When "Everything is Not What it Seems"[1]:

Romantic Relationships in Adolescent TV and its Impact on Young Women

Thais Rulich-Maly
Sociology 365, Dr. Krogh
December 2023
Loyola University Chicago

---

[1] This is a lyric from the Wizards of Waverly place theme song ("Everything is Not What it Seems," 2009).

To the beautiful women of Kappa Delta Theta Upsilon,
Thank you for trusting me with your stories.

Introduction

Since television took the world by storm, it has become a constant in the lives of adolescent girls, in particular. From Saturday morning cartoons, to Disney Channel, to teen dramas, teenagers have been growing up with role models that live on the TV screen. We watch characters struggle to find their identity, most of the time through unrealistic romantic relationships. What is the harm of this? Seeing these romantic relationships causes unrealistic and, sometimes, unattainable expectations that negatively impact the girls who watch them. Unrealistic expectations about romantic relationships can put stress on young women to create and maintain picture-perfect romantic relationships as teenagers and young adults. The result may be damaged self-esteem, unhealthy relationships, and an inability to have or maintain a positive romantic relationship, etc. If we do not generate a better understanding of how harmful these adolescent TV shows are, young women will continue to be negatively influenced by these representations and the expectations they create. This paper will explore young women's experiences with romantic relationships in their favorite adolescent TV shows and how it relates to their own romantic relationships or lack thereof.

Literature Review

Many scholars have studied how Television affects the lives – or *will* affect the lives – of teenage girls and the young women they become. Each study delves deeper into how Television impacts young women's romantic relationships as they grow and develop.

Haggerty (2010) uses reality TV as an example of the debate on what constitutes good vs. bad TV in terms of influence and messages. The scholars Haggerty (2010) references claim reality TV is "cheap" (6), a "money-maker" (p. 37), "stereotypical" (p. 13), and a proponent of

"relational aggression" (p. 17). Poor relationship standards and practices sit alongside gender, race, and class stereotypes in these shows and are essentially selling bad messages to young audiences. Some people may find the entire thing to be great entertainment and an escape from everyday life, but by pointing out the opposition, Haggerty (2010) highlights just how harmful this could be in teaching youth how to relate to others.

Another example of open discourse comes from McKinley (1997) in her study on the popular TV show *Beverly Hills 90210*. McKinley (1997) met with 36 girls ranging from 11 to 22 to watch the show together, and then she listened and discussed the show with them. McKinley learned that the girls were incredibly invested in the relationships of the main characters, Brenda and Kelly, and used their experiences to create expectations for their own lives. She notes, "As I examined conversations about dating and relationships, I became convinced that the primary function of this talk about *90210* was to negotiate and instantiate cultural rules of dating" (McKinley 1997, p. 190). As the girls gossiped about the different characters, she found that they were actively creating dating rules for themselves and other girls. The general norm of relationships being necessary for women infiltrates TV shows and the actual thoughts and opinions of their female audience, putting boyfriends first and friendship last.

Looking back at the teen years of high school, Rivadeneyra and Lebo (2008) conducted a survey of high school freshmen about what kinds of TV shows they watch and what dating looks like for them. In general, they found that these high school students are watching "an average of 42 hours of primetime television and soap operas a month" (Rivadeneyra and Lebo 2008). However, the kinds of shows are what have an impact on dating behaviors. If teenagers watch romantic TV shows, they tend to have a more traditional or normative idea of dating where dating starts earlier and teenagers have a rich dating history. Watching non-romance shows

eliminates this expectation. TV shows that represent romance create a goal for most adolescents and determine that romantic love is the greatest component of a successful life. If teens are exposed to shows where traditional boyfriend-girlfriend dating is encouraged and single hood is not, then the way they navigate and seek out romantic relationships will change as well.

Looking at these phenomena from an intersectional approach, Jean, Neal-Barnett, and Stadulius conducted a study of "66 adolescent black girls" (2022, p. 334). The participants were presented with three images – the Jezebel, the Sapphire, and the Mammy – and the study analyzed if seeing these images frequently negatively impacts them and if a strong racial-ethnic identity can combat this (Jean, Neal-Barnett, and Stadulius 2022). The authors found that seeing these images more often combined with a lack of security in one's racial and ethnic identity is what causes negative self-image as a result of stereotypes on TV and in the media: "Individuals with lower ethnic racial identity scores identified spending less time exploring the history and customs of their ethnic group, have done fewer activities to understand their group better, and feel less sense of belonging to their group. As such, media representations may be one of the few representations of the Black experience they are exposed to and may be more likely to identify the negative messages portrayed in the media images" (2022, p. 341). A young girl's connection with her own racial identity and the self-esteem that comes with it can be a buffer that possibly counteracts the effects of biased media. Essentially, there are intersecting components of personal identity that impact how a media image lands.

Looking at more specific TV shows, Bickford (2015) conducts a content analysis on the show *Hannah Montana*, which follows Miley Stewart (AKA Hannah Montana) who has two lives: normal teenager and pop star. Bickford puts *Hannah Montana* in the context of postfeminism, which he defines as an era that "negotiates a conflict between feminist

empowerment and feminine authenticity" (2015, p. 72). This conflict is deemed a struggle to "have it all" (2015, p. 68); have the bread-winning job and a family all as a woman. In *Hannah Montana*, Miley tries to "have it all" (Bickford 2015, p. 68) by balancing her adult-like pop star life and her desire to maintain a carefree childhood. The show shows how she has to keep her pop star identity a secret or else "*…she would stop being a child*" (Bickford 2015, p. 77). And when she does tell her best friend Lily, she has to deal with the way their friendship changes from carefree and childlike to more grown up and complicated. Womanhood is, therefore, presented to the young audience as a balancing act filled with stressors and complications, especially with relationships and personal identities.

Feasey (2006) takes a similar postfeminist approach to teen TV shows by conducting a content and audience analysis of the TV show *Charmed*. Feasey found that the audience of *Charmed* is composed of more "mature" (p. 3) women, a "16–34 year old female market" (2006, p. 3). The show seems to be designed as a peek into young adulthood, which is why it appeals to both teenagers and young adults. *Charmed* goes beyond *Hannah Montana,* as the experiences and messages are based on young women living in the adult world *Hannah Montana* only alludes to. *Charmed* presents a postfeminist view of femininity. Feasey (2006) thinks this is so because it incorporates feminism into pop media, and it reclaims the feminine (i.e., clothes and style) as a form of "contemporary feminism" (Feasey 2006, p. 5-6). *Charmed* is a positive example of marketed teen media that will be beneficial not just for growing young girls, but for young women as they face the pressures of what it is to be a woman.

Another way to find out how certain TV shows, specifically romantic ones, affect teenagers is to hold discussions about specific shows with the audience members affected. Villarejo-Carballido, Pulido, Zubiri-Esnaola, and Oliver (2022) did a content analysis of the

show *Sex Education* and held interviews with 4 teenagers who watch the show. The authors observed how the main characters acted in their relationships with each other, and then looked at how this influenced the teenage audience's perceptions/expectations of romantic relationships. The main relationships they analyzed consisted of Adam and Aimee and Adam and Eric. Adam's toxic masculinity demonstrates unhealthy relationships. For example, Adam puts Aimee through fear and anxiety through physical retaliation against her new sexual partners (Villarejo-Carballido, Pulido, Zubiri-Esnaola, and Oliver 2022, p. 7). Adam also has a toxic relationship with Eric, causing physical and mental suffering based on the "issues of his [Adam's] sexual identity" (Villarejo-Carballido, Pulido, Zubiri-Esnaola, and Oliver 2022, p. 7). According to the authors, *Sex Education* makes talking about sex and diseases less taboo (2022, p. 8). However, it also presents unhealthy relationships that could negatively impact their teenage audience. However, the authors found that an open discourse between audience members makes it easier for teenagers to see the harm of the media representation of relationships. It diminishes the effects of seeing these relationships normalized in the media and despite the fact that these relationships are still normalized in many teen shows, conversation helps counteract the influence.

Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) found that relationships formed via the media are not just romantic vs. platonic, they can also be parasocial. The authors note that parasocial relationships are "relationships with media figures, which involve users' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to a persona, as if s/he were a personal acquaintance" (2018, p. 112). Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) surveyed 376 undergraduate women and found that 92.6% of participants had a crush on either a TV character or celebrity; 99.2% had an attachment specifically to a man in the media; 78% of the women had crushes on real-life celebrities or people; and 22% had a crush on

a fictional character in the media (Erickson and Dal Cin 2018, p. 122-123). Teen girls are able to "safely begin to explore adulthood" (Erickson and Dal Cin 2018, p. 131) and what it means to have romantic relationships. These parasocial relationships could be a "minimization of emotional and physical risk" (Erickson and Dal Cin 2018, p. 113) or "might heighten media effects on future partner preferences…relationship expectancies…and ultimately, relational happiness and overall well-being" (Erickson and Dal Cin 2018, p. 113). However, it could also make them feel they are at a disadvantage as they grow up due to a lack of the idealized dating experience. This study is a good representation of my topic and how these different kinds of media-formed relationships have affected young women.

From reality TV, images of Black women in the media, to specific TV shows and their effects on their female audience, television is incredibly influential. It is crucial to go further into this topic to understand the ways everyday media is actually constructing healthy or unhealthy behaviors in our daily lives. In this study, I aim to understand what television shows college women watched growing up, how they presented relationships, and the impact that it has had on my participant's understanding of their relationships as teens and now.

Design

The purpose of this paper is academic, and the theory I am exploring is the relationship between watching adolescent TV shows and the real-life experiences of women as viewers. My goal is to understand how the portrayal of romantic relationships in the media affects the self-esteem, expectations, and experiences of teenagers becoming young women. To do so, I will test the following hypotheses: a) adolescent TV shows will have a frequent and important portrayal of romantic relationships, and b) the romantic relationships in these shows will negatively influence women's ability to create romantic relationships, both as teenagers and

young adults. The independent variables are the television shows and their representations of romantic relationships, and the dependent variables are the woman's current relationships/relationship expectations. To test this theory, my hypotheses, and find a relationship between the variables, I conducted interviews of 6 college-aged young women at Loyola University, Chicago. Our discussions reflected on their favorite childhood TV shows, their own romantic experiences, and their experiences as growing young women.

Data

The participants in this study are all female-identifying, between their freshman and senior years at Loyola University, Chicago. They are all members of Kappa Delta sorority on Loyola's campus. Due to my membership in this organization, as the researcher, this is a convenience sample. The following table presents the general demographics of the interview participants.

Table 1: Participant Information

Participants	Year in School	Relationship? (Teen)	Relationship? (YA)
Lorelai	Junior	No	No
Rory	Sophomore	Yes	No
Mary	Sophomore	No	No
Kendall	Junior	Yes	Yes
Piper	Senior	Yes	No
Chloe	Sophomore	Yes	No

Race/ethnicity and sexual orientation was not a requirement for inclusion in this study, although it was a welcome addition. However, all participants had to be female-identifying undergraduate students at Loyola. More information is in Table 1.

The sample of 6 women I interviewed are all members of Kappa Delta sorority at Loyola. Despite my membership in this organization, the decision to recruit here was based on the fact that sororities tend to be support systems for women and foster critical thinking and action about women's issues. I wanted my study to involve some critical thought on the feminine experience. Therefore, I selected this sample with the hope that these women would critically think about how their favorite childhood TV shows relate to their relationship experiences over time.

This sample is not representative of the entire population. It is a convenience sample based on my access as the researcher and the values I have observed among this organization. The participants are, however, from a variety of ages, backgrounds, and experiences with only two common variables: where they go to school, and the organization in which they belong. While not generalizable, I believe it can prove insight into the wider culture and serve as a basis for further study.

Methods

As noted, I interviewed 6 women from Kappa Delta Sorority at Loyola. Upon reaching out to the sorority, the participants either texted me or I reached out to them once they expressed interest in the project. Interviews lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 1 hour long. Two of the interviews were conducted at a local coffee shop, and the other four were at different on-campus buildings at Loyola. If the participant wanted, I bought them a coffee. Upon meeting, the participant signed an informed consent for audio recording. The conversation followed three sections: 1) what were their two favorite teen/childhood TV shows, 2) what were their romantic relationships, expectations, and self-esteem as a teenager, and 3) what were their romantic relationships, expectations, and self-esteem as a young adult. The interview guide structured the

interview, however, it was conversational in nature. Commiserating with the participant helped to validate their experience and helped them to share.

In analyzing this data, I discovered 13 main codes. Each of these codes had separate sub-codes based on shared experiences, thoughts, and realities of the participants. For example, my main codes are: Favorite TV Show (TV), Relationships in TV Show (RS), Womanhood (WH), Lessons (LS), Teen Expectations (TE), YA Expectations (YAE), Parents (PA), Pressure/Guilt (PG), Teen Relationship (TR), YA Relationship (YAR), Teen Single (TS), YA Single (YAS), and Future Changes. The two subcodes that emerged are: Teen Expectations (TE-B) - Boys, and Young Adult Relationship (YAR-Pres.) - Pressure. The subcodes cover the information raised by multiple participants who brought up boys and boyfriends in their expectations for teen dating and experienced pressure in young adult relationships.

From Disney Channel to Pretty Little Liars

From Disney Channel, to TV dramas, to movies, talking about these shows/movies brought a sense of nostalgia to the participants. To understand why these were so impactful, I outline the general plots of the four main shows that were discussed.

Wizards of Waverly Place follows a family of wizards who own a New York City subway sandwich shop. The show follows the main character, Alex Russo, and her two brothers (Justin and Max) as her dad teaches them how to carry on the title of "family wizard." Alex deals with the struggles of high school, crushes, forbidden love, and friendship. However, the more prominent focus of the show is on how the Russo's put family over all else.

Good Luck Charlie also values family. The main character, Teddy Duncan, navigates her romantic, platonic, and family relationships, all while making video diaries to teach life lessons she has learned over time to her baby sister, Charlie. Teddy experiences a tumultuous

relationship with her boyfriend Spencer; close female friendships (her best friend Ivy and the girl Spencer cheats on her with, Skyler); the lessons she learns from her parents and her two brothers (PJ and Gabe); and what she learns as a teenager in high school.

TV dramas were also a favorite, particularly *Pretty Little Liars*. This show follows a group of four high school girls who are being harassed and blackmailed by the "dead" fifth member of their friend group, "A." Throughout the show, the girls have to work through their own chaotic romantic relationships and personal struggles, all while trying to fight against "A."

Finally, Kendall discussed her favorite adolescent movie: *Mamma Mia* and its sequel, *Mamma Mia: Here We Go Again*. *Mamma Mia* follows Donna Sheridan and her daughter, Sophie. Sophie is about to get married and decides to invite three of her possible fathers to her wedding. The movie follows Sophie's quest to find her dad, Donna's experience facing her ex-flings, and Sophie's difficulties with her wedding. *Mamma Mia: Here We Go Again* goes back in time after Donna's death to see each of the love stories between Donna and the 3 "fathers."

Friends, Family, & Womanhood: Looking Back at Memorable TV Shows & Movies

A central question I asked was: "Looking back at your childhood/teen years, what were two of your favorite TV shows?" Save for a few seconds of thought, all six women jumped in immediately with two (sometimes 4 or 5) favorite TV shows from their childhood. They were not just visibly excited, but were passionate in their answers. When talking about the characters and the characters' boyfriends, you would think that they had just watched the show in the last two or three years, since their thoughts on the show were so strong. While the main focus of the interviews was on romantic relationships, each participant revealed a deeper significance of the shows that expanded farther than just romance. Female friendship, family, and womanhood stood out through the shows and impacted the progression of each woman's real life. The identities of

the participants were molded around the importance of female friendship and family. This created an ideal of womanhood as something that can stand on its own without romantic relationships. However, this is a phenomenon that seemed to evolve for the participants. Beginning first with the struggles of their teen relationship expectations, then evolving into independence and self-love as all six women became young adults.

Despite being years out from when these TV shows aired, my respondents still had strong feelings about each show. These sentiments could be because of how often the participants watched these shows growing up, and/or due to the meaning that these shows brought to their lives. Regardless, women like Mary could "…recite like the whole [like the] Bible of Good Luck Charlie." (P4, 7:12), or that of any other favorite among the participants. Specific romantic relationships in the shows were a hot topic. For example, Teddy and Spencer from *Good Luck Charlie.* Chloe and Mary both had *Good Luck Charlie* as their favorite childhood TV show. The two women described Spencer and how he cheated on Teddy with distaste, and were quick to voice their opinions on the 2010 Disney Channel character. Chloe remembers Spencer still as a "two-timing pig" (P6, 04:37). Mary, on the other hand, looks fondly on how Teddy dealt with her cheating boyfriend: "And then even Skylar who [he] cheated on her with, they ended up being friends" (P4, 8:54). While these shows quite definitely focused heavily on romantic relationships, Mary's point on the show's female friendships (in the midst of romantic betrayal) solidifies that female friendship was another popular lesson in these teen TV shows. Female friendships were a recurring topic with every other interview and illuminated the idea of what it meant to be a woman in the context of relationships, friendships, etc. Seeing strong female friendships helped define these women's notions of womanhood based more on the support systems in their lives, how they can be there for other women, and what it means to be an

independent individual. Regardless of boys, femininity and female friendship is vital, which these women learned from these shows and their personal lives.

Wizards of Waverly Place was another popular Disney Channel show that put importance on both romantic relationships and female friendships. For instance, both Lorelai and Piper mentioned how important the friendship was between Alex and her best friend, Harper, almost as much as they did any of the show's romantic relationships. While Alex Russo's character had many love interests, her most significant relationship was her friendship with Harper. When discussing romantic relationships in this show, Lorelai and Piper only briefly discussed Alex's romantic relationship with Mason. Instead, when discussing Alex and the show overall, it was nearly impossible to forget Harper.

Harper and Alex's relationship served as a roadmap for Lorelai as she determined what it meant for her to be a woman and what relationships were most important in her life. For Lorelai, the centrality of women friendship was clear:

"Like they always lifted each other up. They always like – I think of Harper and Alex. Like they fought but also were like sisters. They were like, I also care for you and I want to be there for you…And I think womanhood is a lot like that. I'm like, okay, like I gotta be a girl's girl, because who else is gonna look out for us?" (P1, 58:21).

Similarly, for Piper, Harper and Alex's friendship was similarly defined by this different representation of love:

"She was so kind and really stood by them even when – especially when they had her in the dark. And like weird stuff was just going on and she just went with it because she loved her best friend so much" (P3, 07:03).

The love between Harper and Alex helped these women realize that being a woman is not just about liking boys and having partners, it's also about being there for the other women in your

life. For many of the participants, this was a major part of their definition of femininity. This concept will serve to enhance their self-esteem and counteract the negative impacts of TV's portrayal of romantic relationships.

Disney Channel was not the only place where female friendships flourished. Kendall pointed out that in her favorite movie, *Mamma Mia*, Sophie (the main character) had a group of close female friends that she shared her biggest joys and struggles with. However, unlike for Piper and Lorelai, the portrayal of these female friendships had a more complicated impact on Kendall. Seeing these friendships changed her notion of reality, which had previously been negative and unhealthy friendships. At the time, Kendall "couldn't picture [myself] going up to any one of [my] friends and being like, [I'm] talking to this guy without one of them having like, a negative or critical opinion" (P5, 31:46). Thus, while strong female friendships re-affirmed the already present values in women like Lorelai and Piper, it also opened the eyes of women like Kendall to what womanhood and friendship could look like in the future.

Romantic relationships still played an overarching role in these shows and the lives of their female audiences. However, the impact and role of these romantic relationships can only be understood through the portrayal of women in these adolescent TV shows. How women interact with each other in these shows through beautiful female friendships, their strength, and their compassion will work to undo the negative impacts of TV romantic relationships that we will explore below.

Family was another crucial theme in the shows, transcending the screen and becoming present in the lives of the participants. In *Wizards of Waverly Place* and *Good Luck Charlie*, family was a prominent lesson taught. In *Wizards of Waverly Place*, Alex Russo once again charmed the young female audience, this time through her relationship with her family. For

example, Alex was known for her rebellious decisions followed by consequences instilled by her parents. These interactions taught lessons about the importance and consistent support of family. As Lorelai expressed in our interview, even when Alex does something wrong, her parents are there to say "…we love you, like you made a bad choice, but we're here for you, we care for you" (P1, 23:39). Similarly, Piper felt that the show was "…a lot about the importance of family and friends and making sure you stick close to the people you love and like you stand up for the people you love" (P3, 24:25). Family, just as significantly as friendship, served as a defining factor in Alex's identity and that of the women I interviewed.

We see a similar thing in *Good Luck Charlie*. The show follows Teddy Duncan's varying experiences with family, friends, boyfriends, and high school. Each of these experiences is turned into a video diary that teaches Teddy's sister, Charlie, the importance of family. Chloe explained this perfectly: "Like someone's always pissing someone else off on the show. And Teddy would always be like, 'you gotta love them anyway because they're your family.' Like that was a big one was, like, patience and family values" (P6, 08:55). Behind every other relationship and lesson learned by Teddy Duncan and Alex Russo was the concept of family as number one. Family was the base in which the character's other relationships were built on.

One reason why these lessons in *Wizards of Waverly Place* and *Good Luck Charlie* were so impactful for the participants was because of their own experiences with family. For instance, Lorelai had a very important and close relationship with their parents. Lorelai mentioned her mom as being a critical role in her life, showing her what it meant to be a strong woman. Lorelai perfectly put this into words:

"Because I think that is also supported by the fact that I have such a strong connection with my family that I know I could call my mom and dad and my sisters and be like, I am really struggling

or like something funny happened or whatever. So I think that's something…I really am thankful

for" (P1, 1:09:23).

Lorelai's own relationship with her family is what allows the theme of family in shows like *Wizards of Waverly Place* so significant for her.

No matter what happened with the character's romantic relationships, there were two stable relationships in their lives: friendship and family. These non-romantic relationships worked in tandem with the romantic relationships. As my respondents grew into young adults, they detailed how these lessons on family and friends worked to change their ideas of womanhood and influenced the evolution of their romantic relationships and expectations.

<u>Boys, Boys, and more Boys: High School Relationships</u>

While characters on Disney Channel, hit ABC Family dramas, and popular movies, the six women I interviewed were going through their own realities. The hope? That their lives would mirror those of Teddy Duncan, Alex Russo, and even Sophie Sheridan. This hope led to idealized expectations for what not only their teen years would be like, but even what their 20s would look like.

The one thing that each of these idealized notions of teen romance had in common was boys, boys, and more boys. While the six women had varying attachments to these romantic ideals, they each had thought about what a romantic relationship would look like. For most of these women, their teenage expectations were far from reality. What they saw happen to Alex Russo and Teddy Duncan, even the girls in Pretty Little Liars with their adult-like high school relationships, was not realistic. When a scripted adolescent TV show becomes a guidebook for reality, the young audience creates ultra-specific relationship expectations that they are convinced will happen or that they use to base all future relationships off of. However, this is not realistic and when broken, sends the audience members into unhappy relationships and internal

crises. And so the generally shared ideal among all 6 women continued: a meet-cute with a boy. He'd meet her at summer camp, or while she was on a family vacation (Lorelai). Or he'd pick up the pencil she dropped and make a move (Mary). Or he would like her Instagram post, showing his interest to her and everyone else (Kendall). They'd have a perfect high school relationship. They'd spend all their time together doing homework and supporting each other (Chloe). Maybe this boy would be their future husband, and they would achieve the goals of their small town (Rory), or their church (Lorelai), to date to marry. I mean, if the girls of Pretty Little Liars can have mature and scandalous teen relationships ending in marriage and Disney Channel girls can find their perfect high-school sweetheart, why can't they?

These women are not alone. At some point or another, it seems safe to say that most people have fantasized about what their future relationships would look like. It is nice to daydream about our perfect person saving the day and stealing our hearts. However, this general idea shared by the women I interviewed not only was not based in reality, but impacted any romantic relationship they *did* have.

While talking to them, one thing I learned was that having a romantic relationship as a teenager was not nearly as black-and-white as I expected. For many of the women, it was not as clear as being single or taken. Instead, there were "talking stages," which meant that they would be talking to a guy (texting, talking on social media, going on dates), but were not physically intimate or exclusively "boyfriend-girlfriend." Mary and Kendall's first experiences with romantic relationships were these "talking stages," where their relationship transcended typical friendship, but did not quite meet the specifications of being "boyfriend-girlfriend." Maybe they went to his football game, or went out to get something to eat, but nothing more. For both Mary

and Kendall, this "talking stage" relationship took place before they entered any formal romantic relationship, usually before the age of 16.

Out of the six women I interviewed, four of them were in romantic relationships as teenagers. For three of those four women, these romantic relationships were less than ideal. While the consensus for the ideal teen relationship was a loving and exciting relationship based on companionship and teenage excitement, the reality was far different. In fact, these three women expressed frustration about these relationships, going so far as to say that they were settling for someone they did not really like. For Kendall, her expectation of what a relationship *should* look like mixed with the people in relationships she saw around her made her question her own happiness at the time. She notes:

> "I honestly completely numbed myself to it. I think it was just kind of a matter of fact, thing. Like, it wasn't excitement, you know? And while I was in that, I was kind of thinking, I'm like, there are some people that genuinely look excited to see their boyfriend that they've been dating for six months. And that look good together. Why is this not me?" (P5, 36:39).

In some ways, the way television shows portray relationships created idealized views of what relationships should be like for the respondents and when reality did not mesh with those idealized views, it created unhappiness.

Kendall's reality ended up being a far cry from the relationship expectations all six women created as teenagers. These expectations may have been created by the media the women watched growing up. However, what made them realize the disconnect between reality and these ideals was comparing their own relationship to the surrounding ones. Kendall did this with her relationship, as seen above. Even comparing one's own relationships to each other – like Kendall's "talking stage" compared with her exclusive romantic relationship – reveals this disconnect. Kendall explained: "Let's just say that it was like, just not like – yeah, we had fun.

Like, we were just nice to each other. But like the second one, no. Like it – there's no comparison whatsoever" (P5, 37:30). Comparing her previous experience to her first long-term, official relationship allowed Kendall to see that her relationship was not working. Situations like this where the woman compares her relationship to previous (more exciting) relationships and to other couples is where we see cracks in the foundation. The ideals and expectations from the media and peers begin to break and reality becomes more noticeable.

Chloe is another example of this. Her romantic relationship started at 16 and while she expected it to be "this wonderful, perfect thing" (P6, 17:03), it ended up being "a lot of compromises" (P6, 17:03). Chloe went into her first official romantic relationship similarly to Kendall, focused on the relationships around her. However, she was also heavily influenced by TV relationships. According to those shows, teen couples should spend every waking moment content and perfect together. However, just like Kendall realized the disconnect of her reality from her expectations, Chloe's reality deviated from what she saw in the media and in her sister's long-term relationship. Because Chloe saw TV characters and her sister spending all their time with their boyfriends and living happily ever after with them, Chloe felt like she had to be in a similar relationship. Due to the power of these expectations, Chloe's teenage relationship was not happy and fun because it was constantly chasing an unrealistic goal. Instead, Chloe ended up unhappy, conflicted, and frustrated, a sentiment shared by Kendall and Piper as well.

Piper's first teenage relationship follows the trend of frustration and unhappiness. However, unlike the other two, her relationship runs somewhat parallel with what happened in *Good Luck Charlie*. According to Piper, "…it was just a really frustrating and infuriating experience, because I later found out that he was talking to another girl the entire time we were together" (P3, 35:28). Contrary to the teenage expectations of the participants, where reality

overlapped with fiction would not necessarily be positive. For Piper, this meant having a relationship that mirrored that of Teddy and Spencer in *Good Luck Charlie*. Teddy and Spencer's relationship was widely disliked by the participants, who called *Good Luck Charlie* one of their favorite adolescent TV shows because of Spencer's cheating. Piper's relationship parallels this relationship, which speaks volumes about the way romantic relationships in the teen TV shows actually functioned with the real life relationships of these women. Instead of finding relationships that overlap with the more positive and idealized TV relationships, here we see the exact opposite. The frustration of Piper's relationship and the parallels with negative TV relationships makes the split between expectation and reality even more evident.

As these six women go through adolescence, experience crushes, then "talking stages," then full-fledged official relationships, the relationship expectations and the ideal that we identified earlier in this section become more and more separated from reality. We see this in the frustration of the relationships of Kendall, Chloe, and Piper. There are a few outliers, with Rory having a positive and fun teen relationship, Mary not having a relationship until the end of high school, and Lorelai not having had a teen relationship. However, the vast majority of the participants did have teen relationships and of those four women, three relationships negatively impacted these women. However, these negative experiences led them to young adulthood, a period defined by individual evolution and significantly better self-esteem among all six women.

Refusing to Settle: Young Adult Relationships

With time comes change, and this rings true for the women of this study. Adolescence was defined for many of the participants by roller-coaster experiences, idealized goals that were not exactly unattainable, and frustrating romantic relationships. However, these negative

experiences and the failing of their relationship expectations of the time gave room to new expectations and realities that are significantly more positive.

A little older and a lot wiser, all six women changed their tune when it came to romantic relationships. As teenagers, it was all about boys, boys, and more boys. It was about having a boyfriend just to have one, or dating to marry, or having fairytale meet cutes. However, the negative experiences of these women as teenagers and their broken romantic expectations led to different experiences. There was a consensus among all six of the women: any relationship they would be in now, as young adults, would have to have good communication, be thoughtful, and equal. Gone are the days of frustrating relationships based on feeling like you *had* to have a boyfriend as a woman. Now, relationships need to be partnerships that "make you a better person…" and where you "…push each other to do better" (P5, 42:15). The participants have all moved away from the concept of just having "boyfriends" and have now defined their ideal relationships as "partnerships." This is crucial to understand the change in relationship expectations. Just having a "boyfriend" seemed to encapsulate high school relationships based on unrealistic expectations from TV and movies that (for many of these women) cause frustration. Kendall explains this contrast in her interview, stating:

"Because I think when you're a teenager, you just kind of fantasize about the idea of. But it's like, once you've kind of been exposed to the real world and realize that, okay, it's not hard to get a date, if you really try. You kind of start to worry more about quality and about getting something that's like, going to match you" (P5, 47:48).

However, "partnerships" are based on relationships rooted in common values, have the potential of being long-term, and are thoughtful and equal. Young adulthood is a progression of adolescence, with teenage experiences teaching these women what they want and what they need in future relationships. As Kendall said, these young adult relationships are based on a

relationship that is valuable because of the quality it adds to your life. This is quite different to the teen expectation. Mary explains this by saying, "Like, I kind of just wanted a boyfriend. Yeah. So I would say pretty similar, like, my ideals as a teenager is why I was in that relationship probably" (P4, 25:13). Being in a relationship as a teenager was based just on the idea of having a boyfriend. Now, as a young adult, relationships are of higher quality, are not nearly as important or necessary, and must function with the woman's self-esteem and independence.

When asking the participants if they are in a relationship or have had one since entering college, the difference in answers between this and the teenage section was astounding. As teenagers, four out of six participants were in romantic relationships. However, as young adults, only one participant was in a current romantic relationship, while the rest were happily single. The reasons for this varied: Mary and Chloe had just recently broken up with their partners; Piper and Lorelai were too busy in school and enjoying their lives for a boyfriend; and Rory was spending time working finding her own identity. No matter the reason, none of these women are necessarily chasing down a relationship. Piper explained, "if it happens, great. Obviously, I'd welcome it. But it's not anywhere near the top of my priority list at this point" (P3, 50:03). For Piper, this meant focusing on her own life and her own happiness. As a senior at Loyola, she felt she didn't have the bandwidth for a relationship. Similarly, Lorelai felt that a relationship wouldn't be a good fit for her at the moment:

> "I have so much on my plate right now. I think having to deal with a relationship would just make me, like, more stressful. I also feel like, there's a part of me that I'm like, I'm so busy, I don't think I could be a good girlfriend. Like, that's really at the end of the day. Like, that's what it comes down to" (P1, 50:12).

With more adult responsibilities and the pressures of college, romantic relationships almost gets put on the back burner. Once a primary focus for many of these women, now it comes in second place to doing what is best for oneself as an independent woman.

For Mary and Chloe, their experience with young adulthood so far has been the transition from young adult relationships to independence and self-discovery. When initially creating the question for this section, "are you currently in a relationship or have you been in one since entering college," I expected a different outcome with the answers to this question. I predicted that if someone answered yes to this question, they would have had a relationship that started *after* high school. However, I found that for Mary and Chloe, who have had a relationship since entering college, but are not currently in one, their "young adult relationship" overlaps with the end of their teen/high school years. This difference between my expectations and reality brought an interesting point to the study: while all the participants other than Kendall were single and focusing on themselves, those who had just broken up with their previous boyfriends were more focused on staying single and finding themselves after a relationship they were glad to end. For example, Mary said, "Like, I'm just not looking for anything. So I'm not really focusing on it" (P4, 28:00). We could assume that because of her recent breakup, that is why Mary is more focused on spending time alone. However, even the participants who were not in a recent romantic relationship share similar sentiments, and are not actively chasing a romantic relationship. It's evident that despite the lead-up to being single as a young adult, there is a common decision to focus on oneself and a lack of pressure put on the women to be in relationships.

Chloe shares a similar sentiment, however, this time it is based on self-esteem. During their teen years, many of these women felt pressure to be in a romantic relationship. This

inevitably puts a strain on the self-esteem of these women. As teens, they were more focused in having a boyfriend just to say they had one, rather than being in a quality relationship either with someone else, or with themselves. Chloe emphasizes this point, saying,

"I feel like I've actually like, my self-esteem has probably like, improved a lot since my last relationship…I don't feel like I have worse self-esteem being single. But yeah, I do feel like it's given me a lot of time to decide what I would be looking for in a relationship" (P6, 36:23).

From what each of these women expressed about their teen expectations and lives, not having a boyfriend or a romantic relationship would have negatively impacted their self-esteem as teenagers. However, experiences with previous romantic relationships and going through these negative experiences as teenagers has brought a new line of thought to the lives of these young women. Primarily, that being in a romantic relationship is not necessary and that time alone is sometimes needed to grow as an individual.

For the women who had not had a romantic relationship as young adults (Piper, Lorelai, and Rory), their reasons for remaining single were similar. For all three of these women, staying single was based on a desire to focus on their own identities and what is best for them. As mentioned previously, Piper and Lorelai have taken this time to focus on school and accomplishing their academic, career, and life goals without a partner. Lorelai expressed that she is "...so excited to just be in my 20s in Chicago and have a good time" (P1, 54:22). While finding a life-long partner is something she is interested in, at this point in her life, her focus is set on enjoying her life without compromising for a partner. Piper is similarly focused on living a life that she enjoys and feels content with. Again, for each of these women not in young adult relationships, they are not completely turned off to the idea of a relationship. Instead, they are not actively chasing one.

Despite this self-improvement mindset, Piper did have an image of what college would look like. She thought, "...you're going to live in a cute little apartment – which that's true – But like, you're gonna be in this happy, great relationship and have this massive friend group" (P3, 52:48). This idea was shared by Lorelai and Rory, with both of them assuming that they would find someone in college. However, what is most important here, is that even with this young adult relationship expectation, this time the women were able to break out of it quicker. Instead of being caught in the pressures of their adolescence about teenage relationships, these women have been able to more easily focus on their own personal development. For instance, Piper stated "...I wouldn't trade what I've had the last four years for anything" (P3, 52:48). Here there is a palpable sense of maturity and growth amongst the women as they move into young adulthood less focused on trivial relationships and "boys, boys, and more boys" and are now more focused on what makes *them* happy. For Rory, this meant focusing on loving herself and figuring out her identity on her own.

In her interview, Rory discussed the pressures she felt as a woman in her small hometown. For her, this meant clinging to traditional roles of heteronormativity and femininity (long beautiful hair, a boyfriend, a future husband, etc.). However, when she went to college, she was able to focus on going against these norms and finding happiness and an identity she created for herself. Rory described the progress she has gone through, saying, "I'm glad I've gotten to a point where I'm comfortable just, like, being by myself…how are you going to love someone else if you don't even love yourself?" (P2, 23:01). In terms of her identity, Rory has been "...realizing who I am outside of my home life. And I think that that's kind of a lot. I don't know if I could handle like a relationship on top of that" (P2, 25:50). Instead of focusing all of her efforts on finding the mysterious boyfriend and husband she dreamed of as a teenager, Rory's

new goal is to find who she really is. This journey of self-love is something common amongst all my respondents, who are using their young adulthood to alter teen expectations and pressures about romance as young women. This is representative of moving through the life course, setting the narratives of the media to the side, and maturing as independent individuals.

As Lorelai, Rory, Piper, Mary, and Chloe grew from teenagers to young adults, a lot has changed in their perspectives on life and love. Where they were enchanted with the idea of a superficial romantic relationship as a way to boost their teenage self's self-esteem, they now are focused on what is best for themselves. Kendall is an outlier in this sense, as she is currently in a romantic relationship as a young adult. However, her experience has been positive, as her current partner does exactly what she said young adult partners should do: he pushes her to be her best and makes her life better. Ironically, just like what she expected should happen based on the maturity of the *Mamma Mia* relationships. On the other hand, Lorelai, Rory, Piper, Mary, and Chloe are all single as young adults. Their enthusiasm in being single and finding themselves combined with complete indifference towards a romantic relationship demonstrates that for these participants, young adulthood is more about the woman as an individual and less about the woman as a girlfriend.

Discussion: "Everything is Not What it Seems" – Impacts of TV on Relationship Expectations

As the theme song from *Wizards of Waverly Place* says, "everything is not what it seems" ("Everything is Not What it Seems," 2009). Throughout this study, we have seen the progression of six women – Lorelai, Rory, Piper, Mary, Chloe, and Kendall – as they reconciled romance and individuality as teenagers to young adults with media portrayals. A key player utilized to understand relationship expectations, realities, and struggles was the participant's favorite

adolescent TV shows. From Disney Channel, to ABC dramas like *Pretty Little Liars*, to movies like *Mamma Mia*, the portrayal of teen romantic relationships has socialized these women on how to understand dating and relationships.

At the beginning of the study, I hypothesized that adolescent TV shows would have a frequent and pressuring portrayal of romantic relationships. I then predicted that these representations would negatively impact the ability for young women to form romantic relationships as teenagers and, subsequently, as young adults. As I interviewed each of these women, I had some unexpected findings (i.e., "talking stages" instead of official relationships; young adult relationships starting in adolescence and ending in college) as well as findings that confirmed my hypotheses. As I had predicted, romantic relationships in adolescent TV shows were so important that even now, as young adults, my participant's memories of the TV shows are crystal clear. These shows and their romantic relationships are a form of entertainment that embedded itself into the lives of these women, capturing their thoughts and opinions. Similarly to what McKinley (1997) found in her study of the women viewers of *Beverly Hills 90210*, these women all had strong opinions about who ended up with who and the plot lines of these shows. Unlike McKinley's (1997), my study involved individuals recalling TV shows of their past instead of watching a current show. Additionally, McKinley's (1997) sample pitted the two best friends – Brenda and Kelly – against each other. Meanwhile, the women in my study had more advanced views on female friendship, citing it as one of the more important themes in the TV shows they used to watch. However, what is common between both studies is how personally connected the audiences were to the shows, be it Disney Channel or *Beverly Hills 90210*. Both samples had strong opinions about the characters. For example, who Brenda and Kelly should end up with and whether Teddy should have gotten back together with Spencer.

As noted above, female friendships and family values as a way of defining modern womanhood were themes that were just as influential as romantic relationships to these women. This importance could be biased and based on the fact that this sample of women are looking *back* at these shows with a more mature mindset. If this study was interviewing young girls at the moment that they were watching these shows, then these themes may be less significant. However, the recollection aspect of the study (similar to how Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) had their sample recall experiences) is crucial in understanding how these women have grown over time not just based on romantic relationships, but as individuals.

The importance of friends, family, and womanhood in these TV shows transcended the worlds of these characters and became a part of participant's identities. As individuals moved from adolescence to young adulthood, there was a shift in the way friendship and individuality were conceptualized. Focusing solely on what was represented in the TV shows, the participants listed multiple different TV shows and even a movie that had particularly strong female friendships that were separate or even in defiance of romantic relationships. When recounting their teen years, female friendships were not the main focus of discussion. They were mentioned as sources of support with relationships or even points of comparison. Friendships even occasionally served to negatively impact the participants (i.e., Kendall). However, young adulthood marked a change not just in romantic relationship expectations, but also the importance of female friendship.

The lessons about female friendship in these teen TV shows seem to have had a stronger impact over time. In many ways, this finding runs counter to the idea that these shows are negative influences on teenagers. As these women grew up and experienced life, the friendships they saw in these shows lived in the back of their minds, and reinforced what these women found

most important in life. No longer teenagers, life was not all about the boys the TV characters had lined up. Instead, life is now about independence, friendships, and focusing on oneself. This is the idea of womanhood and femininity that the participants identified, and it is essential to understand that it's coming to fruition occurred as young adults, not as teenagers.

The importance of family more or less stayed the same, with most of the participants having fairly close relationships with their families, and the TV shows echoed the importance of these relationships. Additionally, understanding womanhood must go hand in hand with the understanding of all different relationships: romantic, platonic, and familial. For my participants, what it meant to be a woman was influenced by what they learned through their interpersonal relations. For example, they learned that romantic relationships did not have to be frustrating and full of compromises. Instead, they need to be of quality and enhance one's life. Thus, female friendships would define ideas of womanhood, creating independence and positive self-esteem. Close family relationships work to provide support that allows all of this understanding and change to happen.

At its core, this paper is academic, but the implications are real. We have explored the theory of adolescent TV shows and their impact on the romantic relationship expectations and realities of young women. This study emphasizes the importance of media narratives on the lives of young women. TV shows and movies of any target age say that romantic relationships help socialize young people into what they think life should look like. Thus, one implication is to prioritize a critical analysis of media narratives. We need to be critical of what these forms of media and entertainment are saying about romance and relationship goals, because it will impact the psyches and lives of young female audiences. Also, the implication is that we need more consideration and knowledge about these topics, something that presumably has not been present

in the past, given the stories of these six women. Given the power of the internet to tell stories, this implication is even more important than in previous generations.

Conclusion

From Disney Channel's *Wizards of Waverly Place* and *Good Luck Charlie*; to the popular TV drama, *Pretty Little Liars*; to movies like *Mamma Mia*, media has had a chokehold on the lives of current college-aged women. Televised romantic relationships were tumultuous and engaging, creating unrealistic romantic expectations, yet positive friendship and family lessons for their female audience. Through the interviews with these six women, the data support my initial hypotheses. Adolescent TV shows consistently portray a variety of unrealistic romantic relationships that strongly impact the women that watched them growing up, often negatively shaping real life teen relationship expectations and struggles. However, as young adult women, their struggles create positive self-esteem based on healthier relationship expectations and emphasis on friendships and individuality. Beloved childhood TV shows and movies play a long game, begging for control and influence in the lives of their female audience. While their success in this effort begins negatively, young adulthood changes the impact into one of positivity and individual, female empowerment.

Limitations

While the 6 women interviewed provided great findings that expanded the knowledge on this topic, this sample is not representative of the larger population. All participants are from varying backgrounds and identities, sharing similarities primarily in their gender-identity, their enrollment at Loyola, and their membership in Kappa Delta. Therefore, the information collected cannot be generalized for the greater population, as this study does not provide a universal explanation of *all* young women's experiences. Expanding the sample size, recruiting from

different organizations and universities, and expanding the age range, would enhance the study. Additionally, my sample has little racial/ethnic diversity. A sample size with more diversity in terms of different identities and experiences would also be useful to create true intersectional representation. Additionally, TV shows and movies are not the only causal factor in terms of socialization. There are other mediating institutions that shape how a person understands themselves. However, given the increasing salience of media, the findings here are important. And while my study focused on fairly modern forms of media, focusing on other forms of media, or even a historical analysis of how these effects have grown over time, would provide deeper knowledge and understanding.

Bibliography

Bickford, Tyler. 2015. "Tween Intimacy and the Problem of Public Life in Children's Media:

"Having It All" on the Disney Channel's "Hannah Montana." Women's Studies Quarterly

43(1/2). Retrieved 22 September, 2023

(https://luc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=cdi_proquest_miscellan

eous_1728661050&context=PC&vid=01LUC_INST:01LUC&search_scope=MyInst_and

_CI&tab=Everything&lang=en)

Erickson, Sarah E., and Sonya Dal Cin. 2018. "Romantic Parasocial Attachments and the

Development of Romantic Scripts, Schemas and Beliefs among Adolescents." Media

Psychology 21(1). Retrieved 22 September, 2023

(https://luc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=cdi_proquest_journals_

1977672641&context=PC&vid=01LUC_INST:01LUC&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&

tab=Everything&lang=en).

"Everything is Not What it Seems." *Genius*, 4 Aug. 2009,

https://genius.com/Selena-gomez-everything-is-not-what-it-seems-lyrics.

Feasey, Rebecca. 2006. "Watching Charmed: Why Teen Television Appeals to Women." The

Journal of Popular Film and Television 34(1). Retrieved 22 September, 2023

(https://luc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=cdi_chadwyckhealey_a

bell_R03925704&context=PC&vid=01LUC_INST:01LUC&search_scope=MyInst_and_

CI&tab=Everything&lang=en).

Haggarty, Maryann. 2010. "Reality TV." CQ Press 20(29). Retrieved 16 September, 2023

(https://cqpress.sagepub.com/cqresearcher/report/reality-tv-cqresrre20100827).

Jean, Elizabeth A., Angela Neal-Barnett, and Robert Stadulis. 2022. "How We See Us: An
    Examination of Factors Shaping the Appraisal of Stereotypical Media Images of Black
    Women among Black Adolescent Girls." Sex Roles 86(5-6). Retrieved 16 September,
    2023
    (https://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/how-we-
    see-us-examination-factors-shaping/docview/2637579478/se-2?accountid=12163).

McKinley, E. Graham. 1997. Beverly Hills, 90210 television, gender, and identity. Pennsylvania.
    University of Pennsylvania Press. Retrieved 16 September, 2023
    (https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/luc/detail.action?docID=3441484).

Rivadeneyra, Rocío, and Melanie J. Lebo. 2008. "The association between television-viewing
    behaviors and adolescent dating role attitudes and behaviors." Journal of Adolescence
    31(3). Retrieved 6 September, 2023
    (https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=a9h&AN=3
    2089452&scope=site&custid=s8448101).

Villarejo-Carballido, Beatriz, Christina M. Pulido, Harkaitz Zubiri-Esnaola, and Esther Oliver.
    2022. "Young People's Voices and Science for Overcoming Toxic Relationships
    Represented in Sex Education." International Journal of Environmental Research and
    Public Health 19(6). Retrieved 16 September, 2023
    (https://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/young-p
    eople-s-voices-science-overcoming-toxic/docview/2642462297/se-2?accountid=12163).

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Interviewee (pseudonym)	Date, Time, Location
Lorelai	11/8/23, 11am, Rivers & Roads Cafe
Rory	11/6/23, 11:30am, Engrained Cafe (LUC)
Piper	11/18/23, 11:15am, Damen (LUC)
Mary	11/6/23, 10am, Rivers & Roads Cafe
Kendall	11/8/23, 2:30pm, Damen (LUC)
Chloe	11/19/23, 4pm, Damen (LUC)

Appendix B: Informed Consent Procedures

Project Title: Adolescent Media and its Effects on Teen and Young Adult Romantic
Relationship Status, Expectations, and Self-Esteem.
Researcher: Thais Rulich-Maly
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Marilyn Krogh

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Thais Rulich-Maly for a
senior capstone paper under the supervision of Dr. Marilyn Krogh in the Department of
Sociology at Loyola University of Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you are a student at Loyola University Chicago and
identify as a woman. Any other personal characteristics other than being female-identifying do
not exclude you from the study and will enhance my understanding of your experience.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to
participate in the study.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is first to understand how TV shows aimed at kids/teenagers and
watched by young women growing up create expectations and lessons of and about romantic
relationships. Second, to learn how these TV shows impact the relationship status, relationship

expectations, and relationship self-esteem of these women as teenagers and young adults in college.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a 45-minute to 1-hour interview (can be longer depending on participant interest in the topic).
- Participate in the interview at either an on-campus or off-campus location. Off-campus locations can include (but are not limited to) coffee shops, restaurants, parks, etc. Your comfort level at any location is key to the interview.
- Participate in an audio-taped interview for the sake of the researcher's interview notes and transcriptions.
- Discuss the TV shows you watched as a kid or teenager (as early as you remember seeing a TV show talk about, portray, or teach about romantic relationships).
- Respond to questions about romantic relationships you may or may not have had as a teenager.
- Discuss any relationship-based pressures, expectations, or self-esteem issues you had as a teenager.
- Respond to questions about romantic relationships you may or may not have now as a young adult.
- Discuss any current relationship-based pressures, expectations, or self-esteem you have now.
- Compare and contrast your teenage and current experiences.
- Discuss any lessons about romantic relationships that have stuck with you from pre-defined TV shows, and what you would like to see in future TV shows.

Risks/Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life or everyday internet use.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but your participation can help create community among other women with similar experiences and develop a further understanding of how TV shows may harm or benefit adolescent women.

Compensation:

Participants will receive compensation in terms of a coffee, snack, etc. bought for them during the interview.

Confidentiality:

- Information/data gathered from the study will be coded so that no names are included in the final study or data gathering.
- Coding will be done by checking off information relevant to the questions on my copy of the interview packet/guide and then entering it into Qualtrics.
- No real names, locations, or any other identifying information will be included in data collection, coding, transcription, or in the final study.
- You will select a pseudonym that will be used in the final study, and only your initials will be used in my personal notes for connecting who was interviewed with their pseudonym.
- All of my notes, data, and audio recordings will be loaded onto my personal computer and will be password-protected. They will only be accessible to me, the researcher.
- The interview will be audio recorded, and those audiotapes will be password-protected on my personal computer and will be destroyed at the end of the study.
- Audio recordings will be transcribed on my personal computer using the service Otter AI and will be destroyed after the study is complete.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Any relationship you have to your organization, me as the researcher, or your status as a student at Loyola will have no affect on your status in these organizations or any pre-existing relationship to me, the researcher.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Thais Rulich-Maly at trulichmaly@luc.edu or 708-340-8061 or the faculty sponsor Dr. Marilyn Krogh at mkrogh@luc.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_____ _____

Participant's Signature   interview only   Date

_____ _____
Participant's Signature   interview & audio recording   Date

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Section 1: Adolescent TV Shows
I want to start off asking you about the TV shows that you watched growing up.
     1) How often did you watch TV growing up?
     2) Where did you watch TV most often? Did you watch with others? Please explain.
         a) Tell me more about this experience watching TV as a kid/adolescent.
     3) Looking back at your childhood/teen years, what were two of your favorite TV shows?
         a) Tell me more about what happened in those shows.
         b) Who was your favorite character in each of those shows? Tell me more about them (what were they like, what did you like about them, what was their story-line).
         c) What made these your favorite TV shows? Why were they important to you?
         d) Tell me about the main romantic relationships in each of the shows.
               i) Who were in these relationships?
               ii) How did these relationships start?
               iii) How did the couples interact with each other?
               iv) What kind of challenges did the couple face?
               v) What happened with the relationship at the end of the TV show (or when you stopped watching it)?
               vi) Out of these relationships that you identified, did you have a favorite relationship that you were rooting for? What made you interested in that relationship?
     4) Looking back, what was the role of women in these shows? *Probe:* Were there similarities or differences between the two shows?
     5) Could you identify any lessons that the shows taught or focused on? *Probe:* Any repeated message or lesson, something that happened a lot to a character and had a solution presented in the show.

Section 2: Romantic life and Impacts as a Teenager (past)
Now, I want to shift away from television to your experience with romantic relationships and expectations as a teenager. If there is any question that makes you uncomfortable or that you would like to skip, let me know, and we will move past it.
     6) Looking back to when you were in middle school/high school, what was your idea of the "ideal romantic relationship"?

a)   How similar/different was this ideal to the relationships in the TV shows we discussed?

b)   Tell me about what stood out to you in the TV shows and in your real-life about romantic relationships to create this ideal.

7)   Tell me about how important a romantic relationship was for you as a teenager.

a)   Did either of the shows you mentioned put noticeable importance on romantic relationships? Please explain.

8)   What did your idea of being a woman look like as a teenager?

a)   Tell me more about this experience. *Probe:* Did you feel pressure, guilt, frustration? Did you feel joy, empowerment, etc.?

b)   How would you compare your experience with that of the women in your favorite adolescent TV shows?

9)   As a tween/teenager did you have a romantic relationship?

___ If NO (skip and answer 10).

___ YES (continue through 9)

a)   How old were you when you entered this relationship?

b)   Tell me more about what this relationship(s) was like for you.

c)   How did you feel about this relationship(s) at the time?

d)   How would you compare your relationship(s) to the ones you described in the two TV shows.

e)   If you could use three words to describe the way you felt about yourself during that relationship, what would they be?

f)   If you could use three words to describe the way you feel about your teenage self *now*, what would they be?

g)   Knowing that you were in a relationship, did you ever feel pressure to date or be in a relationship (or be in the relationship you were in)?

i)   Who did that pressure come from? *Probe:* how did this affect you emotionally/mentally, what did you do to cope with that?

ii)   Did you ever feel pressure to be in a or have a romantic relationship from the TV shows we discussed? Please explain.

10) If you were **not** in a romantic relationship as a teenager, what was this experience like for you?

a)   Tell me a bit about this experience: did you ever feel pressure to date?

i)   Who did that pressure come from, how did it make you feel, what did you do to cope with that?

ii)   Did you ever feel pressure to be in a or have a romantic relationship from the TV shows we discussed? Please explain.

b)   Tell me about the expectations you had about romantic relationships at the time. What did you think your experience would be like?

        i)   How similar were your relationship expectations and the romantic relationships you identified in your favorite TV shows?

c)   Tell me more about the social support you had. How did you communicate with others about relationships?

        i)   Were you able to talk comfortably about your relationship status?

        ii)   Could you identify one or two people who made you feel supported? Are there any specific people that made you feel unsupported?

        iii)   How did it make you feel talking with others about your experiences?

        iv)   Were there any discussions of not being in a relationship in your two favorite adolescent TV Shows?

d)   Looking back at the romantic relationships you described in your favorite TV show growing up, what kind of emotions did watching this show and seeing these relationships bring you?

e)   If you could use three words to describe the way you felt about yourself during that period of time (as a teenager), what would they be?

f)   If you could use three words to describe the way you feel about your teenage self *now*, what would they be?

Section 3: Romantic Life and Impacts as a Young Adult (present)

Now, I would like to shift to your current experience with romantic relationships. This section builds off of your answers to the questions in the previous section, which focused on your teenage years. Again, if there are any questions you are uncomfortable answering, let me know, and we will move past them.

11) How would you currently define or describe an ideal relationship?

a)   Is there an image that pops into your head when you describe this relationship? Tell me more about this.

b)   How is this ideal similar to the relationships in the two shows we talked about earlier?

12) How is this idea of an ideal relationship similar or different from when you were a teenager?

13) Tell me about how important you think a romantic relationship is.

a)   How do you feel the TV shows you identified earlier impacted this?

14) Earlier, we talked about what being a woman looked like to you. As a young adult, what would you say being a woman means to you?

a)   Are there any similarities or differences between this image now and when you were a teenager?

b)   How is this similar or different to the representations of women in the TV shows we talked about?

15) Are you currently in a relationship, or have you been in one since entering college?

    ___ If NO (Skip and answer 16)

    ___ YES (Continue with 15)

    a)   Tell me more about this relationship. How would you describe it?

    b)   Have you felt any pressure about your relationship from others?

    c)   How would you compare your current "ideal relationship" to your current romantic relationship?

    d)   How would you compare your *current* ideal/expectation for a romantic relationship to the romantic relationships in the favorite TV shows we discussed?

    e)   How would you compare your teenage-self's "ideal relationship" to your *current* romantic relationship?

    f)   How would you compare the romantic relationships you identified in your favorite TV shows to your current relationship?

    g)   If you could use three words to describe the way you feel about yourself during this current relationship, what would they be?

16) If you are ***not*** in a romantic relationship or ***have never been***, tell me about how this period of time has been for you.

    a)   Tell me a bit about this experience: do you ever feel pressure to date?

        i)   Who does that pressure come from, how does it make you feel, what do you do to cope with that?

        ii)   Do you feel pressure to be in a or have a romantic relationship from the TV shows you watched growing up? Please explain.

    b)   Tell me about the expectations you have about romantic relationships/dating. What did you think this experience would be like as a young adult?

        i)   Have these expectations changed between being a teenager and now being a young adult?

        ii)   How similar are your relationship/dating expectations and the romantic relationship in the adolescent TV shows we discussed?

    c)   Tell me more about the social support you have. How do you communicate with others about relationships?

        i)   Are you able to talk comfortably about your relationship status?

        ii)   Could you identify one or two people who make you feel supported? Are there any specific people that make you feel unsupported?

        iii)   How does it make you feel talking with others about your experiences?

17) How do you think your relationship status (as a teenager all the way through to now, as a young adult) has affected your self-esteem or your expectations for the future?

18) Are you content with your current relationships (romantic, familial, platonic, etc.)?

19) If you could compare your favorite TV shows we discussed earlier with your life right now, what would you say is similar or different between the two?

Section 4: Conclusion

As we wrap up this interview, I'm going to ask you some concluding questions.

20) We've discussed your favorite TV shows from your adolescence a lot up to this point. Now, at the end of the interview, how do you feel about these shows?

21) What is something you would like to see portrayed in kids/teen TV shows?

22) We've talked a lot about your teenage years. If you could, what is something you would tell your teenage self?

23) Is there anything that I have missed or that you would like me to know before we conclude the interview?