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Sexual Health on Television: New Framing of Sexual Health Issues in Netflix's *Sex Education*

Diane Ezeh Aruah

University of Florida

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Abstract

Television drama series have the potential to create awareness about sexual health problems and solutions. This study deployed a qualitative analysis of framing to understand how the Netflix show *Sex Education* framed sexual health concerns. Findings indicate that some sexual health concerns were depicted in the context of teaching sexual responsibility and destigmatizing processes such as seeking information or coming out as LGBTQ+. The show also portrayed the negative consequences of sexual violence and how people might choose to seek help related to sexual trauma. Overall, this study discusses how *Sex Education* frames sexual health issues in both expected and novel ways compared to those previously explored in public interest communications research.

Introduction

On January 11, 2019, Netflix released a British-American television show titled *Sex Education*. The show follows the life of a sexually inexperienced 16-year-old boy, Otis Milburn, whose mother is a sex therapist. Otis perceives himself as talented as his mother in diagnosing and treating people's sexual problems and recommending an enjoyable, active sex life. Otis partners with his friend and schoolmate, Maeve, to counsel their fellow students of Moordale High about sex-related problems. The series portrays sexual violence, sexuality, birth control, LGBTQ+

**Please send correspondence about this article to Diane Ezeh Aruah, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida. E-mail: dezeharuah@ufl.edu.*

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identities, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), masturbation, virginity loss, and the consequences of sexual risk-taking. One year after it was released, *Sex Education* had become the fourth most-viewed show on Netflix with over 40 million viewers (Lee, 2019).

Reviewers of *Sex Education* consider the series to broaden and address perspectives on sexual identity, consent, and contraceptive use and to offer a refreshing portrayal of openness, truth, and diversity (Cumming, 2020). The show has been described as a “smart, sensitive look at teens finding their place and figuring out the owner’s manuals for their bodies” (Poniewozik, 2019, para 7). The show has also been subjected to criticism since its debut. Critics have noted that, for example, “the surreal glossiness in *Sex Education* is a joke and a cloak,” in that, in one episode, the show concealed important facts about chlamydia, treating the disease as harmless and humorous (Cumming, 2020, para 5). However, it is not yet known whether the show was framed to solve the major sexual health problems facing U.S. teenagers. This study adds to the literature of public interest communications by exploring the framing of sexual health problems in the show *Sex Education* and analyzing how it relates to previous concerns regarding the negative influence of television shows on teenagers’ sexual health.

Sexual health among teenagers is a public health issue in the United States and beyond. Three primary sexual health issues include teenage pregnancies, abortion, and STDs. The CDC reports that the U.S. teen pregnancy rate is substantially higher than those in other western industrialized nations, with a birth rate of 18.8 per 1,000 among females ages 15 to 19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019b). In 2017, 194,377 babies were born to females ages 15 to 19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019a).

STD rates are also on the rise in the United States. A CDC report revealed that in 2018 alone, approximately 2.5 million Americans were infected with STDs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019c). Cases of chlamydia were most frequent, affecting 1,758,668 people; 179 per 100,000 people were infected with gonorrhea, and there were 115,045 cases of syphilis. Females ages 15 to 19 accounted for 44% of reported cases of chlamydia, which causes infertility to more than 20,000 females each year when undiagnosed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019c). Similarly, an FBI report also revealed that hate crimes based on sexual orientation are on the rise and are the third most common type of hate crime in the United States (Hauck, 2019).

Previous research has suggested that consistent viewing of sexual content on television contributes to young people's formation of expectations, attitudes, and beliefs about sex, which can have both positive and negative impacts on sexual behaviors (e.g., Booker et al., 2016; Collins, 2004; Collins et al., 2003; Gamble & Nelson, 2016; Kinsler et al., 2019; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Because teenagers use television to model their own sexual health behaviors and because popular television shows contain frequent sexual scenes, it is vital that these shows frame sexual health issues in ways that reflect the consequences of sexual risk behaviors and the dangers of holding opinions that increase hate crimes against women and LGBTQ+ people. The considerable influence of television warrants showcasing incidents where sex is portrayed in conflict with the research.

Thus, this study takes a cue from previous media studies research to explore *Sex Education*, a show worthy of attention given its recent popularity. This study includes a qualitative approach to the framing of sexual health topics in *Sex Education* to address the extent to which the show's portrayal of sexual health problems aligns with previous research into on-screen portrayals of sex and sexual health issues. In addition, this study seeks to understand how such portrayals contribute to the field of public interest communications.

Literature review

Sexual health portrayals in primetime television

Netflix is the most popular streaming service globally, with up to 207 million subscribers and the largest selection of television shows (Haslam, 2021). Having both the features of a traditional television medium and online streaming service, Netflix serves as one of the most prominent sources of media related to sex and sexual health for today's youth (Dudek et al., 2021). Teens watch about seven hours and 36 minutes of traditional television per week, or about one hour and five minutes per day (Marketing Charts, 2021). Along with parents, school, and friends, online media provide an important source of information for youth to learn about sex (Nikkelen et al., 2020).

Previous research has examined the portrayal of sex and reproductive health in primetime television; one of the most common sexual health issues scholars have examined is the portrayal of sexual risks and responsibilities on television, particularly teenage pregnancy, contraceptive use, and abortion (Aubrey et al., 2014; Behm-Morawitz et al., 2019). Studies reveal only limited information regarding on-screen portrayals of contraceptives, birth control, abortion, and STDs. For instance, Lance et al. (2012) analyzed 35 episodes of the reality show *16 and Pregnant* and found that, among the 35 episodes, all the teens experienced unplanned pregnancies; no episode showed a teen who opted for abortion. Moreover, although episodes of *16 and Pregnant* often included mention of birth control, the series rarely offered information about the need for birth control after birth.

Similarly, Hust et al. (2008) assessed *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, *American Pie*, *Seventeen*, and *OutKast* using quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The authors found that the shows rarely mentioned STDs and thus failed to promote safe sex. Of the 446 sexual mentions in these shows, STDs were mentioned only 51 times and were largely depicted as funny and embarrassing. In addition, the shows portrayed teens as feeling ashamed to seek medical help when they experienced STDs; even for those shows that had an urgent tone and portrayed STDs as a common sexual health problem, the producers mostly drew attention to the stigma of having STDs as preventing people from seeking help (Pariera et al., 2014).

Gender stereotypes and bias regarding sex and sexual health responsibilities are also present in television shows. While boys are scripted as being obsessed with sex and sexual performance,

girls are portrayed as being responsible for pregnancy, contraception, and STD prevention (Hust et al., 2008). Kim et al. (2019) suggest that men are consistently portrayed as treating women as sex objects and being consumed by sexual thoughts, fantasies, and urges. Television shows portray men as being free to openly discuss their sexual desires with their friends; men are regarded as sex initiators, often through dubious or forceful means (Kim et al., 2019). Some television shows represent women as being responsible for keeping relationships by maintaining their fitness and looking attractive. Men are portrayed as independent and desiring sexual fulfillment more than intimacy, whereas women are shown to be more in need of relationships and often judged by their sexual conduct (Kim et al., 2019).

Negative portrayals of LGBTQ+ communities are also pervasive in mainstream television, which often contains stereotypes, jokes, and insults about minority gender and sexual identities while overrepresenting heterosexuality (Bond, 2015). Positive representations included LGBTQ+ people overcoming the obstacles of coming out to friends and families, talking about sexual experiences, dealing with physical attraction, and normalizing minority gender and sexual identities (Bond, 2015). One study found that media framing of LGBTQ+ individuals was characterized mainly by a focus on the fight for equal rights, a victimization frame, a deviance frame, a religion frame, and an abnormality frame (Jacobs & Meeusen, 2020). The victim frame focuses on labeling LGBTQ+ communities as victims of discrimination and physical violence. The deviance frame describes the portrayal of LGBTQ+ people as being in unstable relationships, being susceptible to HIV/AIDs, having sex with minors, and engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviors. The religious frame draws on religious arguments regarding the acceptance and endorsement of LGBTQ+ people in different religions such as Christianity and Islam. The abnormality frame depicts LGBTQ+ identity as a mental disease or problem. Jacobs and Meeusen (2020) contend that these frames have implications in normalizing and increasing stereotyping and negative attitudes toward sexual minorities.

Television shows often include portrayals of unhealthy sexual behaviors but erase the consequences of such behaviors. Some of the most common on-screen sexual behaviors among teenagers include teenagers engaging in casual sex, having multiple partners, cheating on their partners, and having sex without love or on the first date. In one study, young adolescents were portrayed as people who enjoyed sex without love and had multiple sexual partners. Depictions of casual sex as part of a committed relationship were a norm in most television programs, as were instances of casual sex within noncommitted relationships (Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018). In a similar study, researchers found that portrayals of the emotional consequences of sex and relationships, including consequences of adultery or sexual violence, are scarce in television programs (Carpentier et al., 2017).

Sexual violence against women and the LGBTQ+ community is another essential sexual health issue often portrayed in television dramas. Depictions of force in sexual interaction are common in television shows and can influence how society normalizes sexual violence and treats victims of sexual assault or battery (Gökulu, 2013). For example, Joy (2019) found that the highly rated show *Breaking Bad* depicted frequent implicit and explicit instances of the main

character, Walter White, isolating, degrading, exploiting, frightening, and controlling his wife through domestic abuse and sexual violence; the author argued that the show reinforced a culture of misogyny and victim-blaming. In contrast, critics of *Game of Thrones*, another widely popular television series, have argued that including rape scenes was necessary to educate viewers about the realities of rape in a historical context (Thompson, 2017).

Theoretical perspective

This study is grounded in social cognitive theory and framing theory, two theories of mass communications. The theory of social cognition argues that “media portrayals can alter perceived social sanctions by the way in which the consequences of different styles of conduct are portrayed” (Bandura, 2001, p. 277). Bandura (2001) recognized that the emotional expressions of others move people, and observers can attain long-lasting attitudes, emotional reactions, and behaviors toward persons, places, or things that have been associated with modeled emotional experiences. More recent studies buttress Bandura’s assertion that mass media, and especially television, serve as models for people to learn how to perform behaviors (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2021; Żerebecki et al., 2021).

Social cognitive theory has been used to design interventions to promote healthy lifestyles and behavioral change among those people most likely to be affected by health issues (Joseph et al., 2017; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). This theory also may be used to predict entertainment media consumption, including its positive and negative effects (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Scholars have widely used social cognitive theory to investigate relationships between exposure to sexual content in the media and real-world sexual behaviors, including sexual consent, violence, and initiation (e.g., Kelly, 2010; Kim et al., 2019; Martino et al., 2005; Medley-Rath, 2007).

This study also is grounded in framing theory, which explains the relationship between media construction of meaning and public opinion (Scheufele, 1999). Framing theory suggests that the manner in which issues are framed determines how viewers interpret and react to those issues (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). According to Entman (1993), frames define problems, identify causes, diagnose judgments, suggest remedies for the problems, and predict their effects. This study emphasizes textual frames, or the “presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing in television also has the potential to promote negative and oppressively normative sexual behaviors. For example, Smith (2012) found that television shows framed teen girls’ desires as focused on romance, attachment, and love and conveyed that such needs should be calm, passive, and heterosexual. Also, Creager (2019) revealed that some LGBTQ+ films are framed to reinforce heterosexuality and increase stereotyping of men who have sex with men. In another study of teen television dramas, Kelly (2010) ascertained that virginity was framed in three ways: as a valuable gift to be given to a deserving partner, as a stigma and something to get rid of to fit into the social status, and as a sexual status that people would eventually abandon.

These kinds of depictions suggest that media frames can be powerful influences on behaviors that lead to common sexual health problems American teenagers face. Because some sexual health frames are problematic while others may promote healthy sex, it is crucial to examine Netflix's show *Sex Education* to determine whether its content differs from previously studied media content or reinforces previous findings.

RQ: How does *Sex Education* frame modern teenagers' sexual health issues and how does this framing relate to previous research about the negative influence of television shows on teenagers' sexual health?

Method

The main objective of this study was to determine how the framing of sexual health issues in *Sex Education* compares to previous research about the negative influence of television shows on teenagers' sexual health. The frames focus on critical sexual health concerns such as teenage pregnancies, birth control use, STDs, sexual identities, sexual violence, masturbation, and virginity loss. Thus, this study deploys a qualitative framing analysis to emphasize the meaning of the messages delivered to the show's audience rather than the amount of coverage each topic received. The qualitative framing analytical method allows for a discussion of how meanings and ideologies are transmitted through storytelling and drama.

Frames are not issues, story topics, or themes, but rather general patterns that can be applied to various issues (Dahinden, 2005). While issues, topics, and themes categorize stories by their subjects (e.g., crime, welfare, or economy), frames lend insight into patterns of emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion in stories (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). According to Dahinden (2005), frames typically comprise problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.

Because this study examines the subjective frames of the characters in the show, generalizability is not a motive for this research. The study employs five predetermined frames as proposed by Entman (1993) to analyze media representation of health issues, including the problem, causative, consequence, solution, and responsibility frames. However, within these predetermined frames, the researcher also identified subframes as they emerged from the data to better reflect the unique elements of *Sex Education* when compared to what others have found in previous studies of sexual content on television.

To date, *Sex Education* has produced two seasons and each season has eight episodes, totaling a data set of 16 episodes to be analyzed in this study. There were 17 main characters and 27 recurring characters in the show, and the characters were predominantly teenagers, their parents, and their friends. The unit of analysis for this study was the storyline—a series of events related over several episodes. Framing analyses of sexual health narratives are better understood when storylines are used as the unit of analysis, as opposed to program or scene analysis (Kelly,

2010). In *Sex Education*, storylines conveying sexual health information portrayed characters making sexual health decisions or seeking advice from a sex therapist, friend, or parent about sex; this study considers both sexual talk and behavior.

The researcher used the constant discovery tenet of qualitative research to analyze the 16 episodes of *Sex Education* (Gore-Gorszewska, 2020). To do so, the researcher first watched each episode twice, following the storyline scene by scene, and taking notes based on the discussions and behaviors characters exhibited regarding their sexual health. Conversations, quotes, and phrases were recorded. After taking down the notes, the researcher watched the episodes again, searching for new frames that may have been missed. The researcher then manually connected each quote, phrase, and conversation to the frames identified in the series. Eventually, frames for each health issue were developed based on storylines portrayed in the show (Shenton, 2004). The qualitative research method is rich in identifying statements, quotes, or phrases that characterize the differences in the portrayal of sexual health issues in *Sex Education* and other shows studied in previous research.

Results

Overall, the researcher found five dominant types of sexual health frames present in the *Sex Education* television series. These frames are the problem, causative, responsibility, consequence, and solution frames. Each of these frames generated interesting subframes, as explored below.

Problem frame

This study found that *Sex Education* depicted sexual health problems facing teenagers in the United States and Britain to include teenage pregnancy, sexual violence, contraceptive use, abortion, STDs, queerness, masturbation, and virginity loss. In terms of framing, these sexual health problems were framed in three unique ways: as institutional, social, or individual problems.

The institutional frame refers to the roles of educational, religious, health, and family institutions in regulating the rate of sexual health problems among teenagers. This finding was observed in the characters of health professionals, peers, parents, teachers, headmasters, and the preachers, who, in their roles, were supporters or opposers of some of the teens' sexual behaviors. The framing of sexual health issues as a social problem suggests that sexual health issues are common and that teenagers and their peers often discuss and commiserate about such problems. For instance, several scenes showed that sexual violence and body dissatisfaction were common among young girls.

In the individual frame, the show revealed that even though these problems are common, teenagers encounter them and are affected differently. For example, Otis was worried about his

inability to masturbate despite watching pornography and viewing sex magazines. In season 2, episode 4, an unnamed student was concerned he had masturbated so much that his penis had run out of erection (Nunn & Taylor, 2020b). Yet another needed help because his pubic hair had grown out of control. One girl asked if she could get pregnant from oral sex, and a boy asked why he had a “fermented penis.” There were also inquiries about anal sex, oral sex, and menstruation in the same episode (Nunn & Taylor, 2020b). *Sex Education* reveals that, depending on context, sexual health issues can be an institutional, social, or individual problem.

Causation frame

The causation frame represents the causes of sexual health issues identified in the series. Four types of causative frames were identified: shame, desperation, stereotypes, and negligence.

The shame frame appeared several times throughout the show. For instance, in season 2, episode 1, Owen was ashamed to reveal to his two sexual partners that he had likely given them an STD (Nunn & Taylor, 2020a). In season 2, episode 7, Ruby was ashamed to purchase emergency contraceptives after engaging in unplanned, unprotected sex with Otis (Nunn & Taylor, 2020c). In season 1, episode 4, yet another depiction of shame involved Otis’ embarrassment while disclosing that he was a virgin to his crush, Maeve (Neal, 2019).

The desperation frame was exemplified by the character of Lily, who was so desperate to lose her virginity that she asked Eric and Otis to have sex with her on different occasions in season 1, episode 3 (Goodhart & Taylor, 2019) and episode 4 (Neal, 2019), respectively.

The stereotype frame involved scenes and storylines in which abortion was negatively stereotyped by religious institutions. For instance, in season 1, episode 3, Maeve visited a clinic to get an abortion and religious activists at the clinic entrance accused her of murder (Goodhart & Taylor, 2019). Another stereotype throughout the show was evident in Ruby’s belief that people would assume that she was promiscuous if they saw her purchasing emergency contraceptives.

The negligence frame was depicted in the scenes where teens were seen engaging in irresponsible actions such as getting drunk at a party to the point that sexual intercourse happened without consent. For example, in season 2, episode 7, Otis and Ruby got drunk and had sex after Otis hosted a party at his house, but neither remembered the ordeal later (Nunn & Taylor, 2020c).

Sex Education suggests that sexual health problems among teenagers may be rooted in the public perception of some common sexual health issues such as STDs, virginity, and abortion.

Solution frame

The solution frame describes solutions to sexual health issues presented throughout *Sex Education*. Four types of subframes were categorized as solutions to tackling sexual health issues: diffusing stigma, normality, acceptance, and seeking help.

The diffusing stigma frame was exemplified by scenes and storylines encouraging destigmatization of abortion, STDs, masturbation, homosexuality, virginity, and contraception. For example, in season 2, episode 1, when students learned that some girls who attended the school had been infected with chlamydia, many started to wear face masks and avoid the girl accused of spreading the disease (Nunn & Taylor, 2020a). School officials invited Jean, a sex therapist, to an emergency parent meeting to make recommendations for sex education. Jean suggested that the sex education curriculum should include programs that decrease the stigma and unwarranted shame associated with STDs. In season 2, episode 6, Otis encouraged Aimee, who was engaged in casual sex with multiple partners, to masturbate because it would help her identify the pleasure points in her body without the need for multiple partners (Goodhart & Taylor, 2020).

The normality frame refers to the framing of homosexuality as something that cannot be faked or rejected. This finding was exemplified through the characters of Adam, Ola, and Lily, who experienced sexual incompatibilities in heterosexual relationships. Though it required a process of denial before each accepted their own sexuality, each ultimately found they enjoyed being in homosexual relationships. The normality frame also applied to masturbation, though not always in a positive manner. *Sex Education* depicted that it was normal for one to masturbate even in public or to be triggered to masturbate by non-human objects such as trees and cats. This example of framing likely involves an element of satire given that *Sex Education* is a comedy-drama; in this type of show, some of the framing of sexual health topics may not be presented in a sincere or straightforward manner.

Eric Effiong, a gay character who is a funny, loyal friend to Otis, exemplified the acceptance frame. The frame suggests that one of the solutions to preventing sexual violence against LGBTQ+ communities is for people to accept different sexualities as the norm. The show reveals that Eric had come out as gay when he was 13. He dresses in bright colors and often wears makeup and jewelry. Everyone is accepting of Eric; his parents and siblings are aware of his sexuality and supportive. Eric also attends a church where the pastor and other church members genuinely love him. In season 2, episode 7, the pastor demonstrated acceptance by welcoming Eric into the church with a hug, telling the teen that the church was his home (Nunn & Taylor, 2020c).

Finally, the seeking help frame hinges on the importance of speaking out when faced with sexual violence. In season 1, episode 5, when Ruby's faceless nude picture was leaked online, she sought the help of her friends Maeve and Otis, who helped her to track down the perpetrator (Goodhart et al., 2019). Another scenario in season 2, episode 3 illustrated the importance of reporting sexual harassment; after Aimee experienced sexual harassment from a man who ejaculated on her on the bus, Maeve took her to the police to report the incident (Goodhart, 2020).

Responsibility frame

Two types of responsibility frames were identified in the show, including birth control as a requirement before sex and birth control as the equal responsibility of both sexual partners. Numerous scenes showed characters revealing, before or after sex, the condoms they would use or have used; other scenes centered on conversations about the implications of not using condoms. For instance, in season 1, episode 6, Otis tried to have sex with Lily, a girl who is desperate to lose her virginity. Both appeared clueless on how to begin the act, but the scene also showed that although they were sex novices, Lily gets a condom from her bag (Nunn et al., 2019). A more straightforward example appeared in season 2, episode 2, when sex therapist Jean Milburn lectured students about their right to decline sex with partners who refuse to use contraception (Nunn et al., 2020).

The second theme, birth control as the responsibility of both sexual partners, was depicted in season 2, episode 7, when Otis and Ruby went to the store together to purchase a morning-after pill. Both were critically concerned about the implications of having an unplanned pregnancy and they jointly answered the questions posed by the pharmacist (Nunn & Taylor, 2020c).

Consequence frame

Sex Education reveals two types of consequence frames: the psychological and physical consequences of sexual violence, infidelity, and casual sex.

The psychological consequence was depicted in season 2, episode 4, where Aimee was psychologically traumatized after a man masturbated on her while riding the bus, ruining her best jeans and the cake she had baked for Maeve (Nunn & Taylor, 2020b). The storyline portrays Aimee as having been so deeply traumatized that she stopped taking the bus to school and chose to walk instead; she became hyperalert and could not even tolerate her boyfriend's touch. Aimee also cried frequently but could not confide in her mother.

Another psychological consequence was the impact of Otis's father's infidelity on his son. The infidelity cost the couple their marriage and greatly affected Otis, who witnessed his father sleeping with his mother's friend (Nunn et al., 2019). Later, during the scene in which Otis and Lily attempted to have sex for the first time, Otis suffered a panic attack as he flashed back to his father's infidelity.

In terms of physical consequence, *Sex Education* included an account of Eric's experience with sexual violence. Eric, one of the show's gay characters, was walking home from the bus station when three men in a car stopped him, mocked his flamboyant appearance, and physically assaulted him. This experience caused Eric to isolate himself and question his sexuality (Nunn et al., 2019).

Elements of Jean's life also portrayed the physical consequences of casual sex, in that Jean, an older woman with multiple sexual partners, became pregnant. Jean's pregnancy was surprising to the other characters and the audience because she was a sex therapist and should

have been versed in knowledge about contraceptive use. The physical consequence of infidelity also appeared in season 2, episode 4, where Otis's father cheated on his second wife and was kicked out, leaving him homeless and desperate as a result (Nunn & Taylor, 2020b).

While *Sex Education* includes characters who have abortions, these scenes are notably not framed as psychological and/or physical consequence. Though the show depicted vital facts about abortion, it failed to highlight the real-world emotional and physical consequences of abortion that many people endure.

Discussion and conclusions

This study of *Sex Education* supports the five basic frames—problem, causation, solution, consequence, and responsibility—originally proposed by Entman (1993). Surprisingly, these frames revealed new findings quite in contrast to previous research into sexual health portrayals on television (Aubrey et al., 2014; Behm-Morawitz et al., 2019; Lance et al., 2012). While previous researchers have found that television shows frame sexual health issues in ways that do not encourage positive sexual behaviors, this study revealed that *Sex Education* contained positive teachings about many sexual health problems that U.S. and British teenagers face.

The framing of sexual health topics in *Sex Education* has several implications for public interest communications. Studies of framing in popular television can reveal how public understandings of topics related to sexual health, for example, are evolving and can inform future health messaging campaigns for various audiences. It was earlier stated that U.S. teenagers may rely heavily on television and similar media for sex education due to the foundational issues of limited sex education in schools and nongovernmental institutions (Edwards, 2016). Thus, framing sexual health issues in the context of causes, solutions, responsibility, and consequences could benefit those public interest communicators seeking to encourage teenagers to make healthier choices. For instance, following the tenets of social cognitive theory, if viewers observe frequent use of condoms on television, they might imitate these actions when they face similar real-world situations (Bandura, 2001). Likewise, for teens who might be reluctant to decline sexual intercourse with a partner who chooses not to use contraceptives, the show provides models to teach that it is safer to decline than to engage in unprotected sex.

Understanding how popular television treats sensitive sexual health topics like abortion may also be of use to public interest communicators and future public health campaigns. For example, in contrast with previous research, *Sex Education* highlighted abortion as a viable option for dealing with unwanted pregnancy. Lance et al. (2012) found no portrayals of abortion in 35 episodes of *16 and Pregnant*. This difference may reflect the stricter abortion laws in the United States, where *16 and Pregnant* was produced, compared to those in Britain, where *Sex Education* was produced (Zornosa, 2021). It is also possible that, at the time *16 and Pregnant* was first produced in 2009, the general U.S. population was more conservative regarding abortion (Pew Research Center, 2009). *Sex Education* reflected on the stigma of

abortion and the judgment religious groups cast on abortion providers and recipients, a potential point of interest for public interest communicators working with such topics. The show also suggested that choosing to have an abortion can symbolize strength; through the character of Maeve, *Sex Education* frequently portrayed female strength in coping with stigmatized sexual health challenges (Joseph et al., 2017; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007).

The show also revealed the need for health care practitioners to provide better care and support for people seeking abortions by equipping them with emotional and physical support rather than inciting feelings of shame and regret. The show's sympathetic portrayal of young people seeking abortion could also help increase viewers' empathy and reduce stigma toward people who choose abortion over, for instance, adoption. However, the lack of emotional impact displayed by the show's characters who have abortions may downplay the real-world phenomenon of abortion guilt. Emphasizing negative consequences of abortion could impact teenagers' perceptions of the issue by, for example, underscoring the importance of contraceptives.

Another concerning element of the show was its suggestion that people might be ashamed to use emergency contraceptives after unprotected sex. For example, in season 2, episode 7, Ruby, who had unprotected sex with Otis in a drunken state, could not comfortably express her needs to the unapproving pharmacist selling emergency contraceptives (Nunn & Taylor, 2020c). Also, while previous research suggests that television shows typically present contraception as a woman's responsibility (Kissling, 2017), *Sex Education* was unique in its portrayal of both partners' responsibility in the decision to use the morning-after pill.

STDs were framed in the context of diffusing stigma to establish that people with STDs should be sincere with their sexual partners to enhance treatment and prevent further spread. This representation may encourage viewers to learn more about STDs and help reduce the stigma of STD diagnoses. It is not uncommon for people to feel ashamed when infected with STDs, but it becomes problematic when they do not seek treatment or inform their sexual partners. *Sex Education* has the potential to increase awareness about STDs and inform related health messaging; this is an important consideration especially because STD rates are at an all-time high in the United States (Keller, 2020). The show also depicted a lack of knowledge about STDs and highlighted the need for overhauling high school sex education curricula to reflect the importance of dialogue, trust, and truth.

Teenagers tend to learn about sex and sexual health from their parents and high school sex education teachers (Shtarkshall et al., 2007). However, from 2006 to 2013, there was a significant decline in U.S. high school instruction and parental communication about birth control, HIV/AIDs, and STDs (Lindberg et al., 2016); instead, sex education in U.S. high schools continues to emphasize abstinence (Hall et al., 2016). *Sex Education* suggests the potential of a more conversational, individualized education within British and U.S. high schools.

Previous research suggests that primetime television shows emphasize heterosexuality over homosexuality (Creager, 2019); even when nonheterosexual characters appear in shows, they are often portrayed as lacking self-esteem (Bond, 2014). *Sex Education* is different in that

homosexuality is portrayed for both women and men, and most of the gay characters are confident. The character, Eric, is perhaps the best example of this trait. The show consistently presents homosexuality as natural and acceptable to God, thus contradicting previous research suggesting that LGBTQ+ characters largely lack self-confidence or represent abnormality (Bond, 2015; Creager, 2019). Eric was inspired by a church sermon to accept and love his sexuality; he even invited his friend, Rahim, to the church to convince him that God loves LGBTQ+ people. These on-screen scenarios may be influential in both reducing real-world hate crimes targeted at people of gender or sexual minority identities and increasing the self-confidence of LGBTQ+ viewers. Drawing on Bandura's (2001) theory, parents who find it difficult to accept their LGBTQ+ children may also be motivated toward greater love, acceptance, and respect, as demonstrated by Eric's parents. Given the frequency of anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes in the United States (Ronan, 2020), representing marginalized groups on screen in a positive manner, as people who are proud of themselves and who are largely accepted by society, may help create similar feelings even among more conservative viewers.

Studies about sexual violence on television often have focused on rape (Elwood, 2018; Joy, 2019; Thompson, 2017), but in *Sex Education*, the audience sees how teenagers struggle with cyberbullying and sexual harassment and how such practices often go unpunished. Because the series has not yet concluded, it is yet unknown whether the sexual harassment victims will eventually find justice. Nevertheless, the show attempts to educate viewers about the varied adverse effects of sexual harassment. Lee et al. (2010) suggested that television portrayals of sexual violence can inform viewers about the reality of victims' lived experiences and recourses for dealing with assault. *Sex Education* offers strategies for combatting sexual harassment and cyberbullying, such as seeking help from the authorities and discussing experiences with therapists, family, and friends. Unlike *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad* (Abi-Khalil, 2020; Puthillam & Karandikar, 2020), *Sex Education* highlights the importance of social consent for sexually active teenagers.

Where previous research has described virginity on television to be stigmatized (Kelly, 2010), the framing of virginity in *Sex Education* appeared to destigmatize sexual inactivity in the face of the social pressures teenagers often face. *Sex Education* attempted to shift the reoccurring narrative that it is abnormal to still be a virgin at 16 years old.

Some of the portrayals of masturbation in *Sex Education* might negatively impact viewers because masturbation was frequently framed as an activity that teenagers can perform frequently in closed and open spaces, and as a sexual act that can boost sexual confidence. Such portrayals might encourage teenagers to imitate such behaviors, which may be damaging to their emotional and physical health. Nevertheless, by portraying female masturbation, *Sex Education* may help to reduce associated social stigma (Robbins et al., 2011).

In *Sex Education*, the topics of divorce and pregnancy were often framed in terms of consequences (Carpentier et al., 2017), but the show largely omitted the emotional consequences of sex itself. In future seasons, the show could include the mental health challenges of sexual

intercourse and break-ups, such as constantly thinking about sexual partners, losing appetite, or losing focus and attention.

Drawing from social cognitive theory, this study concludes that, where some television programs may provide unhealthy models for audiences, *Sex Education* instead has the potential to help viewers unlearn unhealthy scripts related to sexuality and sexual health in favor of more positive examples, such as voicing concerns about sexual health and maintaining open dialogue even about sensitive topics. Overall, this study builds on public interest communications theory by highlighting the role that popular media like *Sex Education* can play to destigmatize modern sexual health issues and model healthier behaviors for viewers.

Limitations of the study

One fundamental limitation of this study is that it presents sexual health issues raised from only one television series such that the interpretations in this article are not generalizable. A larger sample of media geared toward teenagers has the potential to generate richer narratives. However, given the popularity and the target audience of *Sex Education*, this framing analysis proved useful in highlighting a singular case of media and how it frames modern issues related to sexuality and sexual health.

Another limitation is that this study does not include any opinions from viewers, and especially teenage viewers. The prominence of frames in a text does not guarantee that they also resonate with various subsets of viewers (Entman, 1993). For instance, how homosexuality is framed in *Sex Education* may not be acceptable to a conservative viewer. While frames cannot guarantee how a reader will interpret or comprehend an issue or text, they “play a fundamental role in structuring the range of likely decodings” (Greenberg & Knight, 2004, p. 157), often in ways that support dominant ideologies (Foust & O’Shannon Murphy, 2009). This study is based solely on the long-standing argument that television producers cannot make educational programs dramatic, engaging, and emotional (Collins, 2004; Dajches et al., 2021; Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018).

Future research could consider viewers’ perceptions of *Sex Education* as well as its impact on teens’ beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions related to sexuality and sexual health. Similarly, researchers could study other teen drama series on Netflix to compare representations of sex and sexual health issues across series. It is vital to investigate whether the platforms that air teen programs influence the nature of the sexual content shown. For example, a show such as *Sex Education* likely would not be picked up by major U.S. television networks (e.g., ABC, NBC, CBS), but it would be something viewers might see on cable networks or streaming platforms.

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