Journal of Youth Studies, 2013
Vol. 16, No. 3, 287–303, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2012.710744

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Let's talk about sex: audience research of Flemish teenage television viewers and their view on sexuality

Elke Van Damme* and Daniel Biltereyst

Communication Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

(*Received 27 January 2012; final version received 6 July 2012*)

Teenage sexual identity is shaped within a complex cultural landscape in which the issue of protecting the 'innocent' (children/teens) from sexually suggestive images is high on the public agenda. Intimate relationships and sexuality have entered the public domain and are presented on the screen, offering audiences possible roles to play in reality. Trepidation of teenagers being 'corrupted' by sexualised media has urged many scholars to investigate this issue. However, sexualised, mediatised representations can also empower and emancipate teens who are often savvy, active and critical media consumers. We aim to study how young audiences (aged 14–19) in Flanders consume fictional sexual scripts, and how these scripts can help in the development and articulation of sexual identity. A qualitative approach was taken using 57 teenagers divided into eight, in-depth focus groups. Sexual norms and values, as well as the sexual double standard and sexual scripts were discussed. Talking about and watching televised sex has become less of a taboo among teens, but this does not imply their permissiveness is unlimited. Traditional norms and values regarding relationships and sexuality are still highly valued, and although most respondents are tolerant towards casual sex by others, they distance themselves from such behaviour.

Keywords: young people/teenagers; gender; sexuality; identity; television-viewing; audience research

Introduction

In 1995, Plummer stated that sex had become the big story in contemporary society and commonplace in our everyday lives. Or as Attwood (2006, pp. 81–82) said, 'In our culture, sex is becoming more and more visible, and more explicit'. However, the sexual scripts by which this visibility is being achieved are often limited and lack diversity. They are repeatedly stereotypical in terms of male and female sexuality, thus reflecting dominant ideology and social power (McNair 2002). Boys and men are mostly portrayed as sexually powerful, whereas females are repeatedly constructed 'as sexual conquests to be pursued and lusted after. To be feminine is to be available, responsive and open to male sexual advances' (Ott and Mack 2010, p. 186). Similar sexual scripts are not only recognised in content aimed at general audiences but also in youth-oriented programmes, Van Damme (2010) argued. No explicit representations of sexual intimacy are registered in teen drama series, yet, sexual references are found in dialogues, and (casual) sexual behaviour among teenagers is implied (Van Damme 2010). In this respect, social belief about teenage

*Corresponding author. Email: eevdamme.vandamme@ugent.be

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reception is that the media function as super peers and that screen culture and more permissive attitudes and behaviours are somehow connected. Consequently, it is stressed that teen well-being needs to be protected (see Zurbriggen *et al.* 2007). These concerns are fuelled by an extensive number of studies that focus on the possible influences of sexually (suggestive or explicit) images. The majority of this research consists of quantitative and/or policy-related reviews funded by governments or civil society organisations dealing with children's rights. Moreover, the focus is mostly on the negative effects of sexualisation on girls (Duits and van Zoonen 2011, p. 492). In most of these quantitative studies, correlations are investigated, although causality is rarely firmly established.[1]

More importantly, teens are given no explicit voice in this debate, and their agency is not acknowledged. Yet, research by de Graaf *et al.* (2008) showed that teens enjoy talking and learning about sexuality and gender roles. The importance of such a qualitative approach towards the audience is considerable due to the increasing role of the media in the identity construction of contemporary youth (sub)cultures (Besley 2003, p. 167, Sjöberg 2003, Osgerby 2004, p. 165, Cooper and Tang 2009). The current qualitative audience study will give teens a voice and will allow them to reflect on mediated representations of sexuality within contemporary popular culture.[2]

Young people and the sexualised media

In Flanders, sexualised images in (reality) programmes have been the topic of criticism. In 2008, for instance, the association of Flemish sexologists (Vlaamse Vereniging voor Seksuologie, VVS) started with a campaign against what they called the excessive offer of sexual stimuli in music videos and popular television programmes. Next, music channels such as MTV have been criticised not for broadcasting pornographic material but rather for the incorporation of pornographically suggestive images (McNair 1996, Serneels 2008 – pornographication). This media-fuelled moral panic regarding sexualisation and pornographication has thrived on extensive discussions, research and publications concerning the possible effects this content has on teenagers. This thriving of panic is not surprising, as sexual identity development is an integral part of adolescence. Sexual socialisation is the intricate and gradual process by which young people acquire knowledge, attitudes and values about sexuality through the integration of information from multiple resources (Ward 2003). Television, in particular, has received substantial attention as an important source of information about sex and sexuality. The most recurrent research topics focus on the correlation between programme preference and sexual attitudes, gender stereotypes and traditional gender attitudes in dating situations (e.g. Rivadeneyra and Lebo 2008, ter Bogt *et al.* 2010); the amount of viewing and perceptions of peer sexual behaviour (e.g. Eggermont 2005); the mediated relation of programmes and self-objectification (e.g. de Graaf *et al.* 2008); and the influence of exposure to televised sexual content on adolescent sexuality (e.g. Fisher and Hill 2009). More recently, sexually explicit material and its influence on teen sexual attitudes has also been studied (e.g. Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009, Peter and Valkenburg 2010). Results of these studies show, for instance, that promiscuous and 'dangerous' sexual behaviour, permissive attitudes regarding sexuality, engaging in sexual acts at an earlier age, low self-esteem, self-sexualisation

and so on, could be potential effects. However, the dominant discourse on sexualisation often ignores the polysemic nature of texts, and it underestimates audiences' level of agency (Duits and van Zoonen 2011, p. 492). It is therefore necessary to give the audience a voice in the consumption of media content (Buckingham and Bragg 2004).

Understanding the personal meanings individuals take from media texts in relation to their lived social and cultural systems, frames of references and experiences and ideology is the focal motive of reception scholars. Scholars in this direction of qualitative audience studies depart from the notion that representations support the hegemonic or dominant (in the case of gender and sexuality, heteronormative) ideology, yet, according to Hall (1980), texts are open for polysemic or multiple interpretations. It was Hall's textual practice of encoding/decoding that outlined 'the possible ways in which the intended meaning of a text can be potentially reworked in the hands of an active audience' (Ott and Mack 2010, p. 224). This quote illustrates that reception researchers support the notion of an active audience and believe that the interpretative framework is the primary site of meaning-making. Hall's[3] theoretical framework was empirically explored by Morley in his study, 'The Nationwide Audience' (1980), in which evidence of the polysemic nature of the text was found, and thus reception studies were introduced into cultural studies. Yet according to Morley, the text's level of polysemy was limited, since sites of interpretation are always embedded within a hegemonic societal and cultural framework. Therefore, reception scholars need to contextualise their results and incorporate them into the analysis.

Many previous audience studies focused on the reception of one specific programme or genre (e.g. Ang 1985, Pasquier 1996), on emerging adults (e.g. Dhoest 2008), or on the identity construction of ethnic minorities (e.g. Durham 2004). However, the issues of teens' interpretations of mediated representations of sexuality and the role of such representation within teens' sexual identity construction, approached with a qualitative methodology, have been put on the research agenda only recently. Buckingham and Bragg were the first to bridge this gap in 2004. Their study showed teens as critical media consumers who do not believe everything they see. Television is a source of information about sex, and depictions of sex on TV are recognised by the teenage audience. Moreover, the authors stated that the media do not have the power 'to sexually corrupt children or to sexually liberate them' (2004, p. 8). MacKeogh (2004) found that although Irish teens do not think they are at risk, they do argue that younger, insecure or naive children are. Females may also be at risk (Fuller and Damico 2008), and parental supervision is advised for these groups. The participants in MacKeogh's study (2004) stated that the representation of sex on television lacked realism, that there was not too much sex on TV and that teens believed the world represented on TV was in sync with our more sexualised society. MacKeogh (2004) concluded that teens are highly media literate, as they have grown up with sexualised media. According to de Graaf *et al.* (2008), teens consider girls responsible for guarding their boundaries, and research by Felten *et al.* (2009) illustrated that teens do not agree with the sexual double standard.[4] However, teens believe that gender stereotypical ideas (e.g. that boys are always in the mood for sex and that girls value a relationship more than boys) could be reduced to natural differences between men and women or were historically shaped propositions. Duits and van Zoonen (2011, p. 502) added that girls from different backgrounds (low vs.

middle class, religious vs. non-religious) were 'well aware of sexualisation in the world around them, but that they deny, accommodate, or resist this'. This does not imply that this sexualisation trend is not problematic; these girls do not really like this tendency, yet it outlines their cultural environment, and thus they have to deal with it (Duits and van Zoonen 2011, p. 503).

This brief overview of studies on youth and sexualised media illuminates a need for more academic research, with a focus on teenage viewers' strength and agency regarding media consumption. Moreover, previous research often focused on (teenage) girls, as they are labelled potential victims for sexualised media content. In this article, we will investigate how Flemish[5] teenage boys and girls cope with sexualised media and if the consumption of such media images means that the dominant ideology is accepted (cf. Fiske 1989). We will also investigate if their view on sexual actions is as liberal and permissive (and problematic) as is often thought. Specific emphasis will be placed on possible gender differences, since previous studies (e.g. Buckingham and Bragg 2004) indicate that audience interpretations vary across gender (among other lines such as age, ethnicity and social and cultural background).

Methodology

Contemporary audience and reception studies analyse personal meanings that individuals take from media texts in relation to their lived social and cultural systems, frames of reference and experiences, using different approaches (Schrøder *et al.* 2003). In this study, the qualitative approach of focus groups was taken for studying issues of gender and sexuality. This method is more appropriate than individual interviews, as group interactions can stimulate a richer and more complex flow of information (Montell 1999). The focus is on teenagers, as the construction of identity is an integral step in the transitional period of adolescence, during which a world based on generational differences is replaced by one grounded on sexual differences (Pasquier 1996, p. 354). Following qualitative audience and reception studies, identities are not natural or essential but are reflexive and open to negotiation, and therefore must be performed (Giddens 2001, Weber and Mitchell 2008).

Since the main topic of the group discussion is audience experiences and engagement with mediated forms of sexuality, it was necessary to provide a safe and stimulating context for the group discussion. Therefore, all focus groups consisted of friends. The use of friendship groups has been recommended 'for children and teenagers where problems of shyness can be overcome by recruiting a group of friends or pairs of friends' (Gordon 1999, pp. 80–81). Moreover, when using peer groups, less time is spent on getting to know each other, since participants already feel comfortable around each other (Morgan 1998, p. 59). This made it possible to discuss the topic of sexuality in a safe environment and to voice controversial opinions and beliefs, even when they were different from the common ideas of the group. Pre-existing groups can thus (re)create situations of their social relationships in everyday life. These (re)creations probably do not represent natural interactions; however, they are not entirely contrived either. They offer us valuable data for collective or shared meanings, social contexts, group interactions and performances of the everyday self in public arenas (Kitzinger 1994, Warr 2008). It is also through

these group interactions that participants leave a particular impression on others, thus performing their identities for others to see (Buckingham 2008, de Bruin 2008, Gray 2008). One of the main critiques of audience research is the level of reality and the aspect of social desirability (Berger 2000, McKee 2003). Researchers within the social constructionist and symbolic interactionist perspective, however, do not label these practices as obscurities of the data gathering. ‘Rather, they *are* the data because they are important elements in everyday interaction’ (Hollander 2004, p. 611, emphasis in original).

Eight focus groups were formed by a total of 57 teenage volunteers aged between 14 and 19. Thirty-two were female and 25 male. Five focus groups were mixed-sex (boys and girls), whereas three focus groups were homogeneous in terms of gender (one girls focus group; two boys focus groups). Except for one group, which was a mixture of first generation Turkish girls with Flemish peers, all groups were homogeneous in terms of descent. The use of both mixed and homogeneous groups was motivated by the idea that a same-sex group of friends might create a safer and more open context to talk about sexuality and sexually related topics. An additional motivation was the idea that gender performances in mixed-sex groups might differ from those in homogeneous groups. The use of a combination of heterogeneous and same-sex groups provided the opportunity to analyze possible gender differences in media consumption and performances of the self.

As the consumption of sexuality in relation to media content was the main subject of the focus groups, watching fictional programmes regularly was a necessary prerequisite for the focus group participants. Additional demographical information (e.g. age, type of secondary education) about each interviewee was obtained, using a small questionnaire. Visual material from the popular American teen drama series *One Tree Hill* (2003–2012; channel: The CW) and *Gossip Girl* (2007 to present; channel: The CW) was used to stimulate discussion.[6] American programmes dominate the European television market and are often programmed at Belgian commercial channels aimed at teenagers and emerging adults. Moreover, research shows that among Flemish teenagers, American programmes dominate the top five of most favourite television programmes and the top five of the last programmes watched on DVD (Adriaens *et al.* 2011a).

A semi-structured and open-ended questionnaire was used as a guide during the discussion. The first part of the group interviews focused on teens’ evaluation of the incorporation of love and relational and sexual scripts in the storylines of contemporary programmes and their evaluation of the frequency of these sexual representations. Second, the level of realism and relevance of these portrayals was studied by asking respondents if they recognised and compared their own love lives, sexual relationships and experiences with fictional representations. Finally, sexual norms and values were discussed (e.g. sexual double standard, casual sex), as were gender stereotypes such as men preferring sexual fulfilment over love and emotional intimacy. Discussions lasted between 60 and 75 minutes, after which participants were given their incentive for contributing. One can criticise the artificial nature of watching and discussing media content in groups, but previous research (Ging 2005, Adriaens *et al.* 2011b) has shown that film and television are often discussed among friends and peers. Moreover, ‘TV talk is a crucial forum for experimentation with identities’ (Gillespie 1995, p. 25).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, including emotions, hesitations, silences and laughing out loud.[7] These emotions and characteristics give a good overview of the atmosphere, context, and flow of the discussions, and they are useful for the interpretation and analysis (Boeije 2005). This bulk of raw data was organised and broken down before the real analysis, which can be situated in the method of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), could start. A more open coding system was applied, and the codes were structured according to the questionnaire. However, it was possible for new codes to emerge during the coding process and to emanate from the transcripts, so rigorous coding and analysis was conducted. Using a two-phase coding process, we were critical of the first coding, and we believe that non-systematically and previously made coding errors were given less chance to arise. Each quote was given a label of the thematic tree structure, consisting of 'opinion regarding sexual standard', 'definition sexually (suggestive) images', 'acceptance of casual sex', etc. The focus of the thematic and in-depth analysis is on the identification of certain performances within a specific context and on possible gender differences within these practices. It was during the analysis, as is common when using a grounded theory approach, that within a category or label, specific groups of comments could be recognised. The interpretation of such groups of comments resulted in the establishment of practices [e.g. habituation to sexual(ly suggestive) content]. NVivo was used to code the raw data; yet, we preferred the old school, manually (and often colourful) written analysis. The results are often illustrated with quotes from participants, and for every quote, additional information about the respondent is provided in brackets. This information consists of the number of the focus group (FG XX), gender (M for males and F for females) and age.

Results

Relational and sexual scripts: habituation, fatigue and functionality

A clip from the first *One Tree Hill* season introduced the topic of sexually suggestive images on TV. The teenage characters kiss passionately and undress and caress one another, yet the clip contains no explicit images. A first general finding from the research was that, according to participants, similar plotlines and images of love and sexuality are common in television programmes. The participants even state that they 'do not pay any attention to it anymore' (FG7, M, 17), as if they experience a 'sexually suggestive images' fatigue. This lack of reaction, or habituation, can indicate that contemporary Flemish teenagers are more liberal (and therefore do not notice such content anymore) regarding sexually suggestive images. Furthermore, participants regularly mentioned that they consider the presence of such images normal, as they are part of almost every series and, moreover, sexuality is part of human life (normalisation). 'In my opinion, if it wouldn't be integrated [in television programmes] anymore, it would feel really weird. It's part of everything, you know?' (FG2, F, 18). Yet, sexually explicit or pornographic images are evaluated differently (see infra).

Teens experience different feelings when they watch these scripts: Ang's notion of aspirational identification (1985) is not recognised among all female participants. In the third focus group, for instance, girls desire similar things to happen

in daily life; however, they are realistic and 'know that something like that will never happen' (FG3, F, 16). A few girls like the informational side of the images (functionality), whereas a few participants (both boys and girls) are indifferent towards them ('I really don't care about love in TV!' FG4, M, 17), and a distinct group (mostly boys) dislike this kind of content because it is too dominantly present, too idealistic and boring, or too predictable. Some, mostly males, even admitted they get angry sometimes when watching such scripts. Teenagers in the second focus group consider personal characteristics important in their reaction to television content. One girl, for instance, does not really like these kinds of representations, as she lacks melodramatic sentiment and therefore does not share the same joy as her friends and classmates when viewing those representations. This girl's lack of melodramatic sentiment was touched upon by one of the other participants, whereupon the girl indicated that 'those [programmes] are all too corny and I'm not a big fan of such things' (FG4, F, 16). In other focus groups, it was mentioned that reactions also depend on how viewers feel while watching television at that specific moment. Sometimes they long for romantic images or storylines, while at other times, they do not like them at all. Romantic and sexual portrayals are, therefore, functional as they provide viewers with possible scripts regarding these topics (e.g. 'Sometimes, you think about what you saw on TV and reflect about what I'd do if my boyfriend cheated on me.' – FG3, F, 16). These results suggest that media representations fulfil different functions such as entertainment, escapism or information, that they evoke different emotions, and that personal characteristics (e.g. emotional well-being) are influential factors in the evaluation of television content. More importantly, all teens in the third group believe that under the influence of these sexual media representations, sexuality has become less taboo (though it is still taboo among their grandparents) and that this plays an important role in the way they talk and think about sexuality. They label themselves as liberal and permissive regarding sex-related topics and often 'make jokes and see everything in a sexualised way, even when it has nothing to do with it' (FG3, F, 15), 'like [sexualising] the lyrics of a K3[8] song' (FG3, F, 17).

In most mixed focus groups, girls took the initiative to discuss this topic and explain their points of view. Girls admit they like to watch this content, although they are critical and realistic. The use of stereotypical storylines and clichés is criticised by both girls and boys. Most boys in mixed groups, though, label such content as boring, and they are often annoyed when it is incorporated in storylines. Boys' reactions can be read as a performance of a hegemonic masculinity, in which sentiment, love, and romance are connected with femininity and homosexuality. Different reactions, next to habituation and normalisation, were found in the same-sex groups: the participants in group 8 think such content is funny, and these boys mock the characters. In group 7, however, boys also evaluate this content as cool and want more such make-out sessions incorporated in storylines. Such scenes should even be more explicit, they say. In this hegemonic performance, sexually suggestive and explicit images are titillating and turn on 'real' men. Hereby, male participants stressed their heterosexual identity, which might result in their manhood not being questioned by their peers.

Sexual scripts and pornographic content: frequency and protecting the 'innocent'

In general, the amount of sexually suggestive images on television is acceptable for the participants. It was stated repeatedly during discussions that there are not too many of this kind of images, and that no explicitly pornographic or other sexually offensive pictorial material is really shown, except in late-night programmes (after 11:00–12:00 p.m.), on pornographic channels, or on pay TV. Here, the difference between sexually suggestive and sexually explicit images is drawn ('There's no real sex on TV.' FG1, F, 16, vs. 'Yes, there is. At night!' FG1, M, 16). The presence of explicit images on such programmes and channels was most often addressed by boys, in both mixed and same-sex groups, which can be interpreted as a hegemonic performance of masculinity (Nayak and Kehily 1996).

Acceptance of the amount of sexual scripts does not imply that participants are equally enthusiastic about them. More boys than girls can be annoyed when a dominant storyline is interrupted by this subplot. Participants in the second focus group think 'there are more sexual (suggestive) images on television than there were a few years ago' (FG2, M, 18). According to the interviewees, each contemporary series contains some nudity, although this tendency is noticed more in American series than in Flemish ones ('Those are less slutty' – FG2, F, 18). Music videos are most critically evaluated, especially rap music and Lady Gaga's music clips, in which 'women are depicted as cheap whores' (FG2, F, 18). However, one girl believes these images have always been present, but 'when we were younger, we didn't pay attention to them or our parents didn't let us. But now (...) we have grown up and are therefore allowed to watch them' (FG2, F, 18).

In line with previous studies (MacKeogh 2004, Fuller and Damico 2008), our respondents in focus groups 2 and 5 believe media may influence others, but not themselves, as they consider themselves critical, sophisticated and savvy media consumers. Young children and girls are often regarded as the victims of media influence, especially in terms of lack of self-esteem and eating disorders (cf. third-person effect – Davison 1983). Informants also state that the audience might get the wrong impression of how a relationship works due to these idealistic representations ('Everything is so wow, so perfect' – FG5, F, 16), and that certain actions, such as cheating or having multiple partners, are normal. Teens consider it the responsibility of parents to supervise, guide, and shield children from such images and from the possible influence of screen culture.

Although the majority of teens do not criticise the frequency of sexually suggestive images on television, they agree that there is no need for more of this type of imagery. A few boys are an exception to this prevailing discourse, who joked about the depressing number of sexual (suggestive and/or explicit) images on television (e.g. 'There can never be enough [sexual images]' – FG7, M, 17). However, they reformulated their comments ('No seriously, it doesn't really matter to me' – FG1, M, 16), whereupon all boys in the same-sex groups agreed. These comments about pornographic content may be interpreted as performing a hegemonic masculinity (Kim *et al.* 2007: sex as masculinity, males being constantly consumed by sexual thoughts and fantasies and driven by natural urges), but one could see this kind of statement also as indicating their willingness to be more progressive or more open regarding explicit images. Similar comments are not found in mixed groups. Some participants, mostly female, evaluate pornographic material as over the top

and say not to tolerate it (cf. sexual double standard – see infra). A few of these participants are first-generation Turkish girls, and we believe that, for this matter, cultural background may be an important factor to consider. Programmes such as *Sexcetera* and *100 Hete Vragen [100 Spicy Questions]*,[9] which contain explicit sexual content, are labelled over the top and their place on television is questioned. The Internet is more likely to be consulted for information about sexuality than is television, since the Internet gives the opportunity to look for answers actively, while the television audience has no influence on what will be discussed in a certain programme. Explicit and more practical information about sexuality and sexual acts are looked for on the Internet, whereas television seems more appropriate to learn about relationships and love. However, respondents are critical about the reliability of online content. The notion of the active audience can be noted here, since media are listed hierarchically, depending on the type of required information. A male participant stated that 'you have to experiment a bit' (FG4, M, 17) instead of consulting any media for sex-related information, which can be read as a performance of masculinity (see supra) and the construction of a sexual self (Johansson 2007, see infra).

Personal experiences and deconstructing fictional representations

In general, teens agree that fictional romantic and sexual scripts are unrealistic and do not match personal experiences and ideas about love, romance and relationships, although particular situations may appear familiar. Idealisation is one of the televised conventions which cause this lack of realism:

> [T]hey always have time for each other on TV. You can visit the one you love at whatever time of the day and you can go out at night. (. . .) [I]n reality, (. . .) relationships often fail because partners do not have enough time to spend together, because they are both very busy. (FG5, F, 16)

Dramatised scripts cause great scepticism among participants, as do idealistic and exaggerated representations (such as dramatic fights between friends or lovers, or best friends stealing each other's boy or girlfriends). Such scripts do not add realism to programmes either. Both male and female respondents label these as clichéd representations, in which certain positive and negative personal characteristics or situations are exaggerated until any sense of realism has evaporated. A distinct group of mostly boys mentioned that '(sexual) relationships progress faster on television than they do in real life' (FG4, F, 16). Examples of this include replacing partners quickly, starting a new relationship with someone the character hardly knows, hastily taking the step towards a sexual relationship, having sex even before they have a relationship and barely having a relationship when deciding to live together. The next quote illustrates this perfectly:

> [I]n real life, love is something you need to give a lot of time to grow. (. . .) But on television it's like . . . they are together because he saved her life once, and ooh yeah, they are in bed together almost immediately and they fall desperately in love together, all at once. That's . . . *shrugs* bwah no. (FG4, M, 17)

Teens agree on the presence of stereotypical representations of relationships in television programmes, but this does not exclude the premise that such representations function as a reference point regarding relational and sexual scripts. In addition, teens do recognise certain aspects or characteristics of their personal relationships in these programmes. Regarding this matter, gender differences can be distinguished. On the one hand, boys in both mixed and same-sex groups mostly claim not to be interested in such things and do not recognise any aspect of their current relationships on television. They explain that these fictional representations are too artificial and perfect, therefore not measuring up to the events that happen in real life. Girls in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, on the other hand, are often more nuanced and believe some aspects function as a reference point (e.g. a fight between friends or lovers) or are realistic (e.g. the emotional problems gay teenagers encounter when exposing their sexuality). A group of mostly girls explain that they unintentionally compare their relationships with television scripts, long for a perfect relationship or dream of a perfect, romantic date. Simultaneously, they realise that these are fictional formats and that real life is different. These teens also make the distinction between the North American and Flemish cultures, and they contextualise fictitious representations of these differences. They realise that dating is an American phenomenon and that relationships in Flanders start differently: 'We don't date. [In America] they date for over a month and have sex after every date. And even then, they don't really know if they're a couple yet!' (FG3, F, 17).

For many female respondents, it is exactly this lack of realism which makes these programmes so entertaining and interesting. Without the dramatic and idealistic representations, these shows would be unappealing and boring. It becomes clear that respondents view these programmes as entertainment or as a way to escape real life for a moment, to dream about an ideal world and to long for perfect romantic relationships. Yet, respondents also critically evaluate the fictional representational scripts. Moreover, some girls say that they, under the influence of fictitious scripts, think about what they would do if something familiar happened in their lives, such as teen pregnancy. The interviewees deny that these moments of reflection happen intentionally. Although the participants regard themselves as savvy media users, a few girls (FG5) admit they are influenced as well, 'mostly regarding clothing style and haircuts' (FG5, F, 18). Girls' insecurity and the naivety of young children were addressed in the discussion about media influence, as were peers (cf. Fuller and Damico 2008; MacKeogh 2004). It is believed that parental influence is minimal regarding the topic of relationships, physical appearance and clothes, and that media and peer pressure are more important to teens.

Sexual norms, values and the sexual double standard

Finally, we examined participants' opinions and attitudes towards the sexual double standard and towards sexual norms and values, which are often woven into the storylines of popular contemporary fictional programmes. The premise 'A boy who changes partners repeatedly is cool. A girl who does the same is a slut' was first raised to evoke reactions towards the sexual double standard. Teens stress that 'we're all equal' (FG8, M, 14); therefore, the evaluation of such behaviour should not differ across gender (cf. Felten *et al*. 2009). However, it was mentioned in each group (mixed and same-sex) that contemporary society and parents tolerate this behaviour

more for boys than girls and that 'slut' has a more negative connotation than 'player'. The role of television, education and dominant societal discourse are also addressed in this context. It was said that 'boys are stimulated due to similar representations of male role models in fictional programmes and movies, whereas girls and females are often portrayed in a stereotypical manner regarding dating' (FG5, F, 16). Notwithstanding this prevailing discourse, the majority of teens believe this behaviour 'implicates the same negative undertone' (FG2, M, 18). Teens are loyal towards their friends and are not likely to criticise close friends who behave in such ways. However, 'peers they do not know very well can be criticised [about this behaviour]' (FG3, F, 16). Moreover, some respondents realise that they evaluate girls' behaviour more negatively than that of boys, which contradicts their previous statements and illustrates the difference between opinions and practices in daily life. When asked why they do this, possible reasons such as the influence of peers and the importance of age and maturity were raised:

> I think that they [boys] say things like that to brag and look tough and cool. [X3 (FG4, M, 17) agrees] But that, deep inside, they actually like that girl. They're influenced by others. Two years ago, when we were a bit younger, we were also easily influenced, more so than we are now. Now you have your own opinion and when others have something to say about that, you think 'I don't care'. But when you're younger, you're more aware of what others say and you're easily and more influenced. (X4 [FG4, M, 17])

As examples of casual sex are abundant (Cope-Farrar and Kunkel 2002, Van Damme and Van Bauwel forthcoming) in contemporary (youth-oriented) programmes, respondents were asked for their opinions on sex outside a long-term relationship. Next to a small group of mostly girls who 'don't really know' (FG5, F, 14)[10] what to think about this topic, and a second, yet very small group who cannot judge this behaviour because it is 'a personal choice' (FG3, F, 16), there are two trends, namely not tolerating versus tolerating. The group (solely girls) that does not tolerate such behaviour believes sexual intimacy should be part of a loving relationship. A few of these teenagers are first-generation Turkish girls, and we believe that cultural context is an important factor to consider in this debate. The majority of respondents (in both heterogeneous and same-sex groups), however, are tolerant but dissociate themselves from the behaviour and point out that they would not engage in similar behaviour. They agree that such sexual actions are only fair if both participants are single and not already in a relationship. Teens value trust and commitment between lovers; 'cheating is not done and not appreciated' (FG3, F, 16). Equally important is both participants 'agreeing to this one-night stand, and that no one ends up emotionally hurt because intentions were not talked through' (FG5, F, 16). Moreover, participants in a sexual fling have to be sure they will not regret it or fall in love. Some teenagers believe alcohol is a mitigating circumstance, whereas other participants of the focus group do not agree ('I think that's even more repulsive' – FG1, F, 16), though they do believe that alcohol influences teenagers to engage in sexual flings more quickly. Remarkably, and in contrast with previous comments (see supra), female teens are judged more negatively regarding the topic of casual sex and are labelled 'sluts' when engaging in casual flings. This serves as an illustration of the sexual double standard and once again shows the difference between opinions and daily practice. Teens believe that age should be considered

when engaging in casual sex, yet, they also stress that age is relative, since some teenagers are more mature than others. Previous relationships can be reference points, and being engaged in a few long-term relationships is considered necessary before someone has casual sex. Trusting the person you have casual sex with is also seen as important. Teens (both boys and girls) believe losing your virginity should happen in a long-term relationship and with someone you love instead of during a casual fling.

The last postulated black/white premise was 'Boys want sex, girls go for love'. Almost all participants disagree with this assertion and state that this is no longer realistic in contemporary society. A loving relationship is more important than sexual intimacy, although 'it's always nice when sex is part of it!' (FG1, M, 16). This evokes laughter among the other male participants, and this performance can be interpreted as both a performance of a hegemonic masculinity and of a sexual self. Some participants nuance this premise and explain that there are always some boys who prefer one-night stands instead of long-term relationships. It is said that male teens talk about sex more openly than girls and that 'boys initiate a sexual relationship faster [than girls]' (FG2, F, 18). Some teenagers disagree, though, and think that the step towards a sexual relationship should be/is taken by both partners. A few male participants believe that a boy takes the first step and that girls should guard their boundaries or voice any objections they might have ('If the girl doesn't say anything, then the boy can do what he wants' – FG8, M, 16) (cf. de Graaf *et al.* 2008). Girls are allowed to have sexual feelings and desires; however, some of the male respondents believe that girls do not always feel confident to voice them. It was stated several times that boys are considered to have more need for sexual actions than girls and that male teenagers can make the distinction between sex and love, whereas girls cannot separate the two. Here, gender differences are not only noted in relation to sexual scripts but also in gender perceptions of each other. Several participants believe gender is not the only factor that should be taken into account and that it also depends on personal characteristics.

Conclusion and discussion

This article explored how teens give meaning to sexually suggestive images and whether the consumption of such media images indicates that the dominant ideology is accepted. A specific emphasis was on gender differences within these receptions. The results clearly reaffirm Buckingham and Bragg's (2004) findings that contemporary teens negotiate and construct a gender and sexual identity, as well as sexual norms and values, through television use. Yet, teens are not sexually corrupted or as sexually liberated as is often proclaimed in public debates. A trend towards habituation and fatigue is noticed among teenagers, regarding sexual (suggestive) images in television programmes (cf. Felten *et al.* 2009), and these practices are embedded in a broader social and cultural context in which sexualisation is integrated (MacKeogh 2004). Moreover, contemporary teenagers learn how to respond to sexual representations, as this is an integral part of their social and sexual maturation. The trend of sexualisation is not an issue among teenage participants: they experience pleasure in watching programmes, but at the same time, use them to critique the dominant values incorporated in the shows (cf. resistance – Brown 1994). The sexual double standard, for instance, is often present in sexual scripts, but teens

believe both girls and boys should be labelled equally (cf. Felten *et al.* 2009). However, several boys spoke negatively about girls who swap partners frequently, and this difference between opinion and behaviour reinforces the idea that young women obtain bad reputations easily and have a greater burden to behave in a sexually correct way, whereas boys have a wider range of sexual opportunities (Johansson 2007). Most respondents are tolerant towards others engaging in casual sex, though they distance themselves from such sexual behaviour (cf. de Bruin 2008). Like the respondents in Johansson's study (2007), our respondents agree that a young woman's need for sexuality is as great as a young man's, thus performing a 'sexual self'. However, girls are expected to be more sexually insecure and are considered to be responsible for guarding their boundaries, whereas boys tend to talk more openly about sex (cf. de Graaf *et al*. 2008). Gender differences are also apparent in the evaluation of sexually explicit images (pornographic movies, images, etc.). Girls label porn as over the top and are less tolerant of it. Cultural contexts are also important when evaluating pornographic material (e.g. first-generation Turkish girls versus Flemish girls). The focus on the physical aspect of sex, the stereotypical and often degrading representations of women in these scenes, or the aiming of porn mostly at titillating male viewers may be possible reasons why girls do not tolerate it. Boys, on the other hand, would like more explicit representations after prime time. Their comments on pornographic content may be used to enforce the construction of a certain form of masculinity (Kim *et al.* 2007), because they are or think of themselves as more progressive regarding such explicit images or are more open about those images. We believe that the presence of peers contributes to and stimulates such hegemonic performance of masculinity.

Sexual scripts can also empower and emancipate teenagers. 'Sexualised' media have resulted in sex becoming less taboo among teenagers, such that they talk and think about it openly. Younger children, however, need to be protected from such images, most interviewees argue (cf. third-person effect: Davison 1983). Although respondents repeatedly mention that they are free from media influence, they do consider screen culture and peer pressure more important than parental influence when it comes to sexual and relational scripts. This influence, however, is not solely considered to be negative, as public debate often asserts. Fictional scripts are even labelled 'role models', especially concerning sexual norms and values, which illustrates the role television can play in the construction of sexual perceptions, assumptions and a sexual identity (Huntemann and Morgan 2001). However, this research also illustrates that the number of different readings is rather limited (cf. Morley 1980), since television texts are embedded within a hegemonic societal and cultural framework. Furthermore, television talk is a forum for the experimentation with identities (cf. Gillespie 1995), but this article shows that these identity performances are also embedded within a hegemonic framework. Within this context, the use of focus groups with friends can offer a platform where identities can be performed, yet, the presence of friends can also restrict those performances outside the dominant discourse.

We are aware of the limitations of our approach. Due to the organisation of the focus groups, the questions that were asked, and the heterosexual character of the clips that were shown at the beginning of discussions, social interactions were set in motion. With these limitations in mind, we can nonetheless conclude that construction of teenage sexual identity is embedded within a cultural context of which screen culture is an integral part. Although contemporary screen culture often

consists of a liberal view on sexuality, more traditional norms and values regarding relationships and sexuality, such as trust, commitment, and sex as part of a long-term relationship, are still highly valued. We believe young audiences handle the tension between stricter sexual morals and sexual liberation remarkably well. Thus, the consumption of texts does not mean audiences accept the incorporated ideology (Fiske 1989). Teens resist hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity and do not blindly incorporate things in daily life (cf. Pasquier 1996, de Graaf *et al.* 2008). Depending on the social and cultural contexts, teenagers negotiate their identities. In these negotiations, personal characteristics such as gender, age and maturity are used to interpret and critically evaluate what they are watching, as are frame of reference, knowledge and skills, experiences, available scripts, etc. The results of this study also illustrate that there is much evidence of shared understanding, interpretation and identification across gender lines (cf. McQuail 2005, p. 436), though gender differences can be found as well. The importance of peers should also be considered, both in the reception of sexualised images and in their responses and performances.

Notes

1. Only a few studies (e.g. Peter and Valkenburg 2010) have found a causal relation between the use of sexually explicit Internet material and less progressive gender role attitudes among young people.
2. Noteworthy, in this context is the emergence of girls (media) studies, which focus on (gender) scripts embedded in media texts, produced by (teenage) girls. For a good overview of this research field, see Kearney (2006, 2011).
3. Hall's model has often been criticised; however, Hall (1994) stressed that this framework is a starting point, a proposal for new approaches, and thus not an accomplished fact.
4. The sexual double standard prevails when 'sexual norms, attitudes and behaviours vary greatly by gender. (...) Young women are expected to be sexually attractive, but not too sexually active or assertive. (...) Male sexuality is seen as natural, urgent and relentless' (Ward 2002, p. 3). This results in young men's sexual activity being tolerated, encouraged and even rewarded, whereas young women's sexual behaviour is restricted and evaluated negatively (Aubrey 2004).
5. Flanders is located in the northern Dutch-speaking region of Belgium and has 6.2 million inhabitants (58% of the Belgian population). Education is compulsory from the ages of 6 to 18, and Flanders scores high in international comparative studies on education. In 2009–2010, 288,300 youngsters (14–18 years old) were enrolled in some form of secondary education (Flemish department of foreign affairs n.d., Onderwijsstatistieken. Statistisch jaarboek 2009–2010 n.d.).
6. The first clip from *One Tree Hill* (S01E12) was viewed at the beginning of the focus group to introduce the topic of sexually suggestive images on TV. In this two-minute clip, two main characters end up kissing in a motel room. In the end, their intense kiss and make-out session is interrupted when Peyton's hair gets caught in the necklace Lucas got from his girlfriend Brooke. The second clip, viewed in the middle of the focus group, showed a sequence from *Gossip Girl* (S01E01) to stimulate discussion about sexual norms and values. In this clip, the male character, Chuck, attempts to get Jenny drunk in order to sleep with her.
7. The total word count of all focus group transcriptions is 92,695.
8. K3 is a Flemish girl band made up of three adult women whose songs are aimed at young children. However, some of their lyrics can be interpreted differently, in a more mature, sexually suggestive way.
9. *Sexcetera* is an American television programme, which aired on the Belgian commercial television channel Kanaal 2 (now: 2BE). *100 Hete Vragen* is a local Flemish production and was programmed on the same commercial television channel, Kanaal 2.

10. Age and maturity might play a role for these participants, as may the presence of older peers.

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