
**REALITY TELEVISION SHOWS FOCUSING ON
SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH
COLLEGE STUDENTS ENGAGING IN
ONE-NIGHT STANDS**

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Abstract

Reality television shows are very popular and often contain content about sexual behavior. We study the watching of reality television dating shows and sexual relationship shows with sexual behavior of one-night stands. College students (n=578) were surveyed about their reality television watching habits and also their connection and interest with media characters. Those who watched reality television sexual relationship shows as compared to those who did not had greater odds to engage in one-night stands (OR:2.16, 95% CI:1.21, 3.83, p=0.01). However, there was no significant difference for engaging in one-night stands among those who did or did not watch reality television dating shows. Also, there was an overall pattern for those who watched reality television sexual relationship shows to have greater identification with media characters portrayed on these shows. In addition to moral considerations, one-night stands can place individuals at greater risk for sexually transmitted infections. As television can have a strong influence on young adults, we suggest that psychology and public health organizations consider advocating for reality television shows of such genre to limit viewer exposure to sexual insinuations during these shows.

Keywords: sexual behavior; permissiveness; television; mass media

Reality television shows are a popular type of entertainment shown on television. A particular aspect of this genre is that even though participants are being filmed, they specifically mention or viewers perceive that the feelings and/or behaviors shown are real (Aslama & Pantti, 2006). Reality television shows can be specifically focused on dating topics (e.g., *The Bachelor* (IMDb, 2013a), *The Bachelorette* (IMDb, 2013b)) or on suggestive behavior related to

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sexual activity topics (e.g., *Temptation Island* (IMDb, 2013c), *Paradise Hotel* (IMDb, 2013d)). Some of the most popular watched reality television shows include those from this genre. For example, in the United States, Nielsen Ratings ranked “*The Bachelor*,” as the tenth most popular prime broadcast network television show with an estimated 9,866,000 viewers (Nielsen, 2012). Reality television shows of this genre are targeted to a young adult audience, especially women aged 18 to 34 years (Ferris, S. W. Smith, Greenberg, & S. L. Smith, 2007).

Sexual content on television is associated with increased sexual activity attitudes and behavior. One experimental study among college students focused on levels of perceived realism of content on popular television shows and attitudes toward premarital sexual permissiveness. Those with high perceived realism who viewed sexual content on television had significantly greater permissiveness attitudes than those with high perceived realism who did not view sexual content on television, those with low perceived realism who viewed sexual content on television, and those with low perceived realism who did not view sexual content on television (Taylor, 2005). Other research suggests that among adolescents, those adolescents who were virgin at baseline and who watched sexual content on television were significantly associated at one year follow-up with both sexual intercourse initiation and also advancing level of noncoital sex. However, there were no significant associations for type of television exposure of whether sexual behavior or sexual talk was shown on television (Collins, Elliott, & Berry et al., 2004).

The literature on reality television and sexuality reports that among college women increased sexual permissiveness attitudes are associated with positive perceptions of the reality television show named, “*The Girls Next Door*” which focuses on life in the Playboy mansion and other Playboy events (Cato & Carpentier, 2010). Also, one study of reality television dating shows among college students did not find any significant association for either men or women for watching reality television dating shows with sexual behavior of one-night stands (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

The theoretical framework of this study is guided by Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) and Sensitivity Theory (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Social Cognitive Theory suggests that behavior is influenced by what one views others performing behaviors. As applied to reality television, those characters that are rewarded for particular behaviors would be those that viewers would like and possibly even choose to perform that behavior while those characters punished or looked down upon would not have too much influence on viewers wanting to perform that behavior (Nabi & Clark, 2008). Sensitivity Theory (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004) connects motivation to media use. This theory suggests that media use is motivated, is chosen by viewers based upon their needs, and media competes with other activities for viewer attention. It is linked to the 16 basic needs which include romance, social contact, acceptance, and vengeance. As applied to reality

television, those who watched reality television shows had greater mean scores on the romance basic need than those who did not watch any reality television shows (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004).

There is limited literature on reality television and sexuality topics. Also, we are not aware of any study on watching reality television sexual relationship shows and sexuality topics. This study has two aims. First, we compare watching of reality television dating shows with sexual behavior of one-night stands. Second, we compare watching of reality television sexual relationship shows with sexual behavior of one-night stands. We consider as part of our analyses adjusting for the potential impact of demographics, media attitudes, and sexuality attitudes.

Method

Participants and Procedures

We approached 642 college students to complete surveys and received 605 completed surveys for a response rate of 94.2% [(605/642) *100%]. There were 22 individuals who refused to complete the surveys and 15 individuals who returned non-valid surveys. As certain ages from completed surveys were much higher than typical college students, this sample is a subset of those participants who were below the age of 36, for a total of 578 participants in the current sample.

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an inner city public college located in New York City. This is a commuter college and the typical student lives at home with his/her parents. Participants were surveyed in classrooms, the library, cafeteria and public spaces on the university campus. All surveys were anonymous and informed consent was obtained prior to distributing the surveys. This survey received ethics approval by the college Institutional Review Board. All participants were surveyed from May 2011 through October 2011.

Measures

Demographics. Demographic variables included age (years), sex (man, woman), race/ethnicity (White, Hispanic, African American, Asian, South Asian, Other), married/committed relationship status (no/yes), and whether one was born in the United States (no/yes).

Reality Television Hours. Participants were asked, "On a typical week, how many hours of reality TV programs do you watch?"

Reality Television TV Shows. Participants were asked, "In the past year, did you watch a reality TV program that focused on dating?" and also "In the past year, did you watch a reality TV program that focused on sexual relationships?" Response choices for these questions were no/yes.

Sexual Empowerment Scale. The Sexual Empowerment Scale consists of 3 items based upon 4 items used in a previous article (Cato & Carpentier, 2010).

We modified one item to be gender neutral from “women” to “for attractive individuals.” Another item was omitted due to non-relevance for the current study. A sample item is, “Using sex to get what you want is OK.” Items are measured on a Likert-style scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating greater sexual empowerment. This is a reliable measure with Cronbach alpha reliability in the original sample of 0.80.¹⁰ Cronbach alpha reliability in this sample is 0.79.

Permissiveness Subscale. The Permissiveness Subscale consists of 10 items (C. Hendrick, S. S. Hendrick, & Reich, 2006). A sample item is, “I do not need to be committed to a person to have sex with him/her.” Items are measured on a Likert-style scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating greater sexual permissiveness. This is a reliable measure with Cronbach alpha reliability in the original sample of 0.93 (C. Hendrick et al., 2006). Cronbach alpha reliability in this sample is 0.95.

Audience-Persona Interaction Scale. The Audience-Persona Interaction Scale is a parasocial interaction measure that consists of 4 subscales with a total of 22 items (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). Items are measured on a Likert-style scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. These items were slightly modified by adding the words of “reality TV program” to the items. The Parasocial Identify subscale consists of 6 items. A sample item is, “My favorite character from the reality TV program reminds me of myself.” Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating greater identification with a favorite character. The Parasocial Interest subscale consists of 6 items. A sample item from this subscale is, “I would like to meet the actor who played my favorite character from the reality TV program.” Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating greater interest in a favorite character. The Parasocial Group subscale consists of 6 items. A sample item from this subscale is, “The characters from the reality TV program have interactions similar to mine and my friends.” Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating greater group identification and interaction as part of a television family group. The Parasocial Problem subscale consists of 4 items. A sample item from this subscale is, “I wish I could handle the problems as well as my favorite character from the reality TV program.” Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating greater levels of favorite character problem solving abilities. This is a reliable measure with Cronbach alpha reliability in the original sample for the four subscales: Identify=0.87, Interest=0.79, Group=0.83, and Problem=0.85 (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). Cronbach alpha reliability in this sample is: Identify=0.95, Interest=0.91, Group=0.93, and Problem=0.91.

Motive Social Learning Scale. The Motive Social Learning Scale consists of 6 items (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). In the original scale, items were measured on a Likert-style scale ranging from 1=exactly to 5=not at all. We modified the

Likert-style scale to have the scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. A sample item is, "I watch reality TV so I can learn to do things that I haven't done before." Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating greater levels of motives for watching the reality TV programs to learn. This is a reliable measure with Cronbach alpha reliability in the original sample of 0.83 (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). Cronbach alpha reliability in this sample is 0.91.

Perceived Realism Scale. The Perceived Realism Scale consists of 5 items (Rubin, 1981). We slightly modified the items and added the word "reality TV" to the original "TV." The two negatively framed items were reworded so as not to require reverse coding. We modified the Likert-style scale to have the scale ranging from 1=never to 5=always. A sample item is, "The people I see on reality TV are just like people I meet in real life." Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating a greater perception that reality television is similar to real life. This is a reliable measure with Cronbach alpha reliability in the original sample of 0.80 (Rubin, 1981). Cronbach alpha reliability in this sample is 0.89.

Facebook Scale. The Facebook Scale consists of 8 items based upon 6 items adapted from a previously published article (Godlewski & Perse, 2010) and two original items. The adaptation involved adding "online on Facebook" from the original "online" and "reality TV program" instead of "program." A sample item is, "I go online on Facebook to view additional video footage of the reality TV program." Items are measured on a Likert-style scale ranging from 1=never to 5=always. Items are added together for a total score with higher scores indicating greater use of Facebook for reality television purposes. This is based upon a reliable measure with Cronbach alpha reliability in the original sample of 0.90 (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). Cronbach alpha reliability in this sample is 0.92.

One-Night Stand Item. Participants were asked the health behavior question of, "In the past year, did you have a 'one-night stand' (i.e., had sex with someone you just met and didn't date after that)?" Answer choices were either "yes" or "no." This question was obtained from a previously published article (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). It was modified by adding the time frame of "in the past year" rather than the original "have you ever."

Statistical Analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the variables with mean and standard deviation values for the continuous variables and percentages and frequencies for the categorical variables. Inferential analyses compared a number of variables with regard to status of having a one-night stand. Any variable significantly differing in this analysis was included in logistic regression analyses. Both univariate and multivariate analyses were conducted. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare continuous variables and the Mann-Whitney Test was used to compare skewed continuous variables. As appropriate, either the Pearson chi-square test or the Fisher's exact test was used

Articles Section

to compare categorical variables. All p-value were two tailed. IBM SPSS Statistics Version 19 was used for the analyses.

Results

In Table 1, significant differences for the categorical variables were for sex where men had a greater percentage of one-night stands than women and for race/ethnicity among whites where whites had a greater percentage of one-night stands, and among Asians where Asians had a lesser percentage of one-night stands. Significant differences for the continuous variables were that those who had one-night stands had greater mean values than those who did not have one-night stands for the Sexual Empowerment Scale, the Permissiveness Scale, and the Perceived Realism Scale.

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample as Compared to Sexual Behavior of One-night Stands.

Variable	No	Yes	<i>p</i>
	one-night stand <i>M (SD) or % (#)</i> (<i>n=492</i>)	one-night stand <i>M (SD) or % (#)</i> (<i>n=81</i>)	
Age (years)	22.6 (3.45)	23.1 (3.11)	.16
Sex			<.001
Men	42.9% (210)	80.2% (65)	
Women	57.1% (280)	19.8% (16)	
Race/ethnicity			.045
White	38.7% (188)	53.1% (43)	
Hispanic	9.9% (48)	8.6% (7)	
African American	13.8% (67)	12.3% (10)	
Asian	23.0% (112)	12.3% (10)	
South Asian	5.8% (28)	1.2% (1)	
Other	8.8% (43)	12.3% (10)	
Married/Committed Relationship (yes)	35.5% (173)	25.9% (21)	.09
Born in US (yes)	56.3% (276)	59.3% (48)	.62
Reality TV (hours)	3.5 (4.51)	3.72 (5.06)	.45
Sexual Empowerment Scale	6.6 (3.05)	8.5 (2.92)	<.001
Permissiveness Subscale	22.4 (10.04)	33.8 (8.56)	<.001
Parasocial Identity Subscale	11.1 (5.17)	12.0 (5.71)	.20
Parasocial Interest Subscale	14.4 (5.82)	13.2 (5.53)	.11
Parasocial Group Subscale	12.3 (5.27)	11.9 (5.02)	.52
Parasocial Problem Subscale	8.2 (3.69)	7.7 (3.77)	.34
Motive Social Learning Scale	11.3 (4.80)	12.3 (5.79)	.09
Perceived Realism Scale	9.0 (3.56)	10.0 (4.13)	.02
Facebook Scale	10.8 (4.51)	11.6 (5.36)	.14

Note: *M*=mean, *SD*=standard deviation. Sample sizes slightly vary due to omissions by participants.

Table 2 shows a significant difference of greater percentages for one-night stands for those who watched TV reality shows on sexual relationships as compared to those who did not. There was no significant relationship of one-night stands to those who watched or did not watch TV reality shows on dating topics.

Table 2. Relationship between Reality Television Watching and Sexual Behavior of One-night Stands.

Variable	No one-night stand % (#)	Yes one-night stand % (#)	<i>p</i>
Sexual Relationship TV Reality Show			<.001
No	60.5% (297)	37.0% (30)	
Yes	39.5% (194)	63.0% (51)	
Dating TV Reality Show			.15
No	57.9% (285)	49.4% (40)	
Yes	42.1% (207)	50.6% (41)	

Table 3 shows that there were significantly greater mean values for those who watched reality TV shows on sexual relationships than those who did not for the media variables of Parasocial Identity, Parasocial Interest, Parasocial Group, the Motive Social Learning Scale, the Perceived Realism Scale, and the Facebook Scale. There was no significant difference for the Parasocial Problem Subscale.

Table 3. Watching Sexual Relationship TV Reality Shows and Comparisons to Media Variables.

Variable	No watch reality TV sexual relationship <i>M</i> (SD) (<i>n</i> =327)	Yes watch reality TV sexual relationship <i>M</i> (SD) (<i>n</i> =245)	<i>p</i>
Parasocial Identity Subscale	10.83 (5.28)	11.79 (5.19)	.03
Parasocial Interest Subscale	13.37 (5.90)	15.29 (5.48)	<.001
Parasocial Group Subscale	11.56 (5.21)	13.22 (5.15)	<.001
Parasocial Problem Subscale	8.02 (3.80)	8.23 (3.57)	.50
Motive Social Learning Scale	10.92 (4.81)	12.13 (5.09)	.004
Perceived Realism Scale	8.71 (3.57)	9.71 (3.70)	.001
Facebook Scale	10.34 (4.17)	11.67 (5.11)	.001

Note: *M*=mean, *SD*=standard deviation. Sample sizes slightly vary due to omissions by participants.

Table 4 shows in the univariate analysis that those who watched reality TV shows on sexual relationships had significantly greater odds of more than two for one-night stands. Women and Asians had significantly lesser odds for one-

Articles Section

night stands. There were significantly slightly increased odds for one-night stands for greater scores on the Sexual Empowerment Scale, the Permissiveness Scale, and the Perceived Realism Scale. In the multivariate analysis, a similar significance pattern occurred with the only change that the Sexual Empowerment Scale was no longer significantly associated with one-night stands.

Table 4. Relationship of Variables to Sexual Behavior of One-night Stands.

Variable	Univariate OR (95% CI)	p	Multivariate OR (95% CI)	p
Watched Reality TV on Sexual Relationships	2.60 (1.60, 4.23)	<0.001	2.16 (1.21, 3.83)	.01
Sex		<0.001		.01
Men	1.00		1.00	
Women	0.19 (0.10, 0.33)		0.37 (0.19, 0.75)	
Race/ethnicity				
White	1.00		1.00	
Hispanic	0.64 (0.27, 1.51)	0.31	0.54 (0.21, 1.38)	.20
African American	0.65 (0.31, 1.37)	0.26	0.57 (0.24, 1.37)	.21
Asian	0.39 (0.19, 0.81)	0.01	0.34 (0.15, 0.77)	.01
South Asian	0.16 (0.02, 1.18)	0.07	0.18 (0.02, 1.43)	.10
Other	1.02 (0.47, 2.18)	0.97	1.18 (0.48, 2.89)	.73
Sexual Empowerment Scale	1.22 (1.13, 1.31)	<0.001	0.90 (0.80, 1.01)	.07
Permissiveness Subscale	1.12 (1.09, 1.15)	<0.001	1.12 (1.07, 1.16)	<.001
Perceived Realism Scale	1.08 (1.01, 1.15)	0.02	1.11 (1.03, 1.19)	.01

Note: OR=odds ratio, CI=confidence interval

Discussion and conclusions

We found that those who watched reality television sexual relationship shows as compared to those who did not watch reality television sexual relationship shows had a greater percentage to engage in one-night stands. However, there was no significant difference for engaging in one-night stands among those who did or did not watch reality television dating shows. Also, those who watched reality television sexual relationship shows as compared to those who did not watch these shows had significantly greater scores on almost all the media variables indicating greater identification with characters portrayed on these shows. Also, a multivariate analysis for understanding variables associated with one-night stands found that not only those who watched reality television sexual relationship shows had greater odds to have one-night stands but also that greater sexual permissiveness attitudes and greater perceived realism were associated with one-night stands. The multivariate analysis also found that women as compared to men and Asians as compared to Whites had lesser odds to engage in one-night stands.

We found that watching reality television sexual relationship shows but not reality television dating shows was significantly associated with having one-night stands. Our reality television dating show findings are similar to a previous study's findings of no relationship for watching reality television dating shows and one-night stands (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). However, we are not aware of any study focusing on reality television sexual relationship shows and one-night stands. Our study adds to the literature that watching such types of shows is associated with sexual behavior of one-night stands. Interestingly, in that same study that did not find a relationship of watching reality television dating shows to one-night stands, there was a significant relationship among women but not men of increased general TV hours associated with greater sexual intercourse activity (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Our study did not find any relationship for hours of reality television watched with one-night stands.

We found that those who watched reality television sexual relationship shows had greater scores on three of the four parasocial relationship subscales than those who did not watch. Research on dating relationships shows that those who have greater scores on an attachment subscale of depending upon others are significantly associated with greater parasocial relationships (Cohen, 1997). It is possible that those watching the reality television sexual relationship shows were in dating relationships and this is why they had greater scores on the parasocial relationship subscales. However, there may be other reasons for this finding of which we are unaware.

We found increased perceived realism associated with having one-night stands. It is reported that those who perceive reality television as more real and also have a greater interest for the reality television content are associated with using reality television for entertainment, relaxation, social interaction, and companionship (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). Also, as romance is one of the basic desires and values associated with viewing and enjoying reality television shows (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004), it is possible that the casual sexual behavior portrayed on the reality television shows lead the viewers to be more comfortable with more casual sexual behavior and engage in sexual activity of one-night stands.

We found that increased sexual permissiveness attitudes was significantly associated with having one-night stands. A study of African American female college students found higher levels of sexual permissiveness was associated with greater levels of vaginal sexual activity (Barnes & Bynum, 2010). Our study is similar to this study and reports that sexually permissive attitudes are associated with intimate sexual behavior of sexual one-night stands.

We found that women as compared to men had lesser odds to engage in one-night stands. Previous research suggests that women are less likely than men to engage in casual sexual relationships (Townsend & Wasserman, 2011). Also, women are less likely than men to engage in sexual intercourse during sexual

hookups (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Our findings for one-night stands have similar patterns to previous sexual behavior research.

We found that Asians as compared to Whites had lesser odds to engage in one-night stands. Previous research among college students reports that non-Asians have a younger age at first sexual intercourse than Asians. However, there is no difference between non-Asians and Asians with regard to frequency of sexual intercourse. In that study they also suggest that Asians have more conservative approaches to sexual behaviors outside of marriage as compared to non-Asians (Meston, Trapnell, & Gorzalka, 1996). Our results are similar and suggest that Asians may have a more modest approach towards sexual behavior as they have lesser odds to engage in one-night stands.

This study has several limitations. First, this is only from one college and may not generalize to other colleges. Second, as we did not inquire about the particular name(s) of the reality television sexual relationship shows watched, it is possible that only certain shows are related to engaging in one-night stands. Future research should study whether particular shows and the sexual behavior activity insinuated on these shows are associated with engaging in one-night stands. Third, although one-night stands may be risky health behavior, we did not obtain information on condom use which can protect from a number of sexually transmitted infections. However even if participants did use condoms, condom use is not protective of all sexually transmitted infections as condom use is not fully protective for the human papillomavirus (HPV).

In conclusion, watching reality television sexual relationship shows are associated with the behavior of engaging in one-night stands. In addition to moral considerations, one-night stands can place individuals at greater risk for sexually transmitted infections. As television can have a strong influence on young adults, we suggest that psychology and public health organizations consider advocating for reality television shows of such genre to limit viewer exposure to sexual insinuations during these shows.

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