

Verbal sexual content on TV more powerful than visual images

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The attitudes and beliefs that young people have about sex may be more swayed by what they hear on television, rather than what they see, according to a University of Michigan researcher.

A recent study by U-M Communications Studies graduate instructor Laramie Taylor delved into the complex relationships between sexual television content, attitudes and perceived realism. The study appeared in the May issue of *The Journal of Sex Research*.

"The findings run counter to conventional wisdom in society," Taylor said. "We worry about nudity and visual aspects but ignore verbal signals, which are more prevalent in the media, especially TV."

Taylor interviewed nearly 200 college undergraduates between the ages

of 18 to 26. The students were randomly assigned to groups and shown television clips of visual depictions of sexual behaviors, verbal depictions of the same behaviors, television clips with no sex, or no television. Afterwards, the students answered questions about their sexual attitudes and beliefs.

Taylor used video clips from six television programs: "Friends" (NBC), "Just Shoot Me" (NBC), "Ally McBeal" (FOX), "That '70s Show" (FOX), "The Simpsons" (FOX), and "Dawson's Creek" (FOX). Taylor said these programs were chosen because they were watched broadly and their content reflected patterns of "sex is fun for everyone and consequence-free."

People who perceived the television content to be realistic were influenced by sexual content, he said. Participants who scored highly on a perceived realism scale reported more permissive sexual attitudes after watching sexual television content.

Participants who did not think the television content was realistic were not significantly affected by its sexual messages. This suggested "the perception of television content as relatively unrealistic can act as a sort of resistance to its messages," he said.

Taylor also said the beliefs about sexual activity were influenced by verbal sexual content, but not by visual sexual content. Participants who believed that television content was realistic and watched clips of characters discussing sex later reported the belief that relatively more of their female peers were sexually active. However, they were not similarly influenced by visual depictions of sex.

Since two-thirds of the study's participants were women, conclusions based on gender differences could not be made. Taylor noted that other research has indicated women and men often react differently to sexual

media content.

Source: University of Michigan

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