

# **ADOLESCENT AND PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA INFLUENCE ON ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Empirical evidence suggests that television and other media influence adolescents' attitudes and behaviors. Much of the research in this area is based on surveys in which adolescents are asked to rank the relative importance of a fixed set of factors such as parents, peers, and media. We reviewed data from focus groups conducted with adolescents and their parents to examine the extent to which adolescents identify—without prompting—media as a source of influence on sexual behavior. Adolescents seemed indifferent to media influence (e.g., media influence was mentioned in only one adolescent focus group), but their parents expressed significant concern about media influence. Future research should investigate the extent to which influences exist outside of adolescents' consciousness. For now, parents and sexuality educators may need to convince adolescents that concerns about the media are valid before trying to change media-influenced behavior.

Adolescents are active consumers of messages broadcast on radio and television, printed in magazines, distributed on the Internet, and presented in video games. As technology has advanced, access to these varying types of media has become common in U.S. households: 98% have at least one television, 70% have more than one television, 70% have cable, and 51% of households with children have a computer (Paik, 2001). Wireless resources such as radio/CD headsets, handheld televisions, portable video game players, and internet access via cellular phones add to the numerous sources of media access. In addition,

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VCR usage allowing repetitive viewing of movies and access to age-restricted movies must be taken into consideration when studying media access. With each additional source of access, popular media may replace more worthwhile activities (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signoriello, 1986). Further, adolescents appear to be using media in an isolated manner: more adolescents seem to have media available in their private bedrooms (Larson, 1995).

The media passively reinforce gender and ethnic stereotypes (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Passive reinforcement of gender and ethnic stereotypes was demonstrated in a content analysis of *Rolling Stone* magazine, a popular adolescent periodical, which examined gender and ethnic themes in issues published in the years 1968 and 1988 (Wilson, 1990). Results from the content analysis suggested that women and people from traditionally underrepresented groups were rarely the source of stories; when they were featured, they were depicted unflatteringly.

Both children and adults have been reported to believe the media is a central source of information on sex and sexuality for young people (Malamuth & Impett, 2001) considering few programs (from the daily news, to "reality-based" programs, to talk shows, to family-centered programming) appear immune to stories of a sexual nature. Content analysis has been performed on print media, television and movies, music, and computerized media to determine the types of messages delivered through these sources with results showing adolescents being exposed to both implicit and explicit sexual content (Carpenter, 1998; Durham, 1998; Flowers-Coulson, Kushner, & Bankowski, 2000; Kehily, 1999; Strong & DeVault, 1994; Ward & Wyatt, 1994). While neither prior research nor the general public appear to dispute the sexual content of the media, the perceived influence on adolescents and their sexuality appears to warrant further examination. Few studies examine whether adolescents themselves find the media influential in determining their sexual attitudes, values, and behaviors (Malamuth & Impett, 2001).

### *Adolescents and Media*

Larson (1995) suggested that media usage changes—often becoming more individualistic—as adolescents begin to develop their sense of self. The experiences of adolescents as they develop may impact how media is selected and how influential the messages are. Fine, Mortimer, and Roberts (1990) suggest that the medium adolescents select is different during this life stage in an attempt to gain independence from parents. Depending on their rate of development, some adoles-

cents may succumb to media influences, while others may not. Based on an extensive literature review regarding the influences of sexual content in the media, Malamuth and Impett (2001) state that individual personality factors may also be important, as research suggests that the type of media people select and find gratifying is predictably related to their personalities and other individual differences. Roberts (1993) has also examined adolescents and determined that they vary greatly regarding their development in areas such as identity formation and the development of formal problem solving and moral reasoning. Roberts suggests that not only do these affect the impact media has on adolescents, but so do the individual abilities, interests, social relationships, and short- and long-term needs of the adolescent. Some adolescents may not be cognitively equipped to interpret the media images they encounter (Brown, Childers, & Waszak, 1990) leading to differences in how messages are processed and utilized by the adolescents. Hein (1980) has also suggested that media influences may be greater among adolescents who have not had normal personality development.

Along with developmental differences, learning styles may also contribute to the way media are used and interpreted by adolescents. De Pierto and Allen (1984) examined various learning styles in order to determine which contributed most to the knowledge of birth control in a study of 100 adolescents aged 13 to 17. Styles of communication and learning were assessed in terms of who the adolescent communicated with (peers, family, professionals, multiple sources, or no one). The relationship between the interactant communication styles (home, peer, professional, and multi-source) and noninteractant (media influence without communication with others) was significant; adolescents who had interactant communication styles had greater birth control knowledge than those with a noninteractant learning style.

The gender of the adolescent has also been shown to be associated with media influence. For example, Baran (1976) examined the influence of perceptions of sexuality on television and satisfaction with sexuality. While no direct influence of television on sexuality was found, Baran did find that males were more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction with their first sexual experience and lower levels of satisfaction with their virginity. Brown and Newcomer (1991) found that males were less likely to be virgins than were females, and that while females were more likely to watch television, sexual status (virgin or non-virgin) was related to the amount of sexual content viewed on television. In addition, females appear more likely to hold conservative attitudes regarding sexuality (Calvin, Carroll, & Schmidt, 1993). Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Long (1995) revealed similar findings

regarding males being more likely to engage in premarital intercourse and to have liberal attitudes about premarital sex. Similarly, adolescent females seem to be more likely to watch soap operas and MTV, and to spend more time listening to music (Stouse & Buerke-Rothfuss, 1987). In a qualitative, multi-method study, Steele (1999) also found that gender differences might be present in the selection of media to be viewed or listened to. Adolescent girls also appear to be affected differently by print media and are more likely than young males to read and have positive attitudes toward magazines. Girls use these magazines as discussion starters and to supplement sex education classes, whereas boys have reported that they consider the seeking and sharing of advice unmasculine behavior (Kehily, 1999). Girls have also been reported as more likely to seek media showing romance and are therefore more likely to be exposed to sexual content (Donnerstein & Smith, 2001). Based on content analysis research, Durham (1998) concluded that girls are likely to struggle to balance the messages sent by the media in regard to appearance, behavior, and social power dynamics.

Other characteristics of adolescents that have been associated with sexuality and the media include race, class, and family environment. Both verbal and non-verbal messages regarding sexuality have been found to be related to the sexual behavior of European American female adolescents, but not African American females. African American females also appear to be more likely to recall more non-traditional messages on television (Ward & Wyatt, 1994). African American females have been reported as watching more television than do European American adolescents (Brown & Newcomer, 1991), and ethnicity has been noted as a selection factor for types of media sought by both European American and African American teens (Steele, 1999). Based on a qualitative study of adolescent middle-school girls, Durham (1999) concluded that race and class play a part in the sexual socialization of young girls with the dominant culture more likely to pay attention to mass media. In addition to race and class, overall family satisfaction was considered and found to be the most consistent moderator between media variables and sexual permissiveness in a study examining gender, race, and family environment (Strouse et al., 1995). Since not all adolescents are affected by media in the same way, certain moderating variables such as gender and family environment may be significant (Malamuth & Impett, 2001).

### *Impact of Media*

Along with the examination of media usage, several researchers have attempted to explain the relationship between adolescent sexual-

ity and media. Correlational studies indicate that exposure to sexually suggestive materials is associated with premarital sex, although whether sexually active teens seek out sexual content or whether sexual content increases sexual activity remains uncertain (Brown et al., 1990; Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Lackey & Moberg, 1998; Malamuth & Impett, 2001; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987). Other researchers have found sexual content in the media to have a minimal, if any, impact on sexual activity of adolescents (Peterson, Moore, & Furstenberg, 1991; Roberts, 1993).

Explanations for the varied impact of the media include the differing characteristics of adolescents discussed earlier in this paper and additional factors such as the perceived reality of the content viewed, the media's portrayal of consequences (or lack of) associated with sexual behavior, and the influence of other role models. Studies of peer group interaction suggest that learning from the media is not only an individual process, but that messages received during peer group interactions may also contribute to how adolescents learn from and interpret media messages (Durham, 1999; Milkie, 1994). According to Donnerstein and Smith (2001), research shows that parents who openly communicate and actively co-view television may help "inoculate adolescents from potentiallay detrimental effects of exposure" (p. 298). Frequency of viewing (Malamuth & Impett, 2001) appear important as well.

Although the majority of research regarding the impact of the media on sexuality has focused on harmful effects, the media do appear to have some positive effect on the education of adolescents regarding sexuality, sexual behavior, and safe sex. While media campaigns that specifically target the sexual behavior of adolescents can be effective (Berne & Huberman, 2000; Strasburger, 1995), learning also takes place indirectly. Kehily (1999), through participant observation, discovered that young girls read magazines to learn about sex. Milkie (1994) conducted a study with a middle-school aged male peer group and concluded that in this group, movies were the source of learning and sharing about male sexuality. In addition to television, print media, and music, the Internet has now become a viable way for adolescents to gain information about sexuality (Flowers-Coulson, Kushner, & Bankowski, 2000).

### *Purpose*

Although there has been a substantial amount of research regarding adolescents and the media, the conclusions about media effects are based on an approach that may be misleading. This approach asks adolescents to rank the relative importance of a fixed set of factors

such as parents, peers, and the media; by relying exclusively on a fixed-choice format, we cannot be sure that adolescents would identify or rank media influence as significant without prompting. In addition, while teens have been shown to rank the media as influential for peers, they appear reluctant to rank it as influencing their own behavior (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002) and were persistent in suggesting that they themselves were not influenced by television, and that the media is too frequently blamed for their behavior (Fay & Yanoff, 2000). It therefore seems important to identify the extent to which adolescents identify the importance of media without prompting.

We will review data from focus groups to examine the extent to which adolescents identify—without prompting by the research team—media as a source of influence on sexual behavior. For the sake of comparison, we will also examine data from focus groups conducted with parents of these adolescents to identify parental perception of media influence on adolescent sexuality. In addition to evaluating perceptions about the influence of media, we will also examine strategies identified by participants to (a) respond to media messages that promote sexual experimentation and (b) use the media to promote responsible sexual behavior.

#### METHOD

The present research is part of a study we conducted to explore the perceptions of both adolescents and their parents about adolescent sexuality. We conducted focus group interviews with participants from two communities in southwest Michigan, one suburban/urban (with an approximate population of 230,000) and the other more rural (with a population of 10,000). Separate interviews were conducted for adolescent girls and their families and for adolescent boys and their families. All participants were asked the following six questions: (1) “In your opinion, what are important influences on teen age sexual behavior?” (Follow-up: “What are important influences on contraceptive use?”); (2) “How do teenagers’ friends influence sexual behavior?” (Follow-up: “How do friends influence decisions about condom use?”); (3) “How do parents of teenagers influence teen sexual behavior?” (Follow-up: “How do parents influence decisions about condom use?”); (4) “What should be done to help teenagers reduce risky sexual practices?” (Follow-up: “What needs to be done to increase condom use among teenagers?”); (5) “What specific issues should be included in sexuality education for teenagers?” (Follow-up: “How should this information be presented?”);

and (6) "Should parents participate in sexuality education?" (Follow-up: "How could they be included?"). Although we expected media-related comments in response to the first question, we examined all of the transcripts for each group because we were interested in unprompted comments about media.

### *Sample*

We employed a snowball sample to recruit participants: we asked each person who agreed to participate to provide us with the names of other families who might be willing to participate in our study. We interviewed adolescent girls and their families as well as adolescent boys and their families at each site. Separate interviews were conducted with each member of the family so we have data from interviews with two groups of girls ( $n = 8$ ), boys ( $n = 6$ ), mothers of girls ( $n = 7$ ), mothers of boys ( $n = 5$ ), fathers of girls ( $n = 6$ ), and fathers of boys ( $n = 5$ ).

The average age was 15 for girls and 16 for boys. Parents' ages ranged from 41 to 51 with the average age being 46 for mothers and 48 for fathers. Although all of the adolescent participants reported on their anonymous questionnaire that they were virgins, most of them ( $n = 13$ ) had friends who had experienced sexual intercourse. Additionally, all of the adolescents indicated that they were "exclusively heterosexual" in the anonymous survey. Most of the sample identified themselves as being European American. The majority (71%) of the adolescents lived with both biological parents and annual family income ranged from \$30,000 to \$70,000. The average family income for participants was \$60,000. Parents' education levels ranged from a high school degree to a graduate degree with most parents completing four years of college.

## RESULTS

In this section, we will review two themes. First, we will identify the extent to which adolescents and parents provided unsolicited comments about media influence. Second, we will describe strategies identified by participants to (a) respond to media messages that promote sexual experimentation, and (b) use media to promote responsible sexual behavior.

### *Media Influence*

Adolescents rarely discussed media-related themes in their focus groups. It was not mentioned at all in either of the focus groups with

boys and it was discussed only in one of the focus groups with girls. For the one group in which media themes were discussed, the girls seemed to minimize media influence. For example, several stated that they did not believe that sexual content in movies influenced sexual behavior, mocking the idea that they would "go home and have sex" after seeing a movie that included sexual content.

In contrast, parents seemed particularly concerned about the effect of media content on adolescent sexuality. They expressed concerns about the influence of television programming (such as sitcoms and soap operas), as well as teen magazines, computer games, movies, television advertisements, and music, on their children.

Parents expressed concern about media content because they seemed to believe that adolescents were passive recipients of media messages. For example, one parent suggested that television distorted reality: "... kids that watch TV a lot start to think that's how the world really is." Another parent commented: "The media becomes so important because the message they send is one of great promiscuity and that everybody's doing it and that it's just very acceptable to do, and just go for it . . . the trouble is, that message isn't being shown in a realistic way where they show a younger teenager that's dying of AIDS or has syphilis or who is struggling at 16 years old with two kids and living off welfare and food stamps trying to get an education. They're not showing the negatives, they're only showing the 'fun stuff.'"

One parent expressed concern about the influence of these messages: "You wonder how much kids can watch of that from five, three, and two years old and just not feel that it's not normal activity between a male and female to have sex right there." Concern about media content was exemplified in the following comment from a parent: "I hate the videos that are on there. They're just pornography set to music, I just hate them. . . . And they have this one show that I just really object to. It's about these people that they, six people live in a home [referring to the television show "The Real World"] . . . they just live in this place and they discuss all their sexual exploits."

### *Using Media to Promote Responsible Sexual Behavior*

Adolescent participants, perhaps because they did not identify media as being a significant influence, did not comment on responding to media messages. Parents consistently suggested that it was the responsibility of parents to monitor messages in the media and talk to their children about sexual themes in the media. This is demonstrated in the following exemplar: "One of the things we do at our house when we talk about things like that . . . when you see a show about a situation, we use that show and start talking about that show."

Recall that only one group—a group of adolescent girls—discussed media and sexuality. In that group participants reported that recent media campaigns and themes on popular programs effectively addressed HIV/AIDS and responsible sexual behavior. They concluded that messages that included humor were the most effective. Parents also suggested that recent campaigns to promote responsible sexual behavior were helpful, but one parent asked, “Do you think kids take these seriously?”

#### CONCLUSION

In contrast to research that includes forced-choice responses to questions about the influence of media on adolescent sexuality, adolescents in these focus groups—who were not prompted to talk about media influences—seemed indifferent to them. These influences were mentioned in only one of the adolescent focus groups. This is in contrast to parents of adolescents who expressed concern about media messages. This suggests a need for future research on identification of the extent of media influence on adolescent sexuality using experimental or longitudinal studies. Investigators should examine the extent to which influences exist outside of adolescents’ consciousness. For now, parents and sexuality educators may need to convince adolescents that concerns about the media are valid before trying to change media-influenced behavior.

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