Social cognitive theory and norms: Determining the factors that lead viewers to enact sexual behaviors seen on television

THESIS

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Abstract

Individuals often learn sexual health information from entertainment television shows, but they also may learn and enact risky sexual behaviors seen on television. This experiment tested whether viewers are more likely to engage in sexual behaviors after seeing television characters model these behaviors and sought to determine whether this enactment of behavior is attributed to characters experiencing positive or negative emotional consequences as a result of their sexual behavior. Participants were randomly assigned to view either a television show episode that depicted a positive outcome of a “friends with benefits” relationship or one that depicted a negative outcome of a “friends with benefits” relationship. Males reported being more likely to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship after viewing this type of relationship depicted on television. Therefore, people may be more likely to enact behaviors after viewing characters engage in them on television regardless of whether the characters experience positive or negative outcomes. Males’ intentions to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship also increased after viewing the negative outcome condition. This finding demonstrates that although the protagonist of a show may experience negative outcomes as a result of her behavior, viewers may interpret this outcome differently or identify more with other characters, which can increase their intentions to engage in the behavior. Therefore, having a character experience negative outcomes as a result of engaging in a behavior will not necessarily decrease viewers’ intentions to engage in that behavior.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research has shown that individuals are able to learn sexual health information from entertainment television shows (Brodie, Foehr, Rideout, Baer, Miller, & Flournoy, 2001; Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003). Not only can entertainment television shows teach viewers about sexual health, but they can motivate viewers to seek additional health information and participate in discussions regarding sexual health (Brodie et al., 2001; Moyer-Gusé, Chung & Jain, 2011). Television episodes have also been shown to affect people’s attitudes toward sexual health behaviors. A study conducted by Farrar (2006) demonstrated that television portrayals of condom use were able to positively influence females’ attitudes toward condoms, whereas the results suggested that portrayals of unsafe sex were actually able to negatively influence females’ attitudes toward condoms. Despite the ability of television portrayals to change females’ attitudes, no significant effects were found for males’ attitudes toward condoms (Farrar, 2006). This ability to negatively influence attitudes can be problematic because shows that depict sexual acts often do not contain any discussions of risks, including the use of condoms (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). In fact, these sexual risk and responsibility discussions were only discussed in one out of every ten television shows that contained sexual content in Eyal and Finnerty’s (2009) study. Not only are these important discussions not being shown on television, but characters are typically only experiencing
emotional consequences as a result of sexual intercourse, and those are largely positive emotions (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009).

Because television programs show relatively few negative emotions associated with sexual behaviors, it is important to determine the effects that the positive emotions experienced by television show characters after engaging in sexual behaviors have on viewers. Studying emotions associated with sex is also necessary and relevant due to the fact that when parents discuss sex with their children, they most often discuss safe sex and the risks associated with sex (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). Since parents rarely discuss emotional consequences associated with sex, and the discussions of emotions are extremely rare in sexual education programs (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999), one way young adults learn about emotions associated with sex is through entertainment television programming.

The role of emotion in entertainment television portrayals of sexual behaviors is important to study theoretically because social cognitive theory predicts that when characters experience positive outcomes after engaging in a behavior, viewers are more likely to model that behavior than if the character had experienced a negative outcome (Bandura, 2009). In contrast, using schema theory, we may expect that viewers who watch entertainment television programming know that negative outcomes experienced by characters will not be long-lasting (Nabi & Clark, 2008). Thus, viewers may enact behaviors they see on television regardless of the outcome experienced by the character because they will evaluate consequences experienced by characters as positive rather than negative (Nabi & Clark, 2008).
Therefore, this study seeks to explore whether viewers are more likely to engage in sexual behaviors after seeing television characters perform these behaviors and whether this engagement in behavior is attributed to the character experiencing positive or negative emotional consequences as a result of his or her sexual behavior. In order to determine whether social cognitive theory or schema theory better predicts viewers’ intentions to enact risky sexual behaviors, this study will provide a direct test of social cognitive theory. This study will directly test social cognitive theory by manipulating the positive or negative emotional consequences experienced by an entertainment television show character to determine whether these different emotional outcomes affect viewers’ intentions to enact the sexual behavior. This study is a direct test of social cognitive theory as well because it will measure viewers’ identification with the television show character and similarity to the character to determine how these factors affect viewers’ behavioral intentions.

The purpose of this study is not only to address methodological issues with the Nabi and Clark (2008) study but also to test aspects of enacting risky sexual behaviors that are not included in social cognitive theory. An alternative explanation to Nabi and Clark’s findings supporting schema theory will also be further studied by testing an alternative theoretical mechanism, perceived norms.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory is a useful theoretical framework through which to study the effects of television content on sexual health behaviors because social cognitive theory provides a theoretical explanation for how television influences the behaviors of viewers. In order for observational learning to occur, viewers must have sufficient attentional, retention, production, and motivational processes during their television viewing (Bandura, 2009). The outcome the character experienced as a result of engaging in a certain behavior can affect a viewer’s motivation to partake in that behavior. When characters experience a positive outcome or reward for engaging in the behavior, viewers are motivated to engage in the behavior as well (Bandura, 2009). In contrast, when characters experience a negative outcome or consequence for engaging in the behavior, viewers are not motivated to engage in that particular behavior (Bandura, 2009). The rewards or consequences the viewers experience may be in the form of a character experiencing either positive or negative emotions toward oneself as a result of the behavior or in the form of a tangible reward or consequence as a result of the behavior. The effects of observational learning will be stronger for viewers who have not had prior experience engaging in a particular behavior than those viewers who already have prior experience enacting the behavior (Bandura, 2009).
Although observational learning is stronger in those without prior experience, it is possible that those who do have prior experience can be influenced as well. For example, Morgan, Movius, and Cody (2009) found that showing positive and negative depictions of organ donation affected the behaviors of people who were already organ donors. Those who were registered as organ donors were affected by the positive depictions in the television episodes because they indicated intentions to further engage in this behavior by discussing organ donation with others and urging others to become donors (Morgan et al., 2009). Even though organ donation is a unique type of behavior in which the desired outcome is to sign up to engage in a behavior as opposed to the desired outcome being to actually engage in a specific behavior, this study does show that those who are more highly involved with a behavior are also able to be influenced through character outcomes in entertainment television programming.

Although social cognitive theory has been applied to a variety of contexts, there are relatively few studies that directly test social cognitive theory in the context of sexual behaviors (Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliot, & Berry, 2005). Martino et al. conducted two phone interviews a year apart with teens in the U.S. The authors asked participants about their sexual behaviors, their exposure to sexual content on television, and the negative consequences they would expect from having sex. Martino et al. (2005) attempted to test social cognitive theory in order to look at adolescents’ exposure to sexual television content and their sexual behavior, however; their study took the approach of the effect of overall television viewing as opposed to the effect of viewing a
particular television episode. Therefore, they were unable to determine the effects of showing positive or negative outcomes as social cognitive theory predicts.

Social cognitive theory is a useful theory to apply to sexual contexts due to its ability to make predictions about when viewers are likely to enact the sexual behaviors they see on television. Although social cognitive theory predicts that intentions to engage in behaviors depend on the outcomes the television show characters experienced, there is another theoretical argument that predicts otherwise. We can use schema theory to predict that viewers will enact behaviors seen on television regardless of the outcome experienced by the character. Viewers may engage in behaviors that are initially depicted as negative because they expect any negative consequences experienced by characters to be short-lived and not life-altering (Nabi & Clark, 2008). Therefore, due to these different theoretical arguments, it is necessary to understand which theory better predicts intentions to enact sexual behaviors seen in entertainment television programming.

**Schema Theory**

Television program schemas allow viewers to predict what will happen to characters on a particular show (Nabi & Clark, 2008). “Schema theory explains that we use templates (called schema) to orient our perceptions of stimuli and also to guide our interpretations of the meaning of those stimuli” (Potter, Pashupati, Pekurny, Hoffman, & Davis, 2002, p. 28). These schemas that people form guide their cognitive processing of information that they encounter through the real world and through media (Smith & Granados, 2009).
Nabi and Clark (2008) conducted a survey to better understand one schema that exists in entertainment television programming. The authors tested the notions that people think entertainment television shows only depict short-term consequences for characters and that main characters in fictional television shows will encounter mainly positive outcomes. Their study concluded that viewers indeed have these beliefs, and these beliefs about characters experiencing positive outcomes, even if they face negative situations, exist because main characters are essential to continuing a show’s plot and keeping an audience interested in the show (Nabi & Clark, 2008). The character predictions that viewers make affect the way viewers perceive events on the show and react to these events as they happen (Nabi & Clark, 2008).

Based on the Nabi and Clark (2008) findings about schemas that exist in entertainment television programming, we can predict how viewers will behave after viewing entertainment television programs. Because viewers believe that main characters will typically experience positive outcomes and any negative consequences will be short term, viewers will be likely to engage in a particular behavior after witnessing a character engage in that same behavior. Enacting the behavior would not depend on whether the characters are rewarded for their actions or experience consequences for their actions because viewers would not expect any negative consequences to be long-lasting, and thus, viewers would perceive nearly all outcomes as positive (Nabi & Clark, 2008). These beliefs about positive character outcomes should hold true for entertainment television programming because viewers of television tend to adopt and endorse the beliefs they are frequently exposed to on television (Ward & Friedman, 2006). Therefore, viewers of an
entertainment television program should perceive that main characters will not experience long-lasting negative outcomes. This argument regarding viewers’ intentions to enact behaviors regardless of the outcome experienced by the character is in direct contrast to social cognitive theory, which would only predict intentions to enact a behavior after characters were rewarded, or at least not punished, for that behavior. However, because viewers of entertainment television have a schema that negative consequences in entertainment television programming are not long-lasting, schema theory can be used as an argument for why viewers may engage in a behavior regardless of the outcome the character experienced.

H1a: After being exposed to a television show character experiencing either positive or negative outcomes from engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship, individuals will be more likely to report that they intend to become involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship in the future.

The above hypothesis is a prediction that stems from schema theory. The different arguments associated with social cognitive theory and schema theory require a test of competing hypotheses. With social cognitive theory, we would expect that positive outcomes would influence intentions to engage in a behavior while negative outcomes would persuade viewers to avoid the behavior.

H1b: After being exposed to a television show character experiencing positive from engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship, individuals will be more likely to report that they intend to become involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship in the future relative to those who see negative outcomes.

Hypothesis 1b is consistent with social cognitive theory. This effect should be moderated by past experience with “friends with benefits” relationships. In alignment with social cognitive theory, effects should be greater for individuals who have never
engaged in a “friends with benefits” relationship prior to viewing the stimuli in this experiment as opposed to individuals who have previously engaged in a “friends with benefits” relationship.

H2: Individuals who have never engaged in a “friends with benefits” relationship and who are in the positive outcome condition should be more likely to report becoming involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship in the future relative to individuals who are in the negative outcome condition or who have previously engaged in a “friends with benefits” relationship.

In their second study, Nabi and Clark (2008) tested these conflicting arguments put forth by social cognitive theory and schema theory. Their findings supported schema theory in that positive or negative outcomes shown in an entertainment television show were both able to predict behavioral intentions in a sexual context. In the study, Nabi and Clark showed female college students depictions of positive or negative outcomes after a character on an entertainment television show participated in a one-night stand. The researchers measured how likely women were to participate in a one-night stand after seeing either positive or negative outcomes of a character engaging in one. Their results were consistent with the arguments put forth by schema theory because despite the positive or negative outcomes, participants who had never had a one-night stand before were more likely to intend to have a one-night stand after viewing the episode (Nabi & Clark, 2008). The authors’ findings are inconsistent with social cognitive theory because social cognitive theory would predict that participants who viewed the negative outcome condition would be less likely to intend to have a one-night stand. Women who had previously engaged in a one-night stand did not change their intentions to have a one-
night stand after viewing the stimulus, which is a finding that is consistent with social
cognitive theory (Nabi & Clark, 2008).

An alternative explanation for Nabi and Clark’s (2008) findings could be
perceived norms. Perceived norms consist of individuals’ perceptions of how common a
behavior is and the pressure individuals feel to engage in that behavior (Rimal and Real,
2003). Perceived norms of sexual behavior have been shown to influence individuals’
sexual behaviors (Whitaker and Miller, 2000). Thus, viewing the stimulus could make the
behavior seem more normative, which would cause viewers to have greater intentions to
also engage in the behavior. This effect on perceived norms would occur regardless of the
positive or negative outcome experienced by the character. Watching Carrie on *Sex and
the City* have a one-night stand likely made this behavior more normative to viewers by
influencing viewers’ perceptions of how common it is for people to engage in one-night
stands.

Perceived norms consist of both descriptive and injunctive norms. Descriptive
norms are people’s perceptions of how common a certain behavior is, and injunctive
norms are the pressure that people feel to conform to the specific norm (Rimal & Real,
2003). Therefore, people who identify and are similar to the character in the stimulus
should be influenced by descriptive norms because they will view the character’s
behavior as normative, which should then increase their intentions to engage in the
behavior.

H3: Participants who report being similar to and identifying with the stimulus
character Brooke should have greater descriptive norms of “friends with benefits”
relationships and thus will be more likely to report that they intend to become
involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship in the future.
People who are likely to monitor their behavior should be influenced by injunctive norms. High self-monitors control their behavior and are “highly responsive to social and interpersonal cues of situationally appropriate performances” (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986, p. 125). Therefore, those people who monitor their behavior and think that their friends approve of a specific behavior should be influenced by injunctive norms, which should then increase their intentions to engage in the behavior.

H4: Participants who are high self-monitors and report thinking that their friends approve of “friends with benefits” relationships should have greater injunctive norms and thus will be more likely to report that they intend to become involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship in the future.

This study also seeks to understand how participants respond differently to questions about their behavioral intentions. Participants may answer one way when they are asked about whether they intend to or plan to engage in a certain behavior, and this may be different from how they answer a question that asks how likely they are to engage in that particular behavior. For instance, a participant may not intend to engage in a certain behavior, but when asked about likelihood, may report that he/or she might be likely to engage in the behavior. Therefore, even if participants do not plan to engage in a behavior, they may judge that the behavior is normative and feel like it is likely that it will happen to them. Therefore, due to the possibility of answering these questions differently, it is necessary to understand how the wording of behavioral intention questions can affect participants’ responses.

RQ1: When measuring behavioral intentions, how does the wording of questions that ask about intentions versus likelihood affect participants’ responses to these questions?
Purpose and Rationale

This study seeks to advance the research in this area through a direct test of social cognitive theory by manipulating positive and negative emotional outcomes experienced by a television show character by replicating the guiding concepts of the Nabi and Clark (2008) study but correcting for methodological idiosyncrasies of that study. Although Nabi and Clark found evidence to support schema theory, this study attempts to test the competing theoretical arguments put forth by social cognitive theory and schema theory as well as test the possibility of perceived norms as an explanation to Nabi and Clark’s findings. This study seeks to test these theories in a related context and to resolve any methodological idiosyncrasies about the text used in the Nabi and Clark study.

For example, in order to test whether social cognitive theory or schema theory better predicts observational learning, Nabi and Clark (2008) measured whether females intended to participate in a one-night stand after watching segments from *Sex and the City*. Of the two clips the researchers used, one of the clips depicted Carrie, the show’s main character, having sex with Mr. Big on their first date (Nabi & Clark, 2008). Participants familiar with *Sex and the City* would likely have known that Big was not merely a one-night stand. Carrie frequently dated Big on the television show, and they were later married. Although the authors statistically controlled for whether viewers had previously seen the particular episode prior to their study, participants somewhat familiar with the show (but who did not recall seeing that particular episode) may have influenced the results. Some familiarity with the show may have reduced perceptions that Carrie experienced negative consequences, given the knowledge that the encounter ended
positively with Carrie and Big starting a relationship. Thus, these participants may have viewed the overall outcome of the one-night stand as positive, and therefore indicated they were more likely to intend to participate in a one-night stand in the future. Without statistically controlling for familiarity, it is difficult to determine if this stimulus did in fact affect the results and make them favor schema theory.

The present study will also build upon past research by using in-tact episodes rather than clips. Indeed, Nabi and Clark (2008) used five-minute or seven-minute clips of *Sex and the City*. It is possible that a complete narrative is needed in order to fully convey a storyline and to show detailed effects of the positive or negative outcome from the character’s one-night stand. Longer stimuli may make negative consequences seem more negative or long lasting as they would have had an entire episode been shown to the participants.

For this study, the sexual behavior that will be examined is “friends with benefits” relationships. “Friends with benefits” relationships are “distinct in that they combine both the benefits of friendship with the benefits of a sexual relationship, yet avoid the responsibilities and commitment that sexual relationships typically entail” (Hughes et al., 2005, p. 50). For this study, “friends with benefits” relationships will solely focus on the non-exclusive sexual nature of these relationships as this is how this type of relationship is defined in the stimulus episode. Puentes et al. (2008) surveyed 1013 undergraduate students and found that half of the students reported having been involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship.
Although Nabi and Clark (2008) found evidence to support that in accordance with schema theory, television behaviors will be enacted regardless of the character’s outcome, this study hypothesizes that the findings will be in support of social cognitive theory. Showing short episodes, having one stimulus depict a one-night stand between the show’s main character and eventual boyfriend, and not controlling for show familiarity most likely contributed to the authors’ findings, which supported schema theory. By eliminating these stimulus issues and using longer episode clips that are similar in length to a television show, this study expects to find that participants will be more likely to intend to enact the behaviors of characters who were rewarded and avoid enacting behaviors of characters who experienced negative outcomes.

Identification with a television show character should also affect whether or not viewers intend to enact the behavior shown. Identification with a character means that the viewer takes on the character’s role temporarily (Cohen, 2001). This role-taking includes taking on the character’s identity, goals, and perspective (Cohen, 2001). Thus, the viewer experiences events and emotions as the character does. Identification with a character has been shown to affect a viewer’s liking of the character, their perceived similarity to the character, and whether they enact the behaviors of the character (Cohen, 2001). Therefore, in accordance with social cognitive theory, viewers who identify with a character who experienced positive outcomes as a result of engaging in a risky sexual behavior should be more likely to engage in this behavior because they were able to experience these satisfying rewards and would want to continue experiencing them even after the show was over. On the other hand, viewers who identified with a character who
experienced negative outcomes as a result of engaging in a risky sexual behavior should be less likely to enact this behavior because they would have already experienced the consequences and would want to avoid them in the future.

H5a: Participants who strongly identify with the main character in the stimulus will report greater intentions to enact the behavior if the character experienced positive outcomes relative to those who see the character experience negative outcomes.

H5b: There will not be an interaction between identification with the main character and intentions to enact the behavior based on viewing the positive or negative video outcome condition.

Hypothesis H5b is a prediction that stems from schema theory. With schema theory there should not be a video condition by identification interaction, which is in contrast to the predictions put forth by social cognitive theory.
Chapter 3: Method

Participants

Undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at The Ohio State University were recruited to participate in this study. They received extra credit in a communication course in exchange for their participation in the study. One hundred and forty-seven students participated in the study; 60% were female (n=88) and 40% were male (n=59). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 32 (M= 20.85, SD= 1.83); 8% were freshmen, 23% were sophomores, 44% were juniors, and 25% were seniors. The majority of participants were Caucasian (78%).

Eighty percent (n=118) of participants had previously engaged in sexual intercourse. Seventy-six percent (n=67) of females had previously had sex and 86% (n=51) of male participants had. For those who had engaged in sexual intercourse, the age of participants at their first time ranged from 12 to 22 years old (M= 17.05, SD= 1.67). Females responded that they had engaged in sexual activities with 0 to 8 people (M= 1.35, SD= 1.29) in the last 12 months, and males had engaged in sexual activities in the last 12 months with 0 to 8 people (M= 2.53, SD= 2.05).

Fifty-four percent (n=79) of participants had previously been involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship (non-exclusive sexual relationship). Forty-six percent
of females had been involved in this type of relationship while 66% (n=39) of males had been involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship.

Design

Using a between-subjects experimental design, participants viewed an edited episode of the primetime drama *One Tree Hill*. Depending on their experimental condition, the episode depicted a character, Brooke, being rewarded as a result of her engagement in a “friends with benefits” relationship, or participants viewed a television episode that depicted Brooke experiencing negative consequences as a result of her engagement in a “friends with benefits” relationship.

Procedure

Participants entered the lab and were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Prior to beginning the study, participants filled out a consent form. After completing the consent form, they answered several questions in an online survey. The participants then viewed one of the two stimuli on an individual computer. After viewing the television episode, participants again answered questions through an online survey. Once the survey was completed, participants were debriefed and exited the lab.

Stimuli

Participants were shown either a positive or negative depiction of a “friends with benefits” relationship. In the episodes that the participants viewed, one of the main characters from *One Tree Hill*, Brooke, begins a “friends with benefits” relationship with her new neighbor Felix. In both the positive and negative outcome conditions, Brooke
and Felix are seen discussing the details of their “friends with benefits” relationship as well as engaging in sexual intercourse. In both conditions, participants also saw Brooke discussing her reasons for wanting to be in this type of relationship. In the positive outcome condition, Felix is shown doing nice things for Brooke as well as admitting to others that he cares for her. In the end, Brooke and Felix start dating and she explains to another character that she is happy. In the negative outcome condition, Felix discusses how he only wants sex and that he does not care for Brooke. In the episode, Felix lies to Brooke, and she finds out. Brooke then ends their relationship and is shown discussing her regret to become involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship. The episodes shown were between 18 and 19 minutes in length.

Measures

Before viewing the stimulus, participants were asked about their basic demographic information. Several questions were asked to understand their sexual history and current relationship status. Participants were then asked if they have ever been involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship. This relationship was defined to the participant as a “non-exclusive sexual relationship.” Regardless of their response to this question, all participants were asked their likelihood of becoming involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship should the opportunity present itself. After participants viewed the stimulus, their familiarity with the television show and whether they have previously seen the particular episodes shown were measured. A manipulation check was conducted in order to ensure that the manipulation of the negative and positive outcome conditions was effective. The manipulation check asked “In the episode you
watched today, how regretful was Brooke regarding her decision to be involved in a ‘friends with benefits’ relationship?’ Respondents indicated Brooke’s regret on a 10-point scale (1= not at all regretful, 10= very regretful).

Since this particular stimulus showed the female character being in charge of the relationship and creating the rules of their sexual encounters, two questions were asked to control for how this may affect how appealing viewers assess the characters’ “friends with benefits” relationship. On a 10-point scale (1=not at all appealing, 10=very appealing), participants were asked “How appealing do you think a relationship is in which the female makes the majority of the decisions regarding the relationship?” ($M=4.20$, $SD=2.39$) and “How appealing do you think a relationship is in which the decision making regarding the relationship is shared equally among both partners?” ($M=8.73$, $SD=1.77$).

Identification with the main character in the episode, Brooke, was measured using Cohen’s (2001) identification scale. This scale includes ten items that are measured on a 10-point scale (1= not at all, 10= very much). A sample item from the scale states “At key moments in the show, I felt I knew exactly what Brooke was going through” ($M=6.03$, $SD=1.82$, $\alpha=.91$).

Similarity to the character, Brooke, was measured using McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly’s (1975) perceived homophily scale. Eight items from the homophily scale were used and were measured on a 10-point semantic differential scale. These items were chosen in order to measure the participants’ similarity in attitudes and values to the character’s attitudes and values. Sample items from this scale include “Brooke thinks like
me/Brooke doesn’t think like me” and “Brooke has morals like mine/Brooke doesn’t have morals like mine” ($M=4.25$, $SD=2.12$, $\alpha=.94$).

Enjoyment was measured as was done in Moyer-Gusé et al. (2011), which asked about how enjoyable, entertaining, interesting, and likeable participants thought the episode of One Tree Hill they viewed was on a 10-point scale (1= not at all, 10= very much, $M=6.60$, $SD=2.45$, $\alpha=.98$).

Norms were measured by asking how common “friends with benefits” relationships are on college campuses, how favorable college students view “friends with benefits” relationships, how the participants’ friends view these relationships, and how much the participants care about what other students and their friends think. Participants were also asked how likely a college student is to have engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship over the next month, 12 months, and five years. These questions were asked on a 10-point scale (1= strongly disagree, 10= strongly agree). These questions that asked about how common “friends with benefits” relationships are were used to measure descriptive norms ($M=6.48$, $SD=1.90$, $\alpha=.89$). The questions that asked about how favorable people view “friends with benefits” relationships were used to measure injunctive norms ($M=5.44$, $SD=1.77$, $\alpha=.72$).

Twelve questions were asked about participants’ attitudes toward “friends with benefits” relationships. To measure attitudes toward these relationships, participants were asked to evaluate how they would feel if their close friend became involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship and to evaluate how they would feel if they themselves became involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship. Respondents indicated their
attitude toward these situations on a 10-point semantic differential scale by choosing the following responses: with possible responses including good/bad, healthy/unhealthy, positive/negative, beneficial/harmful, safe/risky, and moral/immoral ($M=4.23$, $SD=2.14$, $\alpha=.97$).

Both participants’ intentions to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship and their perceived likelihood to engage in these relationships were measured. Intentions were measured by asking how much they agree with the statements that they intend to engage in at least one “friends with benefits” relationship in the future, in the next month, in the next year, and in the next five years. Participants indicated their intent on a 10-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 10=strongly agree; $M=3.29$, $SD=2.5$, $\alpha=.95$). To measure the likelihood of participants engaging in these relationships, three scenarios were given to the participants. Using scenarios to measure likelihood is similar to the way in which behavioral willingness is measured by Gibbons, Gerrard and McCoy (1995). A sample item includes, “If I liked someone who didn’t want to be in a committed relationship, I would be willing to get involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship with him/her.” Respondents indicated their likelihood to become involved in this type of relationship on a 10-point scale (1=not at all likely, 10=very likely; $M=5.10$, $SD=2.71$, $\alpha=.86$).

Participants’ tendency to self-monitor was measured using Snyder and Gangestad’s (1986) self-monitoring scale. Eighteen items were measured on a 10-point scale (1=doesn’t describe me at all, 10=describes me very well). Reporting a higher number on the scale indicates a person is less likely to self-monitor. Items from this scale include “I can
only argue for ideas which I already believe" and "In different situations and with different people, I often act like very different persons" (\(M=5.17, SD=.94, \alpha=.67\)).
Chapter 4: Results

A t-Test revealed that participants in the negative outcome condition reported that Brooke was more regretful ($M=7.89$, $SD=1.64$) about her decision to become involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship than participants who viewed the positive outcome condition ($M=4.16$, $SD=2.30$), $t(136)=11.37$, $p<.001$. Therefore, the manipulation of the positive and negative video conditions appeared to have been successful.

Hypothesis 1A predicted that participants would be more likely to report that they intend to become involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship after viewing a television show character engage in this type of relationship. This hypothesis predicted this would be true regardless of whether the participant viewed the television show character experience a positive or negative outcome of the “friends with benefits” relationship. This hypothesis was tested using mixed ANCOVA. The repeated factor was the pretest measure of participants’ likelihood of engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship in the future (time 1) and the posttest measure of participants’ likelihood of engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship in the future (time 2). The between-subjects factors were the participants’ sex and which video condition they were in. Age of participants and if they have ever engaged in a “friends with benefits” relationship were covariates. Overall, there was a time by gender interaction $F(1, 130)=7.15$, $p=.01$. Among males, likelihood of having a “friends with benefits” relationship increased from
time 1 ($M=5.58$, $SD=3.04$) to time 2 ($M=6.62$, $SD=2.34$). No such change occurred for females.

Hypothesis 1b predicted that participants who viewed the positive outcome condition of a “friends with benefits” relationship would be more likely to report that they intend to become involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship compared to individuals who viewed the negative outcome condition. This was tested using an ANCOVA with video condition as the independent variable, likelihood of engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship as the dependent variable, and age and if the participant had ever engaged in a “friends with benefits” relationship as covariates. The results of this test were not significant for females $F(1, 79)=.236$, $p=.628$ or for males $F(1, 49)=.126$, $p=.725$. The test was then repeated, but in this case, participants’ intentions to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship was the dependent variable. Results revealed a significant gender by condition interaction. Females did not differ in their intentions between groups $F(1, 80)=.360$, $p=.550$. Males, however, reported greater intentions in the negative condition than in the positive condition $F(1, 49)=11.28$, $p=.002$. Therefore, the results did not support this hypothesis.

Hypothesis two predicted that individuals without prior experience with “friends with benefits” relationships would be more affected by the video condition than those with prior experience, and thus these individuals would report greater intentions when in the positive outcome condition. This hypothesis was first tested looking at participants’ likelihood of engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship. This hypothesis was tested with an ANCOVA. Video condition and past experience with a “friends with
benefits” relationship were the independent variables. The dependent variable was likelihood to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship. Age was used as a covariate. The results of this test were not significant $F(1,131) = .463, p = .498$. The test was then repeated, but in this case, participants’ intentions to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship was the dependent variable. The results of this test were not significant $F(1, 132) = .320, p = .573$. Therefore, H2 was not supported.

Hypothesis three predicted that feeling similar to the character or identifying with the character would increase descriptive norms of the behavior, which would lead to intentions to engage in the behavior. This was tested using Hayes’ PROCESS macro. This analysis revealed that feeling similar to the character did significantly predict descriptive norms ($b = .19, p = .01$). Participants’ descriptive norms, however, did not significantly predict behavioral intentions ($b = -.13, p = .23$). A bootstrap estimate of this indirect effect of similarity was pursued with 5,000 samples (95% CI: -.09 to .01). The indirect effect of similarity on likelihood of engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship was tested as well, and the results did not differ from the results of the indirect effect of similarity on behavioral intentions. This indicates a lack of support for H3 with respect to similarity.
Identification with the character significantly predicted descriptive norms ($b=.27$, $p=.001$). Participants’ descriptive norms, however, did not significantly predict behavioral intentions ($b=-.02$, $p=.88$). A bootstrap estimate of this indirect effect of similarity was pursued with 5,000 samples (95% CI: -.08 to .06). The indirect effect of identification on likelihood of engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship was tested as well, and the results did not differ from the results of the indirect effect of identification on behavioral intentions. This indicates a lack of support for H3 with respect to identification.
Hypothesis four predicted that self-monitoring and injunctive norms would interact to affect intentions. That is, people who are high self-monitors should rely more upon injunctive norms of the behavior, which would lead to greater intentions to engage in the behavior. This was tested using Hayes’ PROCESS macro. This analysis revealed a nonsignificant injunctive norms by self-monitoring interaction ($b=.08, p=.52$). A bootstrap estimate of this interaction effect was pursued with 5,000 samples (95% CI: -.16 to .31). Therefore, this hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 5a predicted a video condition by identification interaction such that participants who identify with the main character should have greater intentions to engage in the behavior if the character experienced positive outcomes. This was tested using Hayes’ PROCESS macro. The interaction was not significant ($b=-.03, p=.91$). A bootstrap estimate of this interaction effect of identification was pursued with 5,000
samples (95% CI: -.48 to .43). Also of note, similarity with the character did not significantly moderate the effect of video condition on posttest intentions (b=-.28, p=.12). Therefore, these results support hypothesis 5b.

Research question one asked whether the wording of questions that ask about intentions versus likelihood would affect participants’ responses to questions about their behavioral intentions. Hypothesis 1b was the only hypothesis to reveal a difference between intentions and likelihood. Males reported greater intentions after watching the negative outcome condition than after watching the positive condition, but males did not significantly differ in their likelihood to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship based on their assigned video condition.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore whether viewers are more likely to engage in sexual behaviors after seeing television characters perform these behaviors and to determine whether this behavior is attributed to characters experiencing positive or negative emotional consequences as a result of their sexual behavior. Overall the results show that males reported being more likely to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship after viewing either a positive or negative depiction of this type of relationship. This finding is consistent with Nabi and Clark’s (2008) finding, and thus it supports the conclusion that people may be more likely to enact behaviors after viewing characters engage in them on television regardless of whether the characters experience positive or negative outcomes. The results of this study also showed that males’ intentions to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship increased after viewing the negative outcome condition. This finding demonstrates that although the protagonist of a show may experience negative outcomes as a result of her behavior, viewers may interpret this outcome differently or identify more with other characters, which can increase their intentions to enact the behavior. Therefore, having a character experience negative outcomes as a result of engaging in a behavior will not necessarily decrease viewers’ intentions to engage in that behavior. In fact, these findings demonstrate that viewing a negative outcome can even increase viewers’ intentions to engage in the
behavior.

The stimulus itself may explain why males were more likely to intend to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship after viewing the negative outcome condition. Although the manipulation check showed that participants in the negative condition perceived the female protagonist to be more regretful of her actions, males may still not have viewed her actions in the same manner. In the positive outcome condition, the male character and Brooke began an exclusive, committed relationship. Although Brooke expressed her happiness toward this, the male viewers may not have necessarily shared those same feelings. However, in the negative outcome condition, Brooke is shown to be upset that her relationship with the male character is over, but the male character’s reaction is not shown. Males may not have viewed this as a negative event due to the fact that the male character was free to begin another sexual relationship with someone else.

A meta-analysis of research that studies the differences in sexuality among genders revealed that males are significantly more likely than females to report engaging in casual sex and approving of casual sex (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). In this current study, male participants were significantly less likely to be in a relationship than females but were significantly more likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse than the female participants. Males and females also significantly differed in their number of sexual partners in the last 12 months (males: M=2.53, SD=1.35; females: M=1.35, SD=1.29). Although these questions do not specifically ask whether males view being in a relationship negatively, it does shed light onto the idea that the males may have preferred to be single and in a non-committed sexual relationship. Thus, the negative outcome
condition in which Brooke and the male character ended their “friends with benefits” relationship, as opposed to beginning a committed relationship, may have been viewed positively by the males and may explain why their intentions to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship increased after viewing this stimulus. This is further supported by the fact that males differed from females in their preference of who took charge in the relationship. In the stimulus, the female character takes charge and sets the rules. Males reported that they found this type of relationship, where the female took charge, to be significantly less appealing than did female participants. Therefore, the males may have reported fewer intentions to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship if they thought this relationship may end in a committed relationship where the female took control, as was seen in the positive outcome condition.

The results of this study show that female participants did not significantly differ in their likelihood to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship from pretest to posttest, and they did not have greater intentions to engage in this type of relationship after viewing either the positive or negative outcome conditions. It may be that merely showing emotional consequences is not powerful enough to affect behavior. The stimulus did not explicitly show the emotional effects that either the positive or negative outcome conditions had on the male character in the stimulus. Therefore, the male participants likely elaborated on what would happen to the male character next. However, the stimulus explicitly showed the positive or negative emotional outcomes that the “friends with benefits” relationship had on the female character. It is possible that merely showing the character as happy or upset was not enough to influence viewers’ behaviors. It may be
that viewing more long-lasting outcomes, such as an unintended pregnancy, would be more likely to affect behavior. Another possibility is that there really was an effect on females’ behavioral intentions, but there was not enough power to detect this effect. A larger sample size would be useful in determining whether the stimulus itself explains why there was no behavioral change or whether there was simply not enough power to detect the effect in this study.

The results of this study did detect a significant relationship between participants’ similarity to and identification with the character and their descriptive norms. Even so, it is important to note that it cannot be determined whether feeling similar to or identifying with the character led to participants’ thinking the behavior was normative or whether those who had existing descriptive norms of the behavior were more likely to feel similar to or identify with the character in the stimulus. Despite this significant correlation between similarity and identification to the character and descriptive norms, this interaction did not have a significant effect on viewers’ behavioral intentions. This finding, however, is consistent with previous literature that shows that descriptive norms do not necessarily predict behavior. Rimal and Real (2003) found that descriptive norms of drinking behaviors did not predict alcohol consumption. They found that college students cared more about the perceived benefits that alcohol would offer them as opposed to whether drinking was a common activity among their peers. Therefore, descriptive norms of drinking did not have a significant impact on alcohol consumption (Rimal & Real, 2003). This finding demonstrates that even though people have descriptive norms of a behavior, such as “friends with benefits” relationships, these
norms are not necessarily the factor that predicts whether or not they will engage in this type of behavior. Another possible explanation to this finding is that although descriptive norms did not significantly predict behavioral intentions, descriptive norms may predict behavior. Measuring the behavior of engaging in a “friends with benefits” would be useful in determining whether those who identified and felt similar to the character and had descriptive norms of “friends with benefits” relationships actually engaged in a “friends with benefits” relationship after the study.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. One limitation to this study is its sample size. Although every effort was made to recruit participants, only 147 students participated. This small sample size makes it difficult to determine if effects would have been significant given a larger sample. A limitation with the stimulus is that the main character was female, and questions were not asked to understand whether the male participants were identifying with the male character in the episode. By knowing if the male viewers identified with the male character and by asking about their attitudes toward casual sexual relationships and toward committed relationships, there would be no need to speculate as to why male participants’ intentions increased after viewing the negative outcome condition. Measuring identification to the male character would also have allowed us to determine how identification with the female character affected intentions differently than identification with the male character. It is likely that identification with the male character and negative attitudes toward committed relationships would increase intentions to engage in a “friends with benefits” relationship.
after viewing the negative outcome condition and decrease intentions after viewing the positive outcome condition. Another limitation of this study is that it focused on “friends with benefits” relationships. Engaging in a “friends with benefits” relationship is more of an abstract and complex behavior than a one-night stand, which was used in the Nabi and Clark (2008) study. Asking about a more complex behavior may have influenced participants’ reporting of their experience with the behavior and their reports of intentions to engage in the behavior.

Having a control condition that did not show a “friends with benefits” relationship would have been useful to help clarify whether there was an effect occurring in the positive and negative conditions but there was not enough power to detect the effect or whether there was not any effect at all. A final limitation is that this study only used one television show and only covered one risky sexual behavior topic, and it is difficult to know whether these results would be replicated using another television show or a different sexual behavior.

Future Research

Despite these limitations, this study does contribute to the literature on media effects. Future research should add to the contribution of this study by further exploring how the positive and negative outcomes in a television show affect viewers’ behavioral intentions. It is necessary for future research to manipulate outcomes in television shows to understand if emotional consequences are sufficient enough to affect viewers’ behavioral intentions. Future research should improve on this study by focusing on a different sexual behavior to determine if similar results to this study will occur. Although
this study did conclude that the outcome of a television episode can affect behavioral intentions, it is necessary to decisively determine how the show affects descriptive and injunctive norms of the behavior and whether these norms predict behavioral intention. It is also necessary to measure if norms affect behavior more so than the positive or negative outcomes experienced by the character. Future research should also include a measure of wishful identification when studying this type of social behavior. It is important to understand how wishful identification with the television show character may affect viewers’ intentions to engage in a social behavior, such as a “friends with benefits” relationship.

The results of this study showed that viewing an episode of an entertainment television show can affect viewers’ likelihood of engaging in a risky behavior, and the positive or negative outcome of the show can affect viewers’ behavioral intentions. This research also concluded that even if the protagonist experiences a negative outcome, viewers may still be motivated, or possibly even more motivated due to the negative outcome, to engage in the risky behavior. These findings demonstrate the impact that a single episode of an entertainment television show can have on viewers’ intentions to engage in a behavior and likelihood of engaging in a specific sexual behavior that a television show character was seen modeling.
References


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