




# TV-MA: An Examination of Sexually Explicit Behaviours in “Sex and the City” and “The L Word” and Their Revivals

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Accepted: 2 February 2024 / Published online: 1 March 2024

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## Abstract

*Sex and the City* and *The L Word* were two groundbreaking television shows aimed at female audiences featuring explicit sexual content and queer characters; however, both have received little research attention over the last two decades. This is a serious omission in light of their popularity and their enduring capacity to influence viewers through streaming platforms as well as the successful launch of two revival series, *And Just Like That...* and *The L Word: Generation Q*. The purpose of this study was to examine depictions of sexual behaviours in the original runs of *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* and compare both with their respective revivals. Sexual behaviours across all episodes of the original runs of both shows and the first season of each revival were coded using a sheet and codebook developed for this study. Results showed that *The L Word* contained more explicit instances of oral sex and intimate touching, whereas *Sex and the City* showed more explicit instances of kissing and total explicit behaviours. The original run of *Sex and the City* contained more total explicit behaviours and more explicit kissing compared to its revival, but *The L Word* featured fewer instances of explicit penetrative/genital sexual behaviours compared to its revival. The implications of these findings for viewers, clinicians, and sex educators are considered.

**Keywords** Television · Sexual behaviour · Male gaze · Sex and the City · The L Word

## Introduction

*Sex and the City* and *The L Word* premiered less than a decade apart and were both considered examples of “chick-lit” television (Hunting, 2012a), a type of television program where the focus of the show is on a group of women who are friends, and

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where the plotlines focus on the issues and events that happen in the women's everyday lives. The shows themselves were ostensibly aimed at female viewers (Hunting, 2012a); however, both shows appeared to actively solicit male viewers through the sometimes-gratuitous sexualization of the female characters. Evidence from both shows suggests the twin influences of *the male gaze* (Mulvey, 1989), i.e., the objectification of women in media as they are viewed from the perspective of men, and *appropriation of female homosexuality* (Kim et al., 2007), i.e., sexual desire shown between women in media to appeal to a heterosexual male audience. The purpose of this study was to compare the explicit sexual behaviours in both *The L Word* and *Sex and the City* and to investigate depictions of sexual behaviours in their respective revival series.

### A Brief History of Sex on Television

Depictions of sex and sexuality have evolved significantly throughout the history of television. In the 1950s, the inclusion of sexual content was so taboo that television shows were not even allowed to discuss pregnancy (Levy, 2021). Following the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s, taboos related to sex on television began to lift (Smith, 1990, p. 1) to the point of including depictions of characters in the same bed and discussions of abortion and birth control by the 1970s (Armstrong, 2015). In 1977, the show *Soap* became the first show to include an openly gay reoccurring character (Bigelow, 2014); *HeartBeat*, which ran from 1988 to 1989, was the first to include an openly lesbian main character on prime-time television (Moritz, 1994). The late 1990s and the early 2000s saw the premiere of shows specifically focused on the experiences of queer characters such as *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk* (Hunting, 2012b; Myers, 2016).

Research on representations of sex and sexuality on television has typically focused on the sexual messages and content of general programming rather than programs specifically targeted at female audiences and featuring female characters. There has also been a general dearth of research on the nature of the sexual behaviours represented, though several studies have looked at the frequency of sexual behaviours per hour (e.g., Greene et al., 2011; Lampman et al., 2002). In a meta-analysis of data collected between 1975 and 2004, Hetsroni noted that the sexual behaviours of interest (i.e., kissing, "petting", implied/explicit intercourse) were depicted less often over the study time frame, but representations of homosexuality had increased (2007). As part of a longitudinal series about sexual content on TV, Kunkel and colleagues (2005) analyzed 4742 programs sampled from the most frequently viewed channels and found that 35% depicted some kind of sexual behaviour, most commonly "passionate kissing". The authors observed over multiple years of sampling (1996, 1999, 2001, 2003) that talk about sex was increasing but the amount of physical behaviour depicted remained roughly the same. A few investigations have looked specifically at sexual activities and behaviour among LGBTQ+ characters. In one investigation comparing LGB to their heterosexual counterparts, Bond and colleagues found that both groups engaged in sexual talk and behaviour in similar contexts (2019). Netzley (2010) found that gay characters

were more frequently depicted in sexual situations compared to straight characters, and that women were more likely to be shown engaging in same-sex sexual behaviours compared to men.

### ***Sex and the City and The L Word***

*Sex and the City* aired from 1998 to 2004 on HBO and explored the sexual adventures, hookups, and relationships of its four main female characters (Dockterman, 2014). It was very popular: 10.6 million people were estimated to watch the 2004 finale (Timms, 2004). *Sex and the City* was seen as influential and shocking for its time due to the sexual behaviours and discussions it included (e.g., threesomes, anal sex, vibrator use) (Oria, 2011). *The L Word* aired on Showtime between the years of 2004 to 2009 and was also very popular as the “first ever lesbian-themed serial drama” (Moore, 2007, p. 5). The two shows were explicitly connected in advertising material: “Same Sex. Different City” was the tagline for *The L Word*, presumably to draw in a similar audience (Moore, 2007, p. 5). Such comparisons were common: *Slate* compared the two series, describing *The L Word* as “a dramatic substitute for *Sex and the City*” (Cass, 2004, para. 4), while an article published on *Observer* credited *The L Word* with helping to fill the void left by *Sex and the City* coming to an end (Ahmad, 2007). The comparison of the two series in the press reinforced the fundamental overlap that existed between the series, regardless of the fact that one of the series was presumed to be targeted at a queer female audience given its focus on the lives of queer female characters. In fact, although the heroines of *The L Word* were all explicitly queer, the target audience appeared to be the same as *Sex and the City* (i.e., heterosexuals): the first 10 min of the pilot episode featured a depiction of sex between two femme characters, presumably to appeal to the heterosexual male audience (Moore, 2007). However, despite this apparent pandering to heterosexual audiences (and men in particular), the depictions of lesbian characters and their sexual practices shown on *The L Word* may have been disproportionately influential on queer audiences, due to a lack of representation of LGBTQ+ characters in the media at that time (GLAAD, 2007).

To date, publications on *Sex and the City* have discussed sexual behaviours and sexual talk in the show, the relational context of sexual activities, female nudity, and female empowerment. Jensen and Jensen (2007) found that relative to television at large, *Sex and the City* was more likely to portray sexual risks and responsibilities and featured more sexual talk and behaviour per hour. Additionally, the show was more likely to include sexual intercourse between established partners, as opposed to those who were recently acquainted. This stands in contradiction to findings from Markle (2008), who noted that sex on the program was more likely to be recreational than relational; differences in findings may be due to methodological variation. Through textual analysis, Lorié (2011) found that *Sex and the City* featured an inconsistent representation of female sexuality, relying on both stereotypical and more contemporary notions of gender and female empowerment. The author argued that the series employed the male gaze through its contrasting portrayals of male and female nudity: Female nudity was depicted primarily within a sexual context,

whereas male nudity was often depicted with a non-sexual or humorous tone (Lorié, 2011).

Publications about *The L Word* have considered the use of sexual behaviours to attract a heterosexual audience, character diversity (or lack thereof), and gender expression of characters. Burns and Davies (2009) discussed how the characters' appearances and ways of life made *The L Word* approachable to audiences as the show focused on White characters of a moderate socioeconomic status; featured characters who were not White or who embodied more masculine traits added to the “cosmopolitan” nature of the show while still being positioned as different from the “norm” established by the other characters. Similarly, Farr and Degroult (2008) found that many characters fit within society's expectations for desirable women (e.g., White, feminine, slim), whereas more masculine or butch characters served as more secondary characters. Moore (2007) examined the appeal of sexual content in *The L Word* as heterosexual viewers were led to believe that they were being given access to the inside lives of queer women. The carefully curated depictions of characters might offer a skewed perception of queer experiences, while simultaneously appealing to queer viewers. Many of the aforementioned papers were written within a critical analysis framework and did not involve the collection of empirical data (e.g., Moore, 2007) or focused on characters or relationships rather than behaviours (e.g., Farr & Degroult, 2008).

To date, no research could be found focused on the content of the reboots of *Sex and the City* and *The L Word*; this is unfortunate as these comparisons are illustrative of changes that occur over time in sexual scripts on a social level. As the series in question share similarities, including the presence of female protagonists and a focus on female friendships, it is reasonable to wonder if the sexual content they contain is similar, and how the characters' sexual orientations may have influenced this content, given that the original series were likened to each other so frequently in the popular press at the time.

## The Male Gaze

The male gaze has been used to describe the ways in which female characters in media are depicted and scripted to behave in ways that appeal to male viewers (Mulvey, 1989), even when heterosexual men are not the intended audience (Albertson, 2018; Andsager & Roe, 2003). Evidence of the influence of the male gaze may include gratuitous nudity by female characters, slow camera pans and framing to include breasts, sexualized clothing, and general sexual objectification (Albertson, 2018; Andsager & Roe, 2003; Mulvey, 1989). The male gaze was apparent in *The L Word*, where there is an erasure of butch lesbians as such characters are typically not seen as appealing to heterosexuals and might be viewed as competition due to their masculine traits (Ciasullo, 2001). On *Sex and the City*, female characters were frequently shown nude and often in a sexual manner, whereas the inclusion of male nudity was less universal and varied in its purpose (Lorié, 2011).

Both shows also pandered to heterosexual male audiences through their depictions of same-sex behaviour between female characters, a trope known as

*appropriation of female homosexuality* (Kim et al., 2007). This trope is frequently illustrated in television shows such as *Glee* and *Grey's Anatomy*, where women in same-sex relationships appear feminine and conform to beauty standards designed to appeal to the male gaze (Albertson, 2018). For example, the marketing posters for *The L Word* showed members of the cast naked and holding one another in strategic ways to conceal genitalia and breasts.

## Television Reboots

Projects that are selected for reboots/revivals are generally notable brands that have been previously market-tested (Tompkins, 2014). Reliance on familiarity and nostalgia from viewers may be especially valuable in recent years, as viewers are swarmed with a surplus of shows available across different networks or streaming platforms, making it difficult for brand-new shows to entice viewers and beat out the competition (Loock, 2018). Producers and advertisers may prefer to greenlight shows with guaranteed audiences over newer, untested concepts. In addition, reboots are often enthusiastically welcomed by fans (Loock, 2018).

However, despite the sheer volume of recent reboots (e.g., *How I Met Your Father*, *That 90 s Show*, *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*, *Fuller House*, *Twin Peaks: The Return*, *Will and Grace*, *The Conners*, *Dexter: New Blood*, *Bel-Air*, *Cobra Kai*, *Queer Eye*, *Girl Meets World*, *Charmed*) and their evident popularity with audiences, research on the content of these programs has been lacking. No studies could be located focusing specifically on the inclusion of sexual content in TV series reboots or revivals, how this might compare to the originals, and how to understand such changes over time. This is a serious omission given the popularity of reboots as well as their capacity to influence a wide audience, including both fans of the original series and new viewers. For women who enjoyed the originals in their twenties, the series may have inspired them to feel liberated and to explore their sexuality, while the revivals find these women at a different stage in life and may lead them to reflect on and redefine their perceptions of relationships and sexuality in midlife. For younger viewers who may be unfamiliar with the original series, the revivals may influence their expectations about relationships and sexuality for when they are older and challenge their perceptions about what constitutes a successful relationship.

## Purpose

Both *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* were known for their primarily female casts and for pioneering depictions of female sexuality on television in ways that were considered shocking for the time. However, research on these shows has not reflected their popularity, and depictions of the sexual content in both *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* have either not been studied or grounded in the collection of empirical data.

Messages about sex and sexuality in various forms of media often reflect culturally predominant sexual scripts (Gagnon, 1977; Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Sexual

scripts serve as guidelines to “appropriate” sexual behaviours and interactions for individuals and couples: the who, what, how, when, and why of sexual encounters, and are usually highly gendered (Wiederman, 2005). At the turn of the millennium, prevailing sexual scripts supported the sexual double-standard, the idea that men could (and should) have lots of sex with lots of different partners but that women’s reputations would be damaged by similar behaviour. Both *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* were marketed as shows that “broke the rules” by depicting their female characters as highly agentic on the sexual playing field; however, the degree to which this is actually supported by the evidence is unclear.

Understanding and evaluating the messages about sex and sexuality presented on these shows is important given the capacity of television shows to influence the sexual attitudes and behaviours of their audiences (e.g., Bersamin et al., 2010; L’Engle et al., 2006; Pardun et al., 2005), especially younger viewers (Ward, 2002). Although both shows first aired two decades ago, they are still influential to this day as they are easily accessible through streaming services and DVDs. These shows may retain the capacity to influence a new generation of viewers; in both cases, the original series may have benefited from a bump in viewership due to the recent revival of both series. The goals of the current study are 1) to examine the explicitness of the sexual behaviours in both *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* and 2) to compare the original series to their revivals.

## Hypothesis and Research Questions

It is hypothesized that *The L Word* will contain a greater number of instances of various sexual behaviours of interest per hour in an attempt to appeal to the male heterosexual audience by evoking the appropriation of female homosexuality in addition to the male gaze, which we might expect to affect both shows equally. This will include A) female orgasms, B) explicit sexual behaviours and behaviours in the most explicit category, C) oral sex, penetrative/genital sexual behaviours and masturbation, D) explicit intimate touching and other (e.g., anal sex, sex toys, kink) sexual behaviours, E) explicit nudity and F) explicit kissing (see Fig. 1).

The following research questions were also examined:

1. How do both revivals compare to their original series in terms of the amount of explicit sexual content (i.e., *And Just Like That...* to *Sex and the City*, *The L Word: Generation Q* to *The L Word*)?
2. How do the two revivals compare to each other in terms of the amount of explicit sexual content?

- Explicit Penetrative/Genital Sexual Behaviours, Explicit Oral Sex, Explicit Masturbation, Explicit Other (Anal)
- Explicit Intimate Touching, Explicit Other (Sex Toys), Explicit Other (Kink)
- Explicit Nudity
- Mild Penetrative/Genital Sexual Behaviours, Mild Oral Sex, Mild Masturbation, Mild Other (Anal)
- Mild Nudity
- Explicit Kissing
- Mild Kissing
- Mild Intimate Touching, Mild Other (Sex Toys), Mild Other (Kink)



**Fig. 1** Hierarchy of sexual behaviour

## Methods

### Sample

All 164 episodes from the television shows *The L Word* (n=70 episodes) and *Sex and the City* (n=94 episodes) were examined using a coding sheet and book that were developed for this study. To ensure comparability of the revivals, only the first seasons of *And Just Like That...* (n=10 episodes) and *The L Word: Generation Q* (n=8 episodes) were considered.

### Measures

Definitions and categories of sexual behaviours for this investigation were based on the categories employed in previous content analyses of television programming (Kunkel et al., 2005; Neuendorf et al., 2010; Ribisl et al., 2003). The definitions and target behaviours were revised based on the findings of pilot coding completed by members of the research team. Regular team meetings were held to ensure that the coding book and form were comprehensive, and that coding was consistent with the definitions.

The unit of analysis for this study was sexual behaviours; these were selected for coding if they were done for the purpose of being sexually arousing (i.e., if the sexual behaviour was meant to be arousing to another character). For example, a character slowly undressing in front of another character and showing nudity in order to generate arousal would be coded, but a character being nude because they are taking a shower would not be coded (c.f., Kunkel et al., 2005).

The coding sheet and coding book developed for this study were used to track and identify the target behaviours in each episode. The coder's name, the date, the

show name, the season and episode number, the episode title, and the episode length in minutes were recorded. The number of instances of sexual behaviours that met the criteria for coding were also recorded on the coding sheet and were classified as mild or explicit sexual behaviours (i.e., a character touching the breasts, genitals and/or buttocks of another character in a sexual context would be coded as an explicit sexual behaviour but a character touching another character's body in other areas in a sexual context would be classified as a mild sexual behaviour). The sexual behaviours that were coded included: nudity, kissing, oral sex, penetrative/genital sexual behaviours, masturbation, intimate touching, and other (e.g., kink, sex toys or anal sex). Additionally, orgasms were tracked on the coding sheet for both males and females.

### Coding Procedure

Coding was completed by two female coders; 18 episodes of *Sex and the City* (19.15%) and 14 episodes of *The L Word* (20.00%) were cross-coded by both coders to ensure accuracy. The observed sexual behaviours were compared by both coders to ensure that the same behaviours were being captured and categorized similarly. Coding of the revival series was completed by a single coder. When coding disagreements occurred, the appropriate episode was revisited by both coders, the coding book was used as a reference, and both coders shared their respective coding sheets and reasoning for their coding choices. The aim was to achieve complete agreement between the two coders.

Each sexual behaviour was recorded on the coding sheet with a short description of the behaviour that occurred and the characters that were involved in the behaviour. Each instance of an orgasm was similarly tracked for each episode alongside the name of the character that orgasmed. Within each discrete sexual encounter, the most explicit sexual behaviour was coded, which was determined by each coder by referring to a hierarchy of explicitness that was developed for this investigation (Fig. 1). If multiple behaviours at the same level of explicitness occurred within a discrete sexual encounter, only the initial most explicit behaviour was coded.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Mann–Whitney U tests were used to examine the hypotheses and research questions as the data was not normally distributed. An independent samples t-test was used in one instance when comparing total instances of explicit sexual behaviour per hour on *And Just Like That...* and *The L Word: Generation Q*, as this data was normally distributed.

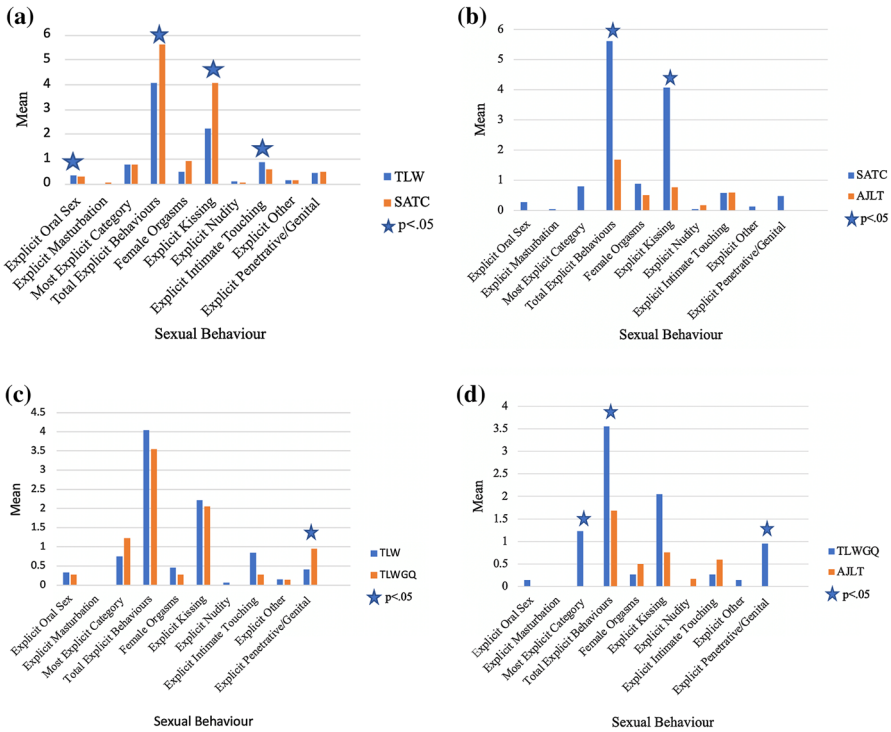


## Results

*Sex and the City* and *The L Word* were both highly explicit shows: 89.36% of *Sex and the City* episodes and 97.14% of *The L Word* episodes contained explicit sexual behaviours. The most common explicit sexual behaviour observed in both *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* was explicit kissing. Sex scenes in *Sex and the City* typically occurred between a man and a woman, and tended to be shorter than those seen in *The L Word*. For example, such scenes often ended prior to a character initiating sex (e.g., a character's head is shown moving towards the genitals to initiate oral sex) or began near the end of the encounter (e.g., just before the character is shown experiencing an orgasm). A prototypical scene might involve a man performing oral sex on a woman in bed, with the motion of the man's head clearly visible under the bed sheets, followed by an orgasm from the female partner. The scene might conclude with explicit kissing. A prototypical scene in *The L Word* might feature two partially nude women (breasts are exposed), engaging in explicit kissing and explicit touching, followed by penetrative/genital sexual behaviours. A notable difference between the two shows is the number of orgasms observed per episode. A total of 79 orgasms were observed across all episodes of *Sex and the City* with a mean of 0.840 per episode; 32 orgasms were observed across all episodes of *The L Word* with a mean of 0.457 per episode.

### Hypothesis 1

It was predicted that *The L Word* would feature more of the following behaviours compared to *Sex and the City*: (A) female orgasms, (B) explicit sexual behaviour and behaviours in the most explicit category, (C) oral sex, penetrative/genital sexual behaviours and masturbation, (D) explicit intimate touching and other (anal sex, sex toys, kink) sexual behaviours, (E) explicit nudity and (F) explicit kissing. Actually, there was no difference between the two shows in depictions of female orgasms. There were more explicit instances of sexual behaviour per hour,  $U=2656.50$ ,  $p=0.035$ ,  $r=0.165$  on *Sex and the City* ( $M=5.61$ ) versus *The L Word* ( $M=4.04$ ) but no statistically significant difference when comparing the instances of explicit penetrative/genital sexual behaviours and explicit masturbation. Oral sex was featured more often per hour on *The L Word* ( $M=0.33$ ) compared to *Sex and the City* ( $M=0.28$ ),  $U=2740.00$ ,  $p=0.002$ ,  $r=0.237$  and explicit intimate touching per hour was higher on *The L Word* ( $M=0.84$ ) versus *Sex and the City* ( $M=0.58$ ),  $U=2649.00$ ,  $p=0.015$ ,  $r=0.190$ . There were no statistically significant differences comparing depictions of explicit other sexual behaviours per hour between *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* (e.g., anal sex, sex toys, kink) or depictions of nudity. Explicit kissing occurred more often on *Sex and the City* ( $M=4.07$ ) compared to *The L Word* ( $M=2.22$ ),  $U=2509.00$ ,  $p=0.009$ ,  $r=0.204$ . In summary, total explicit behaviours and explicit kissing occurred more often on *Sex and the City* whereas explicit oral sex and explicit intimate touching occurred more often on *The L Word*; all other behaviours were not significantly different between the two shows (Fig. 2a).



**Fig. 2** a Depictions of Sexual Behaviour per Hour in Sex and the City (SATC) and The L Word (TLW). b Depictions of Sexual Behaviour per Hour in Sex and the City (SATC) and And Just Like That... (AJLT). c Depictions of Sexual Behaviour per Hour in The L Word (TLW) and The L Word: Generation Q (TLWQQ). d Depictions of Sexual Behaviour per Hour in The L Word: Generation Q (TLWQQ) and And Just Like That... (AJLT)

**Research Question One**

Both original series were compared to their revivals for the same set of sexual behaviours. The number of explicit sexual behaviours per hour was significantly higher in *Sex and the City* ( $M=5.61$ ) compared to *And Just Like That...* ( $M=1.68$ ) was significant,  $U=153.00, p<0.001, r=0.346$ . There were no differences between the two series on oral sex, penetrative/genital sexual behaviours, masturbation, intimate touching, female orgasms or nudity. Explicit instances of kissing per hour was significant and higher in *Sex and the City* ( $M=4.07$ ) compared to its revival *And Just Like That...* ( $M=0.76$ ),  $U=157.50, p<0.001, r=0.344$  (Fig. 2b).

In comparing *The L Word* and *The L Word: Generation Q*, there were no significant differences in female orgasms or explicit sexual behaviour. Explicit penetrative/genital sexual behaviours per hour was higher in *The L Word: Generation Q* ( $M=0.95$ ) compared to the original series *The L Word* ( $M=0.41$ )  $U=164.00, p=0.026, r=0.252$ . All other behaviours including oral sex, masturbation, intimate

touching, explicit other sexual behaviours, nudity, and kissing were not significantly different between the two shows (Fig. 2c).

### Research Question Two

The two revival series, *And Just Like That...* and *The L Word: Generation Q*, were compared to one another. An independent samples t-test was significant for total instances of explicit sexual behaviours per hour,  $t(16) = -2.67$ ;  $p = 0.017$ , 95% CI [-3.349, -0.383]: *The L Word: Generation Q* ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ) featured more of this content than *And Just Like That...* ( $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). In addition, the number of behaviours per hour that fit within the most explicit category was higher in *The L Word: Generation Q* ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) compared to *And Just Like That...* ( $M = 0.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ),  $U = 10.00$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $r = 0.753$ . Explicit penetrative/genital sexual behaviours per hour was also higher in *The L Word: Generation Q* ( $M = 0.95$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) compared to *And Just Like That...* ( $M = 0.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ),  $U = 10.00$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $r = 0.76$ . All other behaviours including oral sex, masturbation, intimate touching, other sexual behaviours, nudity, and kissing were no different between the two shows (Fig. 2d).

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the explicitness of the sexual behaviours that occurred in *The L Word* and *Sex and the City* and to compare and contrast sexual content in the originals with revivals of each series. It was hypothesized that *The L Word* would include more depictions of various explicit sexual behaviours designed to appeal to the male heterosexual audience by evoking the appropriation of female homosexuality. For the most part, this hypothesis was not supported. In the present study, a high prevalence of explicit sexual content was observed in both series as approximately 89% of *Sex and the City* episodes and 97% of *The L Word* episodes contained some explicit sexual behaviours. These findings are a contrast from the results of other investigations (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2005) showing more modest levels of explicitness; this is likely due to differences in sample composition and a focus on more general content compared to shows that were specifically created to feature sexual content. The most common explicit sexual behaviour observed in both series was explicit kissing, which does align with previous research (Hetsroni, 2007; Kunkel et al., 2005).

### Original shows

The only sexual behaviours that occurred more frequently on *The L Word* versus *Sex and the City* were oral sex and explicit touching. Since only a limited number of sexual behaviours were found to occur at greater rates in *The L Word* compared

to *Sex and the City*, it is more likely that the male gaze and even appropriation of female homosexuality were not the sole driving factors of the sexual content of *The L Word*. The increased representation of oral sex on *The L Word* is not surprising insofar as this sex act may be seen as the “equivalent” to intercourse between heterosexual partners (Schick et al., 2016), i.e., the most intimate act in which partners may engage. The greater frequency of explicit touching observed in *The L Word* was likely an artefact of our coding strategy: only the most explicit behaviour in a scene was captured by our coding methodology. It may be the case that instances of explicit touching in *Sex and the City* usually occurred within a scene where a more explicit behaviour also occurred (e.g., intercourse) due to the shorter run time of the show coupled with a desire by the show creators to include more sexual content into the show. In other words, the characters on *The L Word* may have had more freedom to engage in casual sexual contact that did not “lead” anywhere because there was more time in each episode to also a variety of explicit content.

For several categories of interest, *Sex and the City* featured more explicit behaviours including total explicit behaviours and explicit kissing. This confirms findings from Jensen and Jensen (2007) that *Sex and the City* featured more sexual content per hour compared to television at large, even including shows with a focus on sexual content.

In other categories, no differences were observed between the two shows; this included female orgasms, behaviours falling into the most explicit category, penetrative/genital sexual behaviours, masturbation, explicit nudity, and “other” explicit sexual behaviours (e.g., anal sex, toy use). Parity across the two shows in representations of these behaviours may reflect an overall intention to appeal to the male gaze (Lorié, 2011) and sexualize the female characters but with no particular emphasis on female homosexuality. In other cases, the time period during which these shows aired (i.e., late 90 s, early 00 s), and the taboo nature of some of these behaviours may have impacted the frequency with which they were represented in both shows (i.e., not often). For example, there were no depictions of explicit anal sex observed in either show. However, the lack of differences may also be due to the differences in run time across the two shows such that female nudity in *Sex and the City* was quickly followed by a more explicit sexual behaviour and therefore not captured in this investigation. Future researchers might code both for representations per hour as well as total number of sexual behaviours to capture these nuances.

## Revivals

Both *Sex and the City* and *The L Word* were also compared to their revivals to identify changes in depictions of sexual behaviours over time. Results showed that there were fewer depictions of explicit sexual behaviour and explicit kissing in *And Just Like That...* compared to *Sex and the City*; however, *The L Word: Generation Q* contained significantly more instances of explicit penetrative/genital sexual behaviours compared to *The L Word*. Research on changes in media’s sexual content over time is severely lacking. Kunkel and colleagues (2005) found that depictions of sexual content over time were stable, but this sample focused on general programming

and was also collected almost 20 years prior to these rebooted series. A *BBC* article highlights anecdotal evidence of a higher prevalence of explicit sex scenes on television today, primarily crediting HBO for this perceived shift (Armstrong, 2015). Given HBO's reputation for pushing boundaries when it comes to sexual content, it is surprising that *And Just Like That...* seems to have been toned down in that regard.

These findings are consistent with the literature on aging women's sexuality as it relates to the male gaze. *And Just Like That...* follows the lives of the original main characters (with the exception of Kim Cattrall's Samantha) 18 years after the events of the *Sex and the City* finale, whereas *The L Word: Generation Q* focuses on a new, younger generation of characters. Media depictions of older adults often reinforce the negative stereotype that older adults are asexual (Bradway & Beard, 2015); when the sexuality of older adults is acknowledged, it is often played off for comedic relief (Saltzman, 2010, as cited in Bradway & Beard, 2015, p. 515). The disparity in explicit sexual behaviours depicted in *And Just Like That...* compared to *Sex and the City* could be due to the lead actresses now being in their mid-50 s, a group still infrequently represented in the media (Montemurro & Chewning, 2018). However, another factor to consider is the absence of Samantha from *Sex and the City's* revival, whom *Variety* said, "put the 'sex' in the groundbreaking series" (Setoodeh & Wagmeister, 2023, para. 7). This question is beyond the scope of the present study; however, it could be interesting for future research to code sexual behaviours at the level of the character (c.f., Weaver et al., 2015) when comparing original series to their revivals.

The inclusion of more instances of explicit penetrative/genital sexual behaviours in *The L Word: Generation Q* compared to the original may be due to the younger age of the characters in the revival. It may also be the case that in the 15 years between the premiere of *The L Word* (2004) and its revival (2019), inclusion of queer characters has become more common in mainstream media (e.g., *Glee*, *Pose*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Grey's Anatomy*). Additionally, the format in which *The L Word: Generation Q* aired may have impacted the amount of explicit content included in the show as it could only be watched via subscription or streaming, which likely made explicit content more permissible. As LGBTQ+ representation continues to improve on television, it can be expected that gay sex scenes may become less taboo as well. Although only one behaviour appeared more frequently in *The L Word: Generation Q*, this may still reflect the progress that has been made for LGBTQ+ representation.

Research question two considered whether the two revival series differed from each other in terms of sexual content. *And Just Like That...* contained fewer depictions of certain behaviours compared to *The L Word: Generation Q*, supporting the idea that the inclusion of explicit sexual content may have been influenced by the actresses' ages. Bradway and Beard (2015) note that older lesbians experience even greater discrimination and stigma as a result of their sexual orientation intersecting with both their age and gender. Again, it would be valuable to check in future investigations whether older characters who return in rebooted series are given the same opportunities as younger characters to engage in sexual behaviours.

It is important to consider other factors that may have led to reduced sexual content. As previously stated, shows in today's entertainment landscape must compete with a surplus of content to find an audience. Reducing the series' sexual content could broaden its appeal to reach viewers from different age groups and cultures, as well as individuals who may be averse to explicit material. Additionally, placing an emphasis on storytelling and character development beyond sexual relationships may attract an audience unfamiliar with the original series. A revival airing nearly two decades after its predecessor may also necessitate toning down some of its content in order to adapt to evolving norms and attitudes about sex and avoid potential backlash. The extended time gap between the series may have also prompted the showrunners to explore new aspects of the character's lives, and this shift would likely contribute to the sexual content being cut down.

## Implications of the Present Study

*Sex and the City* and *The L Word* both pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable television with their all-female casts and their depictions of sexual content. *The L Word* is particularly notable as it was one of the first lesbian television shows ever created and may have served as a source of education for queer individuals at the time. The representation of sexual behaviours on these shows is vital to consider as even though both series have long since wrapped up their original runs, they still have the potential to influence today's viewers. Research has shown that sexual content in media, including television shows, has an impact on the behaviours and attitudes of viewers including desirable relationship qualities and beliefs about gender roles within sexual encounters (Ward et al., 2016). Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to media messages about sex (Ward et al., 2019), and research has confirmed that they consume media intended for older audiences (Worth et al., 2008). Media, including television shows, can serve as a source of information about sex, relationships, and related stereotypes for adolescents (Ward & Friedman, 2006). At present, individuals around the world can watch episodes of *The L Word* and *Sex and the City* on demand, with no age restrictions on viewership (in their original runs, both shows aired in late-night time slots and were preceded by viewer warnings). Individuals in countries that are socially and/or legally heteronormative as well as countries where female sexuality is suppressed can stream the shows on websites and platforms using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). For better or worse, current viewers are being exposed to the same messages about sex, female sexuality, and the LGBTQ+ community as viewers were 20+ years ago, which may still have the potential to impact their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours about sex and sexuality (Ward, 2002). These messages may be empowering or stigmatizing. For example, *The L Word* or *The L Word: Generation Q* may lead viewers to view queer women as primarily sexual individuals and ignore the complexity of the characters' relationships and lives. Likewise, given that the revival series appear to perpetuate stereotypes about the sexualities of older women, there could be harmful implications for viewers. Such stereotypes may contribute to some older

adults feeling ashamed of their sex lives, even going as far as to hide their sexual desires as a result of internalizing stereotypes (Bradway & Beard, 2015).

Sex educators working with adolescents would be advised to identify programming consumed by their students in order to compare and contrast depictions of sexual behaviours and relationships on those shows with real-life practices (c.f., Cabrera & Ménard, 2013). This may be particularly important in working with female students and individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ given the seeming preference within these shows to reify dominant sexual scripts rather than more authentic representations of female and queer sexuality. Sex therapists would also be advised to discuss media consumption with their clients to identify and explore harmful messages that may have been internalized related to sexuality and age or other unrealistic depictions of sexual behaviours commonly seen in these shows.

## Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations characterized the findings of this investigation. The coding of montage scenes of sexual encounters that occurred in both *The L Word* and *Sex and the City* (i.e., counting sexual behaviours separately only when there are shifts in characters or time) may have resulted in inflated estimates for some behaviours (for example, a montage where a character is shown experiencing five orgasms in a row). In total, 13 episodes of *Sex and the City* out of the 94 episodes in the series and three episodes of *The L Word* out of the 70 episodes in the series contained montage scenes. Currently, there is no research literature on how viewers are impacted by montage scenes compared to single instances of sexual behaviours taking place over the same span of time (e.g., one minute of a scripted television show). This should be examined in future studies. Additionally, only sexual behaviours that had occurred in the “real life” of the characters in the shows were coded (i.e., not sexual behaviours occurring during dream sequences or daydreaming). This might have disproportionately impacted *The L Word*, which featured such content more often than *Sex and the City*. Again, it is unknown what impact such depictions may have on viewers, i.e., whether they have the same capacity to influence beliefs and behaviours as “real world” behaviours. Finally, the runtime of the two shows may have impacted findings: As episodes of *Sex and the City* tended to have a shorter run time than episodes of *The L Word*, sex scenes may have been correspondingly shorter (e.g., 30 s of oral sex compared to three minutes). This would be important to consider in future studies as the duration of the display of explicit sexual behaviours may have an impact on viewers.

More research is needed on media that is intended for consumption by the LGBTQ+ community, as well as media depicting LGBTQ+ sexual behaviours that are intended for heterosexual audiences. Such investigations should capture the differences in how sexual behaviours are portrayed, the explicitness of these behaviours, and the interaction between qualities of the characters and their behaviours (for example, the sexual activities of butch versus femme characters, Farr & Degroult, 2008). Although there is some literature addressing television revivals, the majority of existing research is centered on why there appears to be

a demand for these particular projects and how they often resemble or differ from the original series. However, research focused on sexual content in these projects is lacking. Given the growing number of revivals and reboots, future studies should explore the sexual content present in these types of series, how this differs from the origins, and the impact on audiences.

## Conclusion

Despite their large audiences, both *The L Word* and *Sex and the City* are under-researched shows. The success of their respective revival series demonstrates their enduring popularity among both new and long-time fans. The aim of this study was to compare and contrast sexual behaviours in the original runs of both shows as well as with their recent revivals. Findings showed more explicit instances of oral sex and intimate touching on *The L Word* compared to *Sex and the City* but more total explicit behaviours and explicit kissing on *Sex and the City*; other behaviours showed no differences (e.g., nudity). The revival of *Sex and the City* featured fewer instances of explicit behaviours compared to the original series whereas the revival of *The L Word* featured more. Findings did not fully support the hypothesis that *The L Word* would contain a greater number of instances of various sexual behaviours of interest per hour in order to appeal to the male heterosexual audience by evoking the appropriation of female homosexuality in addition to the male gaze. However, partial support for this can be found in the findings as more explicit instances of oral sex and intimate touching were observed in *The L Word*. Therefore, findings may be interpreted in light of the male gaze and the appropriation of female homosexuality, as well as the desexualization of older characters.

As these shows continue to be available to audiences globally through streaming platforms, more research is needed to explore the sexual behaviours and situations depicted in these shows as well as the impacts they have on consumers. In particular, research is needed on media representations of sex and sexuality that are intended to appeal to a heterosexual audience while featuring LGBTQ+ characters.

**Author contributions** All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation and data collection were performed by [KB] and [HH]; [SC] assisted with statistical analysis. The first draft of the manuscript was written by [KB] and [HH] and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Funding** The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.



**Ethics approval** No ethical approval was required as no data was collected from humans or animal subjects.

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