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TELEVISION TALK AS A SITE FOR IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

A QUALITATIVE AUDIENCE RESEARCH ON FLEMISH TEENAGERS' CONSUMPTION OF SEXUAL TELEVISION SCRIPTS

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ABSTRACT

Teenage gender and sexual identities are shaped within a complex cultural landscape where the issue of protecting the 'innocent' (i.e. children/teens) from sexually suggestive images is high on the public agenda (Buckingham, 2008b; Duits & van Zoonen, 2011; Johansson, 2007). Intimate relationships and sexuality have entered the public domain and are presented on television, offering audiences possible roles to play in everyday life. Trepidation about teenagers being 'corrupted' by sexualised media has urged many scholars to investigate this issue, as illustrated by many newspaper articles, such as 'Sex and the City verhoogt kans op tienerzwangerschap' (Dijkman, 2008, 11 November). However, Buckingham and Bragg (2004), for instance, underlined that sexualised, mediatised representations can also empower and emancipate teens, who are often savvy, active and critical media consumers. Thus, we believe that it is too strong a statement to speak of youth as being 'corrupted' through media use and media consumption. Drawing on insights from the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, we aimed to study how young audiences (14–19-year-olds) in Flanders consume fictional sexual scripts, and how these scripts can help in the development and articulation of a teenager's gender and sexual identities. A qualitative approach was adopted using 57 teenagers divided into 8 focus groups. The topics of discussion were social viewing contexts and television centred communication, as well as sexual norms and values, the sexual double standard, sexual scripts and representations of peers and gay characters. We consider these focus group talks about the consumption of fictional sexual scripts as a site for identity construction, since identity (or the narrative of the self; Giddens, 1991) must be performed for others to see. Since gender and sexuality are both social constructs to which mediated representations contribute (Gledhill, 2003, p. 366; Jackson, 2005; Rahman & Jackson, 2010), and since gender and sexuality are intertwined and cannot be completely separated, both were investigated in this study (Bindig, 2008, p. 21; Lemish, 2010). The results of the study presented in this working paper show that talking about and watching televised sex have, for the most part, become less taboo among teens, and sexual scripts are often considered 'normal'. A rather liberal stance regarding sexual representations was noted among most of the youth; however, this does not imply that their permissiveness is unlimited. In general, they highly value traditional norms and values regarding relationships and sexuality in everyday life, and although most respondents showed tolerance towards others having casual sex, they tended to distance themselves from such behaviour. Hegemonic gender performances and heteronormative discourse were frequently noted in the discussion of representations of gay characters on television, and young men in particular felt the need to stress their heterosexual identity.

Keywords: gender, identity, sexual scripts, sexuality, teenager, television consumption, youth

PREFACE

This working paper is part of the research project *'Youth f[r]iction: A multi-method research into the use, representation and consumption of youth's contemporary screen culture'* (FWO 2008–2013). This doctoral project aims to contribute to the current insight and knowledge about contemporary television use, fictional representations of teenagers in contemporary popular screen culture and the television consumption of youth (age 14–19). Central in this project is the notion of identity construction, which is considered to be an integral consumption that occurs during adolescence. Within this broader research project, this working paper explores the reception of television content within a broader social context and considers how the youth can and do perform a gender and sexual identity through these television-centred communications.

INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution in Western countries was not only the start of the modern age; it also evoked the construction and institutionalisation of childhood and youth (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Cunningham, 2005; Drotner, 1999; Parsons, 1942, 1962; Prout, 2008). Thenceforth, children and teenagers have been regarded as dependent, vulnerable, incompetent and therefore in need of protection and control. Consequently, the media are often scrutinised for their role in young people's immoral behaviour (e.g. juvenile behaviour, sexual immoral behaviour), especially because young people are known for quickly embracing each new communication technology. Drotner (2000) even argued that the youth are often regarded as the pioneers of our mediated culture, since they are the group that spends the most time using media and are innovative in how they consume media. These debates on the role and influence of media, however, are not new; they are recurring features of modernity which resurface whenever a new medium becomes popular and spur public debate on social and cultural norms and values (Critcher, 2008; Drotner, 1999; Kubey & Donovan, 2001). Within this trend of cultural pessimism, it is often feared that different forms of communication will corrupt children and teenagers, since they are vulnerable and thus lack the power or knowledge to resist. Clearly, young people's agency is often ignored in these debates (Davis, 1999; Drotner, 1999; 2000; Livingstone & Drotner, 2011, pp. 406–407; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Wartella & Mozzarella, 1990).

Throughout history, various media have been the focal points of criticism and thus been blamed for putting the youth at risk, but visual culture has always been considered the most damaging (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Cunningham, 2005; Drotner, 1999; Kelley, Buckingham, & Davies, 1999, p. 222; Postman, 1983; Thompson, 2010). In this context, the (lack of) realism of these visual images has been the main topic of concern. This concern has been voiced in and has also been evoked by a plethora of studies (e.g. Peter & Valkenburg, 2007, 2009; Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008; Ward & Friedman, 2006) focusing on the correlations and (possible) effects and influences of media use and media consumption. In these studies, the connection has been made between juvenile delinquency and the consumption of aggressive and violent media images; furthermore, sexual licentiousness, the increase of teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, and the decreasing age at which young people first experience sexual intercourse have been linked with sexual(ly suggestive and explicit) images. Public debates often focus upon the so-called sexualisation[1] of contemporary culture, and there is a fear that the media prompt youth, for instance, to become sexually active at a young age. More recently, the debate on sexualisation has

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[1] Sexualisation refers to a trend of more sex(ually suggestive and explicit images) within contemporary culture (Attwood, 2006).

been extended to the widespread tendency of incorporating iconic codes of pornography[2] in popular media. McNair (1996) called this trend the pornographication of contemporary culture. These debates on the sexualisation and pornographication of contemporary culture contribute to and fuel the anxieties about media use and social and moral decline (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). Obviously, these debates highlight 'the ways in which our attitudes towards sex, sexualized behaviour and sexual representations are culturally contextualized' (Thompson, 2010, p. 396). Further, these debates on sexualisation and pornographication produce cultural anxiety centred on the 'vulnerability' of teenage girls, whose agency is ignored; however, teenage boys are often forgotten within these debates and studies. Moreover, the research often fails to give young people a voice within this debate. In this working paper, then, we will give young people (both male and female teenagers, ages 14–19) a voice within this debate about media and sexual imagery. We recognise that the youth are actively engaged in the use and consumption of media (images) (e.g. Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Durham, 2004; Gauntlett, 2002; MacKeogh, 2004), and we contend that they are both sophisticated and savvy media consumers.

The aim of this study is twofold. First, we wish to obtain more insight and knowledge about young people's media use, consumption and reception. To this end, we shall explore the teenage respondents' social television-viewing context and focus on television-centred communication (i.e. discussing general topics as well as sexual scripts) with parents, siblings and peers. As part of this enquiry, we shall address the issue of sexual (suggestive and explicit) images in contemporary screen culture, by attempting to answer the following questions. (1) How do young people define 'sex'? (2) Is there too much sex on television? (3) Are sexual scripts on television realistic? Specific emphasis will be placed upon teenagers' sexual morality, which we shall study through gender stereotypical statements (e.g. a boy who switches partners regularly is cool; a girl who does the same is a slut). Finally, we will explore young people's reception of fictional representations of peers and gay[3] characters. In analysing our respondents' comments, we will place a specific emphasis on possible gender differences; however, we realise that other identity traits (e.g. race, ethnicity, class) are also important in the study of media.

Our second aim is to investigate how gender and sexual identities are performed through television-centred communications. Within this working paper, the discussion of television will be regarded as a performance through which identities are negotiated and constructed for others

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[2] Pornography literally refers to the visual representations of purely physical aspects of human sexuality, in which the genitalia are emphasized. Such images aim to excite their viewers. "Pornographication of the mainstream" is by Brain McNair (1996, p. 137) defined ad "the incorporation of pornographic imagery and iconography into a variety of popular culture forms, such as advertising, popular fiction and Hollywood cinema." Images and representations of sex similar to those found in pornography are thus frequently appearing in popular culture.

[3] *Gay* will be used as an umbrella term that refers to those who self-identify or are identified as having same-sex desires (cf. Dhaenens, 2012).

to see. Although we tend (or would like) to believe that a 'true' identity resides within an individual as 'an all-encompassing sense of the self that remains relatively fixed and stable once it is attained, recognized, or discovered' (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001, p. 310), a self-identity is something that emerges through social interaction and interpretative practices (Blumer, 1969). In our research, we then turn to Giddens' (1991) theory about identity as a narrative of the self (see *Theoretical inquiry – 1.3 Identity: A reflexive project*) and Goffman's (1959) notion of 'doing' identity through performances (see *Theoretical inquiry - 1.3.2 Doing identity through performances of the self*). Our selves, Brickell (2006) claims, 'are created as we engage, interpret and negotiate the resources and meanings our culture makes available to us through language, symbolism, roles and scripts' (p. 102). Television-centred communication, we then argue, can be regarded as a site for identity performance. A specific emphasis will be placed on the performances of teenagers' gender and sexual identities[4] and gender differences within the performances of these identities.

In the following sections of this working paper, we will define the most important and relevant concepts for this study and provide a brief overview of the existing literature on young people's media use (i.e. overview of media access in the twenty-first century, spatial and social TV-viewing context, and television talk) and media consumption. Then, we will explore the method of focus groups and our specific research questions. Lastly, we will present the results of this study.

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[4] Not only gender, but sexual identity as well, is a social construct to which mediated representations contribute (Rahman & Jackson, 2010). Since gender and other ideological points, such as sexuality, are intertwined and cannot be completely separated (Bindig, 2008; Lemish, 2010), both will be investigated within this study.

THEORETICAL INQUIRY

Before we elaborate upon teens' negotiations of contemporary media texts and how identities are constructed and performed through these discursive talks, we will conceptualise the most relevant notions of *representation*, *identity*, *gender* and *sexuality*, since these concepts are central to this study. We will address why representations—and thus media—matter in the identity construction of the youth. However, we will first define *youth*.

1   Conceptualisation[5]

1.1   <u>Youth deconstructed: A cultural studies approach</u>

In this working paper, youth is defined as people within the age cohort of fourteen to nineteen years. However, youth is not merely defined by age; we emphasize the diversity and heterogeneity of the youth in terms of factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity (cf. Buckingham, 2008a). Thus, the youth represent a heterogeneous group, with heterogeneous experiences, depending on individual identity traits, social and cultural contexts, etcetera. Since youth is a social construct, entwined with identity traits, we cannot fully grasp it. Thus, we conceptualise youth as a non-essentialist category and reiterate McRobbie (1994) that 'there are nonetheless a sufficient number of shared age-specific experiences among young people which still allow us to speak meaningfully about youth' (p. 173). One of these experiences, which illustrates that adolescence is a period of change, is what Pasquier (1996, p. 354) and others (e.g. Jackson, 2005; Rahman & Jackson, 2010, p. 176) have defined as the replacement of a world based on generational differences by one grounded in sexual differences. Furthermore, this period is characterised by physical developments, legal changes, gender role specifications, identifying with a specific (sub)culture, etcetera. The construction of a sexual and gender identity can be situated within these teenage years. In this context, various *cornerstones* can be linked with adolescence, such as graduation ceremonies, prom, going out with peers for the very first time, drinking alcohol, smoking or using drugs, the first sexual contact, to name a few. In this sense, adolescence is regarded as a rite of passage, both literally (from sexually inexperienced to experienced, from high school to college, etcetera) and figuratively (as *an experience of limits*; Driscoll, 2011, p. 66). Within this perspective, what it means to be a teenager is not fixed, but is socially constructed and negotiated (cf. Buckingham, 2008a).

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[5] This section is based upon the conceptualisation within the introduction of our doctoral dissertation *Youth f[r]iction: A multi-method research into the use, representation and consumption of youth's contemporary screen culture'.*

Youth culture has become increasingly autonomous, peer-oriented and mediated sites of identity construction. Television and other media are considered to be but one part of youth culture (Pecora, 2007, pp. 32–33), and like one of the founding fathers of cultural studies, Hall (1990) argues, 'identity is not "an already accomplished fact" but "a production" which is never compete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (p. 222). This brings us to the concept of *representation*, which we shall explain in the following subsection.

1.2   <u>Representation</u>

In his work, *Media power and class power*, Hall (1986) names the ubiquitous visual culture the *machinery of representation*, which produces meaning through language and thus connects meaning and language to culture. Representation has become central to the study of culture, Hall (2003a) asserts, and accordingly, 'representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people' (p. 15). To give meaning to these representations, we have to share the same conceptual maps and speak the same language. Therefore, in this study, we follow a constructionist approach which proclaims that meaning is socially constructed in and through language (Hall, 1986, 2003a, 2003b). It is precisely because we share the same conceptual maps and speak the same language and 'we [thus] interpret the world in roughly similar ways, [that] we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together' (Hall, 2003a, p. 18). Hence, an object is not inherently conveyed with a meaning; it is through the maps and language, shared with other social actors, that meaning is constructed, given and communicated (Du Gay, 1997; Hall, 2003a, pp. 15–25). Subsequently, while it might appear as if a representation of a certain subject is a substitute or a reproduction of a flesh and blood subject in the real world, or while it is possible that images can closely resemble the object to which they refer, they are still signs that carry meanings and have to be interpreted (Hall, 2003a, p. 18). It is through language that we form knowledge about the world, and within this knowledge-gaining process, media are important (symbolic) resources (Barker, 2008; Buckingham, 2008b; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Fisherkeller, 1997; Gray, 2008; Jensen, 1987; Livingstone, 2002, 2007; Milestone & Meyer, 2012). Media do not reflect or present reality; they interpret, represent and construct a possible presentation of reality, and thus both representations and everyday life are two sides of the same coin (Jensen, 1987; Morley, 1992). Representational practices, in both fictional and non-fictional images, are constructions in which a whole set of active decisions and practices are employed by media professionals (e.g. cutting, editing, transcribing) to make sense of the world.

Representations are thus interpretations, human constructs, social and cultural[6] representations, and therefore constitute one site where meaning-making processes take place (cf. circuit of culture – Du Gay, 1997). They are actively produced and mediated and are therefore distinct from reality and (at least) a step removed from it (D'Acci, 2008, p. 375; Du Gay, 1997, p. 10; Gray, 2008; Hall, 1996; Morley, 1992; Osgerby, 2004, p. 60). However, we are accustomed to equating images with reality, due to the omnipresence of visual culture (Hall, 1986, 2003a). Things only become meaningful when represented, so nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse (Hall, 1996, 2003a). Since media representations are prevalent in contemporary society, these social and cultural representations structure our view of the everyday world (e.g. the French are fond of drinking wine and eating cheese and baguettes; masculinity is connected with certain characteristics and behaviours) (D'Acci, 2008). Television, amongst others, is an important symbolic resource for gender scripts and sexual and romantic scripts, as well as for sexual norms and values. According to Buckingham (1993), television functions 'as a symbolic resource which young people use in making sense of their experiences in relating to others and in organizing their daily lives' (p. 13). Thus, television can be important to the identity construction of (young) people.

1.3   Identity: A reflexive project

1.3.1   Identity as a narrative of the self

Identity, Buckingham (2008c) argues, is an ambiguous concept because the term *identity* implicates both similarity and difference. Furthermore, Duits (2008) believes that identity is multi-layered and multi-dimensional. Both authors state that identity refers to multiple identities, such as social identity, personal identity, gender identity and sexual identity. People want to be part of a bigger group, yet they want to be unique and recognisable from others, but what does *identity* mean? In this study, we define identity as a narrative of the self and turn to British sociologist Giddens (1991) and his work on the reflexive project of the self. He approaches self-identity as a reflexive project in which young people especially are absorbed; instead of a passive entity determined by external influences or just *given*, a self-identity is actively constructed. Giddens (1991) argues that our lives are becoming less shaped by traditions and therefore the construction of the self is a *reflexive project*, shaped and achieved by self-monitoring. These self-monitoring practices within the identity project of the self are reflexive, which means that through reflection and introspection, the narrative of the self is constructed (Duits, 2008, p. 35). Identity is constructed through relationships with others, and the use of language is constitutional

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[6] Cultural representations are defined as 'representations that exist and do their work in the cultural realm—the realm of language, art, entertainment; the realm specific to ideas, thoughts, and the mind' (D'Acci, 2008, p. 375).

for the creative identity formations of the past, present and future (Barker, 1997). Barker (1997) also argues that the narratives of the self are not only constituted through language, but are also formed in contexts and sites of interaction. The role of media representations should be considered within this perspective, both Giddens (1991) and Hall (1990) argue, and especially since the development of mass communication, the mediated experience of the reflexive project has become more pronounced (Giddens, 1991, p. 4). Screen culture, then, can be a symbolic resource that helps us in our *quest* for identity, according to media and cultural studies scholar Gray (2008).

1.3.2   *'Doing' identity through performances of the self*

Identities are social constructs, since they emerge and are constructed in interactions with others. According to Hall (1990) identity is both 'a matter of becoming as well as being' (p. 236), for we must and *are* constantly 'doing' identity. However, Gray (2008) argues, 'we cannot be ourselves only to ourselves, for we must perform our identity for others to see (p. 58). Moreover, through these public *displays* of identity, the everyday doing of gender and sexuality can be reflected on and negotiated, claim Grindstaff and West (2006, p. 514). The concept of performance incorporates the notion of *doing* identity within dominant discourses (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Duits, 2008, p. 35), and according to Abercrombie and Longhurst (cited in Gray, 2008), performance is the 'key lens through which we should aim to understand contemporary audiences' (p. 58). Although queer theorist Butler (2006) is often referred to when performance (and performativity) is concerned, the notion of performance was first introduced by social theorist Erving Goffman (1959). In his dramaturgical analysis, Goffman investigated the everyday social life from a theoretical perspective. He defined performances as 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers' (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). Within this quotation, 'some influence' refers to the impression management that guides people's performances; that is, actors attempt to control or guide the impression others have by changing or articulating specific performances (Goffman, 1959, p. 4). Performances are reflexive, since they are based upon previous performances in which the actor selected and adopted current performances (Duits, 2008, p. 36).

Critical voices, such as Brubaker and Cooper (2000), Buckingham (2008c), Duits (2008) and Hall (1996), prefer the notion of identification over identity because identities are not fixed, but can only be constructed through the continuous repetition of performative practices. For Hall (1996), 'identities are points of identification and identifications are points of temporary attachment to the subject-positions' (p. 6). Buckingham (2008c) agreed with Hall, stating a preference for the

use of identification over identity. We, however, will use identity within this study because 'it acknowledges the sociocultural nature of constructing a self. (…) Thus constructing identities is a primary kind of cultural learning' (Fisherkeller, 1997, p. 469).

1.4   <u>Gender</u>

We approach gender as a social construction[7] of femininity and masculinity, and believe that gender is created and recreated through human interactions and in social life. This implicates that we believe that biological maleness and femaleness do not exist (i.e. we *are* not feminine/masculine; we *do* gender), but is instead constructed through social practices (Brickell, 2006; Connell, 1987; Jackson, 2005; Kehily, 2002; Lemish, 2010; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; West & Zimmerman, 1987; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). There is so single social constructionist perspective on gender. Yet, a common ground among the multiple perspectives is that they all believe that a specific set of roles constructed by cultural traditions, moral codes, economy and politics is attached to a gender identity (Brickell, 2006; D'Acci, 2008; Jacobson, 2005, p. 6; Kehily, 2002, p. 34; Lemish, 2010). However, those roles are not stable; they differ across time and space (Butler, 2006, p. 91; Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 175; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Nixon, 2003). School, parents, peers and media are all agencies that help us along in our gendered world, and more so, they are themselves gendered. Gender is therefore both ascribed and achieved in interactions with others (West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987), and according to Judith Butler (2006), it is 'an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts' (p. 191). Gender is thus performative, and we *do* gender through the scripts that we have both consciously and unconsciously internalised (Butler, 2006, p. xv; Ross, 2010). Although Butler is often referred to with respect to the argument that 'language performatively constitutes those sex/gender categories of which it speaks' (Brickell, 2006, p. 93), Brickell (2006) argues in his inspiring article *The sociological construction of gender* that Goffman, with his play theory (see *Theoretical inquiry – 1.3.2 'Doing' identity through performances of the self*), had already claimed that statement in 1977 (Brickell, 2006, p. 93). Although Goffman (1959) referred to these performances as gender displays, in this study, we prefer the use of performances, because gender is one trait of identity, and identities are always performed, as Giddens (1991) asserted. Goffman's concept of performance has been criticised because it considers gender performances to be conscious acts that we can decide to do or not do (Milestone & Meyer, 2012). However, as West and Zimmerman (1987) argued, the social and cultural contexts in which gender is performed structure the freedom of these performances.

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[7] Another approach to gender is inspired by a biological determinative approach. In this essentialist view on gender, it is assumed 'that gender difference is genetically determined and that each gender carries with it a set of physical, emotional and psychological characteristics' (Kehily, 2002, p. 34). Essentialists thus believe that we are born as a man or a woman, with specific characteristics attached to the sex, and thus men and women belong to separate categories (Milestone & Meyer, 2012).

West and Zimmerman (1987) postulated that 'doing' gender is often an ongoing routine and everyday activity that is embedded in social and cultural practices; hence, such gender performances often require no thought. Since gender, as a social construct, is situated in a particular context and history, we have to keep in mind that 'gender experiences and identities are heterogeneous, fluid, ambiguous, incoherent, and ever-changing' (Lemish, 2010, p. 12).

1.5   Sexuality

Although gender does not determine sexuality, we do see this traditional view rooted in many contemporary cultures and societies. A man, for instance, is expected to behave in a masculine way, and when his performances differ from the traditional masculine standard, he is often labelled as gay. Similar tendencies are noted for a woman who behaves in a more masculine manner (Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Rahman & Jackson, 2010). It is thus clear that identity (both in terms of gender and sexuality) is shaped and constructed within the broader society and culture (Rahman & Jackson, 2010, pp. 135–154). Many authors (e.g. Howarth, 2002, p. 152; Irvine, 1994, p. 12; Rahman & Jackson, 2010) have postulated that different aspects of identity are intertwined and thus define each other[8], as the previous example illustrates. Rahman and Jackson (2010) argued that 'the social construction and significance of one can rarely be understood without considering the other (p. 5), and Howarth (2002) claimed that '[t]hese different aspects of identity merge, reinforce and conflict' (p. 152). However, the specific way in which these aspects are connected is complex and cannot be easily explained (Howarth, 2002; Irvine, 1994).

Instead of an essentialist approach to sexuality[9], which regards sexuality solely as natural, given, or as a biological determined force, we follow a social constructionist perspective in which the construction of one's sexual identity is regarded as a process: unstable, insecure and always under construction (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004, p. 12). We then argue that sexuality and thus our sexual interests, behaviours and communities are mediated by a particular culture in a specific society, at a specific time. People can change and adapt, and it is through culture that sexuality is infused with meaning (Gauntlett, 2008; Irvine, 1994, pp. 8–15; Jackson, 2005, 2009; Plummer, 2002; Raymond, 1994). Jackson (2009) therefore argued that the media is 'one of the social institutions in which discourses of sexuality, and the subjectivities constituted within them, are re/produced' (p. 203), and the media can contribute to the normalising process of culturally defined models of gender and sexuality (e.g. heteronormativity) (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001).

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[8] We should highlight that although they are important identity traits, gender and sexuality are not all of who we are (Rahman & Jackson, 2010, p. 156).
[9] This essentialist approach, which regards sexuality as natural and innate, continues to prevail in culture, Buckingham and Bragg (2004), Jackson (2005), Rahman and Jackson (2010) and Raymond (1994) have claimed.

These discourses are symbolic resources that the young viewing audience can use in the negotiation of their gender and sexual identities (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Huntemann & Morgan, 2001; Jackson, 2009, p. 203; Jensen, 1987). Identities, then, are constantly constructed in various social contexts (de Bruin, 2005).

As the earlier example of men behaving in a feminine manner and women behaving in a masculine manner illustrates, a specific norm is prevalent; hence, within this context of gender and sexuality, it is necessary to address the concept of (non-)heteronormativity. Within a heteronormative discourse, a dichotomous, rigid and hierarchical perspective on (the biological) sex, and (the socially constructed) gender and sexuality is reverberated and consolidated (Butler, 2006), and heterosexuality is privileged, whereas other identities are excluded. Several social constructionists, such as Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks, have ascribed the emergence of heterosexuality and homosexuality as historical interventions, situated within the late nineteenth century. Irvine (1994, pp. 8–15) considers the late nineteenth century as quite *recent*, and he believes that heterosexuality has remained the privileged social norm ever since (Raymond, 1994). Rahman and Jackson (2010) explained that such practices of 'doing' heterosexuality are 'often invisible, because it is a taken-for-granted feature of social life that majority of people are heterosexual. This is one aspect of what is usually called *heteronormativity*: the ways in which heterosexuality is subtly normalized so that it is rarely questioned' (p. 164). Furthermore, gender is approached from an essentialist point of view, and a heterosexual identity 'is privileged as the only "normal" and legitimate form of sexuality. (…) Heterosexuality is not a monolithic entity, but a complex of institution, ideology, practice, and experience, all of which intersect with gender' (Jackson, 2005, p. 26). These heteronormative ways of thinking and ideas about gender and identity not only order our sexual lives, but are also encoded within everyday culture (e.g. domestic and extra domestic work) (Jackson, 2005, p. 26); yet they also construct and reinforce these heteronormative ideas and thus retain their normative status, Rahman and Jackson (2010, p. 187) postulated. Since sexuality is often regarded as clear and dichotomous, we are forced to choose one form or the other. However, for the youth, who are unsure about their sexual identity and/or wish to experiment a bit, this choice might not be so easy (Raymond, 1994, p. 141). This heterosexual hegemony, according to feminist cultural studies researcher Raymond (1994), 'serves not only to contain gay sexuality but also to pathologize almost any nonconformity' (p. 125), as the aforementioned example illustrates.

2   Television use

2.1   <u>Introduction: Media access in the twenty-first century</u>

Ten years ago, Silverstone (2002) argued that teenagers in North America and parts of Europe[10] were growing up in a multimedia environment in which the place and presence of television had been integrated into everyday life. Today, we can say that in addition to television, personal computers connected to the Internet and mobile phones have become standard objects in the lives of Western teenagers (e.g. Clark, 2009; Courtois, Paulussen, Mechant, & De Marez, 2011; Ling, 2008; Livingstone, 2002, p. 145; Montgomery, 2000). Not surprisingly, then, today's domestic environments contain a multitude of media goods, and they are often spread throughout the house and among its inhabitants (Livingstone, 2002; Van Rompaey & Roe, 2001). In 2009, 97% of Flemish households owned a television set (IBBT, 2009), and the data on private TV access indicate that, in 1998, 1 in 4 Flemish children had a television set in their bedroom. In 2001, this number had already increased to one in three teenagers, and we suspect that these numbers have increased since then (d'Haenens, Kokhuis, & van Summeren, 2001; Johnsson-Smaragdi, d'Haenens, Krotz, & Hasebrink, 1998; Pasquier et al., 1998; Stevens, 2006). Gender differences have been registered in studies on North American, British and Flemish (among others) media use, and these studies have found that significantly more boys than girls have a TV set in their bedroom. In 2009, Braun-Courville and Rojas argued that nearly 75% of all US households had Internet access and that 93% of American teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 were online. Prior to this, in 2000, Roberts stated that 21% of American teenagers had their own private computer; thus, it is clear that computer ownership among teenagers has increased significantly in prevalence in recent years. The Flemish study of Stevens (2006) indicated that it is more common for a Flemish teen to have his/her own PC than a TV set, and according to Courtois et al. (2011), 63% of the Flemish teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18 have a PC in their bedroom. More than 30% of American teenagers have Internet access in their bedrooms, in contrast to 19% of British teenagers (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Yet, 62% of the Flemish teenagers have (wireless) Internet access in their bedroom (Courtois et al., 2011, p. 30), which gives the impression that contemporary teen bedrooms are multi-mediated. Like gendered TV access, an equal and significant tendency is found for private computer access, whereby male teenagers are reported to have more access to a

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[10] Johnsson-Smaragdi et al. (1998) found that the overall similarities between European countries in terms of media access, ownership and use are far more striking than the differences. Representative figures on Flanders, for instance, show that 97% of Flemish households own a television set, 92% have a cell phone, 81% own a computer and 78% have an Internet connection, which is comparable to other European countries (IBBT, 2009).

private PC than girls (d'Haenens et al., 2001; Roe, 2000; Stevens, 2006)[11]. Generally, according to Livingstone (2002), it is more common for girls than for boys to have a media-poor bedroom; in other words, boys tend to have media-rich bedrooms.

2.2   Spatial and social viewing contexts

Although having a media rich bedroom is common among today's youth, several studies focusing on young people's media use have highlighted that, in Flanders, among other regions in Europe, media are still used collectively within the context of the family (e.g. d'Haenens et al., 2001; Livingstone, 2002; Pasquier et al., 1998; Roe, 2000; Stevens, 2006, pp. 193–194). In the teenage research population of d'Haenens et al. (2001), more than one-third watched TV almost exclusively with family members, although this number decreased as the teenagers grew older. The majority of teenagers, 68%, indicated that they prefer to watch their favourite television programme with others, preferably a family member (Livingstone, 2002; Pasquier, 2001). This means that media are integrated into the collective dynamics with parents and siblings (Roe, 2000; Van Rompaey, 2002) and that *family television viewing* remains strong (d'Haenens et al., 2001; Livingstone, 2007; Pasquier, 2001). During this family time—where a TV set is literally standing in the middle or in a central place in the family room—people come together and share interests, pleasure and conflicts. As Livingstone (2002, p. 188) asserted, watching television appears to be one of the few activities in which family members continue to engage together, and it facilitates positive family interaction. Family members simply like to spend time in each other's company, and TV viewing is one possible way to come together, several authors (e.g. Pasquier, 2001, p. 163; Van den Broeck, Pierson & Lievens, 2007; Van den Bulck & Van den Bergh, 2000) have argued, to increase the family's fund of shared experiences and interests (Kubey & Donovan, 2001), to facilitate communication within the family, or as the research of James Lull (1980, 1988, 1990) illustrated, 'to help with the construction of desired opportunities for interpersonal contact or avoidance' (1980, p. 203). Pasquier (2001) articulated that TV viewing is shaped by family routines and, at the same time, changes those routines. She even proclaims that 'media increase the attractiveness of home as a place of leisure and reshape the social organization of family life' (Pasquier, 2001, p. 162).

More specifically, female teenagers tend to watch their favourite programme more in the company of someone else—generally their mother—whereas boys tend to prefer watching their favourite TV show alone. In the case of sports programmes, however, boys mostly watch with their father (d'Haenens et al., 2001; Pasquier, 2001; Roe, 2000). The study by Pasquier et al.

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[11] Courtois et al. (2011), however, found no gender differences for private PC access in their study on the techno-subsystem of Flemish teenagers; instead, their data showed differences across age: older teens are more likely to have a private PC.

(1998) showed that interaction around media strengthens the links between certain family members, and gender differences are apparent in these interactions: a strong mother–daughter bond is found around TV, male siblings tend to play video games together, and son–father links are centred around the PC.

2.3   Television talk

As the previous sections on media access in the twenty-first century and on the spatial and social viewing contexts have illustrated, television often remains the most important medium through which screen culture is consumed. Not only are media—more specifically, television—used together; the medium and the programmes viewed are often the subject of discussion between parents and their children. According to Pasquier et al. (1998), 'talking about media is, of course, another important dimension of family dynamics around media' (p. 511). Out of French, Flemish and Swedish teenagers, it is the Flemish teenagers who talk the most with their mother or father. Moreover, talking about television appears to be a recurring daily activity, especially between teens—specifically girls—and their mother; boys talk most often about computers, and when they do, it is usually with their father (d'Haenens et al., 2001; Pasquier et al., 1998; Pasquier, 2001). Furthermore, parents are more likely to talk about programmes when their children do not have private access to a TV (Bovill & Livingstone, 2001).

Media communication can also play an important role in regular contact between friends, Livingstone (2002, pp. 196–197) stated, and this contact might include discussion about television or watching certain shows or movies together. According to Livingstone (2002), the majority of teenagers talk about media with their friends, and these conversations are most often centred on television and music (and on computer games for boys). The comparative analysis[12] of Suess et al. (1998) confirmed media's integration in social settings with friends in at least three ways: (1) communal use, (2) themes of conversations and (3) the strengthening of relationships, resulting in a sense of group identity. The communal use of television is a regular leisure activity among younger children, yet it is limited among teenagers (in contrast to gaming). However, when children grow older, communal watching is replaced with television-centred communication, and these discussions appear to be gendered, as the research of d'Haenens et al. (2001), Pasquier et al. (1998), Pasquier (2001) and Suess et al. (1998) has illustrated that boys especially talk about computers and gaming with their friends, while discussions regarding television programmes often occur among girls. A specific programme or show might even be so important that teenagers *have to* watch it to be able to participate in these discussions. Although

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[12] The authors compared interview data about children's and teenagers' media use and the teenagers' relationships with their peers in the three European countries of Finland, Spain and Switzerland (Suess et al., 1998).

some programmes are only locally discussed (for instance, only in Flanders, and not elsewhere), other programmes are talked about among teens all over the world, such as *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* in the 1990s (Suess et al., 1998, pp. 530–535). Using and talking about the same media products also contributes to a group identity, which increases in importance during puberty. We can conclude that media play an important role in regular contact between friends and family members (see Livingstone, 2002; Pasquier, 2001; Suess et al., 1998).

3   Television consumption: 'New' audience research

3.1   Introduction

Research on young people and media is, particularly in the U.S., dominated by approaches drawn from developmental psychology (e.g. Ward & Friedman, 2006), social psychology (e.g. Bandura, 1994) and mass communication theory (e.g. Eggermont, 2006). From a cultural studies perspective, media use and media consumption are situated within a broader social and cultural context which is constructed through dimensions of social power, such as social class, gender, ethnicity, etcetera (cf. Buckingham, 2008a). When studying audiences' encounters with media texts, and in the case of this study, encounters with fictional television texts aimed at a teenage audience, it might appear as if the text is a fixed object. However, such encounters are not isolated or operate within a vacuum; instead, a text 'is surrounded by other texts to which it relates and refers, and which in turn form part of the "symbolic resources" readers use to make sense of it' (Buckingham, 2008a, p. 224). Many previous audience studies have focused on the reception of one specific programme or genre (e.g. Ang 1985; Radway, 1984), on emerging adults (e.g. Dhoest, 2008) or on the identity construction of ethnic minorities (e.g. Barker, 1997, 1998; de Bruin, 2005; Gillespie, 1995). In the present study, however, we will only focus upon the results of studies that have addressed teenage audiences' encounters with television texts in relation to their gender and sexual identities. First, the results of the studies focusing on youth, media and gender will be addressed. Next, research results that elaborate upon the relation between media and sexual identity (sometimes in relation with gender identity) among teenagers will be discussed.

3.2   Overview of the 'new' audience research on youth, media and identity[13]

Media sociologist Dominique Pasquier (1996) conducted research on the reception of the French teen series *Hélène et les garcons* (Helen and the boys). In her multi-method study, she illustrated that

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[13] This overview will be brief, but for a more elaborate review, we refer to our doctoral thesis.

the series was used in the negotiation and construction of young people's gender identity. The series was a valuable symbolic resource for the exploration of alternative gender identities and provided a site for discussion within the peer group. Pasquier (1996) primarily discussed the ethics of the relationships among the young mediated characters. The interpretations and meanings of the plot lines and characters varied according to the age, gender and social background of the young viewing audience. From the observations and interviews with the young viewers, Pasquier learned that the audience regarded the series as fictional and unrealistic due to the systematic happy endings, repetitive plot lines and conventional acting. However, the series also provided pleasure because it addressed issues and topics that were similar to the viewers' own situations (Pasquier, 1996). This illustrates, according to media scholar Gorton (2009, p. 110), that young people can simultaneously be critical of a show and be emotionally involved with the characters, which leads to regular viewing. Pasquier (1996) then concluded that 'teen series do not supply information about society, they supply the emotions around the two main areas a child worries about on becoming an adolescent: friendship and love. Young people don't watch teen series to learn, they watch them to experiment with new feelings' (p. 356).

The issues of sexual identity and youth negotiating media representations of sexuality, approached with a qualitative methodology, have been put on the research agenda only recently[14]. In their study, *Young people, sex and the media: The facts of life?*, Buckingham and Bragg (2004) opposed the research that has ignored or neglected to address young people's agency within media consumption. In their study, Buckingham and Bragg investigated teenagers[15], their media uses and sexuality, using a multi-methods approach (interviews, assignments such as media diaries that were discussed afterwards, survey). The research participants did not agree with the statement that there is too much sex on television, and similar results were found in the study of Felten, Janssens and Brants (2009) in the Netherlands. The participants in Felten et al.'s (2009) research considered sexual imagery as normal; they were used to it, but this does not imply that they also approved of it (Felten et al., 2009). Though they did not problematise the sexual images for themselves, they did express concern about how the sexual imagery might affect younger, insecure or naive children. This has been a common finding in both quantitative and qualitative studies on youth and the media, concerning violent or sexual images. Thus, the teenage participants in the studies of Buckingham and Bragg (2004), Felten et al. (2009) and MacKeogh

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[14] Brown et al.'s study (1994) on teenage room cultures addressed the topic of sexual content in media and teenage identity construction only briefly. These authors identified three categories for the use of sexual media content: disinterested, intrigued and resisting. We do not further elaborate upon these results because this study connects the consumption of sexual media content with social learning theory and the developmental stage of the teenagers, which does not fit into a cultural studies tradition.

[15] In their research, Buckingham and Bragg (2004) used the concept of children, which refers to young people between the ages of ten and eighteen. In this dissertation, we prefer the use of youth instead.

(2004) advocated parental supervision (cf. 3rd person effect[16]; Davison, 1983). Felten et al.'s participants (2009) regarded the media as *an* influential source, next to peers and parents. The study considered an individual's personal characteristics, such as age, gender and self-confidence, and social and cultural factors, such as cultural context, religion and education. When the teenagers talked about the possible influences of media, the topics of clothes and satisfaction with one's own body were the most recurring (Felten et al., 2009). Yet, the participants believed that *sex sells* and that it is used to attract and connect with the audience (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004, p. 160; Felten et al., 2009). Here, the teenage respondents acknowledged the media production process and the powers that be, addressed by other cultural studies scholars (e.g. Ruddock, 2007). While some participants in Buckingham and Bragg's research (2004) did not like how the media glamorised sex, others disagreed and argued that negative consequences are portrayed as well. In this point of view, they did not feel any pressure or encouragement from within media content to engage in premature sexual activity. Soap operas and dramas were recognised for their major function by the participants of Buckingham and Bragg (2004), namely, entertainment. For young people, then, such programmes should not teach the audience moral lessons regarding sex and relationships (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004, p. 168). The researchers concluded that young people can be regarded as media literate media consumers, who 'use a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual content; and this develops both with age and with their experience of media' (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004, p. 238). When judging sexual storylines in soap operas and dramas, young viewing audiences show a level of awareness and are insightful about the conventions of narrative and characterisation, specific to the genre, Buckingham and Bragg (2004) argued. This performative style was also noticed by de Bruin (2005, 2008) in his ethnographical research on the reception of the Dutch soap opera *Goede Tijden Slechte Tijden* (*Good Times Bad Times*). Buckingham and Bragg (2004) and de Bruin (2005, 2008) argued that young audiences actively use the media for the construction of a self-identity, and, while talking about television, young people perform their identity for others to see (cf. de Bruin, 2005, 2008). Buckingham and Bragg (2004) then postulated that '[t]he media do not have an autonomous ability either to sexually corrupt children or to sexually liberate them' (p. 241) and that contemporary media research on youth should consider teenagers' agency instead of assuming their passiveness.

The participants in MacKeogh's study (2004) stated that sexual representations on television lacked realism, but they did not consider the number of sexual representations on television to be too high or too much. Yet, these teenage participants believed that there is more sex on

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[16] Ruddock (2007) explained that the 3rd person effect entails that 'individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication (...) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves (p. 13). Research regarding this 3rd person effect has mostly focused on media and violence; however, a 3rd person effect is found outside of violence issues (Ruddock, 2007, p. 23), as the abovementioned studies illustrate.

television now because it is more part of everyday life, and thus the world represented on TV is in sync with our more sexualised society. Duits and van Zoonen (2011) added that girls from different backgrounds (low versus middle class, religious versus non-religious) are 'well aware of sexualisation in the world around them, but they deny, accommodate, or resist this' (p. 502). Although socially desirable answers might apply here, Duits and van Zoonen (2011) concluded that this does not imply that this sexualisation trend is not problematic; these girls do not really like this tendency, yet it outlines their cultural environment, and thus they have to deal with it (Duits & van Zoonen, 2011, p. 503). Although MacKeogh's (2004, p. 9) participants argued that sexual relationships in fictional formats are not treated realistically, they did agree that media are informational sources, especially for developing relationships, but not for *how to do it*. However, the teenage respondents claimed that media do not influence their (sexual) behaviour. Therefore, MacKeogh (2004) concluded that teens are highly media literate, as they have grown up with sexualised media. The results of the study of Felten et al. (2009) on young people's perception of the sexualisation of contemporary screen culture showed that sex-stereotyped perceptions and attitudes are prevalent among the youth. Young men, for instance, are regarded as always being in the mood for (hetero)sexual intercourse, whereas girls are regarded as being more focused on having a loving relationship as opposed to an intimate relationship (cf. sexual double standard) (Felten et al., 2009). According to the participants in the studies of De Graaf, Nikken, Felten, Janssens, & van Berlo (2008) and Felten et al. (2009), girls should guard their boundaries, since boys and men are 'hunters'. The sexual double standard met with disapproval in Felten et al.'s (2009) study, but the authors considered that it was possible that the focus groups gave socially desirable answers. The young participants believed that such stereotypical perceptions could be reduced to natural differences between men and women or were historically shaped propositions. From this perspective, the media were regarded as representing these distinctions between men and women (Felten et al., 2009). The heterosexual norm was prevalent among the participants in Felten et al.'s (2009) study, which, according to those same participants, is also represented in the media. There is hardly any space for young people with homosexual feelings, both in the images in the media and in conversations with their peers. The media, and more specifically pornographic material, are consulted when boys want to know and learn about the technical aspects of sexual intercourse; alternatively, they discuss this issue with their brothers. Girls, however, watch porn less, Felten et al. (2009) argued.

The results of the audience studies presented here, which all used a qualitative approach (e.g. in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation, media diaries), affirmed previous audience research (e.g. Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982) and illustrated that multiple 'meanings and pleasures cannot be "read off" the text in isolation, but are deeply embedded in the social contexts of its viewing' (Allen, 2004, p. 247). Furthermore, the results show that the construction of identity is situated

within a broader social and cultural context, in which personal contact between parents, siblings, family and peers is important, as is the media, which provides symbolic resources for the construction of both (among others) gender and sexual identities (Ashcraft, 2006; Buckingham, 2008b; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010; Durham, 2004; Fisherkeller, 1997; Gray, 2008; Jensen, 1987; Lemish, 2010; Livingstone, 2002, McMillin & Fisherkeller, 2009). Identity is not fixed and stable; rather, it is constructed and performed in different contexts. It is an ongoing process and is affected by different identity traits, such as age, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, etcetera, and these identity traits also organise teenagers' media use (cf. de Bruin, 2008; Durham, 2004; Fisherkeller, 1997; Qin, 2009).

METHODOLOGY[17]

1   Research questions

This study aims to gain insight and knowledge about teenagers' media use and consumption of fictional sexual scripts in contemporary popular screen culture. More specifically, we will explore the teenage respondents' social television-viewing context and pay attention to television-centred communication (i.e. discussing general topics as well as sexual scripts) with parents, siblings and peers. In addition to this social television-viewing context, we will address the issue of sexual (suggestive and explicit) images in contemporary screen culture by asking (1) how young people define 'sex', (2) whether there is too much sex on TV, and (3) whether these sexual scripts are realistic. In our enquiry, we will focus particularly on the respondents' sexual morality, which will reveal itself through gender stereotypical statements (e.g. a boy who switches partners regularly is cool; a girl who does the same is a slut). Finally, we will explore the teenagers' reception of fictional representations of peers and gay characters. Within the respondents' comments, we will focus specifically on possible gender differences, although we realise that other identity traits (e.g. race, ethnicity, class) are also important in the study of media. Although the focus of this study is on fictional representations, the teenage respondents also elaborated upon non-fictional programmes in many instances, such as human interest or reality shows, as we will illustrate in the results section.

A second aim of this study is to investigate how gender and sexual identities are performed through television-centred communication. Television-centred communication, we argue, can be regarded as a site for identity performance. Thus, we will particularly emphasize the performances of the teenagers' gender and sexual identities, and more specifically on gender differences within their identity performances.

2   Research method: Focus groups

2.1   <u>Audience research: A cultural studies approach</u>

The present study can be classified within the cultural studies tradition of 'new' audience research (Vorderer & Groeben, 1992, p. 362). This metatheoretical approach considers the viewing

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[17] This methodological enquiry is partly based on the methodology sections of the article 'Let's talk about sex: Audience research of Flemish teenage television viewers and their view on sexuality (Van Damme & Bitereyst, 2012) and on the methodological chapter (*Chapter 7*) of our doctoral thesis.

audience as active consumers, whose media consumption is integrated in a broader social and cultural context (Ang, 1985). Within this 'new' audience research, different types of research can be recognised, such as reception research (Ang, 1985; Biltereyst, 1991; Radway, 1984), social use of media (e.g. Lull, 1980; Morley, 1986) and an ethnographical approach in which media's role in identity construction is investigated. Our first group of research questions addressing how youth interpret and negotiate fictional sexual scripts on television can be situated within the tradition of reception studies that are based upon Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980). Audience reception research is characterised by its simultaneous focus on media discourses and audience discourses, in which the 'statements and actions of audiences (…) serve as evidence about their experiences and uses of media' (Jensen, 2002, p. 169). Reception studies investigate what audiences *do* with popular culture, how a cultural product is *read*, and how texts and meanings are *negotiated*, since it is exactly through these practices of negotiation that popular culture in general, and a text or cultural product in particular, becomes valuable (Creeber, 2007; Fiske, 1987; Hermes, 2005). Thus, contemporary audience reception studies analyse the personal meanings that individuals take from media texts in relation to their lived social and cultural systems, frame of reference and experiences, using different approaches. Our second aim, however, can be placed within the ethnographical research tradition that regards media as symbolic resources for identity construction (cf. Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). In this working paper, we use the broad term 'audience research' to refer to this 'new' audience research within the cultural studies tradition because recent audience studies have investigated different elements, such as the reception of a text and the social viewing context, or the reception of texts and identity construction/performance, as ours does.

The tradition of audience studies, however, has often been the object of criticism. One of the main critiques concerns the level of reality or accuracy, which is often made when investigating audiences. Berger (2000) and McKee (2003), for instance, stressed that what audiences say is not necessarily a reflection of what they really think, and not everyone is able to express, explain or nuance their point of view. People do not always remember things accurately or have useful information. Additionally, social desirability has to be taken into account when conducting audience research, and one must remember that what people say can differ from what they would do in a specific situation (Berger, 2000; McKee, 2003). Researchers within the social constructionist perspective, however, do not label these practices as obscurities in the data gathering. 'Rather, they *are* the data because they are important elements in everyday interaction' (Hollander, 2004, p. 611; emphasis in original).

2.2   Focus groups: Theory and praxis

2.2.1   Theory

Audience research has been characterised by different approaches, and different methodologies (e.g. [large-scale] social surveys, social-psychological laboratory experiments, in-depth interviews, focus groups, media diaries, observation) are used to study the consumption of media texts. Since, according to Silverman (2006), 'the main strength of qualitative research is its ability to study phenomena which are simply unavailable elsewhere' (p. 43), and our research question demands it, a qualitative approach seemed preferable to a quantitative research method. More specifically, focus groups are most appropriate for studying 'the social conditions and experiences which play a role in constituting [teenagers'] subjectivities and identities' (McRobbie, 1994, p. 193). In this quotation, McRobbie referred to the use of (traditional) ethnographic research. However, we believe that the use of focus groups as a method for studying issues of gender and sexuality is more appropriate than participatory observation or individual interviews, as group interactions can stimulate a richer and more complex flow of information (Kitzinger, 1994; Montell 1999; Warr, 2008). Moreover, from the perspective of Schrøder, Drotner, Kline and Murray (2003), focus groups are highly suitable when the topics under discussion relate to the dominant norms and values (of the target audience). Within the context of focus groups, personal beliefs and available collective narratives interact. Moreover, 'these interactions can bring to the surface of the discussion the processes for negotiating or alternatively, contesting the meanings of personal and social phenomena' (Warr, 2008, p. 152). According to Dahlgren (1988, p. 292) and McKee (2003), the presence of the researcher, and the social and cultural contexts of focus groups colour the participants' meanings, and when the stimulation of such group processes is (indirectly) a research goal, Warr (2008) suggested the use of natural or pre-existing social groups. Pre-existing groups, such as colleagues or friends, can (re)create situations of their social relations in everyday life. These (re)creations probably do not represent natural interactions, however, they are not entirely contrived either. They offer us valuable data on collective or shared meanings, social contexts, group interactions and performances of the everyday self in public arenas (Kitzinger, 1994; Warr, 2008, pp. 151–173), and thus the information about each individual participant is minimal (Hollander, 2004; Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan & Krueger, 1998). It is also through these group interactions that participants leave a particular impression on others, thus performing their identities for others to see (de Bruin, 2008; Buckingham, 2008b; Gray 2008). Although one can criticise the artificial nature of watching and discussing media content in focus groups, previous research (Adriaens, Van Damme & Courtois, 2011a; Ging 2005) has shown that film and television are often discussed among friends and

peers. Moreover, 'TV talk is a crucial forum for experimentation with identities' (Gillespie, 1995, p. 25).

2.2.2 Praxis

In this audience research, an interpretative, feminist approach was taken for the study and analysis of teenagers' meaning-making processes and the construction of (a gender and sexual) identity (cf. Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010). Since the main topic of the group discussion is the consumption of sexual scripts, in relation to fictional television programmes, it is necessary to provide a safe and stimulating context in which participants can discuss the personal topic of sexuality with respect for each other's opinions. Therefore, all of the focus groups in our study consisted of friends. The use of friendship groups has been recommended 'for children and teenagers where problems of shyness can be overcome by recruiting a group of friends or pairs of friends' (Gordon, 1999, pp. 80–81). Moreover, less time is spent on getting to know each other, since the participants already feel comfortable around each other (Morgan, 1998b, p. 59). This made it possible to discuss the topic of sexuality in a safe environment, to voice controversial opinions and beliefs, even when they were different from the common ideas of the group.

Eight focus groups were formed by a total of 57 teenage volunteers aged between 14 and 19[18]. Thirty-two were female and 25 were male. The average age of the participants was 16.56. Five focus groups were mixed-sex (boys and girls), and the other three were homogeneous (one girls focus group; two boys focus groups). Except for one group, which was a mixture of first generation Turkish girls with Flemish peers, all groups were homogeneous in terms of descent. The number of participants varied between six and nine, as is common for focus groups (Gordon, 1999; Morgan, 1998b). The use of both mixed and homogeneous groups was motivated by the idea that a same-sex group of friends might create a safer and more open context to talk about sexuality and sexually related topics. An additional motivation was the idea that gender performances in mixed-sex groups might differ from those in homogeneous groups. The use of a combination of heterogeneous and same-sex groups provided the opportunity to analyse possible gender differences in media consumption and performances of the self.

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[18] These participants were recruited with the help of Fien Adriaens and the third-year bachelor students who participated in the seminar *'Screenagers, sexuality and diversity': A multi methodical investigation into media use and media reception of teenagers in Flanders* (2009–2010). These students were: Charley Beyen, Sien Beyens, Tim Chanet, Marlies Coene, Carl Declerck, Kameliya Encheva, Maureen Godu, Jonas Haerens, Carolien Keyaerts, Stefanie Meersschaut, Nele Mertens, Stijn Pauwels, Jen Steelant, Dominique Vanbrabant, Fien Van Cauwenberghe, Daniël Van De Peppel, Nele Vandenbroecke, Niki Vandriessche and Clara Vermeersch.

Since the location and timing of a focus group make a difference and are, thus, important factors to consider (Morgan, 1998b), the respondents decided where (e.g. school, at home) and when (e.g. after school, during the weekend) the group interview would take place. Before the start of each focus group discussion, the teenagers were asked to complete a short questionnaire[19], which provided demographical information, such as age and type of secondary education. The focus groups lasted between 60 and 75 minutes, after which the participants were given an incentive for participating. Table 1 gives an overview of the diversity among the different focus groups. For a complete overview of the participating teenagers and their respective demographical information, we refer to appendix 2.

FG number	Date	Duration	Number of respondents	Sex (M/F)	Age in years	Secondary education*
FG1	19/03/2010	1:02:27	9	4/5	16	G
FG2	10/04/2010	1:08:15	6	1/5	18	G
FG3	17/03/2010	1:12:12	9	1/8	15,16,17	G
FG4	31/03/2010	0:59:41	6	4/2	16,17	G
FG5	27/03/2010	1:11:21	7	0/7	14,15,16,17, 18	G/T/V
FG6	01/04/2010	1:05:09	7	2/5	17, 18, 19	V
FG7	07/04/2010	1:06:14	7	7/0	17,18	G/T
FG8	14/04/2010	1:09:35	6	6/0	14,15,16	T/V/A
N = 8	March–April 2010		N = 57	25 M 32 F	14–18y M = 16.56y	

*G = general secondary education, T = technical secondary education, V = vocational secondary education, A = secondary art education.

Table 1. Overview of the focus groups

As the consumption of sexuality in relation to media content was the main subject of the focus groups, watching fictional programmes regularly was a necessity prerequisite for participation in the group discussion. The focus group started with a general introduction to the intended aims and topics of the study, after which the practices of the focus groups were explained (e.g. guarantee of privacy and anonymity, recording of the discussion). Next, a two-minute clip[20] from the popular American teen drama series *One Tree Hill*[21] (2003–2012; channel: The CW) was

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[19] Questionnaire: see appendix 1.
[20] This clip is an extract from season 1, episode 12, 'Crash Course in Polite Conversations'. See appendix 4 for this fragment.
[21] The American teen drama series *One Tree Hill* follows the lives of a group of teenagers in the small but eventful town of *Tree Hill*.

shown. In this two-minute clip, two main characters, Lucas and Peyton, are looking for Peyton's father, the captain of a boat, who went missing at sea. The two teenagers drive to the last harbour where Peyton's father checked in, but due to the bad weather conditions, they have to spend the night in a motel room together. The clip shows how the characters end up kissing in the motel room. In the end, their intense kissing and making out is interrupted when Peyton's hair gets caught in the necklace that Lucas got from his girlfriend Brooke, who is also Peyton's best friend. This clip contained no explicit sexual images, but provided a good introduction to the topic of sexually suggestive images on television. The focus groups were semi-structured, and a pre-tested[22] topic list provided guidance during the discussions. These discussions covered the following four themes[23]: sexually suggestive images and the social viewing contexts of television programmes, television talk, sexual morality and the evaluation of fictional stereotypes and representations of teenagers and gay characters. Prior to discussing the topic of sexual morality, visual material[24] from the popular American teen drama series *Gossip Girl*[25] (2007–present; channel: The CW) was used to stimulate discussion.

As a moderator, I asked questions to stimulate discussions, and I tried to keep my input minimal 'to maintain the casual quality found in unstructured interviews' (Berger, 2000, p. 112). I listened very carefully and asked for amplifications and examples when necessary. I tended to adopt their (dialect) words and terms when asking for further details and elaborations, believing that this might help somewhat to cross the distance between the researcher and the participants. Moreover, this reassured the participants that they were being listened to. Not only is being a good listener a key quality of a moderator, being non-judgemental is equally important, since it is the role of the moderator to create a safe and stimulating environment to discuss the topics. Therefore, I tried to keep the tone of my voice, facial expression and body language as neutral as possible, even when dealing with unpleasant views, such as homonegativity (Berger, 2000; Gordon, 1999; Krueger, 1998a). It is through these processes of discussion and listening that a moderator learns from the participants, and that the research questions are answered. These processes are not passive; they are structured around the topics determined by the researcher (Morgan, 1996, 1998a, p. 10; Silverman, 1997, p. 4, 2006). Additionally, the information provided by the participants in the group discussion can be seen as mediations between the participants (or more specifically, the young viewing audience) and the researcher. Each group, however, has its own dynamics that a moderator should respect, and the participants' priorities have to be

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[22] The third-year bachelor students from the seminar *'Screenagers, sexuality and diversity': A multi methodical investigation into media use and media reception of teenagers in Flanders* (2009–2010) participated in this pre-test.
[23] Topic list focus groups: see appendix 3.
[24] The second clip showed the male character Chuck as he attempts to get Jenny drunk in order to sleep with her. This is a one-minute fragment from season 1, episode 1 'Pilot'. See appendix 5 for this extract.
[25] *Gossip Girl*, an American teen drama series broadcast on The CW, portrays the luxurious yet dramatic and eventful life of a group of teenagers in New York City.

acknowledged if the researcher wants them to discuss the topics. Or, as Morgan (1998a) put it, 'It is *your* focus, but it is *their* group' (p. 10; emphasis in original).

It is necessary, however, to make a critical comment on my role as a moderator. Being a good listener also implies that one should not interrupt the participants or complete their sentences (Berger, 2000). Furthermore, a good moderator is also someone who does not intervene too quickly to keep the discussion from going off topic and thus does not actively assert his or her control over the process (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). During the process of transcribing, rereading and correcting the transcriptions of the group discussions, I felt that, depending on the flow and fluency of the focus group, I sometimes completed sentences or interrupted participants, or asserted my authority as moderator to ensure that the topics on the topic list were discussed. While analysing the transcripts, I realised that the participants should have had more freedom to explore and discuss the topics as they wished, since this could have raised topics that might have been interesting for this research—topics that I had not considered.

The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim, including emotions, hesitations, silences and laughter. These emotions and characteristics provided a good overview of the atmosphere, context and flow of the focus group, and were useful for the interpretation and analysis (Boeije, 2005). The co-moderators transcribed all interviews (except FG3 and FG8), and since the transcripts[26] were the basis of the analysis, the adequacy of the transcripts was very important (Berger, 2000; Peräkylä, 1997, Silverman, 2006). Therefore, I corrected the transcripts, adding useful information, such as pauses and intonation. This bulk of raw data[27] had to be organised and broken down before the real analysis, which can be situated in the method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), could start. According to Morgan (1998a), this method avoids prior hypotheses and is a practice through which raw data is reduced to concepts and categories in order to develop and integrate them into a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding is at the core of this method[28]; therefore, we used the qualitative computer program NVivo to code the transcriptions, since 'such software seeks to facilitate data management chores which are tedious and subject to error when done manually' (Fielding, 2002, p. 162). According to Berger (2000, p. 121), the coding process lacks absolute rules about how coding has to be done; therefore, it is important to describe these practices comprehensively. In

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[26] All transcripts were structured identically. First, general information about the focus group was given (e.g. date and location, name of the moderator and co-moderator(s), name of the audio file, etcetera). Next, the participants' demographic information was provided, such as gender, year of birth, type of secondary education, etcetera. A visual representation of the group discussion was also available, pointing out the seating arrangement. Finally, the actual transcription was introduced with a few general thoughts on the atmosphere and flow of the discussion. For the transcripts of all focus groups, see appendix 6.

[27] The focus group transcriptions are, in total, 92,695 words in length.

[28] To be correct, we have to speak of methods, since both Glazer and Strauss developed a personal paradigm. For a full overview of their individual approaches and differences, see Charmaz's contribution in *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, edited by Denzin and Lincoln (2005).

this study, a more open coding system was applied, and the codes[29] were structured according to the questionnaire. However, it was possible for new codes to emerge during the coding process and to emanate from the transcripts. Each quote was given a label for the thematic tree structure, consisting of, for instance, 'social viewing context parents', 'TV talk peers', 'opinion regarding sexual standard', 'definition sexually (suggestive) images', 'acceptance of casual sex'. Using a two-phase coding process, we were critical of the first coding, and we believed that non-systematically and previously made coding errors were given less chance to arise. In the first coding phase, each transcription was read through four times; one time to code every comment related to each of the four major topics (sexually suggestive images and social viewing contexts of television programmes, television talk, sexual morality, and the evaluation of fictional stereotypes and representations of teenagers and gay characters). After this first phase, we waited a week to continue with the second coding moment. This second phase consisted of a thorough reading of the printed versions of each code, enabling us to replace and delete misplaced comments. This also enabled us to copy some fragments and insert them in a second (or sometimes even third) code. We performed an additional close reading of each focus group transcript to add forgotten comments. Thus, we applied a meticulous and rigorous coding[30] routine.

Next, we began the actual analysis, which was a textual analysis of the discourse, organised by theme. The premise of this interpretative analysis is the social reality in which the negotiation of meanings and identities occur (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These negotiations happen through interactions with other people. According to Boeije (2005, pp. 74–80), the method of grounded theory has three main characteristics: the principle of constant comparison, analytical induction and theoretical sensitivity. Thus, analysis is an active process in which the researcher has to think sensitively about the data in theoretical terms and constantly compare the findings with the data in order to develop a grounded theory (Silverman, 1997, p. 4). The focus of this thematic textual analysis was on the identification of certain general practices and performances in regard to media consumption, and on possible gender differences within these practices. It was during the analysis, as is common when using a grounded theory approach, that specific groups of comments could be recognised within a category or label. The interpretation of such groups of comments resulted in the establishment of practices (e.g. habituation to sexual[ly suggestive] content). Thus, initially, the codes were more like categories, or groups of comments, that covered the same broader topic, and it was only while interpreting and analysing the categories that real codes, labels and theoretical insights appeared. However, we did not only pay close attention to the words and the context, and the frequency and extensiveness of certain comments; it was equally important to look at what had not been said by the teenagers among

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[29] For the complete coding tree, see appendix 7.
[30] Appendix 8 contains the NVivo file with the coded transcriptions.

their peers in the context of the focus group (Kitzinger, 1994; Krueger, 1998b). Instead of using NVivo, which we used to code the raw data, for the analysis, we opted for the old school and manually (and often colourful) thematic analysis[31].

In this working paper, the presentation of the results is illustrated in many cases with quotations from the participants, and, for every quotation, additional information about the respondent is provided in brackets. This information consists of the number of the focus group (FGXX), gender (M for males and F for females) and age.

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[31] A copy of the manual and written analysis is available upon request.

RESULTS

1 Social viewing

1.1 <u>Introductory notes</u>

As addressed in the methodology section, the visual material from the popular American teen drama series *One Tree Hill* broke the ice in the focus group and introduced the topic of sexual(ly suggestive) images on television. It showed teenagers experimenting with friendship, romance, love and sexuality, all of which are aspects of the teenage world. This first topic explored the reactions of the respondents right before, during and after they watched the clip. For an overview of the focus groups (e.g. number of participants, participants' sex, age or type of secondary education), see Table 1.

Both the male and female respondents giggled and laughed out loud at the beginning and end of the clip, and some snickered when the clip ended. This was probably due to the clip's sexually suggestive content; some respondents might have been nervous or felt uncomfortable watching this kind of content in the context of a focus group, in the presence of an adult (researcher) or in the presence of their peers. It is also possible that this reaction was evoked by the funny aspect of the visual material, namely, Peyton's hair getting stuck in Lucas' necklace. It is also possible that the respondents found that situation unbelievable or ridiculous, and the laughing was an ironic reaction to the ridiculousness of the situation. Furthermore, several of the respondents stated that it was a pity that the clip ended so soon. There may be multiple explanations for this finding. First, it is possible that the respondents simply liked to watch such visual material or wanted to know what was going to happen between the characters in this episode, since the clip showed a mutual attraction between Lucas and Peyton, although Lucas was dating Peyton's best friend Brooke. Notably though, the analysis showed that only male respondents voiced their objections to the abrupt ending of the clip. This is remarkable, since the research of Adriaens, Van Damme and Courtois (2011b) underlined that teenage boys watch youth-oriented series (far) less than teenage girls, and teen series are often labelled as 'soft' television content, which is often connected with females (cf. Bonfadelli, 1993; d'Haenens et al., 2001; Eggermont, 2006; Pasquier, 2001; Roe, 2000).

Although the previous results illustrated the teenagers' openness to discussing the clip from *One Tree Hill*, it is necessary to elaborate upon the situation in the sixth focus group after this clip was shown. This focus group was heterogeneous in terms of descent, since the two female

respondents were first generation[32] Turkish girls. Neither of the female respondents felt comfortable watching this first clip, but they could not exactly explain why this was so. When we sought to determine the possible reasons behind this unease, both girls seemed nervous; therefore, we did not ask further questions. The possible reasons for this could be the sexually suggestive content, the presence of an unknown adult while watching the clip, the presence of male classmates and a male co-moderator, the presence of peers in general or a combination of any of these. Later on in the focus group discussion, the two girls stated that the material contained too much sexually suggestive content, which is why they did not feel comfortable watching this first clip. Thus, we believe that in the discussion and viewing of sexually suggestive images, cultural background may be an important factor to consider; however, further research is necessary to validate this.

1.2   Unexpected company?

We asked an introductory question to explore how the respondents would feel if they were watching visual material similar to the *One Tree Hill* clip in private and another person suddenly entered the room. This question was subdivided depending on the person who might enter the room, namely, a parent or a sibling.

1.2.1   Parents

We can distinguish two trends in the teenagers' feelings when watching sexually suggestive images on television in private and a parent suddenly enters the (living) room. A small group of respondents stated that they would feel embarrassed and uncomfortable, and would have the feeling they had done something wrong by watching such content. This group was composed entirely of female teenagers, with the exception of one boy. However, this male participant (X4 – FG6, M, 19) toned down this reaction almost immediately by explaining that he would feel only a little bit uncomfortable, since '…this is just television, right?' The first generation Turkish girls were part of this small group and their cultural and religious backgrounds may have been important factors in evoking these feelings, however, further research on this subject is necessary.

Most of the respondents, however, claimed that they would not mind the presence of an adult, and they asserted that they would not feel any different if an adult were to suddenly enter the room while they were watching this kind of content. This group of teenagers considered this sexually suggestive content to be normal; they stressed the fictional nature of the representations

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[32] Both girls' parents and grandparents were born in Turkey and both girls did not (yet) have a Belgian passport.

and regarded it as 'just' television. Several of them made a distinction with more explicit material, such as pornographic content; that is, if (one of) their parents were to walk in when they were watching explicit content, they would feel embarrassed and would try to change the channel as quickly as possible. The following quotation illustrates the normality of sexually suggestive content and the difference between it and explicit visual material:

> X4 (FG5, F, 16): I don't feel uncomfortable [when my parents enter the room]. Because… they know it; because I always watch it with my girlfriends. So, it's not so bad, right? *X1, X2 and X3 shake their heads, X4 laughs* You don't see any nudity or something like that…

The teenagers agreed upon a more uncomfortable or more embarrassing situation: they would feel more self-conscious if they were watching a series or movie with (one of) their parents and there was an unexpected sexually suggestive/explicit scene. Most of the respondents said that such a situation would make them feel 'weird' and create an uncomfortable atmosphere.

1.2.2   Siblings

We then asked, 'How would you feel if a sibling—older/younger, brother/sister—entered the room when you were watching such visual material?' The respondents offered a diversity of answers, but we found no gender differences. In what follows, however, we noted that the participants did not talk about their *feelings* in such a situation; instead, they discussed what they or their sibling would *do* if the situation occurred. A few respondents, both boys and girls, explained that their brother and/or sister would join them to watch the rest of the programme. One of these respondents asserted that this content was rather innocent (compared to pornographic material) and therefore did not see a problem in co-viewing it. Some of the teenage participants explained that they have an older brother or sister, and these respondents all agreed that their siblings would not comment on what they were watching. Some even mentioned that their siblings would just walk by, without saying anything, while others said that their siblings would laugh if they saw what he/she was watching. The participants with younger siblings had a different point of view. These respondents suspected that their younger brother or sister 'would find it gross, what happens there' (X3 – FG2, F, 18) or would threaten to call their mother and tell her about the kind of television programme that the respondent was watching (X6 – FG8, M, 15). This comment conveyed the impression that this participant's mother would demand that the television be put off or switched to another channel/programme. It also gave the impression that this kind of content was not suitable for this teenager to watch (in private or in the company of his siblings). However, there is one exception: one participant mentioned that his younger

sister would join him to watch the show. The age difference between siblings or the sibling's level of maturity might play a role in these different reactions.

When we consider the answers concerning the first situation, when we asked what the teenagers would feel if (one of) their parents entered the room while they were watching such content, and compare it with what the respondents replied to the second outlined situation, we find that the teenagers who would not feel embarrassed or ashamed if (one of) their parents walked into the room would not feel any discomfort if a sibling entered the room either. However, there was disagreement about whether they would switch channels if a sibling walked in. The age of the sibling was a factor to consider, and especially when younger siblings were considered, the respondents would feel that they needed to 'protect' their brother or sister (cf. third-person effect; Davison, 1983), which is illustrated as follows.

> *X5 (FG4, M, 16): I think they are still a little bit too young for that. They don't know what that is and… for their protection as well.*
> *M: Okay, yeah. X3?*
> *X3 (FG4, M, 17): But I have a younger sister, who is eleven years old, and she also has had sex education at school, so I think….*
> *M: That she is allowed to see this?*
> *X3 (FG4, M, 17): Yeah, she's allowed to watch everything from me.*

In the same focus group, other participants shared X3's opinion, and they did not have the intention to switch channels, because they evaluated the content of this clip as innocent. The level of innocence was compared with the level of explicitness and with real life situations involving similar situations. Apart from the age of the sibling, the relationship that the participants have with their brother or sister is another important component to take into account in the case of some respondents. The first generation Turkish girls in the sixth focus group would feel as ashamed if a sibling entered the room as they would if (one of) their parents entered the room. However, the group also consisted of a Belgian girl whose parents and grandparents were born in Ghana, and this respondent explained that she would feel less ashamed if her brother or sister walked in while she was watching this kind of content.

1.3   Co-viewing

In the next section, we investigate if our teenage respondents watch television with their parents, if this happens regularly, and what (kind of) programmes they watch together. We conduct the same investigation with regard to co-viewing with siblings.

1.3.1   Parental co-viewing

Regarding the topic of parental co-viewing, a plethora of different situations were addressed in the focus groups, yet there were no evident gender related results. A rather small group of respondents said that they always watch television with their parents, because there is only one television set at home, thus obliging them to watch television together, in the living room. One teenage girl explained, '[we] always have dinner in front of the television' (X5 – FG5, F, 16), and television provides background noise in this situation. A male teenager, who said that he always watches television with his parents, asserted that if his family had more than one television set at home, they would never be together. However, one member of the second group (X3 – FG2, F, 18) explained that, although her family has only one television set, 'we do not really watch much television together. No, not really. It's more like… I want to see that specific programme (…) and then the others do something different'. A laptop is also sometimes used as a medium to watch movies (or television series), X4 (FG2, F, 18) claimed, especially when other family members want to watch a certain show in which she has no interest.

A list of programmes which the respondents stated they watch with their parents would be too long to note here, but it is noteworthy that the evening news (around 7 pm) is commonly watched in the sphere of the family, as are specific Flemish daily soaps, such as *Thuis* and *Familie*[33], and American serials, such *Lost* and *Grey's Anatomy*[34]. Co-viewing cannot only be structured around certain programmes; specific time-slots and channels were also mentioned by our participants. For instance, Sunday evenings are often regarded as family television nights reserved for tuning in to the Flemish public broadcaster één, because 'most often, the best and most qualitative programmes are aired on één' (X2 – FG2, F, 18), according to this respondent from our second focus group. Qualitative programmes, such as *Van Vlees en Bloed*, *De Smaak van De Keyser* and *Witse*[35] are considered co-viewing material. A lot of the teenagers also mentioned

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[33] *Thuis* and *Familie* are both Flemish daily soaps. *Thuis* (2005–present) is aired around 8 pm by the Flemish public broadcaster één. *Familie*, which is the longest running Flemish daily soap (1991–present) is aired around 7:45 pm by the private broadcaster VTM.

[34] *Lost* is an American science fiction/drama series which aired from 2004 to 2010 on the American commercial broadcasting network ABC. The story focuses on the survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious island. In Flanders, the series aired on the private broadcaster VT4 (now: VIER). *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–present) is an American television medical drama that focuses on the fictional lives of surgical interns and residents at Seattle Grace Hospital. Both the medical situations and the relationships between the characters are the focus of the show. In Flanders, the show airs on vijftv.

[35] *Van Vlees en Bloed* is a Flemish television mini-series focusing on the lives of a butcher family. This drama/comedy was a production of the Flemish production company Woestijnvis, made by één, and aired in 2009. *De Smaak van De Keyser* is a Belgian television series which aired on één (December 2008–February 2009) and on the Walon public channel La Une. Within this ten-part drama series, three generations of women are followed on their quest for truth and the ultimate taste of juniper. *Witse* is a Flemish police

that they generally watch movies with their parents. In the third focus group, several of the participants mentioned, for instance, that they watch an episode of a television show every night with their father (and discussed it afterwards; see *2.1 Talking about TV with parents*). They watch these programmes on DVD and, the respective teenagers expressed that they value these moments greatly and that it was the only time they saw their father.

Another, smaller, group of respondents did not reply affirmatively to the question about co-viewing. Some of them stated that they prefer the company of a sibling over their parents to watch a programme; others clarified that they do not watch that much television or that their parents hardly spend any time in front of the television and, therefore, they are unable to watch television together. One of the common reasons that the teenagers raised for why mothers do not watch much television was because they always fall asleep before or during the show. In general, the respondents made no distinction between their parents when they responded to the questions about co-viewing, but when the teenagers did mention whom they watch a certain programme with, both parental figures were mentioned equally. However, there is an apparent distinction in the kind of programmes that they watch together: mothers are connected with *softer* programmes with more dramatic elements and storylines (e.g. *Brothers & Sisters*, *Familie*, *Thuis*[36]) and health-related shows, such as *House M.D.*[37] and *Grey's Anatomy*. There was even one female participant (X3 – FG3, F, 17) who labelled these kinds of series as 'girls' shows', and thus she watched them with her mother. On the other hand, the respondents reported watching the news, sports and crime series with their father.

1.3.2 Co-viewing with siblings

In the context of the introductory clip from the American teen drama series *One Tree Hill*, the male respondents regularly stated that their brother joins them when they are watching similar content. This is noteworthy, since youth-oriented series are considered *softer* programmes and are therefore aimed at a female audience. However, the actual viewing audience can differ from the target audience, or—as is so in the case of the teen genre—can attract pre-teen and adult viewers, or male viewers (Dhoest, 2007; Feasey, 2009; Ross & Stein, 2008). The research of Adriaens et al. (2011b) illustrated that male teenagers also watch teen-oriented series. Furthermore, it may also

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series, produced and aired on één, on Sunday evening. The series, which attracted a large audience, was broadcast from 2004 to 2012.

[36] The family drama show *Brothers & Sisters* was first aired on the American network ABC in 2006, and the last episode was aired in 2011. This American television drama series focuses on the Walker family and their lives.

[37] *House M.D.* (also known as *House*) was aired from 2004 to 2012 on the Fox Network in the US, and in Flanders, the American medical drama aired first on VTM but was then rescheduled on KanaalTwee (now: 2BE). The storylines focus on a team of diagnosticians, with Dr Gregory House—the drug addicted medical genius—as the head of the team.

be possible that the male respondents are joined by their brother because of the sexually suggestive content (cf. sexual double standard—men are consumed by sexual thoughts and urges). Some participants pointed out that they watch certain television programmes with (one of) their siblings, and it was obvious that the boys in our focus groups seek the company of a brother (if they have one), while the girls prefer to watch with a female sibling. Gender appeared to be a significant factor in the co-viewing preferences of our respondents. Most of the teenagers, however, did not mention this co-viewing during the interview.

2 Television talk

As illustrated in the theoretical enquiry of this study, television talk is common among Flemish teenagers (d'Haenens et al., 2001; Pasquier et al., 1998; Pasquier, 2001). Next to parents and siblings, peers are also frequent participants in these conversations. With the topic of television talk, we want to explore if teenagers discuss (the content of) certain programmes with their parents, siblings and/or peers and, if so, what they talk about. Do they discuss what happened in the latest episode, or do they predict what will happen in the next one? Are love, romance and sexuality part of these conversations, and whom do they prefer to talk to (father or mother)? We posed these questions regarding television programmes in general and regarding sexually suggestive content in particular. Furthermore, we asked the participants if their parents would talk about the sexualised television content if they unexpectedly walked in on them while such content was playing out on television.

2.1 Talking about TV with parents

2.1.1 General results

Regarding the question 'Do you talk about certain television programmes with your parents?' we noticed a small group of teenage boys and girls who never talk about television programmes with their parents. However, the largest group admitted that they have television centred conversations with their parents. Some members of the second focus group admitted quite reluctantly that they have such discussions, as if such conversations are something to be ashamed of among friends, or perhaps such talks would make them less favourable among friends; other members of this talkative group did not hesitate at all and spoke freely about their television centred communication with their parents. In contrast to the work of d'Haenens et al. (2001), Pasquier et al., (1998), Pasquier (2001) and Suess et al. (1998), it was not possible to detect gender differences (e.g. do teenage girls talk more with their mother about TV?), since the respondents rarely made a distinction between which parent they talked with. These conversations cover

different topics and themes, explained the respondents, such as (1) providing a quick update when one of the parents enters the room after the programme has started, (2) speculating about what might happen next episode, (3) speculating about the killer in murder and investigation programmes, (4) discussing the characters, (5) discussing the actors' clothes, (6) talking about what happened in that specific episode or film, (7) making jokes about what they saw, (8) commenting on certain situations or things the characters did or did not do, etcetera. It is also plausible that parents ask their teenage children to update them about what happened in the previous episode because he/she had fallen asleep while co-viewing it. This situation was relatable for many the participants and happened in a lot of their families.

In addition to the different subjects that are talked about, we recognised that such conversations about television take place at different times, depending on the respondent and his/her familial situation. Some participants discuss matters before, during (during the programme or during a commercial break) or after the show. Some parents, though, do not like to be disturbed during the programme; therefore, TV talk is reserved for the time after the programme. Television centred communication can also happen during dinner, and there was one female respondent (X5 – FG5, 16) who mentioned that her family always eats in front of the television. In this family, television provides background noise, like radio often does, and the family discusses programmes and certain events while eating their dinner.

In relation to this question about television talk with parents, the participants mentioned several TV programmes that had been the topic of conversation among them and their parents. These programmes varied, but the news, (daily) soaps (e.g. *Thuis*, *Familie*), reality TV series such as *Mijn Restaurant*[38] and comedy programmes (e.g. *M!LF*, *Kabouter Wesley*[39]) were mentioned the most. Remarkably, all of these programmes are Flemish productions. In our second focus group (five girls; one boy), the participants explained that their parents prefer to talk about what they themselves call 'qualitative programmes', such as *Van Vlees en Bloed* and *De Smaak van de Keyser*. Moreover, they connected such qualitative programmes with the Flemish public broadcaster één and therefore conveyed the impression that this broadcaster's programmes are of higher quality than the other (private) broadcasters. They attributed lower quality to reality programmes, for instance, and they believe that their parents would not consider such programmes to be interesting enough to watch and discuss. The following serves as an illustration:

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[38] The television programme *Mijn Restaurant* (based upon the format of *My Restaurant Rules*) is made by Kanakna Productions and has aired on vtm. On this programme, five couples, each in their own city, compete to realise their ultimate dream—to have their own restaurant.

[39] In Man!Liberation Front (or M!LF), which airs on 2BE, the 'new' man is sought with humorous clips and sketches. *Kabouter Wesley* (2009–2010) is a Belgian comedic animated series about a grumpy dwarf, invented by Jonas Geirnaert. The style is deliberately amateurish, and the surreal situations are often violent, with foul language and lame jokes. *Kabouter Wesley* was integrated in the human interest programme *Man Bijt Hond*.

M: You mentioned the programmes, airing at één. Do you mean that…

X2 (FG2, F, 18): The programmes of één are most of the time rather qualitative programmes. VT4, for instance, airs programmes such as The Block[40] *and* Mijn Restaurant *or something like that, like reality programmes, and my parents usually don't consider such programmes interesting enough.*

M: Mmm.

X2 (FG2, F, 18): So that's why we don't discuss such programmes. Or, someone says 'X2, what are you watching now?' or something like that. But for other programmes, at één, we watch such programmes with the entire family.

The daily co-viewing and parental television talk among the members of the third focus group are also noteworthy. Several female participants in this group stated that they watch and discuss an episode of a certain series with their father on a daily basis. These series are most often purchased on DVD, and the participants mentioned American television series such as *Friends* and *Sex & the City*[41], as well as older Flemish productions, such as *Kapitein Zeppos* and *Het Eiland*[42]. It is possible that this parental co-viewing and TV-centred talk are intended to establish a strong(er) father-daughter bond, and this impression was strengthened when X4 (FG3, F, 16) mentioned that without this recurring daily activity, she would never or hardly ever see her father.

2.1.2   Romantic and sexual content

The small group of respondents that stated that they do not talk about television do not discuss sexually suggestive images or romantic and sexual content either. Among this group are the first generation Turkish girls and the first generation teenage girl from Ghana. Their cultural backgrounds might explain why these topics are never discussed; however, further research is necessary to support this. The second group, which talks about television with their parents, asserted that their TV discussions sometimes address romantic and sexual content and sexually suggestive images like the visual material from *One Tree Hill*. However, the frequency of such conversations is limited. Gender differences were apparent with regard to such discussions, since only female participants admitted to having them. However, no distinction was made among the

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[40] The reality programme *The Block* (2004–2009) follows four couples that have to remodel a loft with a limited budget. The programme aired on VT4 (now: VIER).

[41] The American sitcom *Friends* (1994–2004), which was broadcast on NBC in the US, focuses upon the lives of five adult friends in their twenties in New York City. The storylines of *Sex and the City*, which aired from 1998 to 2004 on HBO, are centred around the (sex) lives of four adult women in their mid-thirties and forties.

[42] In *Kapitein Zeppos*, a Flemish youth series (1964–1968), the storylines focus upon the life of Captain Zeppos, a mysterious man who visits a small village. The Flemish comedy series *Het Eiland* (2004–2005), produced by production house Woestijnvis, is centred on office workers who struggle to get along and work together.

female participants about whom (mother and/or father) they discussed this with. According to their responses, the female participants discuss romantic and sexual scripts through comments such as who should date who in the programme or the frequent swapping of love interests in series and serials. Sometimes, parental advice in interwoven in TV talk about romantic and sexual content, and such advice is often provided during the actual TV viewing. Such advice can be, for instance, what kind of man is favourable to date.

We also asked the participants whether their parents would discuss or mention the sexually suggestive content that their teenage children were watching, if they unexpectedly entered the (living) room. We were able to distinguish four different categories within the respondents' answers. The absence of any (verbal) reaction was the most common parental reaction, as was joking about this kind of content. The lack of a reaction can be explained, according to the teenage participants, by the high frequency of sexually suggestive content on television. Some of the teenagers believe that their parents would take a mere look at the television programme and would not see any harm in this kind of content, since they know what kinds of things are on television these days. Such mediated representations are thus considered to be common and normal, and therefore, their parents would not discuss or mention anything. It would be different, however, if (one of) their grandparents entered the (living) room, asserted the participants in the third focus group. These teenagers explained that (one of) their grandparents are always complaining about the overflow of sexual images, and they compare contemporary television with what was in the media when they were teenagers. This illustrates that different norms and values are circulating among different generations, and implicitly, the teenagers asserted that sexual content was less present when their grandparents were younger.

In addition to the absence of a verbal reaction, many of the teenagers pointed out that their parents would make jokes about this kind of content, as the following quotations illustrate:

> X5 (FG5, F, 16): I think that my parents would probably make a funny remark, like 'Ola, what is that?' or something like that.
> X6 (FG4, M, 17): My mother would tease and say 'Close your eyes son; you're too young to watch this.

Parents sometimes seize this moment to inform their children about topics such a safe sex and waiting to have sexual intercourse until they have found the right partner, and humour is often used in these moments. The respondents asserted that such talks are relatively short and do not turn into serious conversations about (protection against) sexually transmitted diseases or something related to sexuality; instead, these jokes function as a disguise for the seriousness of the topic. When we asked the teenagers about the possible reason(s) why their parents make such

jokes, some suspected that it is because their parents are somewhat ill at ease, or because they feel that a joke will relieve the tension that the unexpected company caused. However, other participants disagreed. Some thought that maybe their parents did not know how to react, since they did not suspect their teenage child would be viewing those images at that moment. However, this seems to contradict previous comments that addressed the pervasiveness of sexually suggestive images in contemporary screen culture and that parents are not surprised anymore when similar images are incorporated in television programmes.

Apart from the lack of verbal reactions or the use of humour to address the television content, the teenage participants voiced two more parental reactions. One group of teenagers thought that their parents would ask what they were watching and comment on the fact that they were watching television again. This comment conveyed the impression that television viewing is a regular and common habit for this/these teenager(s). Although the teenage respondents did not generally differentiate between their parents, when they did, we noticed that only mothers voiced concern about this kind of content. In one focus group, the respondents explained that their parents were more concerned about violent television content than sexual images, since the parents fear that their children may imitate this kind of violent behaviour. When they were younger, the participants in the second focus group explained, their parents would tell them to turn off the television, but now they are older and wiser and are thus left to make their own decisions about how much television to watch. A last possible parental reaction was co-viewing with their children, and fathers were mentioned the most in this context. The literature on social viewing and television talk has not addressed the issue of discussing and co-viewing television programmes with sexual scripts; therefore, we underline the need for more research on this matter.

2.2   Talking about TV with siblings

Most of our teenage respondents expressed that they do not communicate with siblings about television programmes; rather, they stated that they prefer to discuss them with friends (see *2.3 Talking about TV with friends*). However, one of the male respondents admitted that when he does discuss television content (e.g. football), he does so with his brother and/or father, and some of the girls stated that if they discuss television with a sibling, they prefer to talk with their (older) sister. In contrast, two female respondents specified that their brother is often their conversation partner, especially for discussing films. One of these female respondents is a first generation Turkish girl, and she explicitly stated that she does not discuss sexual and romantic relationships in television programmes or movies with her brother. The following quotation illustrates TV talking among sisters:

M: X3, do you talk about TV programmes with your mother or your sister?

X3 (FG6, F, 17): No, only with my sister *X3 laughs out loud*

M: With your sister, you say?

X3 (FG6, F, 17): Yes *X3 laughs*.

M: Does this happen a lot, that you and your sister discuss this?

X3 (FG6, F, 17): Yes.

2.3   Talking about TV with friends

According to the existing literature (e.g. Livingstone, 2002; Suess et al., 1998), television talk is a regular topic of discussion among peers, yet these studies have not touched upon the issue of not being able to participate in such television talk among friends. Therefore, we structured the following section three axes: (1) If peers discuss television, what topics do they discuss? (2) If peers discuss a television programme, but a respondent does not watch that show and is thus unable to engage in this TV talk, how does (s)he feel? (3) Have the respondents ever watched a programme in order to participate in television talk among peers? We asked these questions to explore the role and importance of television talk in the everyday lives of youth and their peers.

2.3.1   Ability to participate in TV talk

There were three types of replies to the question 'Do you talk about certain TV programmes with your friends, and if so, what topics or things do you talk about?' The first group of teenagers, both male and female, answered that they do not (feel the need to) discuss television programmes with their friends, nor do they talk about the (sexual) relationships between fictional characters. However, some of these respondents would prefer the company of friends to that of their parents and siblings if they were to talk about TV programmes. In the second group, consisting mostly of teenage girls, television-centred communication is often integrated in peer conversations. We reached this conclusion not only because of the respondents' verbal reactions, but also because of the enthusiasm with which they discussed this topic in the focus groups. In the third focus group, for instance, one of the female participants (X8 – FG3, 15) said that when she watches television at home with friends, it automatically leads to conversations related to what they are watching on television. A lot of the female participants admit that the romantic and sexual relationships of their favourite television characters are the topic of discussion among peers, and they discuss, for instance, who should date whom. Although such storylines can be discussed among friends, the romantic and sexual scripts are not necessarily integrated into these chats.

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Such discussions about programmes and relationships on television are most common among female friends. Yet, the female respondents in the fourth focus group stated that they also discuss these things with male peers, since their class is mixed and girls are under-represented. The programmes that they often discuss are *Tienermoeders*, *That '70s Show*[43], *One Tree Hill* and *M!LF*. The second group, namely, those who discuss TV programmes with peers, also consisted of boys, but gender differences were apparent regarding the topics and programmes that they discuss. Romantic and sexual relationships between characters do not factor into their discussions; they tend to discuss the sitcoms *South Park, M!LF* and *The Simpsons*, the science fiction/thriller serial *Heroes* and the crime/mystery serial *The Mentalist*[44]. Although sexual and romantic scripts are not topics that the male teenagers discuss (or at least admit to discussing), the physical appearance of female characters does enter their conversations. Furthermore, the physical appearance of female characters can be a reason why peers are stimulated to watch a certain movie or series, and therefore, the male respondents exchange this information with their peers. This illustrates the male gaze, as described by Mulvey (1975).

The members of the last group, mostly boys, said that when talking with friends, they recall the humorous storylines or situations of a programme that they love. Such humorous on-screen situations can be integrated (or re-enacted) in their everyday lives without talking specifically about the episode or programme.

> X6 (FG4, M, 17): Yeah, like South Park or The Simpsons… yeah like such cartoon things, you sometimes talk about that, but not the day after the episode aired. But just, when something happens in your life and you can link it with such a cartoon or clip of South Park, for instance. *X4 (FG 4, M, 17) and X5 (FG4, M, 16) confirm*

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[43] The docu-series *Tienermoeders* (vijftv) follows teenage mothers from unplanned pregnancy through birth and on to adaptation to life as a mother. *That '70s Show* is centred on the lives of a group of teenagers in a fictional suburban town between 1976 and 1979. The show aired from 1998 to 2006 on the Fox Network in the US, and on 2BE in Flanders.

[44] *South Park* (1997–present) is an American animated sitcom on the Comedy Central television network, and in Flanders, the programme can be viewed on TMF. It follows four boys and their adventures in the town of South Park. The show is intended for mature audiences, but is popular among the teenage viewing audience as well. The sitcom is known for its crude language and dark humour. *The Simpsons* (1989–present) airs on Fox in the US and on VT4 in Flanders. The show is a satirical parody of a middle class American family. The American sci-fi television drama series *Heroes* (2006–2010, NBC) tells the story of ordinary people who discover that they possess superhuman abilities and how these abilities affect their lives. The show aired on VT4, as does the American police television series *The Mentalist* (2008–present, CBS). *The Mentalist* follows a 'psychic' who can read minds and who works for the police as a consultant.

2.3.2   Inability to participate in TV talk

Television appears to be a (frequent) topic of conversation, but how do teenagers feel when peers are discussing a programme or a storyline with which they are unfamiliar, either because they are not allowed to watch the programme or do not know about it? In what follows, we explore the categories of reactions regarding being unable to participate in TV talk; however, we underline that we found no gender differences in this regard. First, there is a large group of teenage respondents who are not irritated or annoyed when peers talk about television programmes that they do not watch. Some of these respondents explained they hardly experience such situations because they are allowed to watch everything on television. On the other hand, other participants underlined that there are other things to talk about, which gave us the impression that television talk is not so important in these teenagers' lives. This impression was strengthened in one of the focus groups, where the participants questioned the frequency of TV related communication among peers: 'but do we talk about television programmes that much?' (X9 – FG3, F, 16). In response to this respondent's question, the other participants offered a few examples of serials they used to discuss among friends.

A male participant clarified that he used to feel annoyed when he was younger and was unable to participate in TV talk among friends, which was normal because he was not allowed to watch much television. However, now that he is older, his parents allow him to watch more television; therefore, such situations do not arise anymore. The issues of taste and personal interests were raised among the participants, and they believe that being unable to participate in TV talk can be explained by (1) a dislike of the programme, (2) not being in the mood to watch it or (3) preferring one programme over another. A participant explained that friendship is not based on watching the same programmes.

> *X6 (FG5, F, 17): But tastes differ, right?! You don't have to watch a TV show because your friends watch it. And if you have no interest in that show, then you don't have to watch it simply for being able to talk along. Your friends are not your friends just because you watch that show.*

Several of the teenage participants pointed to the length of these discussions about television programmes as a measure for their feelings. If, for instance, such television related conversations are only brief, they expect not to feel any irritation. However, when a television related conversation goes on for a very long time, they admitted that they might get annoyed. This irritation can be explained by the teenagers' fondness for participating in television related talks and their dislike of being left out when they cannot join their friends. One of the participants

nuanced this and explained that television and non-television related conversations are alternated, which will give them the opportunity to participate in the discussion with their peers.

A last group of participants admitted that they have felt annoyed/irritated when friends have had a conversation about a programme that they had not (yet) watched. They explained that the main reason for this irritation was the feeling of being 'left out'. It is obvious that the teenagers in our focus groups like to participate in television related discussions, especially when a lot of their friends have seen the programme under discussion. In this, we can recognise a social identity and the need to be part of a bigger group.

2.3.3 *Watching a programme to participate in TV talk*

We have seen that television related conversations are common among friends. Some teenagers do not mind being unable to participate in these conversations, whereas others feel left out if they cannot participate. Thus, we asked the teenage participants if they had ever started watching a programme that their friends talked about so that they could participate in the TV related conversations, and if so, which programme that was.

We were able to distinguish two tendencies in the teenage respondents' answers. The first (and smaller) group does not or would not watch a programme in order to join television related conversations among peers. When we link this with the respondents' comments in response to the previous question (*Do you think it is irritating when friends talk about a programme that you do not or are not allowed to watch?*), we find that almost all of the respondents in this first group do not mind not participating in such TV talks. There was one male participant, however, who felt a little bit left out when he could not participate in such conversations, yet this feeling was not strong enough to compel him to watch that programme. Although some of our respondents asserted that they would not start watching the programme, they nuanced their answer throughout the focus group discussion and said that they would watch it (1) if their friends told them it was really interesting or a must-see or (2) if they changed channels and stumbled upon it. The second and largest group of teenage participants, however, had watched a certain show because it was the subject of discussion among friends or said that they would do it if the situation occurred in the future. However, their level of interest was a factor in this decision; they might tune in to a show and watch a few episodes, but if they lost interest or disliked it, they would stop watching it. The respondents clarified that their reason for tuning in to a TV show would not solely be to participate in such TV talks in the future; a few of the teenagers also stated that the television-related conversations among peers evoke curiosity and therefore they decide to watch an episode of the show in question. Moreover, the teenage viewing audience does not solely watch

programmes aimed at a youth audience, since the respondents repeatedly referred to programmes and television shows that are produced for a mature, adult audience. The humoristic Flemish programme *M!LF* was, for instance, mentioned repeatedly in the focus groups as a programme that the teenagers often watch or that had been recommended by peers. Other such programmes are *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *That '70s Show*, *Kabouter Wesley*, *Heroes* and *Lost*. No gender differences were found regarding this topic.

3 Sexual morality

A group of questions explored the topic of sexual morality among the teenage participants. In what follows, we explore the teenagers' reactions to the frequent relational and sexual scripts in television programmes and whether they consider the frequency of such scripts to be excessive. Furthermore, the questions focused on whether the teenagers compare their relationships with the fictional scripts on screen. The respondents made a number of interesting statements (e.g. a boy/man has to make the first move to seduce a girl). However, before we address these topics, we want to discuss what these young respondents consider/define as sexual images.

3.1 <u>Sexually suggestive versus sexually explicit images</u>

Before we explore the participants' answers, we feel compelled to highlight that not everyone was eager to answer this question regarding sexual content on television. Especially in the first (mixed) focus group, it seemed as if the teenage participants did not feel comfortable discussing this topic (with me or their peers). Further, in the sixth focus group, which was heterogeneous both in terms of gender and cultural background, the two first generation Turkish girls did not feel comfortable discussing this either. Their cultural background may be one reason for this, but further research is necessary. However, when we asked the respondents how they would define 'sexuality', a lot of them spontaneously compared the *One Tree Hill* clip to the types of images that they consider to be sexually suggestive material. Most of the participants considered the *One Tree Hill* clip not to be sexually explicit material, yet a lot of them considered it obvious (to them/the audience) that sexual actions were insinuated in the clip. Two participants asserted that the labelling of this *One Tree Hill* clip might vary according to the age of the viewers, as well as personal characteristics; some viewers, the participants argued, would label this as over the top, whereas others would say that this is just the beginning. The two first generation Turkish girls labelled this clip as 'too much', and they did not feel comfortable watching it (in the company of (male) peers, and/or the interviewer). The other participants in this sixth focus group did not agree and even stated that such images are very common and ordinary in our contemporary Western culture, and therefore they do not pay any attention to them anymore. It is possible that

the first generation Turkish girls' cultural and religious backgrounds are important to consider in these labelling and evaluation practices.

Sexual images are often compared with pornographic images, nudity and explicit close-ups of sexual behaviour and body parts. Furthermore, sexually explicit images would probably contain less background music, more sexual noises, such as moaning, and no bloopers, such as in the *One Tree Hill* clip. When the participants were asked where and when such sexual images can be watched, they asserted that (1) such programmes air late at night (after 11 or 12 pm) or that (2) a password is needed to access these kinds of images (pay-TV or pornographic channels). All participants agreed that children should not have access to such visually explicit material, and two participants stated that the *One Tree* Hill clip was not suitable for younger children, although others said that they had watched the same programmes when they were younger. In the second focus group, the respondents mentioned *Sex and the City*, *Sexcetera* and the Flemish movie *Bo*[45] as television series or movies that contain sexually explicit images. They labelled the sexual images in *Bo* as not romantic (or too graphic); due to the camera position and the lighting of specific scenes, the images felt so real that some participants in the second focus group felt sick watching it. Furthermore, many of the teenagers of both sexes suggested that boys (and men) like to watch sexually explicit or pornographic material (cf. sexual double standard; Kim et al., 2007: sex as masculinity, men being constantly consumed by sexual thoughts and fantasies and driven by natural urges), but a few male participants asserted that they do not (always) like these kinds of images and prefer series and movies without sexual(ly explicit) content.

One female participant wondered why explicit sexual images are incorporated in certain cultural products, such as theatre, and explained that she did not think it was necessary to incorporate such material, at least not frequently.

3.2 Relational and sexual scripts: Habituation, fatigue and functionality

The participants asserted that similar romantic and sexual scripts, like the visual material from *One Tree Hill*, are common in television programmes. The participants even stated that they 'do not pay any attention to it anymore' (FG7, M, 17), as if they have experienced 'sexually suggestive images' fatigue. This lack of reaction, or habituation, can indicate that contemporary Flemish teenagers are more liberal (and therefore do not notice such content anymore) regarding sexually suggestive images. Furthermore, the participants repeatedly mentioned that they consider the

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[45] *Sexcetera* is an American television programme which aired on the Belgian commercial television channel Kanaal 2 (now: 2BE). In the Flemish movie *Bo* (2010), a fifteen-year-old girl leaves her ordinary home and enters the exciting nightlife, where she becomes an escort living the fast life, until she is arrested and locked up in a juvenile institution.

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presence of such images to be normal, as they are part of almost every series, and sexuality is part of human life (normalisation). 'In my opinion, if it wouldn't be integrated [in television programmes] anymore, it would feel really weird. It's part of everything, you know?' (FG2, F, 18) (cf. Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Felten et al., 2009). Yet, the teenagers evaluate sexually explicit and pornographic images differently (see infra).

The teenagers experience different feelings when they watch these scripts; we did not recognise Ang's (1985) notion of aspirational identification among all female participants. In the third focus group, for instance, the girls expressed a desire for similar things (e.g., a romantic date, a handsome boy running through the rain to stop them) to happen in daily life; however, they are realistic and 'know that something like that will never happen' (FG3, F, 16). Some of the female participants in the third focus group linked representations, such as being saved by the most handsome guy from school, or having a super romantic date, with the American Dream, which they explained as idealistic and romantic (e.g. the prince on the white horse, leaving for the airport and your boyfriend runs after you in the rain). A few girls appreciated the informational side of fictional scripts about love and relationships (functionality), whereas a few participants (both boys and girls) were indifferent towards them ('I really don't care about love in TV!' - FG4, M, 17), and a distinct group (mostly boys) expressed dislike for this kind of content because it is too dominant, too idealistic and boring, or too predictable. Some, mostly males, even admitted that they get angry sometimes when watching such scripts. The teenagers in the second focus group said that they consider personal characteristics to be important in their reaction to television content. One girl, for instance, does not really like these kinds of representations, as she lacks melodramatic sentiment and therefore does not share the same joy as her friends and classmates when viewing those representations. This girl's lack of melodramatic sentiment was touched upon by one of the other participants, when the girl indicated that 'those [programmes] are all too corny and I'm not a big fan of such things' (FG4, F, 16). In other focus groups, it was mentioned that reactions also depend on how viewers feel while watching television at that specific moment. Sometimes they long for romantic images or storylines, while at other times, they do not appreciate them at all. Romantic and sexual portrayals are, therefore, functional, as they provide viewers with possible scripts related to these topics (e.g. 'Sometimes, you think about what you saw on TV and reflect about what I'd do if my boyfriend cheated on me.' FG3, F, 16) (cf. MacKeogh, 2004). These results suggest that media representations fulfil different functions, such as entertainment, escapism or information, that they evoke different emotions, and that personal characteristics (e.g. emotional well-being) are influential factors in the evaluation of television content (cf. Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; MacKeogh, 2004). More importantly, all participants in the third focus group believe that under the influence of these sexual media representations, sexuality has become less taboo (though it is still taboo among their

grandparents) and that this plays an important role in the way that they talk and think about sexuality. They label themselves as liberal and permissive regarding sex-related topics and often 'make jokes and see everything in a sexualised way, even when it has nothing to do with it' (FG3, F, 15), 'like [sexualising] the lyrics of a K3[46] song' (FG3, F, 17).

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

3.3 Sexual scripts and pornographic content: Frequency and protecting the 'innocent'

In general, the participants found the number of sexually suggestive images on television acceptable (cf. Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Felten et al., 2009; MacKeogh, 2004). It was stated repeatedly during the discussions that there are not too many images of this kind and that no explicitly pornographic or other sexually offensive visual material is really shown, except in late-night programmes (after 11:00–12:00 pm), on pornographic channels, or on pay-TV. Here, the difference between sexually suggestive and sexually explicit images was highlighted ('There's no real sex on TV.' FG1, F, 16, versus 'Yes, there is. At night!' FG1, M, 16). The presence of explicit images on such programmes and channels was mostly addressed by boys, in both the mixed and same-sex groups, which can be interpreted as a hegemonic performance of masculinity (Nayak & Kehily, 1996).

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[46] K3 is a Flemish girl band made up of three women whose songs are aimed at young children. However, some of their lyrics can be interpreted differently, in a more mature, sexually suggestive way.

Acceptance of the amount of sexual scripts does not imply that the participants are equally enthusiastic about them. More boys than girls expressed annoyance at a dominant storyline being interrupted by this subplot. One of the participants in the second focus group said, 'there are more sexual (suggestive) images on television than there were a few years ago' (FG2, M, 18). According to the teenagers, each contemporary series contains some nudity, although they noted that this tendency is greater in American series than in Flemish ones ('Those are less slutty' FG2, F, 18). The respondents most critically evaluated music videos, especially rap music and Lady Gaga's music videos, in which 'women are depicted as cheap whores' (FG2, F, 18). However, one girl believes that these images have always been present, but 'when we were younger, we didn't pay attention to them or our parents didn't let us. But now (…) we have grown up and are therefore allowed to watch them' (FG2, F, 18). The so-called chick flicks, or 'girl movies' as some of the participants (both male and female) called them, were discussed as well; the teenagers connected these movies with stereotypical representations of love and romance, and stated that they are full of clichés and thus lack quality. This genre of films is designed to appeal to, although not exclusively, a female target audience, and although some female participants regard such movies as irritating, others admitted to enjoying them for the characteristics of the genre (i.e. a predictable story about a boy and a girl who fall in love, have a hard time coming together, but live happily ever after) and because such movies can be enjoyed without having to think.

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

Although the majority of the teens did not criticise the frequency of sexually suggestive images on television, they agreed that there is no need for more of this type of imagery. A few boys were the exception to this prevailing discourse; they joked about the depressing number of sexual(ly suggestive and/or explicit) images on television (e.g. 'There can never be enough [sexual images].' FG7, M, 17). However, they reformulated their comments ('No seriously, it doesn't really matter to me.' FG1, M, 16), whereupon all the boys in the same-sex groups agreed that it does not matter to them. Their comments about the lack of pornographic content may be

interpreted as the performance of hegemonic masculinity (Kim et al., 2007; sex as masculinity, men being constantly consumed by sexual thoughts and fantasies and driven by natural urges), but one could also interpret this kind of statement as an indication of their willingness to be more progressive or more open regarding explicit images. Similar comments were not found in the mixed groups. Some participants, mostly female, evaluated pornographic material as over the top and said that it should not be tolerated (cf. sexual double standard). Among these participants were the first-generation Turkish girls, and we believe that, in this matter, cultural background may be an important factor to consider. The teenagers labelled programmes such as *Sexcetera* and *100 Hete Vragen*[47], which contain explicit sexual content, as over the top and questioned their place on television. The participants said that they would be more likely to consult the Internet for information about sexuality than television, since the Internet gives users the opportunity to actively seek out answers to their questions, while the television audience has no influence on what will be discussed in a certain programme. In particular, they regarded the Internet as the appropriate place to search for explicit and more practical information about sexuality and sexual acts, whereas television seems more appropriate to learn about relationships and love. However, the respondents were critical about the reliability of online content. The notion of the active audience can be noted here, since media were listed hierarchically, depending on the type of information required. A male participant stated that 'you have to experiment a bit' (FG4, M, 17) instead of consulting any media for sex-related information, which can be read as a performance of masculinity (see supra) and the construction of a sexual self (Johansson 2007, see infra).

3.4   Personal experiences and deconstructing fictional representations

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

> X5 (FG5, F, 16): [T]hey always have time for each other on TV. You can visit the one you love at whatever time of the day and you can go out at night. (…) [I]n reality, (…) relationships often fail because partners do not have enough time to spend together, because they are both very busy.

> X9 (FG1, F, 16): Everything is always so perfect. If you're in love, then the other one is too. Love is always returned, and it doesn't happen that someone says 'Sorry, no, I'm not in love with you'.

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[47] *100 Hete Vragen* is a local Flemish production that was broadcast on the commercial television channel, Kanaal 2 (now: 2BE).

Dramatised scripts cause great scepticism among our participants, as do idealistic and exaggerated representations (such as dramatic fights between friends or lovers, or best friends stealing each other's boy or girlfriends). Such scripts do not add realism to programmes either. Both the male and female respondents labelled these as clichéd representations, in which certain positive and negative personal characteristics or situations are exaggerated until any sense of realism has evaporated. Some believe that girls are too exemplary, lack assertive capacities and always look perfect, while others believe that fictional programmes also show assertive girls in relationships. Yet, the respondents agreed that representations on television are often black and white, whereas everyday life is greyer. A distinct group of mostly boys mentioned that '(sexual) relationships progress faster on television than they do in real life' (FG4, F, 16). Examples of this include replacing partners quickly, starting a new relationship with someone the character hardly knows, hastily taking the step towards a sexual relationship, having sex even before they have a relationship and barely having a relationship when deciding to live together. The next statement[48] illustrates this perfectly:

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

The teenagers agreed on the presence of stereotypical representations of relationships in television programmes, but this does not exclude the premise that such representations function as a reference point. Additionally, the participants stated that they recognise certain aspects or characteristics of their personal relationships in these programmes. Regarding this matter, we could distinguish gender differences. On the one hand, most of the boys in both the mixed and same-sex groups claimed that they are not interested in such things and do not recognise any aspect of their current relationships on television. They explained that these fictional representations are too artificial and perfect; therefore, they do not measure up to the events that happen in real life. Most of the girls in the homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, on the other hand, provided more nuanced statements, sharing the belief that some aspects function as a reference point (e.g. a fight between friends or lovers) or are indeed realistic (e.g. the emotional problems that gay teenagers encounter when exposing their sexuality). A group consisting mostly of girls explained that they unintentionally compare their relationships with those on television, long for a perfect relationship or dream of going out on a perfect, romantic date. However, they also realise that these are fictional formats and that real life is different. These teens also make the distinction between the North American and Flemish cultures, and they contextualise fictitious

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[48] Although the respondent referred to fictional television scripts in this quotation, it is also possible (and likely) that other media, such as movies, contain similar stereotypical representations. Further research regarding this matter is therefore necessary.

representations of these differences. They realise that dating is an American phenomenon and that relationships in Flanders start differently: 'We don't date. [In America] they date for over a month and have sex after every date. And even then, they don't really know if they're a couple yet!' (FG3, F, 17).

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

3.5   Interlude: Reactions to *Gossip Girl*

We showed a second clip in the middle of the focus group, to stimulate discussion about sexual norms and values. The respondents saw a sequence from *Gossip Girl* (S01E01 – 'Pilot') in which the male character, Chuck, attempts to get the young female character Jenny drunk in order to sleep with her. Before we explore the respondents' comments on the topic of sexual norms and values, we shall describe their reactions to this clip and its content.

When the moderator mentioned that the group was going to be shown a second clip, from *Gossip Girl*, a lot of the respondents start talking about the series. Most of them had heard of the series or had watched it in the past, but only a few (female) respondents said that they still watch the series. While watching the clip, most of the teens were quiet, or at least they were at the beginning of the clip; further along, some of the respondents started laughing or giving feedback/criticism on what they were seeing. They predicted what would happen, and these predictions were probably based on their experiences with previous fictional media representations (in similar or other programmes) or real life experiences. Some of the boys made

fun of the clip and mocked the characters' actions (e.g. Chuck trying to get Jenny drunk and then seducing her; Jenny being naïve and 'stupid' in following Chuck to a secluded place). The boys also laughed at Chuck's wardrobe. In one focus group, the series *Gossip Girl* was labelled as a 'girls' series' by both male and female respondents, referring to the specific characteristics of the genre (i.e. the focus on friendship, love, romance and relationships) (cf. chick flick – see *4.1 Sexual scripts and pornographic content: Frequency and protecting the 'innocent'*).

3.6 <u>Sexual norms, values and the sexual double standard</u>

Finally, we examined the participants' opinions and attitudes towards the sexual double standard and towards sexual norms and values, which are often woven into the storylines of popular contemporary fictional programmes. First, we raised the premise that 'a boy who changes partners repeatedly is cool, and a girl who does the same is a slut' to elicit reactions towards the sexual double standard. Almost all of the teens stressed, 'we're all equal' (FG8, M, 14); therefore, the evaluation of such behaviour should not differ across gender (cf. Felton et al., 2009). Yet, the first generation Turkish respondents underlined that girls are not allowed to do the same; however, we did not talk this through, and therefore we do not know if this comment reflects the participants' personal opinions or the actual practices within the society/culture. However, it was mentioned in each group (mixed and same-sex) that contemporary society and parents tolerate this behaviour more for boys than girls, and that the term 'slut' has a more negative connotations than the term 'player'. The roles of television, education and dominant societal discourse were also addressed in this context. One participant said that 'boys are stimulated due to similar representations of male role models in fictional programmes and movies, whereas girls and females are often portrayed in a stereotypical manner regarding dating' (FG5, F, 16). Notwithstanding this prevailing discourse, the majority of the teens believe that this behaviour 'implies the same negative undertone' (FG2, M, 18). Teens are loyal to their friends and are not likely to criticise close friends who behave in such ways. However, 'peers, they do not know very well can be criticised [about this behaviour]' (FG3, F, 16). Moreover, some respondents confessed that they evaluate girls' behaviour more negatively than that of boys, which contradicts their previous statements and illustrates the difference between opinions and practices in daily life. When asked why they do this, they offered possible reasons such as the influence of peers and the importance of age and maturity. Some females also wondered if they take part in trashing girls behind their backs to make themselves feel better or because they feel insecure.

> *X4 (FG4, M, 17): I think that they [boys] say things like that to brag and look tough and cool. *X3 (FG4, M, 17) agrees*, but that, deep inside, they actually like that girl. They're influenced by others. Two years ago, when we were a bit younger, we were also easily influenced, more so than we are now.*

Now you have your own opinion, and when others have something to say about that, you think 'I don't care'. But when you're younger, you're more aware of what others say and you're easily and more influenced.

As this quotation illustrates, both boys and girls believe that (younger) boys often brag about their love conquests. This was addressed in several of the focus groups, yet some male participants disagreed and nuanced this thesis.

When asked about fictional representations of dating and getting together with a partner, almost all of the participants shared that they think gender stereotypical dating rules should be updated in television programmes. For instance, girls should be allowed to take the first step in a relationship or to invite someone on a date. The male teenagers especially stressed that girls are allowed to let a boy know that they are interested. However, boys want girls to do this more often, although some of the male teenagers stated that they also like the act of seducing and winning a girl's heart. Although most of our respondents agreed that girls are allowed to initiate the first step, almost all of them believe that in contemporary society, the traditional perspective remains present, and it is still (expected to be) a male's task. Both girls and boys mentioned that girls prefer to be seduced and both genders consider it normal for boys to initiate a relationship, which some male respondents said they do not mind.

*X5 (FG4, M, 16): I think that it should come a little bit from both sides, but maybe a boy is always going to take the first step. That is maybe a bit of a cliché, but I believe that it is still how it should go. *X4 (FG4, M, 17) agrees**

Most of the girls admitted to waiting to pursue a boy until he shows interest, and these female participants take this interest as a compliment. Many of the girls mentioned that they would probably not take the first step, as the following comment illustrates: 'Yeah, but I think that it is mostly a masculine job [to seduce a girl]' (X8 – FG3, F, 15). This lack of initiative can be caused by insecurity, namely, because they are not sure the feelings are reciprocated, and girls fear that their feelings will be hurt, but when they know for sure, the girls said that they take the first step. The teenage respondents considered the possibility that boys have more courage. Here, socially and culturally constructed norms and expectations are reduced and essentialised to biological differences between the sexes.

It was regularly stated that when two people are in love with each other, they should both invest in getting together. A balance was often mentioned as a metaphor to refer to the equal investment of both partners. Playing hard to get is something that the male participants do not

appreciate, and they stated that it is a reason to stop the act of seduction. Remarkably, a few male participants labelled girls who take the first step as slutty (and/or drunk), but two male friends did not agree with this. The teenagers referred to the role of television regarding this subject; they believe that stereotypical representations of dating and seduction are interwoven in contemporary fictional programmes and that they influence young people's view of reality and enforce girls' level of insecurity (see previous paragraph). When asked to give a few examples of fictional programmes in which a female character takes the first step in a romantic relationship, the teens could not think of many examples. They mentioned two movies (*Bruce Almighty* and *American Pie)* and two teen drama series (*Skins*[49] and *One Tree Hill)* as possible examples of a girl taking the first step. Those respondents who offered *One Tree Hill* as an example explained that the female protagonist is extremely beautiful and her physical appearance strengthens her self-esteem; therefore, she knows that she will be successful in seducing the male protagonist. The respondents confirmed that their spectrum of possible representations consisted mostly of male characters taking the initiative.

As examples of casual sex are abundant in contemporary (youth-oriented) programmes (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002; Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2012), we asked the respondents for their opinions on sex outside of a long-term relationship. A small group consisting mostly of girls replied that they 'don't really know' (FG5, F, 14)[50] what to think about this topic, and another very small group replied that they cannot judge this behaviour because it is 'a personal choice' (FG3, F, 16). Apart from these groups, there were two clear trends, namely, not tolerating versus tolerating. The group (solely girls) that does not tolerate such behaviour believes that sexual intimacy should be part of a loving relationship. Among this group were the first generation Turkish girls, who said that they consider sexual relationships to be reserved for marriage, and we believe that their cultural context and cultural tradition are important factors to consider in this debate, although further research is necessary. The majority of the respondents (in both the heterogeneous and same-sex groups), however, are tolerant, but dissociate themselves from the behaviour; they pointed out that they would not engage in similar behaviour.

> *X5 (FG1, F, 16): When you have sex and you then don't see the other anymore? No, I would not like that…*

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[49] The fantasy comedy movie *Bruce Almighty* (2003), starring Jim Carrey and Jennifer Aniston, tells the story of a man who becomes God for a week. *American Pie* (1999), on the other hand, is a comedy that focuses on four teenage boys and the pact that they enter into to lose their virginity by prom night. *Skins* (2007–present) tells the story of a group of British teenagers who try to grow up and find love and happiness in the English town of Bristol. This teen drama series airs on E4.
[50] Age and maturity, as well as the presence of older peers, might be a significant factor for these participants.

X4 (FG1, F, 16): I think it's weird, that you can do that without feeling anything for your partner. What is nice about that? It's pure lust and no love, and it's exactly for that [sex] that you do it, right?

It was not only the female respondents who shared this opinion; some boys agreed as well:

X6 (FG4, M, 17): If you have sex without love, I think that it would be half less…
X4 (FG4, M, 17): Enjoyable.
X3 (FG4, M, 17): Fun.
X6 (FG4, M, 17): Fun, or how would you say it…

The respondents also agreed that such sexual actions are only fair if both participants are single and not already in a relationship. Our respondents value trust and commitment between lovers: 'cheating is not done and not appreciated' (FG3, F, 16). Equally important is both participants 'agreeing to this one-night stand, and that no one ends up emotionally hurt because intentions were not talked through' (FG5, F, 16). Moreover, they stated that the participants in a sexual fling have to be sure that they will not regret it or fall in love. Some of the teenagers believe that alcohol is a mitigating factor in such flings, whereas others did not agree ('I think that's even more repulsive.' - FG1, F, 16), though they do believe that alcohol influences teenagers to engage in sexual flings more quickly. Remarkably, and in contrast to previous comments (see the previous paragraph), girls are judged more negatively regarding the topic of casual sex and are labelled 'sluts' when they engage in casual flings. This serves as an illustration of the sexual double standard and once again shows the difference between opinions and daily practices. The teens believe that age should be considered when engaging in casual sex, yet they also stressed that age is relative, since some teenagers are more mature than others. Previous relationships can be reference points, and the respondents expressed that being in a few long-term relationships is necessary before someone has casual sex. According to them, trusting the person with whom you have casual sex is also important. The teenagers (both boys and girls) believe that the loss of virginity should happen in a long-term relationship and with someone you love instead of during a casual fling.

The last postulated black/white premise was that boys want sex, whereas girls seek love. Almost all of the participants disagreed with this assertion and stated that this is no longer realistic in contemporary society. A loving relationship is more important than sexual intimacy, although 'it's always nice when sex is part of it!' (FG1, M, 16). This evoked laughter among the other male participants, and this performance can be interpreted as both a performance of hegemonic masculinity and of a sexual self. Some participants nuanced this premise and explained that there are always some boys who prefer one-night stands to long-term relationships. The participants

asserted that male teens talk about sex more openly than girls do and that 'boys initiate a sexual relationship faster [than girls]' (FG2, F, 18). Some of the teenagers disagreed, though, and expressed that the step towards a sexual relationship should be/is taken by both partners. A few male participants believe that it is the boy who takes the first step and that the girl should guard their boundaries or voice any objections she might have ('If the girl doesn't say anything, then the boy can do what he wants.' FG8, M, 16) (cf. de Graaf et al., 2008). Girls are allowed to have sexual feelings and desires; however, some of the male respondents believe that girls do not always feel confident in voicing them. It was stated several times that boys are considered to have a stronger need for sex than girls and that male teenagers can make the distinction between sex and love, whereas girls cannot separate the two. Here, gender differences were not only noted in relation to sexual scripts, but also in gendered perceptions of each other. Several participants believe that gender is not the only factor that should be taken into account and that it also depends on personal characteristics. The first generation Turkish girls did not elaborate upon this question, and it is possible that they did not feel comfortable discussing this matter (e.g. due to the presence of the moderator, two male class mates or the group itself) or that they had an opinion which differed from the majority of their peers and therefore did not feel comfortable speaking up.

4 Representations: Realism, stereotypes and how to do it differently

In this last section, we explore the reception of fictional representations of peers and gay characters, since the construction of gender and sexual identities is central to youth, and such representations and scripts can function as symbolic resources for the young viewing audience. We asked the teenage respondents to elaborate upon the level of realism of such representations, and explored their knowledge of gay representations. Finally, we wondered if/how the respondents would represent themselves (i.e. representations of teenagers) differently if they were television producers.

4.1 Representations of peers

4.1.1 Evaluation

None of the participants labelled the fictional representations of teenagers in contemporary screen culture as realistic, and gender differences could not be found in their comments about the teenage fictional representations. They discussed several specific topics, such as teenage characters' physical appearance, the actors who play the characters and frequently recognised

stereotypes. All respondents agreed that the characters are too beautiful (or more beautiful than the average teenager) and look too perfect. Furthermore, some respondents also believe that there is a black and white distinction regarding the physical appearance of teenage fictional characters; specifically, there are perfect and good-looking people on one side of the spectrum and less good-looking[51] teenagers, such as nerds, on the other side. Moreover, less good-looking people are often bullied, the respondents believe, or less-perfect looking characters are not or are under-represented on television. The respondents believe that the motivation behind casting good-looking characters is the show's ratings, since less good-looking characters might not attract viewers and plain looking teens are not or are less interesting. A distinction between North American and Flemish programmes was drawn here: beautiful people are always part of the cast of North American television programmes, whereas Flemish programmes contain more diverse and average looking characters. Furthermore, according to the participants, fictional female teenagers in American mainstream programmes always have a perfect figure (i.e. they conform to the conventional beauty standard), and thinness is glorified within these representational politics. For female characters, the conventional beauty standards are blonde, fashionably cut hair, being tall, having large breasts and wearing make-up. Boys, on the other hand, are, according to our teenage respondents, most often muscular and have six-pack abs. Male teenagers on television are sleeker and have bigger chests than the average teenager, they said. Furthermore, the respondents believe that the make-up department covers up possible facial imperfections, such as pimples. Not only do the characters of (North American) fictional programmes have an impeccable appearance, good-looking characters are, according to the respondents, often represented as successful: a good-looking student get good grades, is also popular among girls, and is admired by his peers. However, not everyone agreed with this thesis, since some respondents remembered storylines in which smart teenagers were portrayed as nerds and were mocked.

The respondents made several comments on the age of the actors/actresses who play teenage characters, and they stated that it is unrealistic for a 22-year-old man to portray a 16-year-old boy. The use of an *older* actor gives the impression that a teenage boy looks more masculine, and thus the audience receives an incorrect impression, according to the respondents. They also find unrealistic representations in the storylines involving teenage characters (e.g. how and where they spend their time) and the situations in which young people find themselves in these storylines (e.g. stalking, kidnapping). It also appears, the respondents said, that fictional teenage characters hardly do any homework, spend almost no time at school and are allowed to spend a lot of time outdoors with their friends and loved ones. Parents are often absent, and if they supervise their teenage kids, the respondents noticed a black and white distinction: some parents are extremely

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[51] The respondents used the word 'ugly', but we prefer to use of the term 'less good-looking' instead.

old fashioned, causing their teenage children to revolt against their authority, while other parents do not set any boundaries and allow their children to spend a lot of time outside the home. Not only did our teenage respondents recognise this black and white distinction in the representations of parental figures; they also saw it in the representations of teenagers' drug and alcohol use, sexuality, romantic relationships, etcetera. Everything is exaggerated, the respondents asserted, and representations are often stereotypical and full of clichés. Girls are often represented as drama queens or are portrayed as bitches, and teenage boys are often picking fights. Real life, the respondents said, is neither black nor white, but grey.

The teenage respondents believe that these fictional programmes give the viewing audience a wrong impression, yet they also believe that programmes with realistic teenage representations would not be as interesting (see *4.1.2 Producer for one day: What would you do differently?*). Some respondents claimed that these representational politics are influenced by the dominant ideological discourse in our contemporary society (e.g. drug use is always connected with 'the bad' guy) and that certain storylines are meant to contain a moral and educational message (e.g. to prevent teens from, for instance, using drugs). A distinction was made by the respondents between North American and Flemish television productions, since they postulated that the former contain more stereotypical and extreme (e.g. eventful) representations as compared to the latter, for example, *16+: Uit het leven gegrepen*[52].

4.1.2   Producer for one day: What would you do differently?

In the previous section, the respondents evaluated the level of realism of the fictional representations of teenagers and it was obvious they did not find them realistic. However, we wanted to know if the respondents would represent young people differently if they were producers, and if so, what they would change. One of the first responses, provided in each focus group, was that teenagers should be represented more realistically, in everyday life situations. This implies that the fictional characters' lives should be more pragmatic (e.g. less drama, more positive portrayals) and the actors should resemble the diverse teenage population (e.g. less perfect-looking actors, less muscular, less stereotypical, wearing less make-up). Furthermore, the frequency of scripts involving teenage characters should increase in fictional programmes, the respondents claimed, thereby implying that they are dissatisfied with the current frequency. Notwithstanding, the teens also believe that such realistic representations would be less popular among the viewing audience, and they fear that such representations would be boring and

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[52] *16+* (2005–2008) is a Flemish teen drama series of the Belgian entertainment and TV-drama production company Kanakna, broadcast on één. The series is described as a blend of documentary and fiction, since it combines actors who portray unscripted, real-life events. It follows a group of students who go to school in Brussels and struggle with school, friendship, relationships and other age-related issues.

uninteresting, and would therefore fail to attract a lot of viewers. The motivations behind television-viewing were addressed within this context: the teenage respondents often watch television to see things that are unlikely to happen in their own lives; therefore, all the drama in TV series is a fun way to pass the time. The perfect world represented on television is exciting to watch and dream of, the respondents asserted.

> *X6 (FG5, F, 17): I think people watch television for entertainment, so if you watch TV and you see things that happen in everyday life, then that's not entertaining, I think. You find yourself in a daze where everything is good and pretty, and that's nice to watch.*

The teens understand that a large viewing audience is important, for instance, for the existence of the television programme, and the respondents fear that more realistic representations will not result in large viewing numbers. Therefore, all teenagers in the fourth focus group (heterogeneous) agreed that they would not change anything at all. In the third focus group (heterogeneous), it was mentioned that more diverse, more positive and more realistic representations would positively affect the participants' and audience's self-image (referring to the female participants of this focus group). Here, the impression was given that the female viewers are affected by the fictional representations of peers; however, we cannot make this conclusion, and further research is therefore necessary.

4.2 Representations of gay characters

4.2.1 (S)He is gay: Awareness of and familiarity with gay characters

As an introduction to the topic of gay representations on television, we wanted to assess whether our teenage respondents were familiar with fictional gay characters in television formats. Therefore, we asked for examples of gay characters as an introductory question. The results show that the respondents were familiar with a variety of fictional gay characters in national and international television programmes and famous gay people. In each focus group, several participants were able to name a gay character, a television programme or a movie in which a gay actor or gay character has a (leading) role. Different genres were, for instance, national telenovelas (e.g. *Sara*), national soaps (e.g. *Familie*), national and international teen drama series (e.g. *Dawson's Creek* and *Skins*) and lifestyle programmes (e.g. *De Heren Maken de Man*[53]). *Brokeback*

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[53] The Flemish telenovela *Sara* (2007–2008; VTM) is an adaption of the Columbian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea* and focuses on the life of Sara, an ugly duckling who fails to grab the attention of her good-looking boss, until a makeover makes him notice and fall in love with her. *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) is an American teen drama television series that depicts the fictional lives of a group of close friends through high school and college. On the lifestyle programme *Heren Maken de Man* (KanaalTWee – 2BE), a team of

Mountain[54] was the only movie with gay characters that the respondents remembered. In several instances, the respondents did not know the name of the actor or fictional character in a television programme, but did remember his/her homosexual identity (in the television programme or in everyday life). The most frequently mentioned programmes and/or gay characters were the reality programme *Mijn Restaurant*, telenovela *David*[55] and Doctor Ann from the Flemish soap opera *Thuis*. Although we asked about fictional gay characters, several famous gay people in Belgium were mentioned as well: Koen Crucke, Felicé, Timo Descamps, Yasmine, Sarah Bettens, Showbizz Bart. In addition, the international, famous singer Mika was mentioned. We think it is remarkable, however, that the smallest group of fictional characters, famous personalities and programmes mentioned were English (both North American and British). We had expected that the teens would mention more English-speaking characters, people or programmes, since they are most popular among teens (cf. Adriaens et al., 2011b) and because English-speaking programmes are frequently broadcast on Flemish television channels (Chalaby, 2006; De Bens & de Smaele, 2001). Furthermore, all examples were artists working in the entertainment sector. The teenagers did not mention any athletes or news anchors.

4.2.2 (S)He is so gay: Evaluation

Next, we explored our teenage respondents' ideas about fictional gay characters and asked them if these representations resembled their real-life experiences with gay people. Although it was never our intention to investigate their personal opinions about homosexuality, we saw opinions interwoven in some of the teenagers' answers. According to the respondents, fictional representations of gays and lesbians are 'often marked with stereotypes' (FG2, F, 18), and gay men's characteristics in particular are enhanced and exaggerated in television programmes. The respondents noted that a male homosexual identity is defined around feminine characteristics, and most expressed the belief that the characteristics of fictional gay men are exaggerated, with a specific emphasis on feminine features. They situated these feminine characteristics on different levels, such as dress codes (e.g. wearing a purse), physical codes (e.g. swaying hips) and social and cultural codes (e.g. tanned skin, up-to-date with the latest fashion, friends with many women) (cf. Buijs, Hekma & Duyvendak, 2009). These feminine characteristics were recognised as (one of) the main element(s) through which the homosexual identity of a male character is established.

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five gay men give a heterosexual man a style makeover. This programme is an adaptation of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.
[54] *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) tells the story of a forbidden and secret relationship between two cowboys and their lives over the years.
[55] *David* is a Flemish telenovela, which aired on VTM from 2009 to 2010, and it tells the story of David, who was stranded on an uninhabited island at the age of twelve. Years later, he is discovered by Sofie who takes him with her to Belgium.

The number of lesbians in television programmes was evaluated differently than the presence of gay men. The teenage respondents stated that fewer lesbians seem to be present in television fiction. Considering the research of Batchelor, Kitzinger and Burtney (2004), this observation may be correct. The represented lesbian characters were evaluated like their male counterparts, namely, that the focus in the representation of lesbians is mainly on masculine characteristics. However, the participants in the second and third focus groups (both mixed gender) disagreed and stated that a lesbian character often has extremely feminine features. Moreover, these teenagers cited that lesbians in contemporary television programmes are often (extremely) sexually active (e.g. *A shot at love with Tila, Tequila*[56]) (cf. 'lipstick lesbians'). It was mentioned in the second focus group that fictional representations of lesbians are often a-stereotypical, and examples of 'lesbians as beautiful vamps' (FG2, F, 18) or 'super, over the top sluts' (FG2, F, 18) were raised, illustrating hegemonic discourses of masculinity and femininity (a 'butch' is unattractive; cf. Jackson, 2009). This is what Jackson (2009) called the attempt to 'de-lesbianize' lesbians, so that they are 'unthreatening to a heterosexual audience' (p. 208). These representations are integrated in a broader post-feminist discourse in contemporary popular culture in which physically beautiful and sexy women are the norm (Gill, 2009; McRobbie, 2004). Naomi and Emily from the British teen drama series *Skins* were mentioned in the third focus group, and they were praised because they are not represented as butches, but as normal 'girlie-girls'. *Skins* has been rewarded and praised because of 'the incorporation of a realistic intimate long-term sexual lesbian relationship, something that hardly occurs [between fictional characters in contemporary media formats]' (FG3, F, 15). In the sixth focus group (homogeneous, only girls), it was mentioned twice that fictional gay relationships do not last very long and that the intimacy between gay characters is mostly absent, with the exception of the teen drama series *Skins*. These teenagers advocated for more such representations. One participant in the seventh focus group (homogeneous, only boys), mentioned what Diamond (2005) called 'hetero flexibility': female teenage characters are often shown experimenting with other girls, and this experimentation is unthreatening to heterosexuality because 'in the end, these characters turn out to be straight' (FG7, M, 18). These examples can be seen to illustrate the fluid character of sexual identity and behaviour. It also shows that adolescence can be a period during which teens experiment and test their boundaries, and the teenage respondents showed tolerance towards girls experimenting with other girls.

Several studies (e.g. Batchelor et al., 2004; Davis, 2004; Walton, 2011) have illustrated that coming out of the closet is a common storyline in contemporary television programmes in which

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[56] *A shot at love with Tila, Tequila* is an American television bi-sexual dating game show (2007; MTV) about sixteen heterosexual male contestants and sixteen lesbian-identified female contestants who compete for Tila Tequila's attention and affection. In Belgium, the show was also aired on MTV.

confused teenagers, often bullied by their classmates and peers, are shown. In some focus groups, these representations were valued positively because homosexual viewers may identify with them (cf. media representations as symbolic resources; Buckingham, 2008b), while others expressed the belief that coming out of the closet in daily life is accompanied by less drama than what is portrayed in fictional representations. The teenage respondents believe that stereotypes are also integrated in daily life, yet they mentioned that gay people are more diverse than the gay characters on television. Production and marketing strategies thus arose in this context; the respondents mentioned the possibility of subtly incorporating elements through which a homosexual identity can be defined, although they believe that 'it's common in television series that gay men are represented more gay than they are in everyday life' (FG5, F, 16). Here, the teenage respondents addressed the production context of television programmes, since it seems that, in the context of gay characters, the use of obvious, exaggerated stereotypes was considered by the respondents as a convention of televised representations.

4.2.3 *I'm so not gay: The performance of gender through television talk*

In this section, we will focus upon the evaluations of gay representations and their interrelation with specific ideological gender performances. Additionally, we will analyse and report gender differences regarding these performances. As mentioned earlier, a male homosexual identity is, according to the respondents, irrevocably connected with the performance of feminine characteristics. These feminine features were, in all focus groups (homogeneous and heterogeneous), considered as (one of) the key element(s) of homosexuality. This tends to be judged as 'not normal', as is shown by the comment of a 16-year-old girl (FG3): 'I do believe that there are some gays that are like..., who are "normal" men'. A specific performance of masculinity that differs from the hegemonic discourse, recognised in a male body, is considered anomalous. This abnormality is not only connected with gay men, but with lesbians as well, since they are often labelled as 'butch' (i.e. having masculine characteristics). These comments illustrate that gender and sexual identities intersect; they also show that biological sex and socially constructed gender are interrelated in teens' minds (e.g. a man should behave in a manly way, and hegemonic masculinity is connected with heterosexuality). This interrelation between biological sex, the socially constructed gender and sexuality can be seen as examples of Butler's heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1993). Moreover, a hegemonic definition of masculinity was recognised in the focus groups discussions in beliefs such as 'authentic' men do not care for fashion and do not sway their hips (cf. Connell, 1995; Plummer, 2001).

The male participants evaluated lesbians and the frequency of representations of lesbians differently than they did the frequency of representations of gay men, but we did not note this

difference among the female participants. The boys tended to be more tolerant towards (fictional) lesbians than they were towards (representations of) gay men. This became obvious in comments such as 'gays are often bullied and that's how it should be' (FG7, M, 18) or 'More gays on my television screen? No increase in gay men for me though, that's for sure!' (FG7, M, 17). Moreover, the male participants in two focus groups (one mixed and one homogeneous focus group) labelled lesbian representations as hot and alluring. The boys evaluated these representations as male titillations ('male fantasy lesbians'; Gill, 2009; Jackson, 2009), and this displayed a hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity. In this hegemonic performance, two women making out is something that turns on 'real' men. Thus, sex is seen as masculine; men are constantly consumed by sexual thoughts and fantasies, and they are driven by natural urges (Kim et al., 2007). When talking about fictional gay characters among his peers, one boy stressed that he did 'not really watch such programmes in which extremely feminine gay men are part of the cast' (FG1, M, 16). This comment can be read as the performance of a certain kind of masculinity, in which watching a genre/programme with gay characters is unmanly and not done by 'authentic' men (cf. Ging, 2005). Another performance of this hegemonic interpretation of masculinity was in laughter at the subject of male gay characters, which was a recurring act in the focus groups that consisted of boys only. The boys especially ridiculed gay characters who display extreme levels of femininity. According to one of the boys, this ridiculing is recognised among all Flemish viewers ('Those [gay men] of, for instance, *Mijn Restaurant*, everyone in Flanders laughs with them, I think' – FG8, M, 14). The same boy joked about avoiding gay men ('someone who has a limp wrist' – FG8, M, 14) because he did not want to catch the 'disease' (Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Buijs et al., 2009). His comment evoked laughter among his peers, after which he continued, 'A more serious and "normal" character, though, like Doctor Ann from the Flemish series *Thuis* was acceptable because she was normal like everybody else' (FG8, M, 14). When this participant was asked to explain why he compared homosexuality with a transmitted disease, he laughed away his comment and explained that it was only a joke and that he is tolerant towards gays. In this context of (male) peers, labelling homosexuality as a disease and joking about avoiding gays can function as a performance of heterosexual masculinity, which results in eliminating a homosexual identity and a possible forced marginalised position. Such a homonegative performance can also upgrade his position among peers, and result in a higher status and respect (Kimmel, 1994). Most of the teens offered progressive opinions about homosexuality, which gave the impression that this liberal stance is appreciated and common among the peer groups. However, this opinion may not accurately reflect the respondents' personal attitudes towards gay people and does not exclude homonegative talk or behaviour. Moreover, the teenagers simultaneously distanced themselves from a homosexual identity by stressing that they would never do such a thing themselves. Here, sexual identity is seen as an act or behaviour that someone can or cannot (decide to) do. With the exception of three

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participants, no one in the focus groups vocalised a negative attitude towards homosexuality (see following paragraph).

Although the previous results illustrated that it was mostly boys who performed gender to conform to the hegemonic discourse, there was also a mixed focus group (FG6) in which three female participants clearly voiced a homonegative opinion. These opinions were integrated in a broader ideological discourse in which, for at least two participants, cultural contexts might have been of relevance, since these participants come from a Turkish Muslim background. These girls commented upon 'homosexuality as weird' (FG6, F, 19) and disgusting, and they explained that their cultural environment is not tolerant of homosexuality and that their cultural capital influences their opinion about homosexuality. This also shows that gender performances are embedded within broader cultural and social contexts, as was one of the criticisms of West and Zimmerman (1987) on Goffman's concept of performance. This therefore illustrates that culture and generation are important elements to consider. The third girl labelled homosexuality as deviant, against nature (homosexuality as a problem) and stressed that homosexuality is a personal choice (see supra):

> X7 (FG6, F, 17): I can't stand that—gays and lesbians. I'm... I don't want to be rude, but I can,... I think... Man and woman are okay, but... Men and men, and women and women, I think that's weird. How is our contemporary society... How does our society evolves nowadays? I don't get it. Gays and lesbians, I don't understand that. I think it's gross. I think it's really gross. *loathing* I don't want to offend anyone, but in my opinion, I think 'Can't they act normal like everyone else?' I know, it's their choice but...

This teenage girl did not consider homosexuality as an identity, but as a deviant gender performance and a personal choice, but a choice that cannot be made, since homosexuality goes against the only 'natural' form of sexuality, namely, heterosexuality. This is an essentialist view on sexuality. Other participants in this focus group, however, distanced themselves from this comment; instead, they presented themselves as tolerant and did not mind someone else's sexual identity. Two boys and one girl in this focus group, however, distanced themselves from a homosexual identity and commented that they 'would not "do it"' (FG6, F, 17). A fourth girl stressed her tolerance by mentioning that she has (close) gay girlfriends.

In some focus groups, we asked the teens to voice their opinions about whether or not the frequency of gay characters should increase or decrease. As mentioned earlier, lesbians on television can be tolerated because, as the male respondents stated, they are hot and pleasant to look at. However, different opinions about the frequency of gay male characters circulated: one

boy (homogeneous FG8, M, 14) wanted less representations, whereas others stressed that the frequency is okay. Another boy compared homosexuality with having a disability and said, 'No, there doesn't have to be a disabled person in each program either, right? That's not funny…' (FG8, M, 14). We believe that this comparison is not trivial. His comment illustrates that, for him, homosexuality differs from the heteronormative discourse, which sees heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as deviant or abnormal. However, not all boys in this homogeneous focus group agreed with this statement, and some even believed that the frequency of gay representations should be increased. These participants stated that more fictional representations would make people and society in general more tolerant towards gays and lesbians, especially since gay visibility is increasing in daily life (media as symbolic resources; Buckingham, 2008b). However, these male participants stressed that the nature of gay representations is also important, and they called for more realistic fictional representations. Here, the possible positive role of fictional representations and media was stressed for gay people in and out of the closet, and for a wider audience and society. These teenagers saw the possibility and potential of changing attitudes (and maybe even the heteronormative discourse) through diverse representations of gay people.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this audience study was multifaceted, yet the main goal was to obtain more insight and knowledge about media use and consumption of mediated sexual scripts among the youth. More specifically, this research investigated the use and consumption of television content, taking young people's social and cultural contexts into account. This study can be classified within the cultural studies tradition of 'new' audience research, and combined a reception study (based upon Hall's (1980) famous encoding/decoding model) with an ethnographical approach in which the role of media was considered in terms of the construction of a teenage identity (cf. Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). More specifically, we regarded television-centred communication as a site for identity performance, and we placed a specific emphasis on teenagers' performances of their gender and sexual identities. We also paid special attention to gender differences within teenagers' reception of mediated sexual scripts and their identity performances. We will conclude this paper by discussing the most important findings, which are structured along the four axes and research themes of the questionnaire that was used during the focus group discussions.

1 Social viewing

Although a small group of teenagers would feel embarrassed if (one of their) parents or siblings entered the room where they were supposedly privately watching a scene in a television series or movie that contains sexually suggestive images, most of the respondents would not mind the presence of parents or siblings; neither would their parents or (older) sibling regard the television programme with suspicion. The lack of an emotional reaction among the teenage respondents, their parents and/or siblings is motivated by the abundance of sexually suggestive imagery in contemporary popular screen culture. Within this context, the young teenage respondents also distinguished between sexually suggestive content and sexually explicit or pornographic content: the latter would cause a different reaction between both the young viewers as their parents or siblings. Although some of the teenagers always watch television with family members, other respondents do not or only sporadically engage in co-viewing practices. It is, however, important to note that co-viewing is (in some families) structured not only around certain programmes or genres, but also around specific time slots (e.g. Sunday evenings, the news around 7 pm) or specific channels (e.g. the public broadcaster één). Although no gender differences could be found regarding parental co-viewing in general, we did notice that mothers were regularly connected with *softer* genres that contain more melodramatic elements and storylines, or health programmes, whereas fathers were often mentioned by both boys and girls in co-viewing the news, sports and crime series (cf. d'Haenens et al., 2001; Pasquier, 2001; Roe, 2000). Similar

gender differences were found in co-viewing practices with siblings: boys prefer the company of a male sibling, and girls like the company of a sister. These results illustrate that media remain integrated into the collective dynamics with parents and siblings, as the research of Roe (2000), Van Rompaey (2000) and d'Haenens et al. (2001), among others, has underlined.

2 Television talk

Similar to previous results on social viewing, we also noticed a small group of teenage respondents who do not have any television centred communication with their parents. Yet, the largest group admitted that such television talk sometimes occurs, and different topics can be discussed (e.g. speculating about what will happen next, discussing the characters). Such discussions generally occur right before, during (e.g. a commercial break) or after the programme, or while having dinner. Although romantic and sexual scripts are most often absent from this television centred communication, some respondents did mention that such scripts are sporadically discussed, though often jokingly (e.g. close your eyes son; you're too you to see this). A few participants mentioned daily co-viewing of a television series with their father, which they discuss afterwards. This recurring activity seems to establish a strong father-daughter bond for these female participants.

Gender differences were noted for television talk among siblings: boys prefer to discuss television related topics with a brother, and girls prefer to have these discussions, particularly with regard to romantic and sexual television scripts, with a sister. Such discussions on romantic and sexual scripts are also common among girlfriends, the respondents asserted, although other topics are discussed as well. However, it is not only girls who talk about television with their girlfriends; male peers have such discussions as well, although the male respondents asserted that romantic and sexual scripts are not discussed among friends, except when a good-looking actress is a cast member. This illustrates the male gaze, as described by Mulvey (1975), and these identity performances can also be regarded as underlining a masculine, heterosexual identity. Furthermore, girls' frequent discussions about romantic and sexual scripts can be regarded as a gender identity performance, since romance and sentimentality are connected with feminine characteristics (Gunter, 1995). Moreover, when young people are unable to participate in television centred communication, most of them would not feel annoyed. However, their emotional reaction would often depend on the length and frequency of such talks, and (young) people's need to be part of a bigger group (i.e. social identity) can be recognised in this respect. Although such talks can stimulate some teenagers to tune in to a certain television programme, they admitted that personal interests are also important when making the decision to continue to watch the specific programme that their peers talked about. It was mentioned that friendship is

not based on television talk, which illustrates that although TV talk is a frequent pastime for (some) groups of friends, television is not the only subject discussed among friends.

3   Sexual morality

We also explored how teens give meaning to sexually suggestive images and whether the consumption of such media images indicates that the dominant ideology is accepted. The results clearly reaffirmed Buckingham and Bragg's (2004) findings that contemporary teens negotiate and construct gender and sexual identities, as well as sexual norms and values, through television use. Yet, as the participants in this research demonstrated, teens are not sexually corrupt or as sexually liberated as is often proclaimed in public debates. A trend towards habituation and fatigue was noticed among the teenagers with regard to sexual(ly suggestive) images in television programmes (cf. Felten et al., 2009), and these practices are embedded in a broader social and cultural context in which sexualisation is integrated (MacKeogh, 2004). Moreover, contemporary teenagers learn how to respond to sexual representations, as this is an integral part of their social and sexual maturation (cf. social learning through television). The trend of sexualisation was not an issue among the teenage participants; they experience pleasure in watching programmes, but at the same time, use them to critique the dominant values incorporated in the shows (cf. resistance; Brown, 1994). The sexual double standard, for instance, is often present in sexual scripts, but the teens believe that both girls and boys should be labelled equally (cf. Felten et al., 2009). However, several boys spoke negatively about girls who swap partners frequently, and this difference between opinion and behaviour reinforced the idea that young women obtain bad reputations easily and bear a greater burden to behave in a sexually correct way, whereas boys have a wider range of sexual opportunities (Johansson, 2007). Most respondents appeared tolerant towards others engaging in casual sex, though they distanced themselves from such sexual behaviour (cf. de Bruin, 2008). Like the respondents in Johansson's (2007) study, our respondents agreed that a young woman's need for sex is as great as that of a young man, thus performing a 'sexual self'. However, girls are expected to be more sexually insecure and are considered to be responsible for guarding their boundaries, whereas boys tend to talk more openly about sex (cf. de Graaf et al., 2008). Gender differences were also apparent in the teenagers' evaluations of sexually explicit images (pornographic movies, images, etcetera). The girls labelled porn as over the top and were less tolerant of it. However, it seemed that cultural contexts are also important when evaluating pornographic material (e.g. first generation Turkish girls versus Flemish girls). The focus on the physical aspect of sex, the stereotypical and often degrading representations of women in these scenes, or the aiming of porn mostly at titillating male viewers may be possible reasons why the girls do not tolerate it. The boys, on the other hand, would like more explicit representations to be aired after primetime. Their comments on

pornographic content may be used to enforce the construction of a certain form of masculinity (Kim et al., 2007), because they are or think of themselves as more progressive regarding such explicit images or are more open about those images. However, based on our focus groups, we believe that the presence of peers contributes to and stimulates such a hegemonic performance of masculinity.

Sexual scripts can also empower and emancipate teenagers. *Sexualised* media have resulted in sex becoming less taboo among teenagers, such that they talk and admit to thinking about it openly. Younger children, however, need to be protected from such images, most of the participants argued (cf. third-person effect; Davison, 1983). Although the respondents repeatedly mentioned that they are free from media influence, they do consider screen culture and peer pressure more important than parental influence when it comes to sexual and relational scripts.

4   Representations of peers and gay characters

None of the respondents evaluated the fictional representation of teenagers as realistic, and especially the conventional beauty standard that is maintained in mainstream American television programmes; this includes the unrealistic age of the characters (i.e. a twenty-something actor playing a teenage character) and the unrealistic storylines in which teenagers are represented. According to our participants, all teens (both male and female) on television look perfect and beautiful, and less good-looking characters are often absent or are bullied by the other characters. The production context of a television series was considered within this context; that is, some expressed the belief that good-looking people are more interesting and attract more viewers. Furthermore, the dominant ideological discourse in contemporary society influences these storylines (e.g. drug use is represented as bad), and storylines often contain a moral and educational message, the respondents believe. The teenage participants noticed different representational strategies for Flemish productions, since more average looking actors are cast in these series. When we asked the teenagers what they would do differently if they were producers, an initial reaction was that they would make the representations more realistic, yet they also pointed out several times that such realistic representations would fail to attract and entertain a large audience. According to the participants, one often watches television for entertainment, and they adapted their reply accordingly, stating that nothing would change if they were television producers.

We also learned that the teenagers are familiar with gay television characters, as they were able to provide examples of famous people who are gay. The homosexual identity of a television character tends to be recognised due to the exaggerated use of stereotypes, which our

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respondents considered to be a convention of representations of gay characters on television. A man with feminine features was labelled as 'so gay', even if the teenagers did not know the real sexual identity of the character. Such characteristics are connected with normality and authenticity, in which a man fails to perform a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). This clearly illustrates the heteronormative discourse, or what Butler (1993) called the heteronormative matrix. Heteronormativity is expected, and biological sex, socially constructed gender and sexual desire cohere in certain ways (Chambers, 2007). When someone *fails* in this coherence, our teenage respondents would assign that person the label *gay*. More nuanced opinions were found concerning the representations of gay women; the respondents recognised lesbians because of more masculine characteristics, although they were familiar with examples of extremely feminine lesbians in contemporary television programmes. We believe this trend is embedded within a broader post-feminist discourse in popular (American) culture, in which conventional beauty standards for women are linked with slimness and sexiness (Gill, 2009; McRobbie, 2004). Examples of *heteroflexibility* (Diamond, 2005; female characters experiment with other girls, although they turn out to be heterosexual) were picked up and tolerated by our teenage respondents. We assume, however, that the same level of tolerance would not be registered for heteroflexible behaviour among boys. This assumption is made on the basis of the male respondents' comments about gay men, and also on the basis of their comments, we believe that the presence of peers (as gender police; Kimmel, 1994) intersects with the performance of heteronormative masculinity (Buijs et al., 2009; Curtin & Linehan, 2002). Although the boys generally stressed that they tolerate gays, which might be a socially desirable answer within the context of focus groups, several of their comments contradicted this statement. Moreover, the teenage boys often distanced themselves from homosexuality and stressed that they would never *do* such a thing. In this context, homosexuality is regarded as a behaviour or a personal choice, not an identity. Joking about the feminine features of gay men or stating that they would steer away from gays to avoid *catching this disease* was common among the male teenagers in our focus groups. Acting tough and joking functioned as the performance of a hegemonic masculinity. Hereby, the male participants stressed their heterosexual identity, which might ensure that their manhood would not be questioned. This practice is embedded in a heteronormative discourse in which heterosexuality is rewarded (with status and respect), while a subordinate masculinity is avoided (Connell, 1995). The presence of lesbians in contemporary television programmes was evaluated differently; they function as male titillations and were labelled as hot and arousing, and the male participants would not mind more fictional lesbian characters on television. Consequently, hegemonic codes of masculinity were articulated in this aspect of the discussion, whereby masculinity was equated with sex.

Except for three girls, the female respondents regarded and valued male homosexuality in less negative ways than the young men did (Buijs et. al, 2009; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Since girls seemed more comfortable than boys discussing both male and female homosexuality, we suspect that for girls in general, peer pressure is less pronounced. Moreover, several of the girls stated the need for more long-term and sexual relationships between male and female gay characters in contemporary television programmes. However, three female participants, of whom two were first generation Turkish girl, regarded heterosexuality as the only biologically natural sexuality (heterosexual matrix, homosexuality as deviant), which illustrates the intersection of culture, generation and gender.

This study shows that we should not consider television's role as solely negative, as is often asserted in public debates. Fictional characters were even labelled *role models* by some of the participants, especially with regard to sexual norms and values. This illustrates the role that television can play in the construction of sexual perceptions, assumptions and gender and sexual identities (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001). However, this study also illustrates that the number of different readings is rather limited (cf. Morley, 1986), since television texts are embedded within a hegemonic societal and cultural framework. Furthermore, television talk is a forum for experimentation with identities (cf. Gillespie, 1995), but this study shows that these identity performances are also embedded within a hegemonic framework. Within this context, the use of focus groups containing friends can offer a platform where identities can be performed; however, the presence of friends can also restrict performances outside of the dominant discourse. This was especially noticed among the male participants, since the results show that group dynamics intersected and reinforced the performance of heteronormative masculinity in a more patriarchal direction, especially when the discussion turned to homosexuality and gay representations in contemporary television programmes. The presence of feminine participants in heterogeneous focus groups seemed to play a role in the television talk, since examples of joking about (male) gay characters were present only in the homogeneous focus groups. In general, similar results for girls were not found. We suspect that similar interactions and comments might be noted among boys outside the context of the focus groups, for instance, at school, during sports practice, etcetera, since these are playgrounds for performativity (Butler, 1993). Apparently, any alternative masculine behaviour fails to achieve the hegemonic masculine norm and is labelled as a subordinate masculinity (Connell, 1995). Thus, teenage boys are under pressure to perform the right masculine codes; otherwise, they are forced into a marginalised position. We want to emphasize the social necessity of similar studies among contemporary teenagers (and audiences in general), since homonegativity and anti-homosexual behaviour are still prevalent in 2012.

We are aware of the limitations of our approach. Due to the organisation of the focus groups, the questions that were asked and the heterosexual character of the questions and clips that were shown at the beginning of the discussions, social interactions were set in motion. With these limitations in mind, we can nonetheless conclude that the construction of a teenage gender and sexual identities are embedded within a cultural context of which screen culture is an integral part. Although contemporary screen culture often contains a liberal view on sexuality, more traditional norms and values regarding relationships and sexuality, such as trust, commitment and sex as part of a long-term relationship, are still highly valued. We believe that young audiences handle the tension between stricter sexual morals and sexual liberation remarkably well. Thus, the consumption of texts does not mean that audiences accept the incorporated ideology (Fiske, 1989). Teens resist hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity and do not blindly incorporate what they see in their daily lives (cf. Pasquier, 1996; de Graaf et al., 2008). Depending on the social and cultural contexts, teenagers negotiate their identities. In these negotiations, personal characteristics, such as gender, age and maturity, are used to interpret and critically evaluate what they are watching, as are their frame of (cultural) reference, knowledge and skills, experiences, available scripts, etcetera. Although we focused on possible gender differences within the answers of the teenagers, we believe that cultural context and ethnicity are also important factors to consider, since the two first generation Turkish girls were part of the small group that did not engage in television talk (centred on romantic and sexual scripts), and they would not feel comfortable if their parents or siblings entered the room while they were privately watching television content containing sexually suggestive images. The results of this study also illustrate that there is much evidence of a shared understanding, interpretation and identification across gender lines (cf. McQuail, 2005, p. 436), though gender differences can be found as well. The importance of peers should also be considered, both in the reception of sexualised images and in their responses and performances.

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APPENDICES

1   Questionnaire focus groups

Algemene gegevens

1. Ik ben een: (Kruis aan)

- o   Jongen
- o   Meisje

2. Geboortejaar: …………………….

3. Welk onderwijstype volg je?

- o   ASO (= Algemeen secundair onderwijs)
- o   TSO (= Technisch secundair onderwijs)
- o   BSO (= Beroeps secundair onderwijs)
- o   KSO (= Kunstonderwijs)
- o   DTO (= Deeltijds onderwijs)

4. In welk studiejaar zit je nu?

- o   3e
- o   4e
- o   5e
- o   6e
- o   7e

5. In welk land ben je geboren?

6. In welk land zijn je ouders geboren?

Vader:
.Moeder:

7. In welk land zijn je grootouders geboren?

Van vaders kant:
Van moeders kant:

8. Heb je een Belgische identiteitskaart?

- o   Ja
- o   Nee

FG & participant	Sex	Age	Secondary education	Nationality
1.1	F	16	General	Belgian
1.2	M	16	General	Belgian
1.3	M	16	General	Belgian
1.4	F	16	General	Belgian
1.5	F	16	General	Belgian
1.6	M	16	General	Belgian
1.7	M	16	General	Belgian
1.8	F	16	General	Belgian
1.9	F	16	General	Belgian
2.1	F	18	General	Belgian
2.2	F	18	General	Belgian
2.3	F	18	General	Belgian
2.4	F	18	General	Belgian
2.5	M	18	General	Belgian
2.6	F	18	General	Belgian
3.1	F	16	General	Belgian
3.2	M	16	General	Belgian
3.3	F	17	General	Belgian
3.4	F	16	General	Belgian
3.5	F	16	General	Belgian
3.6	F	16	General	Belgian
3.7	F	16	General	Belgian
3.8	F	15	General	Belgian
3.9	F	16	General	Belgian
4.1	F	16	General	Belgian
4.2	F	16	General	Belgian
4.3	M	17	General	Belgian
4.4	M	17	General	Belgian
4.5	M	16	General	Belgian
4.6	M	17	General	Belgian
5.1	F	16	Vocational	Belgian

5.2	F	15	General	Belgian
5.3	F	14	Technical	Belgian
5.4	F	16	General	Belgian
5.5	F	16	General	Belgian
5.6	F	17	General	Belgian
5.7	F	18	Technical	Belgian
6 .1	F	18	Vocational	Turkish (first gen.)
6.2	F	19	Vocational	Turkish (first gen.)
6.3	F	17	Vocational	Belgian
6.4	M	19	Vocational	Belgian
6.5	M	18	Vocational	Belgian
6.6	F	18	Vocational	Belgian
6.7	F	17	Vocational	Belgian
7.1	M	17	Technical	Belgian
7.2	M	17	Technical	Belgian
7.3	M	18	General	Belgian
7.4	M	17	Technical	Belgian
7.5	M	17	Technical	Belgian
7.6	M	18	Technical	Belgian
7.7	M	18	Technical	Belgian
8.1	M	14	Technical	Belgian
8.2	M	14	Technical	Belgian
8.3	M	16	Vocational	Belgian
8.4	M	16	Technical	Belgian
8.5	M	14	Art	Belgian
8.6	M	15	Technical	Belgian

3 Topic list focus group

Introductie

- Welkom heten
- GSM afzetten
- Naamkaartje + anonimiteit uitleggen
- Socio-demo's invullen
- Vragen onduidelijk -> uitleg vragen

- Wil je niet antwoorden -> hoeft niet
- Vraag herhalen als je ze niet verstaan hebt
- Duur focusgroep vermelden

Social viewing (gerelateerd aan seksuele –suggestieve- beelden)

- CLIPJE 'seksueel getint' (vb. One Tree Hill)
- Stel je voor dat je in de living hiernaar kijkt en je ouders komen net binnen. Hoe zou je je hierbij voelen? Welke programma's?
- Cfr. voor vrienden, broer, zus….
- Wordt er hier dan over gepraat?

TV Talk

- Vind je het vervelend als je vrienden over programma's praten waar jij niet naar kijkt/niet naar mag kijken?
- Ben je al naar programma's beginnen kijken omdat je er veel vrienden hebt over horen praten? En zo ja welke?
- Wordt er met ouders over bepaalde programma's gesproken? En zo ja welke, en over wat (verhaal, thema's, gevoelens, ….) ?
- Wordt er met ouders of vrienden gepraat over liefdesrelaties in televisieprogramma's of films? En zo ja, over wat? Met wie praat je hierover het meest?

Seksuele moraal

- In programma's draait het vaak rond relaties en seksualiteit. Vind je dit belangrijk dat dit aan bod komt?
- Vind je dat er teveel seks getoond wordt op tv?
- Wat versta je onder seksueel getinte beelden? + voorbeelden
- Stemmen de (seksuele) liefdesrelaties die je op televisie ziet overeen met je eigen ervaringen?
- Herken je jezelf of jouw relatie hierin?
- Zou je dezelfde versiertrucjes gebruiken als op tv?
- TEASER: CLIPJE van man die initiatief neemt (vb Gossip Girl)
- Wat vinden jullie? Mag een meisjes initiatief nemen tot het verleiden van een jongen of is dit iets dat de jongen moet doen? Ken je voorbeelden van televisieprogramma's (teen series, telenovela) waarin het meisjes initiatief neemt?
- Wat vind je van de stelling: 'Een jongen die regelmatig een nieuw lief heeft, is cool. Een meisje die regelmatig van lief wisselt, is een slet.'
- Vind je seks buiten vaste relatie (of huwelijk) aanvaardbaar? 'casual sex'
- Wat vinden jullie van de stelling: 'mannen willen seks, vrouwen willen liefde'

Stereotiepen & representatie

- Vind je dat jongeren realistisch worden voorgesteld (zowel fysisch, thema's die aan bod komen, activiteiten die jongeren ondernemen)?
- Wat is er fout? Wat wil je anders? Wat kan beter?
- Ken je bekende homo's, lesbiennes…uit tv-programma's ?
- Lijken deze personages op homo's, lesbiennes die jij persoonlijk kent?
- Denk je dat homo's, lesbiennes in het echte leven ook zo zijn?

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Afronden

- Iedereen bedanken
- Cinematicket geven

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4   Clip *One Tree Hill*

Extract from *One Tree Hill,* season 1, episode 12 *"Crash Course in Polite Conversations"*: available upon request to the author.

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5   Clip *Gossip Girl*

Extract from *Gossip Girl,* season 1, episode 1 *"Pilot":* available upon request to the author.

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6   Focus group transcriptions

Transcripts are available upon request to the author.

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7   Coding tree

Themalijst analyse focusgroepen

A   Sexually suggestive images & social viewing contexts of TV programs

A1   Reactie op clipjes tijdens de focusgroep (~kijken met peers)

A2   Reactie op clipjes als ouders binnen komen

A3   Reactie op clipjes als broer/zus binnen komen

A3.1   Jongere broer/zus

A3.2   Oudere broer/zus

A4   Reactie op clipjes in aanwezigheid vrienden

A5   Welke programma's worden samen bekeken?

A5.1   Met ouders

A5.2   Met broer/zus

A5.3   Met vrienden

B   TV Talk

B1   Niet kunnen meepraten over TV programma's (met vrienden)

B2   Bekijken programma's na TV talk met vrienden

D4   Perceptie homoseksualiteit op TV

D5   Houding homoseksualiteit in dagelijkse leven

8   Nvivo data file

The NVivo data file is available upon request to the author.