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**Separating the sex from the object: Conceptualizing sexualization and (sexual)  
objectification in Flemish preteens' popular television programs**

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## **Separating the sex from the object: Conceptualizing sexualization and (sexual) objectification in Flemish preteens' popular television programs**

Media effects research has confirmed that sexualizing media exposure can negatively affect preteens' body image and sexual development. While there is a link between sexualizing content and adverse outcomes such as self-objectification and body dissatisfaction, an interest in sexual media content is a normal part of healthy sexual development during the preteen years. Hence, research is needed that examines the variety in preteens' sexual media diet thereby addressing the subtleties involved in sexualizing media. To what extent do sexual content, appearance-related content, sexual objectification, and objectification occur in Flemish preteens' favorite TV-shows? And, how are these different types of content related to gender roles? Seeking to address these questions, this article reports on a quantitative content analysis of 24 episodes from five TV shows popular among Flemish preteens. Drawing on a sample of 465 scenes, results demonstrated that one in five scenes contained sexual behavior, and one in ten contained sexual objectification. Male characters were sexually objectified as often as female characters. Women were more often judged for their appearance, but were also more often shown treating others as objects in a non-sexual way. Results are discussed in light of objectification and social cognitive theory, culminating in suggestions for future research and implications for parents.

Keywords: content analysis; sexualization; sexual objectification; objectification; pre-adolescence; television; Flemish

Assessing the diversity of sexual content in preteen popular television programs, this study focuses on conceptual clarity by exploring the differences between sexual and appearance-related content, sexually objectifying content, and non-sexually objectifying content. Over the last decades, scholars have called attention to the increasing prominence of media sexualization (e.g., Durham, 2009; Gunter, 2014), or the process by which people are socialized by a media environment that normalizes situations where:

“a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007, p. 1)

Research (for a review, see APA, 2007 and Ward, 2016) has consistently demonstrated that sexualizing media exposure is associated with negative body image and poor sexual health outcomes across the life span (e.g., partner-objectification in adults [Zurbriggen, Ramsey, & Jaworsky, 2007]), acceptance of stereotypical gender roles in adolescents [Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2014]), and self-and other objectification in preteens [Rousseau & Eggermont, in press]). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) explains how individuals’ daily exposure to sexualizing practices, including sexually objectifying experiences, can result in these negative psychological outcomes. Fredrickson and Roberts explain that the self is a social construct and that the way society treats individuals will be reflected in the way individuals treat themselves. As such, the pervasiveness of sexualization in society socializes women to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated. In

turn, the internalization of an observer's perspective affects one's subjective experiences in a negative way (e.g., body shame).

Although a solid research base has explored the effects of being exposed to a sexualizing media environment, scholars have not consistently taken into account the subtleties involved in sexualizing media content. As Ward (2016) states, sexualization research is troubled by conceptual ambiguity. Sexualization is often conflated with sexual objectification, while sexual objectification is only one component of sexualization. We argue that conceptual clarity is a priority, especially for research on sexual media content: While the negative impact of sexualizing content has been established (Ward, 2016), inconsistent conceptualization poses the risk of painting sexual and appearance-related media content with too broad a brush.

In addition, Lerum and Dworkin (2009) and Haslam (2006) have questioned why objectification research has semi-exclusively focused on sexual objectification, claiming there is no clear reason why only sexual types of objectification would be problematic. The current content analysis aims to address these issues by distinguishing between sexual content, appearance-related content, sexually objectifying content, and non-sexually objectifying content. These concepts are empirically tested by means of a content analysis of the most popular TV shows (four Flemish produced shows and one imported Argentinian TV-show) among Flemish preteens. The preteen audience segment was chosen because early adolescents experience sexual curiosity and are especially invested in developing schemata of (romantic) social interaction (Zosuls, Miller, Ruble, Martin, & Fabes, 2011).

### **The concept of sexualization: Over-generalization and misuse**

The concept of sexualization appears to have been used inconsistently in previous research. In some instances, sexualization refers to the amount of sexual content present in media (e.g., Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Turner, 2011). For instance, comparing African American and

White music videos, Turner (2011) concludes that the former are more sexualizing than the latter because they display more sexual acts (e.g., affectionate touch, implicit intercourse). Similarly, Peter and Valkenburg (2007) put forward the concept of a sexualized media environment to refer to the increasing amount of sexual content across different media formats. However, not all sexual content is sexualizing or sexually objectifying in nature, the media can also portray healthy sexual content, such as sexual interactions that involve mutual respect between consenting partners (Collins et al., 2017).

In other cases, sexualization refers to appearance- or body-focused content in media. For instance, in their content analysis of female self-sexualization in MySpace.com, Hall, West and McIntyre (2012) refer to body display (e.g., wearing mini-skirts) as a form of self-sexualizing behavior. In another study examining instances of sexualization in children's (ages 6-11) popular TV programs, self-sexualization was coded as characters wearing sexy clothing, exhibiting sexual behavior, or showing an investment in their appearance (McDade-Montez, Wallander, & Cameron, 2016). However, the media's coverage of appearance-related content does not necessarily socialize preteen audiences to view themselves as objects to be valued solely by sexual appeal to the exclusion of other characteristics.

### **Sexual and appearance-related vs sexualizing media content**

Following the APA report, sexualization differs from 'healthy' sexuality because it encompasses a person being forced into an sexual role, thus virtually eliminating the possibility of agency and empowerment. However, as it stands today, sexualization research suffers from generalizations, with the concept being used to categorize appearance-related content as well as depictions of both explicitly problematic and seemingly innocuous instances of sexual behavior (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). With respect to sexual content, we deem it important to differentiate between non-sexually objectifying sexual content and sexual content that is objectifying in nature. Preteens' interest in sexual media content is a

normal part of healthy sexual development. As such, it would be inaccurate to label any type of sexual content as dangerous and potentially harmful for preteens sexual development. For instance, preteen girls (ages 10-13) reported that sexual media content can also be useful, interesting, and educational (Vares & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, we aim to differentiate between scenes that depict non-violent and non-degrading sexual references and/or portray mutually consenting sex and scenes that depict a person (involuntarily) being forced into an (exclusively) sexual role, such as sexual harassment (e.g., Hall, West, & Hill, 2011).

With respect to appearance-related content, we argue that non-sexualizing appearance content is related, but distinct from, sexualizing content (Smolak et al., 2014). A person can be portrayed as appearance-oriented or (sexually) attractive without being sexualized. For instance, a character can be portrayed as investing in their appearance and engaging in grooming behaviors, without being displayed as a sexual object, a person who conforms to narrow sociocultural definitions linking attractiveness and sexiness, or a person that assumes that one's value comes primarily from their sexual appeal (e.g., Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012).

However, in line with the APA definition of sexualization, appearance-related content can acquire a sexualizing connotation when it turns individuals into a subordinate or inappropriate sexual position, limits individuals' agency in the adoption of beauty practices, or implies that individuals are predominantly valued for their sexual function or physical attractiveness. To illustrate, a scene portraying a character as sexually attractive can be read as being sexualizing, if the characters' outward appearance resembles cultural ideals of attractiveness. Similarly, a female character being praised for her physical appearance during a job interview is in correspondence with the notion that women are valued predominantly in terms of physical attractiveness rather than competence-related skills, and can therefore be categorized as sexualization.



We believe it is important to differentiate between sexualizing and non-sexualizing appearance-related content, as these different types of media content are theorized to elicit different responses among media users. First, following sociocultural theory (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), it is useful to distinguish between idealized appearance-related messages (i.e., content that promotes narrowly defined appearance ideals that are being equated with sexiness) and appearance-related content that does not promote unrealistic standards of (sexual) attractiveness. The former are theorized to trigger awareness of a discrepancy between one's actual and ideal appearance (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006), whereas the latter does not necessarily lead to negative body image evaluation or affect. When individuals use non-idealized media characters as a comparison standard for self-evaluation, they are less likely to experience body image-related negative affect due to self-deflation, as comparison with non-idealized others is theorized to enhance the self (Higgins, 1989). As such, portraying a character as (un)attractive is not necessarily problematic, if that character does not embody narrow, unrealistic cultural standards of attractiveness.

Second, based on objectification theory (Roberts & Fredrickson, 1997), we aim to distinguish between objectifying and non-objectifying appearance-related content. In particular, we opt for a distinction between a gaze that objectifies and one that recognizes beauty (e.g., Cahill, 2003). We reason that visual attention to a person's outward appearance cannot simply be equated with a sexualizing or sexually objectifying gaze. As stated by Roberts and Fredrickson (1997):

Always present in contexts of sexualized gazing is the potential for sexual objectification. Sexual objectification occurs whenever a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her (p. 175).

However, a non-objectifying gaze does not necessarily render the observed individual a mere object of the spectator's sexual desire, nor does it necessarily involve a form of dehumanization or reduction of a person to an object (e.g., Cahill, 2003). One can be attracted by the beauty of another person and communicate this via non-verbal signs (e.g., using body language to express and/or negotiate mutual attraction). In the absence of objectification, it is less likely that the experience of being evaluated as an attractive person will socialize individuals to adopt an observer's perspective on the self. In support of this reasoning, Herbozo and Thompson (2006) found that perceived positive appearance-related feedback induces higher levels of self-esteem and a more positive body image. This study distinguishes between scenes portraying a person as mostly ornamental and scenes portraying a person being evaluated for his/her physical appearance in a non-objectifying way.

### **Non-sexually objectifying media content**

Additionally, while sexual objectification is an established subject of scientific interest, no content analysis has looked into the prevalence of non-sexual objectification in media content. Objectification and sexual objectification are often used interchangeably, however, objectification originally was not a sexual concept (Nussbaum, 1995), it became one after it was adopted by second wave feminists like Bartky (1982). According to Nussbaum (1995, p. 257), objectification is present whenever a person is treated (a) as a tool that contributes to another person's goal (instrumentality and ownership), (b) as lacking capacity to act independently and make free (goal-directed) choices (inertness and denial of autonomy), (c) as if permissible to hurt (violability), (d) as something whose feelings and thoughts are not of concern to others (denial of subjectivity), or (e) as replaceable by similar others (fungibility). Scholars such as Nussbaum (1995) and Lerum and Dworkin (2009) have questioned the narrow emphasis on sexual objectification, while non-sexual objectification is such a prevalent part of our culture. For example, many popular sporting events are characterized by

controlled aggression, justified by non-sexual objectification through dehumanizing the opponent (Haslam, 2006). In addition, the non-sexual objectification of a person has been found to induce dehumanizing perceptions of that person (Zhang, Chan, & Cao, 2014), increasing the chance that one treats that person as violable (Haslam, 2006). For instance, the dehumanization of women as objects has been found to play a role in men's sexual aggression towards women. As such, not only sexual objectification but also non-sexual objectification places women (and presumably men as well) at risk for sexually objectifying victimization (Rudman & Mescher, 2012).

### **Preteens and sexual media**

Preteens may be particularly vulnerable to sexualizing media messages, because they are in the process of establishing a gender identity, they reengage in cross-sex interactions, and begin to form sexual scripts (Gondoli et al., 2011). Sexual scripts can be communicated through the sexual roles displayed by parents and peers, as well as through media characters who model sexual interactions. Given that sexuality related information is often insufficiently supplied by parents (de Graaf, Neeleman, & de Haas, 2009), and preteens are major media consumers, mass media are an easily available source of sexual information. In support of this assumption, research has indicated that early adolescents (ages 12-15) turn to the media as a source of information about sexuality that is unavailable in their micro-environment (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2006). This reliance on media for sexual information can negatively impact preteens' sexual development. Research among preteens (ages 9-14) demonstrated that exposure to sexually objectifying TV scripts was positively related to the idea that girls should predominantly use their body and sexiness to gain attention from boys (Rousseau & Eggermont, in press). Despite the media's potential to provide youth with sexual information, little is known regarding the nature of sexual content in preteen popular media. We aim to address this gap by analyzing the prevalence of sexual and appearance-

related content, sexually objectifying content, and non-sexually objectifying content in preteens' popular television.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As mentioned above, we argue that sexualizing (including sexually objectifying) media content is best studied in tandem with non-sexualizing forms of sexual content, such as scenes containing French kissing or scenes portraying a character as attractive. This way, a more complete impression is developed of how media portray sexuality. Additionally, when combined with coding of character gender, this will shed light on whether television narratives may sexualize female characters in more subcutaneous ways. For example, a character being complimented on their appearance might not qualify as sexualization, if this does not narratively reduce the character to merely ornamental value (APA, 2007). However, if women are more often judged on their appearance, this sexist pattern may still be linked to sexualization because it prioritizes the relevance of beauty for women.

Departing from the idea that sexual objectification includes criteria of *both* appearance focus and reduced perceptions of personal qualities (e.g., Budesheim, 2014), we aimed to conceptualize non-sexually objectifying appearance-related content as content that focuses on appearance but not reduces perceptions of personal qualities (e.g., Cahill, 2003). We created four variables that each refer to practices or situations that emphasize a person's physical appearance and/or sexiness without intentionally reducing that person to a body and/or instrument of other's sexual pleasure (e.g., Smolak et al., 2014).

To operationalize sexually objectifying content we relied on Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) definition of sexual objectification, stating that when sexually objectified, "a woman's [or man's] body, body parts or sexual functions are separated out from her [his] person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her [him]" (p. 175). Drawing on this definition we created three variables that refer to a

person being treated as ornamental, an instrument of sexual pleasure for others, or as sexually violable.

Finally, drawing on Nussbaum's (1995) dimensions of objectification, our conceptualization of non-sexual objectification included criteria of instrumentalization and ignoring aspects of personhood that do not have a sexual dimension. Drawing on the above mentioned conceptual issues, the first aim of this study is to examine the prevalence of sexual content, appearance-related content, sexually objectifying content and non-sexually objectifying content in preteens' favorite TV shows.

RQ. To what extent do (1) sexual and appearance-related content (2) sexual objectification and (3) objectification occur in TV programs most popular among preteens?

Next, we formulated a set of hypotheses pertaining to how sexual and appearance-related content, sexual objectification, and objectification are related to gender roles in preteen popular TV. Bandura (2002) argues that when people notice similarities between themselves and a character in terms of personal characteristics such as gender, they are more likely to adopt the character's behavior. In support of this claim, research confirmed that children seek out role models from television who are similar in gender, and adopt gender roles based on these models (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, & Birkbeck, 2016). Thus the (sexualized) characterization of same-sex role models may affect preteens' own developing sense of self. With respect to preteen TV programming, being portrayed in a sexual light and being sexually objectified are associated more strongly with female gender roles (McDade-Montez et al., 2017), while men are more often portrayed as sexualizing others (e.g., Kirsch & Murnen, 2015). For instance, analyzing gender roles in U.S. tween TV, Gerding and Signorielli (2014) found that, compared to males, females are more often portrayed as attractive and concerned about their appearance. Similar results were reported by McDade-Montez et al (2017); TV programs popular among U.S. preteen girls (ages 6 to 11)

more often showed female characters in a sexual light compared to male characters (e.g., wearing revealing clothing, conducting behavior to elicit sexual arousal). In addition, Kirsch and Murnen (2015) showed that American children's TV shows contained elements of the heterosexual script, with messages that involve the notion that girls should predominantly use their body and sexiness to attract boys. In contrast, types of non-sexual objectification such as physical aggression are linked more clearly to male gender roles (e.g., Luther & Legg, 2010).

Based on the abovementioned study results, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Female characters are more often presented in a sexual light than male characters.

H2: Female characters are more often sexually objectified than male characters.

H3: Male characters more often behave (verbally and non-verbally) in a sexually objectifying way towards others than female characters do.

H4: Male characters are more often non-sexually objectified than female characters.

H5: Male characters more often act in a non-sexually objectifying way towards others than female characters do.

## **Method**

By means of a quantitative content analysis we assessed the presence and forms of sexual and appearance-related content, sexual objectification, and non-sexual objectification in TV shows most popular among Flemish 10-13 year-olds. To this end, a preliminary survey was conducted enquiring into the target group's preferred media content. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the ethical review board of the host university. The survey accounted for demographic data as well as media habits and preferences. Participants were invited to share when and how often they used different types of media and which specific content they preferred. Using a database of the Flemish Department of Education, schools from different educational levels were randomly selected and requested to participate; six elementary schools and four secondary schools agreed upon participation. Next, an active informed

consent procedure was followed in which principals, teachers, parents and pupils were informed about the study and written informed consent from the legal guardians of all enrolled pupils was obtained, along with pupils' assent. During the second stage, research assistants visited the consenting schools and administered the survey by asking all participants to complete a paper-and-pencil questionnaire.

This approach resulted in a total sample of 401 questionnaires (57% boys). Among the participants, there were 138 5th graders, 116 6th graders, and 147 7th graders. The majority of the sample was born in Belgium (91%). The survey showed television to be the most popular medium, with more than nine in ten children watching television every day, at an average daily usage of 183 minutes. Because of this prominence of television in the media use of preteens, we opted to analyze preteens' preferred TV shows. Following the example of McDade-Montez et al. (2016), a top five of most popular programs was selected for analysis<sup>i</sup>. There proved to be considerable overlap between the most preferred TV shows of boys and girls, with four of the selected shows being part of the top five for both genders. Eighty-three percent of the preteens named one of the five shows as their absolute favorite and 65.7% said that one of these shows was in their top two.

The family-oriented soaps, *Thuis* and *Familie*, revolve around personal relationships, which is typical for the genre (Fiske, 1987). The sitcom *F.C. De Kampioenen* features the (mis)adventures of a fictional local football team. Its cast mainly consists of middle aged friends and relatives, who are often portrayed in a gender-stereotypical manner. The teen adventure series *Galaxy Park* follows six teens and one adult who work in a sci-fi themed amusement park that is besieged by aliens. Finally, the Argentinian telenovela *Violetta* revolves around a talented teenager who wants to become a singer. Its main focus is on interpersonal relationships, romance, and trials and tribulations of growing up. *Familie*,

*Thuis*, and *F.C. De Kampioenen* have a broad, family target audience, while *Galaxy Park* and *Violetta* are explicitly geared at the preteen segment.

A constructed week of episodes was selected for *Galaxy Park*, *Thuis*, *Familie* and *Violetta*, which were aired daily, and a constructed month for weekly aired *FC De Kampioenen*. This resulted in a total of 24 episodes being analyzed – five for *Thuis*, *Familie*, *FC De Kampioenen* and *Violetta*, and four for *Galaxy Park*, which was aired Monday to Thursday. Although there is no gold standard in terms of an acceptable number of episodes to sample from a television program, previous research suggests that a sample of three to seven episodes should be examined to provide a reasonable assessment of the overall sexual content of the program (Manganello, Franzini, & Jordan, 2008).

### ***Levels of analysis***

The episodes were analyzed at two levels: scenes and characters. A scene was defined as an interaction between a number of characters that takes place in one location, during a certain time (Van Mierlo, 2008). For every scene, all of the variables were coded for every featured character that played a prominent part in the coded scenes, which covered characters that had a speaking part (Ortiz & Brooks, 2014). This resulted in 465 scenes being analyzed for 130 characters, making a total of 1691 entries. Given that preadolescence is crucial to the formation of interpersonal sexual scripts (Zosuls et al., 2011), we choose to code interpersonal (sexual) objectification, meaning that we focused on how characters (sexually) objectified one another, rather than on how characters objectified themselves, or were featured as (sexual) objects by the program.

### ***Intercoder reliability and measurement validity***

The first two authors conducted the coding and analysis, dividing the sample between them. To minimize coder subjectivity, rigorous attention was paid to the clarity of the coding instrument (e.g., checklist including well defined operationalization of all coding items) as



well as to extensive testing of the codebook as a form of training for the coders (Neuendorf, 2011). Training sessions (7-8 h) involved watching and coding episodes not included in the sample. This involved group coding, individual coding, and in-depth discussions of the coding scheme and categories. During group sessions, the coders practiced on several issues so that they could identify and resolve problems with the codebook. After the codebook was modified on the basis of these group sessions, approximately 10% of the sample was selected randomly and coded independently by the two main authors. To check reliability, a third coder, blind to the research hypotheses, coded 20% of the scenes. The third coder was an graduate female student, pursuing a graduate-level degree in communication science, who had completed advanced coursework in content analytic research. She was trained for approximately 7 h on television content outside of the actual sample. The training involved one group coding (a coding session together with the first author and three other students in which difficulties with the interpretation of the different codes used in the codebook were identified and the meaning of each code was clarified) and three rounds of individual coding followed by an in-depth discussions of the coding results with the first author. Using Hayes SPSS macros, Krippendorff's alphas were calculated to measure inter-rater agreement for each coding category. Since lower criteria can be used for indices known to be more conservative, like Krippendorff's alpha, and since the variables revolve around complex theoretical concepts, .66 was selected as minimum level of reliability (Lombard, Synder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). All variables except fungibility were sufficiently reliable. Fungibility only occurred twice in the test sample, which meant that one disagreement between the coders resulted in a reliability score of 0. Due to this lack of reliability, this variable was not used in the analysis. In order to establish a more formal assessment of validity, we performed discriminant validity analyses and tested if sexual objectification, sexual content and appearance-related content are distinct and discriminable constructs. As

shown in Table 1, the square root of AVE exceeded the construct's correlation with every other construct, indicating that the constructs differ from each other.

[TABLE 1: ABOUT HERE]

### ***Content measures***

#### *Sexual content at scene level (sexual acts)*

Each scene was coded for occurrence of a sexual reference or sexual activity, and if so, what type (Ortiz & Brooks, 2014). To be coded as containing sexual content, scenes had to convey a sense of potential or actual sexual intimacy (Eyal, Kunkel, Biely, & Finnerty, 2007). Sexual content encompassed physical sexual behavior as well as sexually loaded statements. Sexual talk ( $\alpha = .88$ ) included innuendo. Physical sexual behavior was measured using five categories, ranked from least (*physical flirting* [ $\alpha = .74$ ]) to most (*sexual intercourse* [ $\alpha = 1.0$ ]) sexually explicit. Other variables for physical sexual behavior were *implied sex* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ) (scene portrays the body just before or immediately after an act of intercourse), *individual arousal* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ) (scene contains masturbation or watching others act sexually and becoming sexually aroused), and *light sexual behavior* ( $\alpha = .85$ ) (scene contains any sexual touching, such as passionate kissing, cuddling, light touching, holding hands, rubbing and petting).

#### *Appearance-related content at character level*

Characters were coded within each scene for active (a character addressing someone else in a sexual way) and passive (a character being addressed sexually) sexual content. The following variables were included to measure the occurrence of neutral sexual acts; (1) *explicit mention or treatment of a character as attractive* ( $\alpha = .75$ ;  $\alpha = .86$ ), (2) *explicit mention or treatment of a character as unattractive* ( $\alpha = .80$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), (3) *evaluation of a character as sexy, due to his or her physical appearance* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), and (4) *non-verbal evaluation of*

*character's physical appearance* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = .67$ ). For instance, a scene where two characters are having dinner and one praises the other for looking sexy and being such a good parent, does not fit the APA definition (i.e., a person's value is determined only or primarily by sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics).

### *Sexual objectification*

We defined sexual objectification as a situation where (1) *a character implied that another character was of mostly ornamental value* ( $\alpha = .75$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), (2) *a character treated another character as an instrument of sexual pleasure* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), (3) *a character sexually violated another character* ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = 1.0$ ). For instance, a dance teacher selecting participants for an upcoming dance concourse solely based on the participants' physical appearance would be coded as a sexually objectifying act (i.e., a character implied that another character was of mostly ornamental value). In contrast to the example we gave for appearance-related content, this scene may convey a message of attractiveness being valued over other qualities.

### *Objectification*

For objectification, indicators were derived from Nussbaum's (1995) seven dimensions of objectification: (1) *denial of autonomy* (e.g., when a character prohibited another character from doing what they wanted to do) ( $\alpha = .70$ ;  $\alpha = .66$ ); (2) *denial of subjectivity* (e.g., when a character's thoughts and feelings were ignored or dismissed as unimportant) ( $\alpha = .70$ ;  $\alpha = .73$ ); (3) *inertness* (e.g., when someone told a character what to do, as if they were unable to take initiative) ( $\alpha = .77$ ;  $\alpha = .71$ ); (4) *violability* (e.g., when someone used violence against a character) ( $\alpha = .82$ ;  $\alpha = .72$ ); (5) *ownership* (e.g., when a character was treated as property, such as by being bought, sold or given as a present) ( $\alpha = 1.0$ ;  $\alpha = .86$ ); (6) *instrumentality* (e.g., when a character was duped into doing another character's dirty work) ( $\alpha = .84$ ;  $\alpha =$

.75); and (7) *fungibility* (e.g., when a character is treated as if they were interchangeable, such as when a romantic partner is dumped for a more attractive prospect) ( $\alpha = 0.0$ ;  $\alpha = 0.0$ ).

### ***Data analysis***

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 21.0. Descriptive statistics were collected to measure the amount of sexual and appearance-related content (RQ1), sexual objectification (RQ2) and objectification (RQ3). For each specific type of expression, frequencies as well as percentages (frequencies divided by total amount of scenes) were calculated.

### **Results**

To provide context for our results, we assessed the demographics of the characters. Male characters (57.7%,  $n = 75$ ) were more frequent than female characters (42.3%,  $n = 55$ ) in the sample. The majority of the sample (69.2%,  $n = 90$ ) was coded adult (> 25 years); 12.3% ( $n = 16$ ) were coded as emerging adults (18-25 years), 15.4% ( $n = 20$ ) were coded as adolescents (12-18 years), and 3.1% ( $n = 4$ ) were coded as children. The results also indicated that the sample included more acts in which female character were depicted as a sexual object ( $n = 11$ ), compared to male characters ( $n = 6$ ). Similarly, female characters were more often portrayed in appearance-related acts ( $n = 35$ ) than male characters ( $n = 14$ ). In addition, the results showed that the tween-gearred programs contained fewer instances of sexual objectification, and portrayed less appearance-related acts than the family-oriented programs.

[TABLE 2: ABOUT HERE]

### ***Frequency of sexual acts***

RQ1 examines the frequency of sexual acts. Our results showed that one in five scenes contained sexual references or activities. The most common types of sexual expression were sexual talk and light sexual behavior, occurring in 8.8% and 8.6%, respectively, of all scenes. Overt acts of sexual intercourse were not present in the selected sample. Youth-oriented programs showed fewer instances of sexual behavior than the family shows ( $t[1620] = 9.11, p$

< .001), with *Galaxy Park* (zero sexual references) and *Violetta* (14.8%) containing less sexual references compared to all other programs (*Thuis* = 23.26%; *Familie* = 18.40%; *F.C. De Kampioenen* = 36.59%).

#### ***Frequency of appearance-related messages***

Explicit mention or treatment of a character as attractive was the most common act (6.7%), closely followed by non-verbal evaluation of a character's physical appearance (6.3%). With respect to a character being addressed sexually by other characters, being gazed at was most prevalent (4.7%), followed by being treated as (un)attractive (3.2% versus 3.4%). Scenes portraying the evaluation of a character as sexy due to his or her physical appearance were rather rare (0.5%).

#### ***Frequency of sexually objectifying messages***

RQ2 addresses the prevalence of sexual objectification. Prevalence rates of characters enacting (active) as well as experiencing (passive) sexually objectifying acts are shown in Table 3. About one in ten scenes portrayed a character performing a sexually objectifying act (9.7%).

[TABLE 3: ABOUT HERE]

#### ***Frequency of non-sexually objectifying messages***

RQ3 pertains to the prevalence of the different types of non-sexual objectification. The rates of occurrence for each type of objectification are listed in Table 4. We identified 333 acts of active objectification, denial of subjectivity – ignoring or downplaying other's thoughts or feelings - being most common (20.5%), followed by instrumentality - using others as a means to attain personal goals (17.7%) and denying other's autonomy (15.9%). A similar pattern could be observed for passive objectification, with denial of subjectivity (18.1%), instrumentality (17.2%) and denial of autonomy (15.7%) as the most frequently experienced forms of objectification. Additionally, a dependent samples t-test was performed to test for significant

differences in the occurrence of sexually objectifying and non-sexually objectifying acts. On average, non-sexually objectifying acts ( $M_{active} = .03$ ,  $SE = .10$ ;  $M_{passive} = .03$ ,  $SE = .09$ ), were significantly more depicted than sexually objectifying acts ( $M_{active} = .01$ ,  $SE = .07$ ;  $M_{passive} = .002$ ,  $SE = .04$ ),  $t_{active}(1603) = 9.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $t_{passive}(1490) = 11.99$ ,  $p < .01$ .

[TABLE 4: ABOUT HERE]

### ***Gender differences in appearance-related content and (sexual) objectification***

Hypotheses one to five focused on gender differences in the portrayal of appearance-related content (H1), sexual objectification (H2,3) and non-sexual objectification (H4,5). Using Pillai's trace, a MANOVA showed a significant effect of gender on our set of dependent variables considered as a group ( $V = .009$ ,  $F(6, 1481) = 2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta p^2 = .009$ ). Separate univariate ANOVAs on the outcome variables showed no significant gender difference for sexual objectification (passive and active), passive non-sexual objectification and appearance-related content (active). This means that no support was shown for the hypotheses that women are more often sexually objectified (H2), that men more often sexually objectify others (H3), and that men are more often non-sexually objectified (H4).

Our data did reveal a statistically significant relationship between gender and active non-sexual objectification ( $F [1,486] = 4.49$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta p^2 = .004$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed men's mean scores to be significantly lower than women's mean scores, rejecting the hypothesis that men are more often depicted as acting in a non-sexually objectifying way towards others (H5). There was also a marginally significant main effect of gender on passive appearance-related content ( $F [1,486] = 3.01$ ,  $p < .08$ ,  $\eta p^2 = .002$ ), with women more often than men depicted in a sexually attractive way. These results are in line with our hypothesis (H1) that female characters would be more often presented in a sexual light than male characters.

Additionally, each specific type of appearance-related, sexually objectifying and non-sexually objectifying content was tested for gender differences with a series of chi-square tests. Except for women being treated somewhat more as ornamental ( $\chi^2 [1, N = 1613] = 4.90, p < .05$ ) (see Table 3), male and female characters were equally likely to be the target of sexually objectifying acts. A similar trend occurred for active sexual objectification. Here, men were more likely to be portrayed treating another character as primarily ornamental ( $\chi^2 [1, N = 1613] = 8.87, p < .01$ ) (see Table 3). With respect to appearance-related acts, only the treatment of a character as attractive seemed to be related to gender ( $\chi^2 [1, N = 1613] = 4.71, p < .05$ ), with men more often judging the attractiveness of other characters, and women more often explicitly depicted as being attractive to other characters ( $\chi^2 [1, N = 1613] = 11.79, p < .01$ ).

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to measure the prevalence of sexualization and objectification in the top five TV shows most popular among preteens. We argued for a distinction between sexual and appearance-related content, sexual objectification and non-sexual objectification. This distinction proved to be useful, as reflected in the following main findings. First, while women were more often judged for their physical appearance than men (for example by receiving remarks on their perceived [un]attractiveness), they were not more likely to be subjected to outright sexual objectification. In addition, the significantly higher number of women non-sexually objectifying others means that women were also portrayed as more socially dominant than men, indicating that within the same narrative, neutral sexuality, sexual objectification and non-sexual objectification can convey competing messages with regards to appearance, objectification, and gender roles. For example, while the analyzed narratives regularly showed men commenting on women's appearances, female characters

were often shown to be socially assertive or even aggressive, for example by dominating decision processes or imposing their point of view on a discussion partner. Second, non-sexually objectifying acts (such as physical violence or types of verbal bullying) were significantly more prevalent than sexually objectifying acts.

### ***Sexual objectification***

One in ten scenes featured sexually objectifying acts, meaning acts that reduced a character to their sexual value, for example by unwanted sexual touching or disparaging remarks about a person based on their lack of sexual appeal. Although this might not seem like a high ratio, we have reason to believe that this is still relevant to preteens' gender-role values. First, approximately one quarter of the preteens in our sample reported watching all of the analyzed shows on a daily basis. Given that, for each of the selected shows, a random episode contained on average 20 scenes, this means that the number of sexually objectifying instances of exposure for the average preteen is likely quite higher than our results suggest. The impact of this repeated exposure likely contributes to preteens' cumulative normalization and acceptance of sexual objectification toward girls and boys, as prior research has shown that even one single exposure to gender stereotypical or objectifying content can result in more stereotypical views about gender and relationships (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005), and prime self-objectification (Aubrey, Henson, Hopper, & Smith, 2009) among its viewers.

Second, since most preteens have few dating experiences, they lack the ability to assimilate sexuality-related media information into existing sexual schema. As a consequence, they experience less schema-incongruence and are less prone to generating counter-arguments when consuming sexually objectifying content (Lee & Schumann, 2004). Thus, over time, repeated exposure to sexually objectifying content might prime preteens' recognition that individuals' value is strongly connected to their bodies, and might lead to the



application of an objectified dating script – prescribing that individuals should use their body and sexiness to attract a romantic/sexual partner (Rousseau & Eggermont, in press).

### ***Gender differences***

We did not find women to be explicitly treated as sexual objects more often than men. However, our results did show that female characters were far more likely than male characters to be portrayed as (un)attractive (e.g., Gerding & Signorielli, 2014), for example through remarks of other characters, or by preening in front of a mirror. This consistent association of femininity with being judged for appearance strongly links a person's worth as a girl or woman to their beauty, which is sexualizing to women as a group. Following SCT (Bandura, 2002), the consistent focus on beauty and attractiveness for female characters potentially stimulates girls' self-objectification, as self-perceptions are most affected by exposure to same-sex characters. As theorized by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997), the implicit sexualization of women might socialize preteen girls to internalize an observer's perspective of themselves, and encourage them to evaluate and control their bodies more in terms of attractiveness to others than in terms of competence. Moreover, existing objectification theory research has suggested that individuals who are being socialized into sexual objects would experience more difficulties with asserting sexual choices and advocating their own sexual feelings, which in turn, hinders a healthy sexual development and increases one's engagement in sexual risk behaviors (e.g., Curtin et al., 2011). In addition, the emphasis placed on (female) beauty might also induce an appearance-centered personal focus in boys (e.g., Aubrey & Taylor, 2009).

### ***Limitations and future directions***

This study reports on a sample of five TV shows most popular among Flemish preteens. Due to this selective sampling, our findings cannot be generalized to other TV shows or other media outlets, such as magazines and social network sites. Future studies could examine a

wider range of media outlets, and look for differences in media sexualization between specific media genres and/or media outlets.

Second, this quantitative content analysis focused on counting instances of sexual and appearance-related content, sexual objectification, and objectification. However, media content is saturated with rich, often conflicting meanings (Fiske, 1987), leading to one specific scene being open to multiple readings. For example, the narrative of a specific TV program or storyline can either reward or punish sexual objectification, thus creating different messages for viewers. Future studies should take this into account by looking into the specific ways sexualization and (sexual) objectification are contextualized and treated within a media text. For instance, qualitative content analyses could contribute to our understanding of how narrative contextualization impacts whether sexual objectification is framed as problematic and hurtful or as a form of flattery (e.g., Barrett & Levin, 2014). The second approach could possibly normalize sexually objectifying behavior, while the first may demonstrate that this is not acceptable behavior (e.g., Bandura, 2002).

Third, media effects research should investigate how preteens process contradictory portrayals of female characters. Preteens are in the process of developing the cognitive ability to understand that a single individual may fall within two or more categories simultaneously, which could lead to the formation of counter gender stereotypes (Liben, 2014). As such, preteen television's coverage of women as assertive and socially dominant, yet also defined by their appearance, might help to combat stereotypes of attractive girls as passive objects, solely concerned about their appearance. Follow-up research would benefit from discourse analysis (e.g., Vares, Jackson, & Gill, 2011) to assess ways in which preteens negotiate these complex portrayals of female characters.

Fourth, the current study focused on sexual and appearance-related content, sexual objectification, and objectification. Due to this focus, we did not code instances related to the

fourth criterion of the APA definition of sexualization, i.e., sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon people. Future content analytic research should account for this form of sexualization (e.g., Speno & Aubrey, in press) and examine its prevalence in media content popular among preteens.

Lastly, research has indicated that teen-gearred networks such as Disney and Nickelodeon are trusted by parents, because parents believe they produce content specifically for a less mature viewing audience (Rideout, 2007). However, the results here show that even these seemingly innocuous programs contain problematic messages. Although the teen-gearred shows portrayed few explicit sexual acts, they did contain implicit instances of sexualization (e.g., Malacane & Martins, 2017). Discussing the subtle sexism exhibited by popular characters in these programs may be particularly helpful for parents, as these characters and storylines can be informational as well as aspirational for their children (Bandura, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

Television exposure remains an influential source of sexual knowledge, especially for preteen viewers who lack sexual experiences and thus less elaborate sexual self-schema. Through the observation of media models, preteen girls and boys may learn which sexual roles are appropriate and inappropriate. However, despite narrative richness reflected in the data, the current content analysis shows that preteens' popular television content still supports sexually objectifying schemata regarding romantic and sexual interaction between men and women. According to the most popular TV programs among Flemish preteens, men more often treat others as ornamental, and women are more often judged for whether or not they qualify as attractive.

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Table 1. Results of discriminant validity testing.

Construct	Appearance-related	Sexual acts	Non-sexual Objectification	Sexual objectification
Appearance-related	<b>0.687</b>			
Sexual acts	0.177	<b>0.574</b>		
Non-sexual objectification	0.209	0.092	<b>0.436</b>	
Sexual objectification	0.303	0.518	0.281	<b>0.602</b>

*Note.* Diagonal elements (bold) are the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) between the constructs and their measures. Off-diagonal elements are correlations between constructs. For discriminant validity, diagonal elements should be larger than off-diagonal elements.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

Program title	# of episodes	# of scenes	Length of episodes (min)	# of character occurrences		# of sexually objectifying acts (active/passive)		# of appearance-related acts (active/passive)		# of non-sexual objectifying acts (active/passive)	
				Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
FC De Kampioenen	5	82	192	138	211	(3/ 8)	(29/ 0)	(8/ 20)	(38/ 6)	(530/ 36)	(82/ 80)
Familie	5	125	152.78	151	145	(0/ 0)	(0/ 0)	(1/ 1)	(2/ 2)	(43/ 26)	(24/ 36)
Galaxy Park	4	36	46.63	62	63	(0/ 0)	(0/ 0)	(3/ 0)	(3/ 1)	(4/ 6)	(3/ 4)
Thuis	5	86	115.37	155	163	(8/ 1)	(3/ 6)	(14/ 12)	(12/ 8)	(37/ 47)	(22/ 39)
Violetta	5	135	199.07	223	310	(0/ 2)	(2/ 0)	(0/ 2)	(2/ 0)	(26/ 32)	(32/ 24)

Table 3. Amount of sexually objectifying acts by character gender.

		Sexual objectification					
		All characters		Male characters		Female characters	
		Active	Passive	Active	Passive	Active	Passive
Ornamental	Count	22	4	19	0	3	4
	(count/scenes (%))	(4.7)	(0.9)	(4.1) <sub>a</sub>	(0.0) <sub>b</sub>	(0.6) <sub>a</sub>	(0.9) <sub>b</sub>
Instrumental	Count	17	8	10	5	7	3
	(count/scenes (%))	(3.7)	(1.7)	(2.2) <sub>a</sub>	(1.1) <sub>b</sub>	(1.5) <sub>a</sub>	(0.6) <sub>b</sub>
Violence	Count	6	5	5	1	1	4
	(count/scenes (%))	(1.3)	(1.1)	(1.1) <sub>a</sub>	(0.2) <sub>b</sub>	(0.2) <sub>a</sub>	(0.9) <sub>b</sub>
Total	Count	45	17	34	6	11	11
	(count/scenes (%))	(9.7)	(3.7)	(7.3)	(1.3)	(2.4)	(2.4)

*Note.* For each type of sexual objectification, differences between male and female characters, differing at  $p < .05$ , were given a different subscripts in the same row.

Table 4. Amount of non-sexual objectifying acts by character gender.

		Non-sexual objectification					
		All characters		Male		Female	
		Active	Passive	Active	Passive	Active	Passive
Denial of autonomy	Count (count/scenes (%))	74 (15.9)	73 (15.7)	33 (7.1) <sub>a</sub>	39 (8.4) <sub>b</sub>	41 (8.8) <sub>a</sub>	34 (7.3) <sub>b</sub>
Inertness	Count (count/scenes (%))	40 (8.6)	57 (12.3)	19 (4.1) <sub>a</sub>	32 (6.9) <sub>b</sub>	21 (4.5) <sub>a</sub>	25 (5.4) <sub>b</sub>
Denial of subjectivity	Count (count/scenes (%))	95 (20.5)	84 (18.1)	42 (9.1) <sub>a</sub>	41 (8.8) <sub>b</sub>	53 (11.4) <sub>a</sub>	43 (9.2) <sub>b</sub>
Violability	Count (count/scenes (%))	24 (5.2)	22 (4.7)	15 (3.2) <sub>a</sub>	15 (3.2) <sub>b</sub>	9 (1.9) <sub>a</sub>	7 (1.5) <sub>b</sub>
Ownership	Count (count/scenes (%))	18 (3.9)	14 (3.0)	10 (2.2) <sub>a</sub>	10 (2.2) <sub>b</sub>	8 (1.7) <sub>a</sub>	4 (0.9) <sub>b</sub>
Instrument	Count (count/scenes (%))	82 (17.7)	80 (18.9)	44 (9.5) <sub>a</sub>	46 (9.9) <sub>b</sub>	38 (8.2) <sub>a</sub>	34 (7.3) <sub>b</sub>
Total	Count (count/scenes (%))	333 (71.8)	330 (71.0)	163 (35.1)	183 (39.35)	170 (36.6)	147 (31.6)

*Note.* For each type of objectification, differences between male and female characters, differing at  $p < .05$ , were given a different subscripts in the same row.

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<sup>1</sup> Using an electronic television guide database listing current and upcoming television programs on the channels most popular among Flemish viewers (CIM, 2011), we selected 174 TV shows that were broadcast during the three weeks prior to data collection. For each show that was listed in the questionnaire, we asked the respondents to report how frequently they watched the show, as well as how much they liked the show. Based on the participants' reported popularity ratings (e.g., how much do you like this television program on a scale from 0 [not at all] to 10 [very much]) and exposure frequencies (e.g., how often do you watch this television program on a scale ranging from 1 [almost never] through 5 [almost every week]), a top five of most popular, and frequently watched programs was selected for analysis.