A recent study was conducted that revealed that the more people watch television, the more they expect their lives to comply with what is happening on it (Russell, Russell, Boland, & Grube, 2014), and they tend to adopt the beliefs and attitudes of their favorite characters on television. The present study represents a longitudinal content analysis of the portrayals of teenagers on teen-oriented situation comedies. It aims to examine the differences in relationships in 30-minute teen-oriented situation comedies in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. An initial analysis showed that many of these teen sitcoms take place inside the home with interactions between the teens and their parents or siblings. These shows were specifically excluded from this analysis in order to focus on the relationships between teens outside of the home.

Research Questions

• RQ 1: What were the most common types of interactions that occurred between teen dyads (put-downs, compliments, conflict, advice or support, etc.)? How did these interactions change over time?
• RQ 2: Has representation of people of color changed over time?
• RQ 3: In what way and to what extent have serious topics changed over the decades?

Methods

Sample
The television programs included in this study originated from the Center for Research on the Effects of Television (CRETV) at Ithaca College. The archive consists of representative samples of television videotaped from 1983-2017, recorded quarterly, 2 weeks per month, from 7 am to 1 am. The sample used for this study included shows on Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, NBC, ABC, and ABC Family (Freeform). To be included in the sample for this study, the program had to be a 30-minute teen situation comedy that included at least 3 non-related teen characters, airing originally in the 1990s, 2000s, or 2010s. There were 32 different programs, with 1-7 episodes coded for each resulting in a total of 91 episodes in the sample.

Examples of Programs Studied

1990s
- California Dreams
- Saved By The Bell: New Class

2000s
- Zoey 101
- iCarly

2010s
- Shake It Up
- Austin & Ally

Results

Character Demographics (see Figure 1)
• There were 629 different dyads in the 91 episodes: 247 dyads in the 1990s, 202 in the 2000s, and 180 in the 2010s.
• Most of the dyads consisted of two white characters, although this decreased over time (63.2% in the 1990s, 46.5% in the 2000s, and 51.1% in the 2010s). The percent of dyads made up of two people of color increased over time (6.1% in the 1990s, 8.4% in the 2000s, and 10.6% in the 2010s).
• The percent of dyads with one white character and one character of color also increased over time (30.8% in the 1990s, 45.0% in the 2000s, and 38.3% in the 2010s (N = 69).

Serious Issues Discussed by Decade (see Fig. 2)
• Dyads rarely discussed serious issues at all; discussions related to drugs and alcohol only occurred in the 1990s.
• Discussions of most serious issues decreased significantly over time, except for social justice issues which increased significantly over time. \( \chi^2(6, N = 151) = 16.88, p < 0.01 \).
• There were significantly more discussions of school-related problems between dyads in the 1990s, more discussions about bullying and peer pressure in the 2000s.

Other Findings
• Discussions among dyad members included both positive aspects (social support, compliments, advice) as well as negative aspects (conflict, put-downs) across all decades.

Discussion

This study showed that while teen shows continue to primarily portray white characters, the percentage of dyads that included at least one person of color increased over time. Shows focused primarily on friendships and relationship issues – exclusively heterosexual in the programs we studied – and rarely focused on the more serious issues that often characterize adolescence (e.g., peer pressure, bullying, school problems, drugs and alcohol). Overall, the teen shows were most likely to include serious issues in the 1990s, decreasing over time (except for social justice issues). This may be changing, however, with recent shows like Andi Mack, where in 2019 a character comes out as gay, a first for Disney.