD) / %</i>	(1.68)	female	(1.46)	(0.84)	(0.90)	(0.50)	(0.93)	(0.89)	(1.45)

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$