Girl Power or Powerless Girl? Television, Sexual Scripts, and Sexual Agency in Sexually Active Young Women

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Abstract

Both traditional gender roles and traditional heterosexual scripts outline sexual roles for women that center on sexual passivity, prioritizing others' needs, and self-silencing. Acceptance of these roles is associated with diminished sexual agency. Because mainstream media are a prominent source of traditional gender portrayals, we hypothesized that media use would be associated with diminished sexual agency for women, as a consequence of the traditional sexual roles conveyed. We modeled the relations among television (TV) use, acceptance of gendered sexual scripts, and sexual agency (sexual assertiveness, condom use self-efficacy, and sexual shame) in 415 sexually active undergraduate women. As expected, both TV exposure and perceived realism of TV content were associated with greater endorsement of gendered sexual scripts, which in turn were associated with lower sexual agency. Endorsement of gendered sexual scripts fully mediated the relation between TV use and sexual agency. Results suggest that endorsement of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts may be an important predictor of college women's sexual agency. Interventions targeting women's sexual health should focus on encouraging media literacy and dismantling gender stereotypic heterosexual scripts. *Online slides for instructors who want to use this article for teaching are available on* PWQ's *website at* http://journals.sagepub.com/page/pwq/suppl/index.

Keywords

gender role attitudes, television viewing, sexual attitudes, psychosexual behavior

Sexual script theorists (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) argue that cultural norms about sexuality inform individual behaviors in romantic and sexual relationships. These norms are referred to as sexual scripts. Sexual scripts may be especially salient among college-aged women, many of whom are entering emerging adulthood, a developmental stage in which romantic relationships are more likely to include sexual intercourse than in adolescence (Arnett, 2000). Among first-year college women, 32% reported engaging in vaginal sex with a casual partner, and 51% reported engaging in vaginal sex with a romantic partner (Fielder, Carey, & Carey, 2013). One prominent script in U.S. American culture is the heterosexual script (Kim et al., 2007), which describes the courtship strategies, commitment orientations, and sexual goals considered appropriate for women and men in heterosexual relationships. According to this script, men are expected to actively pursue sexual relationships, objectify women, and prioritize sex over emotion; conversely, women are expected to be sexually passive, use their appearance to attract men, and serve as sexual limit setters (Kim et al., 2007). Similar messages about women's sexuality are conveyed through gender roles more broadly. For example, theorists (Mahalik et al., 2005; Tolman & Porche, 2000) suggest that traditional gender roles for women include prioritizing others' needs over their own and

investing heavily in their physical appearance. Parent and Moradi (2009) suggest that traditional masculine gender roles include being dominant, having power over women, and presenting oneself as heterosexual. In both traditional gender roles and traditional sexual scripts, women are passive participants in their relationships, are expected to prioritize the desires of others (particularly men), and are valued for their appearance and sex appeal. We refer to these expectations as *gendered sexual scripts*.

Although gendered sexual scripts are acquired from a number of socializing agents, the mainstream media are believed to be particularly influential because of their

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prominence in the lives of emerging adults and because of the prevalence of portrayals of traditional gender roles (Ward, 2003). Emerging adults are frequent consumers of mainstream media: They spend between 7 and 8 hr per day with media (including television [TV], video games, and the Internet; Nielsen, 2015). Further, studies conducted over the past 20 years indicate links between regular media exposure and young women's acceptance of traditional gender beliefs (Signorielli, 2001) and traditional sexual scripts (Ward, 2003; Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2013). Is acceptance of gendered sexual scripts that are prominent in the media associated with women's sexual agency in their own relationships? There is evidence that media use is related to sexual self-concept (Aubrey, 2007) and contraceptive self-efficacy (Tolman, Kim, Schooler, & Sorsoli, 2007). However, most of the existing work testing the effects of media use has focused on how media influence level of sexual experience of media consumers (for review, see Ward et al., 2013); it is unclear if media exposure is associated with other aspects of sexuality, such as sexual assertiveness, passivity, or affect. We set out to model this question in the current study. We tested whether embracing the traditional sexual scripts that are promoted by the media, and that emphasize passivity, is associated with diminished sexual agency among sexually active heterosexual college women. We employed Tolman, Anderson, and Belmonte's (2015) definition of sexual agency as a woman's ability to act on her behalf sexually, express her needs and desires, and advocate for herself.

TV and Gendered Sexual Scripts

TV, in particular, is believed to be a salient source of information about sexual scripts among college-aged women for several reasons. First, sexual content is common on TV, appearing in 82% of TV programs (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2004), and researchers find that emerging adults spend nearly 3 hrs per day viewing TV (Nielsen, 2015). Emerging adults spend more time viewing TV than they do on any other media form (e.g., Internet, smartphone, and video games). Second, depictions of sex and gender on TV tend to adhere to gendered sexual scripts. References to the heterosexual script occur 15.5 times per hour in prime-time TV (Kim et al., 2007) and appear in 11.45% of the interactions between characters on "tween"-oriented programming (Kirsch & Murnen, 2015). Ward (1995) notes that sexual themes that portray women as sex objects and men as sex-driven are particularly common. In addition, when female characters violate gendered expectations by initiating sexual activity, they are met with more consequences, such as sexually transmitted infections and social isolation, than when male characters initiate sexual activity (Aubrey, 2004). Finally, because emerging adults are in a developmental stage focused on establishing romantic and sexual relationships, they may seek out TV content that portrays such intimacy (Arnett, 2000; Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013). Thus, it is especially important to consider the role of TV in the sexual lives of emerging adults.

Although initial work on TV content focused mainly on "scripted" programming, evidence indicates that these portrayals are also prevalent on "unscripted" programming or reality TV. Reality TV programming has been defined "as a distinct genre made up of entertainment-oriented programs that feature nonprofessional actors playing themselves whose words and behavior are presented as being unscripted" (Hall, 2009, p. 431). Reality TV is particularly popular among emerging adults; reality programs such as *Jersey Shore* and networks that feature reality programs, such as MTV, report a median viewer age of 23 (Consoli, 2012). In addition, researchers argue that this genre holds high potential to influence viewers because of the suggested "reality nature" of the programming and because of the strong emphasis on sexualized messages (Vandenbosch, Muise, Impett, & Eggermont, 2015). Researchers who analyzed reality dating programs indicate that references to men as always looking for sex occur 3.6 times per hour and references to women as sex objects occur 5.9 times per hour (Ferris, Smith, Greenburg, & Smith, 2007). In their analysis of five reality programs, Flynn, Park, Morin, and Stana (2015) found that female cast members exhibited significantly higher rates of body exposure than male cast members, conforming to the sexual objectification component of the female sexual script.

Is there evidence that regular exposure to TV content contributes to viewers' acceptance of gendered sexual scripts? According to Bandura's (2002) social cognitive theory, the media provide models for how people should behave by showing beliefs and behaviors that are either rewarded or punished. Viewers incorporate information about the acceptability of these beliefs and behaviors into their own minds as rules or conceptions. Thus, social cognitive theorists would argue that frequent exposure to gendered sexual scripts on TV, which are often rewarded, leads viewers to internalize these messages and apply them to their real-life relationships. Findings published over the last two decades, testing mainly undergraduates, tend to support this premise and indicate that more frequent exposure to both mainstream and reality TV content is associated with stronger support of individual aspects of gendered sexual scripts (Ferris et al., 2007; Guo & Nathanson, 2011; Seabrook et al., 2016; Ward, 2002; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). For example, among undergraduate women, more frequent prime-time TV viewing was associated with greater endorsement of the idea that women are sex objects and men are sex-driven (Ward, 2002). Similarly, Ferris, Smith, Greenburg, and Smith (2007) found that among undergraduates, frequently viewing reality dating programs predicted stronger endorsement of the notions that men are sex-driven, dating is a game, and women are sex objects. Together, these findings demonstrate that elements of gendered sexual scripts are prevalent on both scripted and reality programming and that regular exposure to this content is associated with stronger support of individual components of gendered sexual scripts.

Social cognitive theorists acknowledge that media viewers are not simply passive recipients of the messages presented in the media (Bandura, 2002); instead, their own engagement with and cognitions about media content affect the degree to which they internalize media messages. Accordingly, we chose to focus on the potential influence of one such cognition: perceived realism. Researchers theorize that the extent to which viewers perceive TV content as realistic, regardless of how much they watch, will affect their openness to accepting the themes and messages presented (Potter, 1986). Across numerous studies of undergraduates, findings indicate that attributing more realism to either scripted or reality TV content, regardless of how much TV one actually watches, is associated with higher levels of TV-inspired behaviors or beliefs (Ferris et al., 2007; Fogel & King, 2014; Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2006; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). For example, Lippman, Ward, and Seabrook (2014) found that attributing greater realism to TV content was associated with greater acceptance of romantic beliefs, in general, and of specific romantic beliefs (e.g., love finds a way), even after controlling for level of romantic media exposure.

Gendered Sexual Scripts and Sexual Agency

One concern about gendered sexual scripts is that they interfere with a woman's ability to be agentic in her sexual relationships because they present roles for women that directly contradict the definition of agency (Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003). Sexual agency has been conceptualized in the literature as a multidimensional construct that reflects a woman's ability to act on her behalf sexually, express her needs and desires (including the desire to say, "no"), and advocate for herself (Tolman, Anderson, & Belmonte, 2015). However, if women are expected to prioritize men's sexual desires over their own, they may feel uncomfortable asserting their own desires in sexual relationships, thereby experiencing less sexual agency. Further, because women are expected to be sexual gatekeepers and set sexual limits, they may feel uncomfortable initiating sexual activity because admitting sexual desire requires defying gendered sexual scripts. These patterns have emerged in both qualitative and quantitative data. For example, Moran and Lee (2014) found that in interviews, many women reported they engaged in unprotected sex because they worried that advocating for safer sex practices (which meant advocating for and protecting themselves) would "kill the mood" or imply they did not trust their male partner. In another study, in-depth interviews with 26 adult women revealed that some did not discuss condom use with their partner because "nice girls" are not supposed to have sex, and asking to use a condom implies a plan to engage in sex (Cook, 2012). Bay-Cheng (2010) argues that it is oppressive gender norms, rather than sexual activity itself, that creates sexual risks for women. Not only might concerns about conforming to gendered sexual scripts prevent women from advocating for safer sex practices, such concerns also may prevent women from initiating desired sexual activity.

Results from quantitative data also suggest that endorsement of feminine gender roles and traditional sexual scripts are linked to components of sexual agency. Among college-aged women, greater endorsement of traditional gender roles was associated with less sexual assertiveness, less sexual knowledge, and less condom use self-efficacy (Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011). In addition, greater endorsement of the sexual double standard (that men want sex and women should be sexual gatekeepers) is associated with less comfort talking about sex (Levin, Ward, & Neilson, 2012) and lower likelihood of using condoms (Caron, Davis, Halteman, & Stickle, 1993). Traditional sexual scripts also affect women within committed heterosexual relationships. For example, a study of heterosexual couples revealed that endorsement of the sexual double standard was associated with less communication with each other during sex. For female partners (but not male), endorsement of the sexual double standard was also associated with less assertiveness in initiating, refusing, and talking about sex (Greene & Faulkner, 2005).

Researchers have measured and operationalized sexual agency in multiple ways. Most commonly, sexual agency has been measured using sexual assertiveness (initiation, refusal, and communication about sex; Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007; Curtin et al., 2011), sexual autonomy (Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006), perceived ability to advocate for safer sex behaviors (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007; Curtin et al., 2011), knowledge of sexual risks (Curtin et al., 2011), and negotiation of sexual risk-taking behaviors (Impett et al., 2006; Yoder, Perry, & Saal, 2007).

In addition to the ability to initiate (or refuse) sexual activity, ask for and demand one's own pleasure, and negotiate safe-sex practices, a woman's feelings about her sexual experience is likely an important aspect of sexual agency. Reflecting on one's sexual experiences, in addition to the actual experience, is posited to be an important part of women's feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Tolman, 2002). Moreover, findings indicate that experiencing sexual guilt and shame is associated with less comfort with sexuality, less satisfaction with one's sexual experiences, and lower condom use self-efficacy (Higgins, Hoffman, & Dworkin, 2010; Moore & Davidson, 1997; Wayment & Aronson, 2002). Thus, we believe positive and shameful feelings about one's level of sexual experience are important components of sexual agency.

The Current Study

Endorsing gendered sexual scripts is related to at least some components of sexual agency, and TV use is related to endorsement of gendered sexual scripts. However, to date, no researchers have examined both the predictors and consequences of gendered sexual scripts in one model. The purpose of the current study is to examine whether TV use predicts
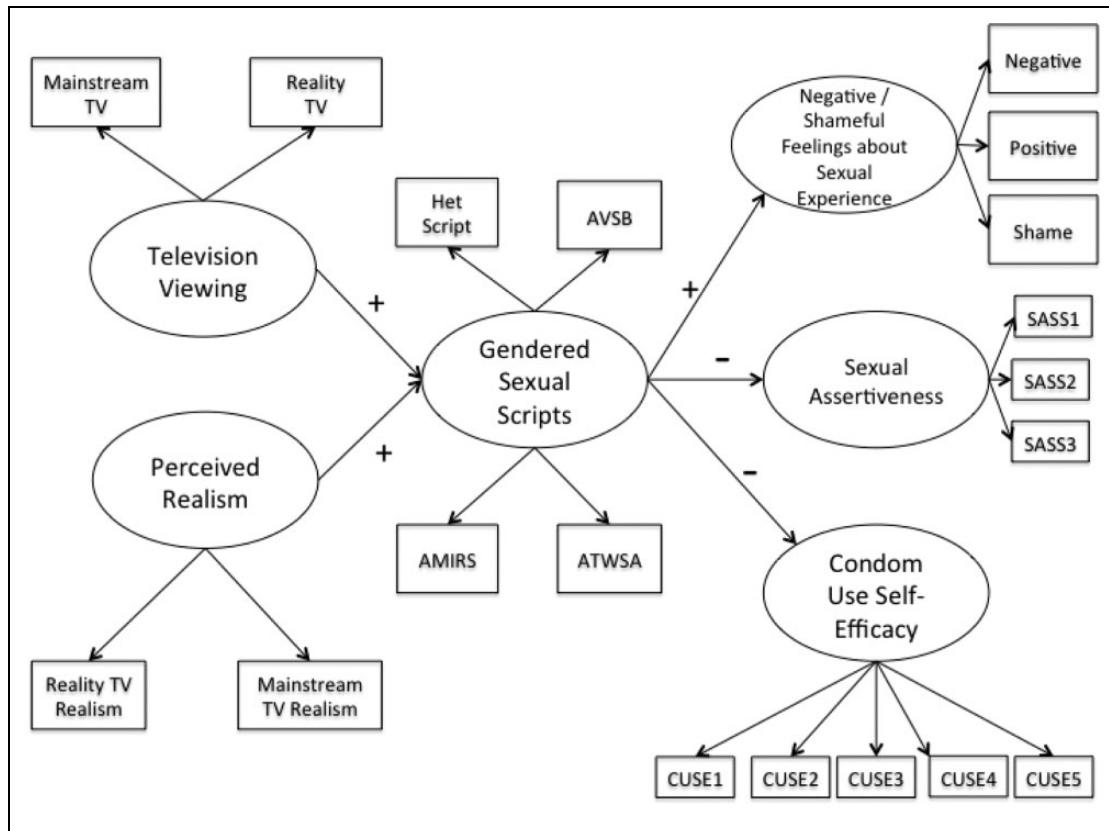
Figure 1. Proposed structural model. Het script = heterosexual script; AVSB = adversarial sexual beliefs; AMIRS = Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale; ATWSA = Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents; SASS = sexual assertiveness; CUSE = condom use self-efficacy.

endorsement of gendered sexual scripts and whether gendered sexual scripts, in turn, predict lower sexual agency among emerging adult heterosexual women. We operationalized sexual agency using three constructs: sexual assertiveness, condom use self-efficacy, and comfort with one's level of sexual experience. Sexual assertiveness and condom use-self-efficacy have been used previously as measures of sexual agency (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007; Curtin et al., 2011; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Impett et al., 2006). Sexual comfort, a component of sexual subjectivity (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006), was added in order to assess both cognitive and affective components of sexual agency, which have largely been missing from the literature on sexual agency.

Figure 1 presents our hypothesized model. We hypothesized (1) Greater TV exposure (a) and greater perceived realism (b) would each be associated with greater endorsement of gendered sexual scripts. (2) Greater endorsement of gendered sexual scripts would be associated with (a) lower condom use self-efficacy, (b) lower sexual assertiveness, and (c) more negative and shameful feelings about one's level of sexual experience. (3) Endorsement of gendered sexual scripts would mediate the relation between TV use and perceived realism and sexual agency (as conceptualized by condom use self-efficacy, sexual assertiveness, and sexual affect).

Method

Participants

Eight hundred forty-four undergraduate women at a large Midwestern university completed the surveys. Because we were interested in traditional U.S. American sexual scripts, we only included women who spent their formative years (ages 5–15) in the United States in our analysis (95.2% of our sample). Because our measures of sexual agency were specific to heterosexual sexual activity, we only included participants who identified as heterosexual (92.1% of our sample). Finally, we only included women who indicated that they had had vaginal intercourse (52.0% of our sample) because sexual agency may mean something different for those without coital experience. This distinction may be especially true for our analyses, which included assessments of condom use self-efficacy (those without coital experience are not likely using condoms[1]) and feelings about level of sexual experience (women with and without coital experience would be responding about different statuses). Other researchers who study components of sexual agency have also elected not to include participants without previous sexual intercourse experience (Troth & Peterson, 2000; Widman, Welsh, McNulty, & Little, 2006). We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance comparing women with and without sexual

intercourse experience on each of our sexual agency constructs (measures are described below). Women with sexual intercourse experience reported fewer negative feelings, $F(1, 672) = 8.84$, $p < .001$; more shameful feelings, $F(1, 672) = 5.91$, $p = .002$; greater condom use self-efficacy, $F(1, 672) = 21.97$, $p < .001$; and greater sexual assertiveness, $F(1, 672) = 29.22$, $p < .001$, than women without sexual intercourse experience. There were no differences on positive feelings, $F(1, 672) = 4.05$, $p = .052$, between women with and without sexual intercourse experience.

We were left with 415 participants. The mean age of the remaining participants was 19.00 years, and the range was 19–21 years. The majority of the sample identified as White ($n = 333$, 80.2%). Another 35 (8.4%) participants identified as Asian/Asian American, 23 (5.5%) as Black/African American, 11 (2.7%) as Latino/Hispanic or Native American, 8 (1.9%) as Middle Eastern, and 2 (0.5%) as multiracial. Participants came from well-educated backgrounds. On average, their mothers had completed 16 years of education, and their fathers had completed 17 years, levels equivalent to a bachelor's degree.

Measures

TV use variables. In order to assess TV use, participants were asked to indicate how many hours of TV (live or online) and reality TV (live, online, or on DVD) they watched on a typical weekday, typical Saturday, and typical Sunday. To calculate weekly use, we multiplied weekday usage by 5 and added Saturday and Sunday usage. This procedure yielded weekly hours for mainstream TV and for reality TV.

Perceived realism. Participants indicated the degree to which they thought mainstream TV and reality TV reflected reality using two modified versions of Rubin's (1981) Perceived Realism Scale. The scale was modified by removing 2 items and adding 3 items from the Perceived Realism Measure (Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005). Responses were given on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) for both the mainstream TV (6 items) and reality TV (8 items) Perceived Realism Scales. Sample items for the mainstream TV Perceived Realism Scale included "TV content reflects everyday life" and "People on TV shows are just like people in the real world." Sample items for the reality TV Perceived Realism Scale included "People on reality TV handle their relationships just like people I know" and "Reality TV content is mostly staged and created for the viewers" (reverse scored). Mean scores across the items were calculated for both the mainstream and reality TV versions of the scale, with higher scores indicating stronger beliefs that TV content reflects real life. Internal consistency for both mainstream TV ($\alpha = .78$) and reality TV ($\alpha = .83$) was good.

Gendered sexual scripts. Attitudes about women and men in dating relationships were measured using four scales. The Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale (Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005) is a 12-item scale that measures participants' feelings about appropriate roles for men in social relationships. Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a 6-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included "In a good dating relationship, the guy gets his way most of the time" and "I think it's important for a guy to talk about his feelings even if people might laugh at him" (reverse scored). Mean scores were computed across the 12 items ($\alpha = .78$), such that higher scores indicated stronger support of traditional gender beliefs.

The Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents (Galambos, Petersen, Richards, & Gitelson, 1985) was used to assess participants' attitudes about women's roles in society. Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included "Swearing is worse for a girl than for a guy" and "Girls should be more concerned with becoming good wives and mothers than desiring a professional or business career." Mean scores were calculated across the 12 items ($\alpha = .76$), with higher scores indicating more traditional views of women's roles.

The Adversarial Sexual Beliefs Scale (Burt, 1980) was used to measure endorsement of the idea that women and men are naturally opposites and have antagonistic relationships with one another; this notion is part of traditional sexual scripts. Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included "Most women are sly and manipulating when they are out to attract a man" and "Men are only out for one thing." Mean scores across the 9 items were calculated ($\alpha = .77$), with higher scores translating to greater endorsement of adversarial beliefs.

The Heterosexual Script Scale (Seabrook et al., 2016) is a 22-item measure of participants' endorsement of multiple elements of the heterosexual script, including the sexual double standard, gender-specific courtship strategies, and gender-specific orientations toward commitment. Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a 6-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included "A woman should be willing to make personal sacrifices in order to satisfy her partner" and "It's only natural for a guy to make advances on someone he finds attractive." Mean scores were computed ($\alpha = .88$), with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the script.

Sexual agency. Sexual agency was conceptualized as sexual assertiveness, condom use self-efficacy, and feelings about one's level of sexual experience. Sexual assertiveness was measured using the Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness (I make a distinction between the constructs being studied

(sexual assertiveness and condom use self-efficacy) which I spell out and do not capitalize, and the measure used to operationalize the construct (SASS and CUSE). SASS and CUSE should be used only after the section "Measures."sexual assertiveness and condom use self-efficacy; Hurlbert, 1998). Participants rated the frequency of each statement on a 5-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*all of the time*). Sample items included "When a technique does not feel good, I tell my partner" and "I feel uncomfortable talking during sex" (reverse scored). Mean scores across the 25 items were calculated ($\alpha = .90$), with higher scores translating to more sexual assertiveness.

The Condom Use Self-Efficacy Scale (CUSE; Rosenthal, Moore, & Flynn, 1991) was used to measure participants' self-rated ability and comfort with using a condom. Using a 5-point scale anchored by 1 (*very uncertain*) and 5 (*very certain*), participants rated their confidence in performing five condom-related behaviors, such as "Carry condoms around with you 'in case'" and "Discuss using condoms and/or other contraceptives with a potential partner." Mean scores were computed ($\alpha = .73$), with higher scores indicating greater condom use self-efficacy.

Finally, participants were asked to rate how strongly they felt 16 different emotions (e.g., comfortable, embarrassed) related to their level of sexual experience. Participants responded using a 5-point scale that ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*). We conducted a factor analysis of the 16 emotions using principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation and uncovered three factors that together explained 57.79% of the variance. We called our three factors "negative feelings" (insecure, anxious, self-conscious, uneasy, frustrated, sad, confused, and embarrassed; $\alpha = .85$), "positive feelings" (pleased, happy, satisfied, content, proud, and comfortable; $\alpha = .89$), and "shame" (ashamed, regretful; $\alpha = .81$). The Positive Feelings Subscale was reverse scored, so that higher scores for each subscale indicate more negative feelings about one's level of sexual experience.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from the university's Introductory Psychology Subject Pool. All students enrolled in introductory psychology classes could sign up for this study. Participants received course credit for full or partial completion of the survey. Participants were told the survey was for a study of media use and social relationships in the new millennium. The data analyzed here were part of a larger study that also included measures of parental socialization experiences and several personality instruments that were not analyzed here (Giaccardi, Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Lippman, 2016; Lippman, Ward, & Seabrook, 2014; Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015; Seabrook et al., 2016; Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Reed, 2016). We ordered the measures such that measures that could be influenced by each other were not placed in proximity. Participants completed the study via paper-and-pencil surveys administered in hour-long sessions

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables of Interest.

Variable	Range	Mean	SD
Television use			
Hours of mainstream TV/week	0–70	10.98	9.70
Hours of reality TV/week	0–70	4.08	5.93
Perceived realism			
Perceived realism—Mainstream TV	1–7	2.58	0.85
Perceived realism—Reality TV	1–7	2.28	0.86
Gendered sexual script			
Heterosexual script	1–6	3.26	0.65
AMIRS	1–6	1.75	0.50
AVSB	1–6	2.27	0.67
ATWSA	1–6	1.86	0.53
Sexual agency			
Negative feelings	1–5	.56	0.64
Positive feelings	1–5	2.12	0.96
Shame	1–5	.58	0.85
SASS	1–5	2.56	0.59
CUSE	1–5	3.82	0.84

Note. $N = 415$. AMIRS = Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale; ATWSA = Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents; AVSB = adversarial sexual beliefs; CUSE = Condom Use Self-Efficacy; SASS = Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness.

that consisted of 8–10 participants per session. Upon returning the survey packet, participants were given a debriefing form that described the study in more detail and provided resources to mental health services on campus. Administration of the full survey took approximately 45 min. The university's institutional review board approved all procedures and measures.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics for the variables of interest are provided in Table 1. Overall, participants watched 11 hr of mainstream TV and 4 hr of reality TV per week and scored moderately on perceived realism for both genres. Participants scored slightly below the midpoint on the measures of gendered sexual scripts. Means for negative and shameful feelings about level of sexual experience were well below the midpoint, and the means for CUSE, SASS, and positive feelings were closer to the midpoint. Overall, participants moderately endorsed gendered sexual scripts and reported low-to-moderate levels of sexual agency, although means differed according to the measure used.

We next examined zero-order correlations between our variables of interest (see Table 2). As expected, indicators of the same latent construct were significantly correlated (e.g., greater mainstream TV consumption is related to greater reality TV consumption; negative feelings, shame, and positive feelings about level of sexual experience were each correlated). None of these correlations were large enough to indicate a problem with multicollinearity. In

Table 2. Zero-Order Correlations Between Variables of Interest.

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Mainstream TV/week	—											
2. Reality TV/week	.59***	—										
3. PR—Mainstream TV	.09	.06	—									
4. PR—Reality TV	.14**	.22***	.61***	—								
5. Heterosexual script	.11*	.04	.13*	.25***	—							
6. AMIRS	.11*	.14**	.10*	.17***	.47***	—						
7. AVSB	.14**	.11*	.14**	.22***	.62***	.56***	—					
8. ATWSA	.06	.13*	.04	.10*	.49***	.63***	.56***	—				
9. Feeling negative	.09	.01	.03	−.04	.15**	.06	.20***	.05	—			
10. Feeling positive	−.03	.07	.06	.05	−.02	.02	−.06	−.03	−.47***	—		
11. Shame	.05	.04	.00	−.02	.14**	.08	.13**	.12*	.64***	−.39***	—	
12. SASS	−.10*	.00	.02	−.00	−.07	−.03	−.04	−.04	−.47***	.50***	−.27***	—
13. CUSE	.03	.06	−.07	−.05	−.18**	−.15**	−.11*	−.11*	−.19***	.28***	−.20***	.38***

Note. $N = 415$. AMIRS = Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale; ATWSA = Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents; AVSB = adversarial sexual beliefs; CUSE = Condom Use Self-Efficacy; PR = perceived realism; SASS = Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

addition, the variance inflation factors for each set of indicators were all below 2.

Testing the Hypothesized Model

We used structural equation modeling (MPlus version 7) with maximum likelihood estimation to test our proposed model (see Figure 1). We followed the recommendations of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) by first testing a measurement model and then testing a structural model. In each model, indicators were assigned to parcels using the item-to-construct balance technique recommended by Little, Cunningham, Shahar, and Widaman (2002). Factor loadings are computed for a one-factor model, and all items are distributed across three "parcels" according to their factor loadings, such that the three highest loading items are distributed across the three parcels, followed by the next three highest loadings, until all items are distributed across the three parcels. The approach was used for all constructs except TV consumption (two indicators) and CUSE (five indicators; each of the five items in the scale served as an indicator). The measurement model fits the data well, $\chi^2(137, N = 415) = 256.09$, $p < .01$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .97, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .046 with 90% CI [.037, .054], standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .038. Standardized factor loadings were all significant at $\alpha = .001$ and ranged from .51 to .92.

Next, we tested our proposed structural model. In the structural model, we allowed our measures of sexual agency to correlate because we expected that each type of agency would be related to the others. The proposed structural model fits the data well, $\chi^2(143, N = 415) = 264.39$, $p < .01$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .045 with 90% CI [.037, .054], SRMR = .041. All proposed pathways, with the exception of the path from gendered sexual scripts to SASS, were significant for one-

tailed test at $\alpha = .05$. Use of the one-tailed test is justified because our hypothesized model proposed the direction of the relation between variables, which is consistent with the direction in the model (Cho & Abe, 2013). Standardized path coefficients appear in Figure 2. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a and b, TV use and perceived realism of TV content were each associated with stronger endorsement of gendered sexual scripts ($\beta = .11$ and .22, respectively). Our hypotheses about the relations between traditional sexual scripts and our three indicators of sexual agency were partially supported. Specifically, endorsement of gendered sexual scripts was associated with lower CUSE ($\beta = -.23$; Hypothesis 2a), and more negative feelings about one's level of sexual experience ($\beta = .11$; Hypothesis 2c), but was not associated with lower SASS ($\beta = -.08$; Hypothesis 2b).

Finally, in order to determine whether gendered sexual scripts fully mediate the relation between TV and sexual agency, and between perceived realism and sexual agency, we used the method outlined by Kline (2011). We tested the same model as above, with additional pathways estimated between TV viewing and each of the sexual agency indicators and between perceived realism and each of the sexual agency indicators. In other words, this alternative model specifies effects of TV viewing and perceived realism on sexual agency indicators both indirectly (via gendered sexual scripts) and directly, consistent with partial mediation. This partially mediated model fits the data well, $\chi^2(137, N = 415) = 256.09$, $p < .01$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .046 with 90% CI [.037, .054], SRMR = .038. We compared this partially mediated model to the original, fully mediated model (in which the relations between TV viewing and sexual agency, and perceived realism and sexual agency, exist only through the mediating construct of gendered sexual scripts). If the fit of the fully mediated model was not significantly worse than the fit of the partially mediated model, there would be evidence of full mediation (Kline, 2011). We compared the fit of the partially
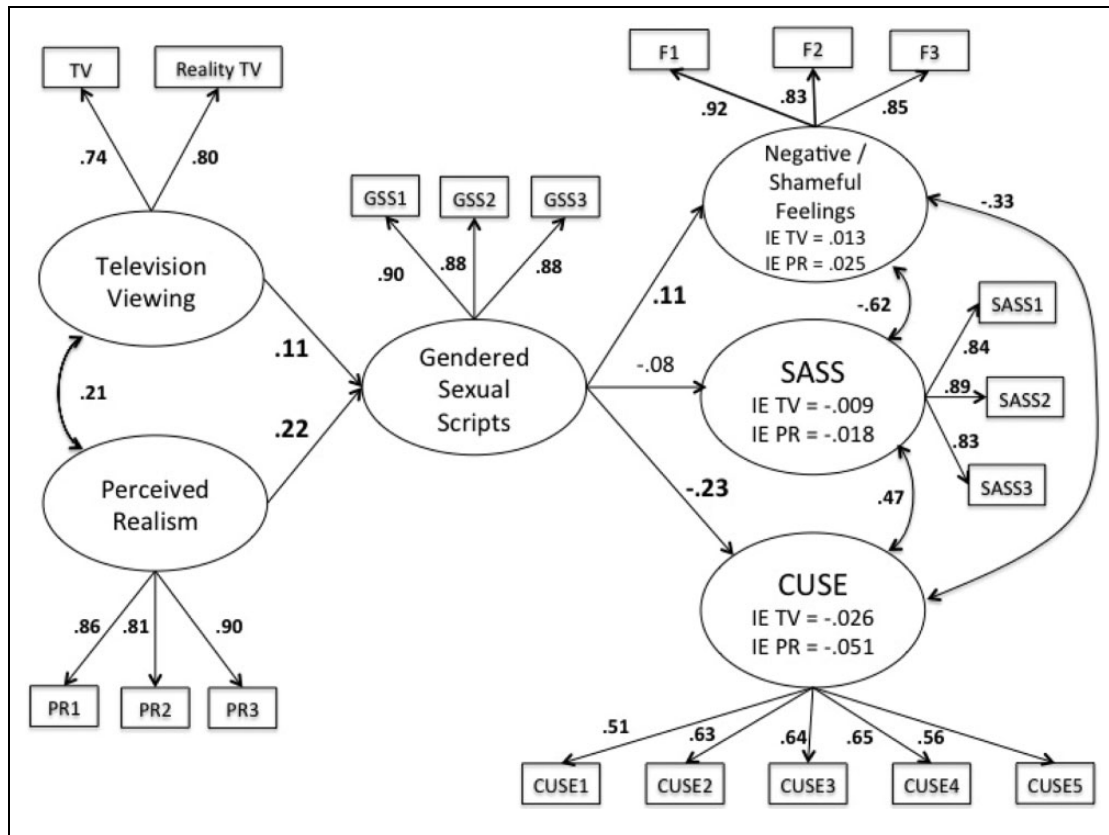
Figure 2. Finalized structural equation model. Pathways in boldface are significant at $p < .05$. Indirect effects are significant using one-tailed test for pathways from television viewing to condom use self-efficacy, perceived realism to negative/shameful feelings about sexual experience, and perceived realism to condom use self-efficacy. CUSE = Condom Use Self-Efficacy; F = feelings about level of sexual experience; GSS = gendered sexual scripts; IE PR = indirect effect of perceived realism; IE TV = indirect effect of television viewing; PR = perceived realism; SASS = Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness.

mediated and fully mediated models using the χ^2 difference test and comparing the fit indices. We found a nonsignificant difference between the models, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(6) = 8.30, p = .22$, indicating that both models fit the data equally well. In addition, we compared the CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR of both models. The fit statistics were nearly identical for the fully versus partially mediated model (0.97 vs. 0.97 for the CFI, 0.046 vs. 0.045 for the RMSEA, and 0.041 vs. 0.038 for the SRMR), suggesting that the fully mediated model fits the data equally well. Because the fully mediated model has the advantage of parsimony (specifying fewer paths among constructs), we deemed it to be superior (Kline, 2011). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, these results suggest that gendered sexual scripts fully mediate the relations between TV viewing and sexual agency and between perceived realism and sexual agency.

Discussion

Overall, our results suggest that college women who frequently consume TV, or who believe that its content is real, tend to endorse the gendered sexual scripts that are portrayed frequently on TV. Endorsement of these gendered sexual

scripts is, in turn, associated with less confidence using condoms and more negative and shameful feelings about one's level of sexual experience. Although researchers have found relations between women's TV consumption and endorsement of gendered sexual scripts (Guo & Nathanson, 2011; Ward, 2002), and between endorsement of gendered sexual scripts and components of sexual agency (Curtin et al., 2011; Levin et al., 2012), ours is the first to test these relations in a single model. We add to the current literature on media and sexuality by proposing a fuller model of the relations among media, gendered sexual scripts, and sexual agency. In the current study, we included a broad set of gendered sexual scripts, rather than individual sexual scripts (e.g., men are sex-driven; Ward & Friedman, 2006) or gender roles (e.g., femininity; Curtin et al., 2011), and used an expanded definition of sexual agency that included sexual affect.

We believe our model has the potential to shift research on media use and women's sexual agency in three ways. First, our findings highlight the importance of considering sexual agency as an outcome of TV viewing. Much of the previous work on media and sexuality has focused on sexual risk. A content analysis of 606 articles in four high-impact sexual

and health journals revealed that only 7% of the articles focused on positive aspects of sexuality, compared to 58% of articles that focused on negative aspects of sexuality (Arakawa, Flanders, Hatfield, & Heck, 2013). Feminist scholars have argued that we need to be thinking about women's sexuality in more positive terms rather than conceptualizing women's sexuality as inherently risky (Bay-Cheng, 2010; Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2012). Further, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2006) defines sexual health as,

> not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. (p. 5)

Studying sexual agency, instead of focusing only on sexual risk, allows for the possibility of considering healthy and positive aspects of women's sexual activity and better captures the WHO's definition of sexual health.

Second, our results support broadening conceptualizations of sexual agency to include sexual affect. We found that endorsement of gendered sexual scripts is related to more negative affect and shame about one's level of sexual experience. We suggest that women who more strongly endorse gendered sexual scripts may feel shameful about their level of sexual experience because it conflicts with gendered expectations that women should abstain from sex except in limited, circumscribed circumstances. The inner conflict heterosexual women feel about expectations for their sexuality may be related to sexual health. For example, some qualitative work has revealed that college women use alcohol as a way of excusing violations of the expectation to be sexual gatekeepers (Livingston, Bay-Cheng, Hequembourg, Testa, & Downs, 2013). However, alcohol use is linked to several sexual health risks for women, including a greater likelihood of having unprotected sex and increased likelihood of sexual victimization (Mouilso & Fischer, 2012; O'Hara & Cooper, 2015; Stappenbeck et al., 2013). Researchers who study sexual agency and sexual health should consider including affect in their conceptualizations of sexual agency. Researchers should consider the role of negative and shameful feelings in the relation between endorsement of gendered sexual scripts and risky sexual behaviors, such as alcohol consumption.

Third, our results suggest that cognitions are an important mediator of the relation between media use and sexual behavior. Much of the early work on sexual media effects tested direct connections between media use and sexual behavior. Now, most researchers acknowledge that this association is likely mediated by cognitions (e.g., Wright, 2011), and some have tested cognitive mediators including identification with TV characters, motivations for viewing TV, and one's own sexual efficacy (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliot, & Berry, 2005; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Fewer researchers have tested beliefs about gendered

sexual scripts as a cognitive mediator between media use and sexual behaviors; there is evidence that endorsement of traditional sexual scripts mediated the relations between media use and sexual risk behaviors in heterosexual men and adolescents (Ward, Epstein, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2011; Ward & Friedman, 2006). However, none of these researchers examined sexual agency as an outcome. Yet, gendered sexual scripts contain roles for women that directly contradict sexual agency. For example, being passive and prioritizing men's needs contradict our conceptual definition of sexual agency as the ability to act on behalf of oneself, express one's needs and desires, and advocate for oneself (Tolman et al., 2015). Our results suggest that endorsement of gendered sexual scripts explains the relation between TV use (viewing amounts and perceived realism) and sexual agency and supports the observation of a conceptual conflict between endorsement of gendered sexual scripts and enactment of sexual agency among heterosexual college-aged women. Further, our results highlight the importance of cognitions (e.g., gendered sexual scripts) in understanding the relation between media use and sexual behaviors.

Some scholars have argued that the frequent portrayals of women's sexuality depicted on TV signal a culture in which women are afforded greater agency over their own sexualities (Gill, 2007). Whereas these TV portrayals may appear to depict sexual agency on the surface, their depictions of women's sexuality still exist within a heteronormative framework that presents the female body for male viewers and privileges bodies that adhere to strict feminine appearance norms (Fahs, 2014; Gill, 2007). The association we found between TV consumption, endorsement of gendered sexual scripts, and diminished sexual agency suggests that although depictions of sexuality on TV may appear to be agentic, their consumption is associated with lower sexual agency for female viewers.

Given the negative associations of adhering to gendered sexual scripts, why do women endorse them? Researchers demonstrate that women who reject traditional gender norms face backlash for failing to adhere to the culture's expectations for them. For example, women who reject feminine sexual scripts by acting agentically (e.g., initiating sex and communicating desire to a partner) are perceived as having a greater likelihood of having an STI (Cook, 2012) and as having more sexual partners (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015). Further, women expect to be judged for violating gendered sexual scripts (Cook, 2012; Hynie & Lydon, 1995; Moran & Lee, 2014). Thus, adhering to gendered sexual scripts may protect women from perceived and actual judgment, at the expense of their sexual agency.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the important findings reported here, we acknowledge several limitations of our approach that future researchers should address. First, TV is only one source, among many, of information about gender and sex. This complexity may explain why the relation we found between TV consumption

and gendered sexual scripts is small in magnitude, given the variety of sources that provide young women with information about these domains. In addition, messages about gendered sexual scripts likely vary across TV programs. A more comprehensive measure of TV use might ask participants to rank the frequency with which they view a list of popular programs. Due to the on-demand nature of TV use today, it is difficult to provide a comprehensive list of all TV programs that young women are viewing.

Second, it is possible that the "good girl" component of gendered sexual scripts may actually help women refuse unwanted sexual activity; this possibility may explain why we did not find an association between gendered sexual scripts and sexual assertiveness. It is important for future researchers to examine whether this refusal is agentic (e.g., refusing unwanted sex) or nonagentic (e.g., feeling pressured to say no in order to uphold expectations for women's behavior in sexual relationships). We also should examine whether each component of sexual assertiveness (refusal, initiation, and communication) uniquely relates to endorsement of gendered sexual scripts.

Third, because our sample was mostly White women, entirely heterosexual, college aged, and coitally experienced, we cannot generalize to other populations. A more ethnically diverse sample may have revealed different TV viewing habits. Some ethnic minority youth have been found to consume media at higher rates than White youth (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), and thus may have even greater exposure to gendered sexual scripts. Alternatively, ethnic minority youth may perceive TV content to be less realistic, especially if their race/ethnicity is rarely represented on TV, and therefore may be less influenced by the messages portrayed on TV (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004). This work also needs to be extended to sexual minority women. We anticipate that some gendered sexual scripts may not apply to women in same-sex relationships because these scripts are specifically about heterosexual relationships. Further, many existing measures of sexual agency (e.g., CUSE) are less likely to be relevant to women who have sex with women (McNair, 2005).

Fourth, most existing scales of sexual agency refer to partnered sexual activities and may not be appropriate for women without partnered sexual experiences. For example, the Sexual Assertiveness Scale used in this study asks respondents to indicate their comfort telling a partner when a technique does not feel good. Such questions may not have the same meaning for women without partnered sexual experience. One's perceived ability to assert her own desires may differ from her actual ability. How do we conceptualize sexual agency for women without intercourse experience? Such research is especially important for young women preparing for their first sexual relationships.

Finally, because our study is cross-sectional, we cannot make assumptions about the direction of causality. Media scholars have argued that just as media content affects viewers' attitudes, viewers' attitudes also affect the media content they choose to consume (i.e., women who endorse gendered sexual scripts may be more likely to consume TV content that upholds their beliefs). We acknowledge that the relation between TV viewing and endorsement of gendered sexual scripts is likely bidirectional. Additional support of our proposed direction can be seen in experimental studies in which researchers found that viewing TV content featuring gendered sexual scripts causes women and men to more strongly endorse those sexual scripts (Ward, 2002; Ward & Friedman, 2006). Further, because children demonstrate knowledge of gender stereotypes before puberty (Signorella, Bigler, & Liben, 1993), at least some beliefs about gender and sexuality develop before experiences with sex. We did not randomize the order of our measures and therefore cannot rule out order effects, though we were careful to not place measures that could influence each other in proximity.

Practice Implications

The results of our study have practical implications for those concerned with women's sexual health. Our results suggest that endorsement of gendered sexual scripts helps to explain the relation between TV viewing and sexual agency among heterosexual college-aged women. Policy makers and educators concerned with women's sexual health should consider designing interventions that include a media literacy component. Portrayals of sex on TV, and the extent to which women perceive these portrayals as realistic, are associated with endorsement of gendered sexual scripts. These scripts are, in turn, associated with lower sexual agency. Viewers who can critically analyze the media may be less likely to perceive its content as realistic, and thus less likely to endorse gendered sexual scripts that are linked to lower sexual agency.

Our results also suggest that interventions targeted at improving young women's sexual health need to address traditional gender roles. We found that women who endorse traditional gender roles and sexual scripts are less likely to feel comfortable using condoms and more likely to have negative and shameful feelings about their level of sexual experience. We suspect that encouraging women to reject gendered sexual scripts will improve their sexual health, not simply by helping them engage in risk-reduction techniques (e.g., condom use) but also by helping them feel more positively about their sexual experience. Finally, when conceptualizing sexual agency, we should consider not just a woman's ability to say "no" or "yes" to sexual activity but also her feelings about her sexual experiences. If we endorse the WHO's (2006) definition of sexual health as, "not merely the absence of disease but also ... the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences" (p. 5), then we must strive to improve women's sexual comfort and agency.

Conclusion

Our results indicate that TV use is associated with endorsement of gendered sexual scripts, which in turn are associated

with diminished sexual agency, namely, lower condom use self-efficacy and more negative and shameful feelings about one's level of sexual experience. Of note, we do not believe that all TV portrayals of women are negative or disempowering. There are several portrayals of powerful and nontraditional female characters on mainstream TV (e.g., Leslie Knope of *Parks and Recreation*, Olivia Pope of *Scandal*). Future work should consider whether these portrayals have a positive impact on women's sexual agency and what factors make women more likely to choose media with counterscripted content. However, the broader media landscape, including TV programs, commercials, and music videos, portray women in ways that reify gendered sexual scripts (for a review, see Ward et al., 2013). Exposure to the larger media landscape may have disempowering effects for heterosexual women's sexuality. Interventions to decrease sexual risktaking should consider developing media literacy programs that help viewers critically analyze media content and its perceived realism, thus disrupting the relations between TV viewing and endorsement of gendered sexual scripts. Encouraging college women to challenge the dominant discourse about sexuality may increase their sexual agency and, subsequently, decrease sexual risk behaviors.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. We do not wish to imply that condoms are only used for vaginal intercourse. However, researchers in both the United Kingdom and the United States found that only 2–6% of heterosexual women use condoms during oral sex (Leichliter, Chandra, Liddon, Fenton, & Aral, 2007; Stone, Hatherall, Ingham, & McEachran, 2006).

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