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Gendered Transformations Theory and Practices on Gender and Media

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intellect Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA

P
96
.S45
G463
2011

First published in the UK in 2011 by Intellect,
The Mill, Parnall Road, Fishponds, Bristol, BS16 3JG, UK

First published in the USA in 2011 by Intellect, The University of Chicago Press,
1427 E. 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover design: Holly Rose
Copy-editor: Rebecca Vaughan-Williams
Typesetting: John Teehan

ISBN 978-1-84150-366-0

Printed and bound by Gutenberg Press, Malta.

Contents

Preface <i>Liesbet van Zoonen</i>	1
SECTION I: GENDERED POLITICS	
Chapter 1: Silent Witness: News Sources, the Local Press and the Disappeared Woman <i>Karen Ross</i>	9
Chapter 2: Tracing Gendered (In)visibilities In the Portuguese Quality Press <i>Claudia Alvares</i>	25
Chapter 3: Women's Time Has Come: An Archaeology of French Female Presidential Candidates – From Arlette Laguiller (1974) to Ségolène Royal (2007) <i>Marlène Coulomb-Gully</i>	43
Chapter 4: Gender Analysis of Mediated Politics In Germany <i>Margreth Luenenborg, Jutta Roeser, Tanja Maier and Kathrin Mueller</i>	57
SECTION II: EMBODIED PERFORMATIVITIES	
Chapter 5: Hollywood, Resistance and Transgressive Queerness: Re-reading <i>Suddenly, Last Summer</i> (1959), <i>The Children's Hour</i> (1961) and <i>Advise & Consent</i> (1962) <i>Frederik Dhaenens, Daniel Biltreyst and Sofie Van Bauwel</i>	79
Chapter 6: Political Blogging: At a Crossroads of Gender and Culture Online? <i>Olena Goroshko and Olena Zhigalina</i>	93

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**CHAPTER TEN:
CASUALIZING SEXUALITY IN TEEN SERIES.
A STUDY OF THE GENDERED SEXUAL DISCOURSES IN THE
POPULAR AMERICAN TEEN SERIES, *ONE TREE HILL*
AND *GOSSIP GIRL***

Elke Van Damme

'Teens can learn about sex from the mass media. They've grown up as neighbours to the residents of Melrose Place on television, watching preening fictional characters swap sexual partners as casually as baseball cards.' (Sutton, Brown, Wilson & Klein, 2002: 26)

Introduction

Time and again, the mass media, and especially television and the internet, are held responsible for all kinds of social ills and negative behaviour involving children and teenagers (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan, 2007). Parents, politicians and academics are most concerned about young people since, at the age of eighteen, they spend more time in front of the television and at the computer than they do on any other daily activity (Ralph, Brown & Lees, 1999: 105; Weimann, 2000). Indeed, we could say that media are predominant in the everyday lives of teenagers (Osgerby, 2004: 6). These concerns about the possible effects and impact of media content are not new; anxieties have been around since the media's heyday, and we see the same tendencies reoccurring whenever a new form is developed. A similar fear has been expressed in the past about earlier types of media, such as films and comic books (Cricher, 2006), but the potential effects of new

mediums, like the internet and game consoles, are being studied as well in this respect (Mazzarella, 2007). According to several authors (Morgan, 2007; Signorielli, 2007; Bindig, 2008), television is still the primary storyteller, both in national and international terms, which is why it has quite possibly become one of the most common learning environments across the globe. The world of television shows us the workings of daily life and how society is organized and presented, primarily in the form of highly consistent and repetitive entertainment (Mirzoeff, 1998: 1, 6; Morgan, 2007). Buckingham (2003: 3–5) argues that despite not offering a translucent window to the world, the media shape a view of reality and give us tools to interpret our relationships and define our identities. Unlike cultivation theorists,¹ we do not think that young viewers adopt the reality represented on screen as their own, but instead believe that the role is more nuanced and complex, in what resembles the cultural studies' point of view. The media are not the only distributors of meaning; peers, parents and schools are other socialization agents in the lives of teenagers that we have to consider. Moreover, viewers are not passive victims of media content and are regarded as being media literate. It is, however, necessary to study the substance of contemporary media programmes directed at teenagers, since we live in a mediated reality. We agree with Bindig (2008: 5) that 'while it would be ridiculous to think that viewers imitate exactly what is portrayed in the media that surround them, it would be similarly naive to believe that the messages of the media are meaningless'. We can, therefore, say that youth media provides a site for teen identity construction (Bindig, 2008: 14) and the evaluation of teen television content is, therefore, absolutely crucial.

Gender and other ideological themes such as class and sexuality are intertwined and cannot be fully separated (Bindig, 2008: 21), which is why we will analyse the gender representations of a group of teenagers in the popular North American teen series *One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl*, with a specific emphasis on the relationship with sexuality. However, we first need to be acquainted with the meaning of our key concepts, gender and representation, as well as with an overview of the studies focusing on the portrayal of teens.

The social construction of gender

Although people often assume that we are born as male or female, an individual has to *learn* his or her gender identity and how to be a man or a woman. We follow a non-essentialist approach to gender and believe that it is through civilization and socialization that a human being is constructed as feminine or masculine (Lorber, 1997: 35; Gunter, 1995: 2). Gender is created and recreated out of human interactions and social lives, and is the texture and order of that social life (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is thus socially constructed and cannot be equated with biological and physiological differences. A specific set of roles, created by cultural traditions, moral codes, the economy and politics (Jacobson, 2005: 6), is attached to gender identity. Those roles are not stable but differ

across time and space (Nayak & Kehily, 2008: 175). Adolescents develop their personal sexual behaviour according to the gendered scripts that society advocates. However, we do not perform gender so freely. School, parents, peers and the mass media are the agencies and tools that help us, and more specifically young people, to integrate into a gendered world. Gender is, therefore, both ascribed and achieved (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Moreover, ranked according to prestige and power in most societies, it is therefore unequal. Men are attributed greater worth and importance than women of the same race and class, even if their activities are similar or alike (e.g. the glass ceiling). Not only is this stratification reflected and constructed by the media (Lorber, 1997: 40–43), but they 'also contribute to the construction of hegemonic definitions that often appear to be self-evident... Generally, stereotyping in the media context follows patterns of power by diminishing those with little power and influence' (Jacobson, 2005: 5).

When assumptions are made about a person only on the basis of gender, we speak of gender stereotyping. Female stereotypes follow themes such as appearance, sexuality, relationships and traditional gender roles like housekeeping. The stereotyping of masculinity, on the other hand, is organized around coolness, aggression and violence (Jacobson, 2005: 6; 25–26).

Representation of sexual behaviour

In his work *Media Power and Class Power* (1986), Stuart Hall describes the ubiquitous visual culture as the 'machinery of representation'. Representation can be defined as a production of meaning through language; it connects meaning and language to culture. To make sense of these representations, we have to share the same conceptual maps and speak the same language (Hall, 2003: 15–31).

Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people... Because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. (Hall, 2003: 15–18).

Although images can closely resemble the object to which they refer, they still exist in signs that carry meanings, thus requiring interpretation (Hall, 2003: 18). Media do not reflect or present reality; they instead interpret and represent a possible take thereon. Media representations of youth, then, are not a straightforward reflection of young people's culture and lifestyles either. 'Instead, they offer a particular interpretation of youth, constructing images of young people that are infused by a wealth of social meanings' (Osgerby, 2004: 60). The (content of) representations (is) are important since the media

can be powerful and educative instruments of (re)socialization, especially for teenagers who are at a very critical stage in the process of their identity construction (Wartella, 2007: 2). The construction of a self-identity is a lifelong and dynamic process, and youth is situated in a crucial phase of that course of construction. Exploring values and beliefs about relationships and sexuality, as well as developing a healthy understanding of their own gendered, sexual behaviour, is at the core of that identity construction in which the media targeted at teens may function as virtual tool kits of many different possible identities (Brown, Steele & Walsh-Childers, 2002: 12; Eyal, Kunkel, Biely & Finnerty, 2007: 316). Previous research (Brown, Childers & Waszak, 1990; Davis, 2004) confirms that television—among others—is an important source of information about sexual and romantic scripts, as well as norms about sexual behaviour. According to Buckingham (1993: 13), television functions 'as a symbolic resource which young people use in making sense of their experiences in relating to others and in organizing their daily lives'. Soaps and shows aimed at a teenage audience can therefore extend the repertoire of youthful knowledge about society and sex. In accordance with Cope-Farrar and Kunkel (2002), we define the representation of sex in this paper as:

any depiction of talk or behaviour that involves sexuality, sexual suggestiveness, or sexual activities/relationships...To be considered sexual behaviour, physical actions must imply potential or likely sexual intimacy between the participants...Physical flirting or passionate kissing were included, depending on the context in which they were presented. (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002: 63).

The teenage world on television

Research about representations of youth proclaims a recurring duality in which a negative, stereotypical depiction refers to youth-as-trouble (youth crime, violence and sexual licence) and positive portrayals resemble youth-as-fun (freedom, hope and fun) (Hebdige, 1979; Osgerby, 2004: 71). Recent studies stress that sexual messages are more abundant among teens in popular programmes, and this sexual content has itself changed as well: characters have their first sexual encounter at a younger age, and these experiences do not necessarily take place within a committed relationship (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). Concerns arise due to teenage sexual licence, and casual sex is seen as troubling, as is the increasing sexual content in teen television programmes (Eyal, Kunkel, Biely & Finnerty, 2007: 317). One of the concerns expressed is that today's sexual portrayals in the media are 'too explicit', 'too over the top' and 'too unrealistic' for young viewers (Ward, Gorvine & Cytron, 2002: 96). This 'hyper-sexual' media content, as Jacobson (2005) calls it, has to be put into perspective, in our opinion. There are

little or no explicit sexual representations visible in teen series, but sexual innuendo or talking about sexual relationships is presented more than ever before, as is implied sexual behaviour between characters. Where, in the 1990s, series like *Dawson's Creek* focused on the romantic and affective aspects of a relationship (Bindig, 2008), we note that the sexual aspect thereof has become one of the core subjects of recent teen series. Sexual relationships are often *just* for fun (no serious commitment), which makes us wonder whether we perhaps do need to reconsider sexual licence as part of youth-as-fun instead of youth-as-trouble (Hebdige, 1979).

Scholars tend to focus on children, while teenagers have received little attention in the past. For general findings about the portrayal of teenage girls and boys, we refer to Katherine Heintz-Knowles (1995; 2000) and others. It should be noted that most studies use quantitative content analysis instead of the qualitative approach we have utilized in our research. Young people in prime-time programmes are often portrayed in roles where they are coping with problems related to romance, friendship, popularity and family issues. Many of these difficulties were resolved without help from adults (Aubrun & Grady, 2000: 8). Heintz-Knowles (1995) argues that teenagers in entertainment television are not motivated or driven by school-related issues, but rather by peer relationships, sport and hobbies, family, and romance. In TV series, young people who are sexually active rarely take any precautions to protect themselves against pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. More importantly, these characters seldom experience negative consequences as a result of their sexual actions (Aubrey, 2004), and having sex is suggested as normative if you are in a committed relationship (Gunter, 1995: 5).

Upon taking a closer look at the results concerning female teen characters in fiction, we notice contradictory findings, both confirming and breaking gender stereotypes. Plots involving teenage girls are centred on dating and shopping (Signorielli, 2007: 174–175) and contain many stereotypical messages about relationships, careers and appearance. Female characters are often devalued as sexual objects (Bindig, 2008: 26) and are depicted as bad when they express their sexual desires openly. Remarkably, girls in teen programmes initiate sexual dialogue more than they initiate sex, but when they do the latter they experience more negative consequences than men do (Aubrey, 2004: 510). Boys, however, get more positive media messages about how to be a man, though stereotypes are found as well. On the one hand, male characters often have athletic, muscular bodies, which are highlighted by the clothes they wear, while on the other, their physical appearance is, in contrast to female characters, seldom the subject of discussion. Male characters are shown for their abilities and talents, not because of their looks.

A particularly worrying aspect in the portrayals has emerged in the context of images of sexual behaviour and sex (Gunter, 1995; Kellner, 1995), because both sex and sexuality are depicted in a clichéd and stereotypical way. A boy has sex with as many women as he can because a 'real man' never says no when the opportunity for sex arises (Brown, Steele & Walsh-Childers, 2002: 3; Signorielli, 2007: 174–175). This sexual double standard

results in men's sexuality being encouraged and rewarded and male characters are portrayed as active choosers ('predators'). This is in contrast to passivity, restriction and compliance for female sexuality (Aubrey, 2004: 506). 'The stereotypical media concept of sexuality is built around the female as the object of desire and the male as active chooser of object.' (Jacobson, 2005: 14) According to Schor (2004, quoted in Bindig, 2008: 16) 'teen media depict a manipulated and gratuitous sexuality, based on unrealistic body images, constraining gender stereotypes and, all too frequently, the degradation of women'. Studies focusing on gender representations in, for example, music videos confirm the presence of the same stereotypes that appear in other forms of popular media for both men and women (Kaplan, 1997). Those portrayals may function as role models for young people and contribute to their gender-role socialization and identity construction (Gunter, 1995: 4). As Jacobson (2005: 27–29) concluded, masculinity is depicted as superior to femininity, even in teen television series.

Looking into the teenage world of television series: Methodology

Textual analyses are usually interpretative and thus qualitative, and attempt to understand latent meanings of a text. This type of analysis is successfully transferred and incorporated into the area of film studies (Larsen, 2002: 117–120). The current type of film analysis is mostly based on narration, because of the narrative format of the studied programmes, and consists of an exploration of the levels of content and representational strategies used in the audiovisual text. Cinematographic elements have, however, been studied as well. We explored the representations of teen sexuality, with a specific emphasis on gender, by means of a qualitative textual film analysis (Bordwell & Thompson, 1993). Because of the importance of plot development and the evolution of characters in the series researched, we want to stress the importance of the use of our sample. This approximately eighteen hours of television fiction included sixteen *One Tree Hill* episodes (the first, eighth, sixteenth and final episodes of every season that had been released on DVD before June 2008) and eleven episodes of *Gossip Girl* (the first, fourth, eighth, twelfth, sixteenth and final episode of seasons one and two³).

One Tree Hill (OTH) first aired in the United States on 23 September 2003, and the seventh season is currently showing in North America on the free CW Television Network. The series has been nominated for a Teen Choice³ award 23 times, and the fact that it has won twice⁴ reflects its importance in popular teen media. The series focuses on the lives of some teenagers in Tree Hill, a small but eventful city in North Carolina. The storyline is developed around the high school basketball team and the different relationships, be they friendship, romantic or of a sexual nature, between the male protagonists, Lucas and Nathan, and their female (girl)friends, Peyton, Brooke and Haley. *Gossip Girl* (GG) was first shown on the same CW Television Network, on 19

September 2007 and the third season is currently being aired. The series has won eleven awards from sixteen nominations,⁵ including the Teen Choice Awards for best breakout show and best television drama in 2008, which stresses the popularity of the series with teenagers. The programme tells the story of several teenagers (and their families), some of whom live on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, while others travel by train instead of being escorted in a limousine from Brooklyn to New York City. These teenagers are about to make the most vital decision in their young lives—which university to attend—while they also experiment with love, sex and drugs. *Gossip Girl* refers to the female voice-over who spreads gossip and rumours about the main female characters, Blair and Serena, and their male opponents, Chuck, Nate and Dan.

Sexual gender roles in *One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl*

The objectification of the self, the other and their sexuality

Several authors (e.g. Jacobson, 2005; Nayak & Kehily, 2008; Bindig, 2008) have concluded that female characters are often devalued as sexual objects, and *One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl* are no exceptions. We can distinguish different strategies through which this devaluation becomes visual in our research sample. Female characters regularly use their bodies to get what they want or to intimidate a man. Brooke, for instance, shows her underwear as a way of getting some painkillers from a young physiotherapist (OTH), and Blair—wearing a mini-skirt—exposes her long legs and underwear to drive Chuck crazy and win the contest they had organized (GG). No example of male characters using their physical attributes in similar ways is found in either research sample. The devaluation of female characters as sexual objects can also be observed when the camera wanders over a character's figure from head to toe, highlighting her thin, perfect body with screenshots. Female characters (e.g. Peyton (OTH) and Dorota (GG)) are also literally objectified in that, for example at a basketball game, they can unknowingly be the real trophy the boys are playing for. Furthermore, in *Gossip Girl*, female bodies and their sexuality are mentioned as part of a consumption culture ('goods' you pay for) or as a prize that can be claimed by males. During Ivy-week, for instance, the girls present are only paid for giving male attendants (sexual) pleasure and are mentioned in the same context as the food and drinks that are served. Blair organises a scavenger hunt at the prom for her boyfriend Nate: if he finds Blair before midnight, he can claim his prize. Chuck adds a bet to the hunt: if Nate does not find her in time, Chuck himself will collect it. We can link this with the active/passive distinction that is often negotiated between male and female characters and their sexuality (Mulvey, 1975; Jacobson, 2005), and the traditional gender roles according to which a woman is supposed to serve her man, even with her body. Serena, for example, wants to thank her partner Erin properly by having sex because he agreed to join her at an important charity event. Chuck abuses his dominant position and

physical power when he forces himself on Jenny. She voices her objections, but Chuck does not listen. In the end, she is saved by her brother (active heroic male versus passive female victim). Remarkably, the male characters in *Gossip Girl* are objectified as well, although in a more subtle and less explicit manner. Some teenage girls use these young men to make another jealous. Georgina, for instance, tries to sleep with Dan—Serena's boyfriend—because the two females are stuck in a fight and a competition over who can hurt each other the most. Sometimes, two teenagers use each other for their own reasons: Jenny is dating the rich but gay Asher to climb the social ladder. Asher, on the other hand, is using Jenny as well, to cover up his sexual orientation.

(The insinuation of) sexually active teenagers

The general impression given by the two series is that the represented youngsters are very sexually active. This impression is strengthened when we take a closer look at the recurring examples of casual sex in the programmes: Peyton wanted to have casual sex with Lucas; Brooke and Felix were friends with benefits (a friend you call when you want to have sex) (OTH); and Chuck has sex with several girls (at the same time) (GG). The 'having fun-element' is very important ('It's just sex.') in those kinds of sexual flings (cf. youth-as-fun versus youth-as-trouble, Hebdige, 1979). However, both series do also contain several examples of teenagers who do not rush into having sexual affairs with one another; here sex is portrayed as meaningful. This is addressed on the level of narration, namely in a conversation between Dan and Serena (GG).

Sex is commonly implied in both series but there are no overt portrayals of intercourse; this is probably due to the hour of programming, the target audience and the dominant norms and values. Silverman, Sprafkin and Rubinstein (1979) found that sexual behaviour was about to take place, or had just happened but was not seen, in prime-time programmes. Passionate kissing and embracing were the most common acts in our sample, and this confirms Cope-Farrar and Kunkel's findings (2002). When we note the sexual behaviour (from passionate kissing to sexual intercourse) in both series, girls initiate and take decisions on the matter (i.e. when it will happen). Serena tells Erin that she wants to have sex with him later that night (GG), and Brooke sets the rules and decides what a casual relationship between her and Lucas means. Marvin, who left Rachel behind in a motel room before they had sex, is a counterexample and also goes against the sexual double standard (see infra) (OTH); female sexuality as passive and restricted (Aubrey, 2004: 506) transforms into a more positive, active and emancipatory gender script. However, the 'problem' mentioned above—regarding objectification of the female body and sexuality (of which both men and women are guilty) puts this female gender script into a more negative perspective.

In both *One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl*, having a (sexual) partner is an important contribution to the development of the youngsters' identities. This is especially the case when a relationship fails, and the (male and female) teenagers realize they have lost themselves while giving their heart to the person they loved. (Sexual) relationships

force teenagers to reflect upon who they are and who they want to be. Love is not always represented as negative; on the contrary, it is idealized in certain situations and portrayed as being able to survive and challenge anything. Dan addresses his relationship with Serena as the single greatest moment in his life, and he would do it all over again, even though they have broken up (GG). Sex is a normal step in a romantic relationship, which is taken rapidly and sometimes even hastily without talking it through with the respective partner. There are, however, two important exceptions in our sample of *One Tree Hill* episodes. First, Haley is afraid to have sex for the first time and decides to wait until she is married. Her partner, Nathan, has a hard time accepting this and visits porn sites to cope with his sexual feelings towards his girlfriend. Later, though, he admits that he wants to wait too and help her survive her fears. The second example is the 'Clean Teens', a group of teenagers (mostly girls) who are against sex before marriage. These youngsters are, however, mocked and looked upon as if they are freaks; the group is condemned to die out silently. The connection between sexuality and teenagers' groping boundaries, values and norms is drawn here. They are searching for their own sexual identity and relationships in a process that will allow them to define themselves and who or how they want to be. In *Gossip Girl* we found that having sex with your partner gives you a better social standing, but lying about it is unforgivable and results in a reduction of status (e.g. Jenny).

Different gender, different sexual standard?

The sexual double standard (Aubrey, 2004) is recognized in both series; a man is always in the mood for sex and never says no when he gets the opportunity to have it, an example being Lucas accepting Nick's offer to go out with him and have sex later that night even though they had just met (OTH). In contrast to *One Tree Hill*, *Gossip Girl* contains some counterexamples which show the male characters refusing the opportunity of sexual interaction. Dan, for example, puts great value on sex and doesn't sleep around with random girls (GG). Brooke understands that Lucas cheated on her because boys screw you over all the time, but she does not understand why Peyton did so, thus implying the existence of a different standard for boys and girls (OTH). Girls who sleep with several boys are portrayed as slutty. This double standard is also discussed on the level of narration in the series: Haley, Peyton, Brooke, and Anna agree that they should stop living up to the double standards that are created by men and just be happy (OTH). Due to the use of a sample of episodes, however, it was not possible to investigate if their behaviour does indeed change or not.

Sexual interaction is once addressed as a statement in *Gossip Girl*: Lexie sleeps with men on a first date as a political comment against male domination. In light of the sexual double standard, the question is whether Lexie's statement has any result at all, confirming instead the double standard in what can be read as both an example of the objectification of the female body and sexuality, as well as of 'false' empowerment. Generally, men are easily seduced, and this is stated literally when Brooke shows her breasts to a group of

boys in a boat, telling Peyton that men are so easy (OTH). Even Dan (GG) addresses something similar when he tells Blair, who wants to seduce Chuck to win a bet, that: 'Chuck is still a man. Be present everywhere, it will drive him crazy.' This kind of sexual talk or sexual innuendo between characters is recurrent in both series; in the *One Tree Hill* research sample, this innuendo only appears between female characters, while in *Gossip Girl* we notice the same tendency, although we also found that Chuck has some sexually coloured conversations with Blair. We see the sexual innuendo between female teenagers as an emancipatory gender script in which teenage girls are depicted as active sexual creatures, instead of passive and compliant. Another positive and emancipatory gender script can be found in the sequence in which a female teenager (GG) conveys her impression of masturbation, a unique situation in the research sample from both series.

Idealising and 'casualising' sexual behaviour

Sexual intercourse is mainly depicted as unrealistic and idealistic, as illustrated by the following two examples. Haley and Nathan have sex two weeks after she gives birth, and when Brooke undresses in front of her boyfriend he declares it is the best day of his life (OTH). We found one example in *Gossip Girl* in which this idealisation of sexual intercourse is broken and the impression is given that sex can destroy any existing happiness between two characters: Serena does not want to rush things with Erin since the relationship is going well. Generally, however, sex goes smoothly and easily, and the use of condoms is never mentioned, nor indeed are any sexually transmitted diseases. This should be regarded as problematic, particularly the lack of references towards condoms in (casual) sexual relationships. The only negative consequence that is connected to sex in our sample is a possible (teen) pregnancy in *One Tree Hill*. The potential emotional impact of sexual interaction for both female and male teenagers is rarely addressed in either series, in accordance with the results obtained by Aubrey (2004). The only example is found in *Gossip Girl*, when Blair feels ashamed that she has lost her virginity to Chuck—who she is not dating—in the back of his limousine. Yet this can again be seen as rather stereotypical since emotions are, once more, connected to females.

Both series contain several other more traditional (and stereotypical) gendered discourses that we would like to address. Romantic relationships involve popular and attractive characters; physical appearance is of the utmost importance for *One Tree Hill's* teenagers (both girls and boys). The same applies to *Gossip Girl's* main characters, although financial wealth and status are added to that depiction. The same series shows Chuck as the stereotypical man who is afraid to commit to one woman; despite being in love with Blair, he leaves her behind due to his refusal to 'play husband and wife'. This leaves him alone with heartache and random girls. Three examples illustrate stereotypical representations of male teenage fantasies: Nate has a (sexual) relationship with an older married woman; Dan falls in love with a young female teacher who will suffer expulsion when the school board discovers their relationship; and Chuck (who is a minor) has

(paid) sex with several older women simultaneously (GG). This last example of the use of prostitutes and a threesome can be seen as both an incorporation of porn culture into the daily lives of youngsters as well as another attempt to 'casualise' (paid for) sex.

Conclusion

The analysis of sexual scripts in relation to gender in the series *One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl* revealed several stereotypical gender scripts, although more positive and emancipatory discourses regarding both female and male characters are found as well. Our data confirm previous research results, but put some of them in a different perspective. In general we can say that *Gossip Girl* contains more diverse, sexually gendered representations than *One Tree Hill*, even though paradoxical messages are to be found in both series.

Female characters are often devalued as sexual objects in both programmes, confirming the results of previous studies (Jacobson, 2005; Nayak & Kehily, 2008; Bindig, 2008). This devaluation and objectification becomes visible in several different ways. Women use their bodies to intimidate a man to get something done. Specific female body parts like breasts and thighs are highlighted by (subtle) screenshots, and girls appear as the real trophy that men compete for during a game. Female characters often objectify their own sexuality and see it as a prize a man can claim, or as a way to *thank* a man for his efforts. In *Gossip Girl*, female characters are even mentioned as part of a consumption culture and as *goods* that you pay for. Remarkable is the fact that in the same series, males are used and objectified by women, although in less explicit and more subtle ways.

The sexual double standard is recognised in both shows, where male teenagers who sleep around are depicted as cool and girls who do the same are portrayed as slutty (cf. Aubrey, 2004). Male sexuality is represented as insatiable; a *real* man never says no when the opportunity to have (casual) sex is offered. There are, however, a few counterexamples of men refusing such an offer and placing high value on sexual interaction.

Both the male and female teenagers in our sample have several romantic (and sexual) relationships during the seasons we researched, and having a partner is regarded as an important contribution to the development of identity. Teenagers sometimes lose themselves due to love relationships, although love is not always represented as negative. On the contrary, it is idealized by both boys and girls, and we find the same tendency when it comes to sexual behaviour. Having sex is addressed as the single greatest moment in someone's life, although it is mentioned once that it risks destroying a relationship (friendship, sexual).

Sex is often insinuated and neither the use of condoms nor sexually transmitted diseases is ever mentioned in our research sample, in keeping with the results of Aubrey (2004). The only negative consequence that is connected to sex is a possible teen pregnancy; the

emotional impact is, for the most part, non-existent in both series.

Although sex is idealized, we also found that it is often minimized. This finding is supported by the regularly recurring examples of casual, non-committed sex, where teenagers in the series do it *just* for fun. Hebdige (1979) regarded teens' sexual licence as troubling, but we think that this should be reconsidered. Twenty-first century teenagers and (casual) sex are woven together in contemporary teen fiction, and sex has become part of the 'having fun' culture among this group. However, the absence of any references to condoms in (casual) sexual relationships, as well as the lack of discussion of sexual intercourse or the emotional consequences of sex can be regarded as problematic since media shape our view of reality and offer us tools to interpret our (sexual) relationships and define our identities. We have to be careful, however, not to exaggerate the role of television, for it is not the only distributor of media, and there are other socializing influences and agents in the lives of adolescents which also have to be taken into account (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002: 75). Moreover, young viewers are not passive victims of media content and are media literate.

No overt portrayals of sexual intercourse are seen in the series; passionate kissing and embracing were the most common acts, confirming the results of Cope-Farrar and Kunkel (2002) and Jacobson (2005). In the cases in which sexual behaviour was registered in either show, female characters took decisions on the matter in what we consider to be a positive and emancipatory gender script. The 'problem' of objectification of the female body and sexuality, though, places this script in a more negative light.

Girls often engage in sexually suggestive talk and this strengthens the impression that the represented female teenagers are very sexually active. This impression of sexually active (male and female) teenagers only increases when we take all of the examples of casual, non-committed sex into account. In examples of paid for sex and threesomes, we found several illustrations of stereotypical representations of male teenage fantasies and references towards the incorporation of porn culture into the daily lives of teenagers. We can, therefore, conclude that whereas teen fiction in the nineties (Bindig, 2008) focused on the romantic and affective aspects of a relationship, *One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl* are built around sexual relationships between the main characters. We can even say that in the teen series we researched, sexuality is being 'casualized'.

Further work focusing on non-heterosexual relationships is necessary, as is an exploration of the differences between representations in United States and non-US teen series, possibly using methodologies such as audience reception research. Meanwhile, we plead for more diverse representations of both male and female teenagers and hope that, in time, writers and producers will present young viewers with less stereotypical images, and will incorporate positive and more realistic examples of teen life in the series that teenagers watch. Or, in the words of Douglas (1994: 294), 'Media still are our worst enemy and our best ally in our ongoing struggle for equality, respect and love.'

Endnotes

1. The cultivation hypothesis of Gerbner (1973) holds that 'television, among modern media, has acquired such a central place in daily life that it dominates our "symbolic environment", substituting its (distorted) message about reality for personal experience and other means of knowing about the world... Viewing television gradually leads to the adoption of beliefs about the nature of the social world which conform [to] the stereotyped, distorted and very selective view of reality as portrayed in a systematic way in television fiction and news' (McQuail, 2005: 497).
2. The last episode of the second season had not, however, been aired when this paper was written.
3. The Teen Choice Award is annually presented by FOX and honours the year's biggest achievements in music and television (and other disciplines), as voted on by teens aged thirteen to nineteen. In 2009, the Teen Choice Award had over 83 million votes. (<http://teenchoiceawards.com/index.php> and http://www.imdb.com/Sections/Awards/Teen_Choice_Awards/)
4. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0368530/awards>
5. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0397442/awards>

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