

A Review of Sexual Content in Black-Themed Television Programming

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Article:

INTRODUCTION

African Americans watch more television than any other race, with African American teens watching 7 hours and 55 minutes per day compared to 6 hours and 33 minutes viewed by total U.S. teens. It is hypothesized that exposure to television content may impact health behavior.

The purpose of this review is to discuss what is known about the exposure of African American adolescents to sexual content presented in black-themed television programming.

Current research shows distinct differences in viewing preferences among adolescents; no studies, however, have analyzed sexual content in black-themed television programming. This discussion focuses on past studies analyzing sexual content and methodologies, which have proven numerous shortcomings, and implications for future research.

Since the advent of television, mass media has reflected or been reflective of societal norms, mores, and values. Recently, media researchers have cautioned that there is a greater shift toward "life imitating art," which could be increasingly troublesome in the area of sexual content presented in programming. Studies have documented an association between adolescents' attitudes and behavior related to sexual behavior and their exposure to media content (Centers for Disease Control, 2004). Researchers note that "Gone are the days of 'I Love Lucy' and ... separate beds," and that sexual behavior is frequent in every form of media and becoming more explicit (Brown & Keller, 2000). Furthermore, it has been found that nearly one-third of shows presented during the family viewing hour (8-9p.m.) include sexual references and an escalating incidence of vulgar language (Parents TV Council, 1997). In a 2005 nationwide study conducted by The Pew Research Center, 66% of participants commented that entertainment television shows are worse now than in the past. Of the participants who thought TV has gotten worse, 21% expressed concerns about sexual content and 16% were concerned with depictions of immoral behavior and a lack of good values (The Pew Research Center, 2005).

The media is consistently cited by adolescents as a major resource and is second only to school sex education as the leading source for information about sex (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1996). The period of adolescence — those years between childhood and adulthood — is variously defined throughout the literature (World Health Organization, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005); however, for this discussion adolescents are those age 10 to 17. Mass media is defined as television, radio, newspapers and magazines, records, computers, video, and films (Feldman & Elliott, 1990). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has voiced concerns about the role media plays in adolescents' lives and the amount of time spent engaged by media for the past 20 years (AAP, 1984). Research in the past decade has shown that American children spend more than 38 hours per week using media (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999), and it has been predicted that by the time adolescents graduate from high school, they will have watched 15,000 hours of television, greater than the time spent in the classroom (Strasburger, 1997). Moreover, with technological advances such as the introduction of Apple's iPod, it is likely that this prediction will pale in

comparison to future media exposure. iPods are portable handheld media devices that allow users to listen to music, watch videos, and store photos. In addition, users can view broadcast shows and Apple recently signed a deal with Disney that will allow users to view episodes of TV shows aired on the Disney network (Baig, 2005). Apple recently reported having sold 14 million iPods for the 2005 holiday season compared to 4.5 million in the 2004 holiday season (Graham, 2006).

Given that television is a powerful influence on the attitudes, values, and beliefs of adolescents, (Strasburger, 1997; Brown, Greenberg, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1993; Brown & Steele, 1995; Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998) it has been documented that adolescents adopt attitudes that mimic themes common in media messages and behave in ways that reflect media content. In their book "At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent," Feldman and Elliott (1990) indicate that mass media, particularly television, plays a formative role in adolescents' lives by influencing ideas, attitudes, and behaviors. Of particular interest, given media's pervasiveness in multiple markets, is the effect messages, particularly sexual ones, are having on a more diverse adolescent population, specifically adolescent African Americans. According to Nielsen Media Research, African Americans are the largest minority segment of the U.S. television household population, and African Americans view more television than any other segment of the American viewing public (Nielsen Media Research, 2004). Additionally, African Americans watch more TV on average during primetime than any other race, with African American teens watching 7 hours and 55 minutes per day compared to 6 hours and 33 minutes viewed by the total U.S. teen population (Nielsen Media Research, 2004). According to Gruber and Thau (2003), sexual messages on television may place adolescents of color at an increased risk of sexual activity due to earlier pubertal development, greater desire for acquiring information from this highly available source, and the need to identify role models not present in their proximal community. The fact that content analyses show adolescents are bombarded with sexual content in the media is alarming (Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998; Brown & Steele, 1995; Kunkel, Cope, & Colvin, 1996). A disturbing trend has been observed that programs viewed by adolescents present a greater concentration of sexual content than any other programs on television (Kunkel et al., 2003). Analogous to television programming, sexual messages are becoming more explicit in dialogue, lyrics, and behavior in other media outlets (Committee on Public Education, 2001). Although media research has revealed gender as a "significant predictor of media choices," studies analyzing media content have failed to consider programming aimed at adolescents based on gender and race (Brown & Pardun, 2004). Additionally, little research has been conducted to determine the potential exposure of adolescents of color to sexual content in television (Gruber & Thau, 2003). However, due to the profound presence of African American characters on one television network, the United Paramount Network (UPN), a vast majority of African American adolescents select UPN for their entertainment needs, which is inconsistent with networks frequently viewed by other adolescents (Brown & Pardun, 2004). Given the increased levels of TV exposure, what is its influence on African Americans' health risks, including risky sexual behavior and initiation? The purpose of this review is to discuss what is known about the exposure of adolescents, particularly African American adolescents, to sexual content presented in television programming aimed specifically at an African American audience.

METHODS

Health education-related databases were searched using the following terms: African American adolescents and TV, sexual content in media, adolescents and media, sexual messages on TV, and sex in media. Databases queried were Ebscohost, PsyInfo, ERIC, Journal Storage (JSTOR), Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar. Studies were included if they investigated sexual content in TV, the influence of sexual messages on the attitudes or behaviors of adolescents, and had a target audience of African American adolescents between the ages of 10-17. Only studies deemed methodologically appropriate and relevant to the purpose of this review were synthesized and are discussed.

RESULTS

Portrayals of sexuality are frequent in mainstream mass media but they are rarely accompanied by serious talk of consequences (Brown, 2002; Media Scope, 2001). The average adolescent will be exposed to 14,000 sexual

references per year and only 165 (1.1%) of these references deal with birth control, self-control, abstinence, or the risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Harris, 1988; Lowry & Shidler, 1993). Adolescence is a crucial time in the developmental processes and individuals at this time usually determine what sexual practices are moral, enjoyable, and appropriate for them (LeVay & Valente, 2003). Due to the availability of media, adolescents can easily access information to learn about or view sexual behavior. In fact, more than 80% of adolescents reported that their peers gathered information about sexual issues from television shows, movies, and other entertainment media, with 10% reporting they learned more about AIDS from these media sources than other sources (Kaiser Family Foundation/Children Now, 1999). In a 1991 national study, more than half of high school males and females reported learning about birth control, contraception, or preventing pregnancy from television (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002). However, evidence is accumulating that in addition to imparting basic information about sex, the ubiquitous and risk-free media portrayals, coupled with inadequate alternative models from other sectors, encourage unhealthy sexual attitudes and behaviors (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002).

Despite the variety of media sources, adolescents spent more time viewing television than using any other source of entertainment media (Kaiser Family Foundation/Children Now, 1999). Unfortunately, mass media rarely depicts commitment, contraceptives, or consideration of consequences in sexual relationships (Brown, 2002). Such an observation was made by Kunkel et al., in a 2003 Kaiser Family study; they concluded that despite the prevalence of sexual content, material involving risk reduction and personal responsibility is almost non-existent. Moreover, according to Dietz and Strasburger (1991), even family-oriented shows contain sexual references and vulgar language, and soap operas portray extramarital sex eight times more commonly than sex between spouses. Talk shows regularly have sexual themes and air shows discussing unusual sexual practices. Furthermore, sexual imagery is commonplace in music videos, and research has shown viewing videos may influence adolescents' attitudes concerning early sexual activity (Calfrin, Carroll, & Shmidt, 1993). Sex is used in advertising, and adolescents are often pictured in provocative poses (Kilbourne, 1993). As a result of the ambiguous depiction of sex and sexuality in the media, adolescents may attain unclear messages about the reality of sex. Results of studies have shown that three out of four adolescents say one reason adolescents have sex is because TV shows and movies portray sex as a normal practice for adolescents (Media Scope, 2001).

MEDIA PREFERENCES DENOTED BY RACE AND GENDER

Researchers have postulated that there are significant differences in media use patterns for males and females, and African American and Caucasian adolescents (Brown, 2000). As early as the 1980s, when there were few portrayals of African Americans on television, studies found that African American audiences favored shows featuring African American characters or predominantly African American casts (Dates, 1980; Eastman & Liss, 1980). As a result of technological advances, media has gravitated to offer specialized programs for different population groups (Brown & Pardun, 2004). Black Entertainment Television (BET) is the largest cable network serving African Americans (Viacom, 2003). In 1990, White teen girls knew that Warner Brothers Network was their channel because its primetime lineup featured shows designed especially to attract them to television (Brown, 2000). Seemingly, African American youth were attracted to shows aired on the UPN channel that targeted them (Brown, 2000). Brown and Pardun stated, "Whole channels and programs have been developed primarily to appeal to younger audiences segmented by race and gender." In concordance with previous research, Brown and Pardun concluded African American adolescents, regardless of gender, clearly preferred shows featuring African American characters, and suggested race and gender are basic motivators for program preferences.

It was determined that programs with predominantly African American cast members appeared on the most-viewed shows among African Americans, but were not on the top 10 list among all viewers (Steadman, 2005). In 2001, Freeman concluded UPN network was the "only network that continued to feature primetime shows with primarily African American cast." Nine out of 10 broadcast network regular primetime programs that were most viewed by African American adolescents were aired on UPN (Steadman, 2005).

LIMITATIONS OF THE LITERATURE

Although studies have been conducted to analyze sexual content in media, previous studies have numerous shortcomings (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Among cited flaws in previous studies analyzing sexual content in media were that researchers assessed television viewing without considering the sexual content contained in the programming (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995), or had raters subjectively rate "sexiness" of shows (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003; Brown & Newcomer, 1991). Additionally, in 2005, Escobar-Chaves et al. published results of a comprehensive literature analysis of the impact of mass media on the sexual attitudes and behaviors of adolescents for the past two decades. The study included research that analyzed sexual content on television, the exposure of adolescents to television, and the effects of that exposure. The researchers concluded that despite the association of sexual behavior and media exposure, studies were limited because of inappropriate study designs, limited sampling methodology, and small sample sizes.

CURRENT RESEARCH

To date, the Kaiser Family Foundation biennial studies are the only ongoing monitoring of sex on TV as a whole (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005). Although the 2003 Kaiser Family Foundation study found 83% of the top 20 Nielsen-rated teen shows contained sexual content, only one show predominantly viewed by African American adolescents, "WWE: Smackdown" airing on UPN, was analyzed (Kunkel et al., 2003). Similarly, for the 2004 Kaiser Family Foundation study, of the top 20 teen shows analyzed, only 2, "WWE: Smackdown" and "America's Next Top Model," were aired on UPN and analyzed for sexual content (Kunkel et al., 2005). The researchers concluded that sex is lavish on TV; however, sexual risk and responsibility messages are uncommon and of little significance (Kunkel et al., 2005). Additionally, researchers stated the average viewer would be exposed to approximately 100 programs with sexual content before they view one that significantly addresses sexual risk or responsibility (Kunkel et al., 2005).

The most appropriate study analyzing sexual content on television and the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents was conducted by the RAND Corporation and published in 2004. To date, this is the only longitudinal study to use a representative sample to investigate the phenomena (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005; Kunkel et al., 2005). The results showed that heavy exposure to sexual content (viewing sexual behavior or hearing about sex) on TV was predictive of the initiation of sex (Collins et al., 2004). Of particular significance for the purpose of this discussion is that the researchers also found exposure to portrayals of safe sexual practices and sexual risk was predictive of delayed sexual behavior for African American adolescents only (Collins et al., 2004).

DISCUSSION

As a whole, African Americans watch more television than any other segment of the population. African American youth have higher exposure to TV (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999) and the highest prevalence of sexual behaviors as well as STIs and nonmarital pregnancies (Grunbaum et al., 2004). However, few existing studies on media exposure and sexual beliefs and behaviors have targeted this at-risk group (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005). Of the minimum research available, there has been an established association between exposure of sexual content on television and attitudes and behaviors of adolescents. Moreover, African American adolescents' sexual behavior was delayed with exposure to sexual risk and sexual responsibility messages. Although studies have been conducted to monitor sex on TV since 1998, there has not been a significant inclusion of programs most frequently viewed by African American adolescents.

Whereas exposure to sex through TV is by no means the only cause for promiscuous sexual behavior for African American adolescents, the impact of this medium must be explored. As previously mentioned, TV exerts a significant influence on the behaviors, attitudes and beliefs of adolescents and this influence may be extremely important for certain population groups such as African American adolescents. Therefore, the purpose of this review was to determine what is known about the extent and nature of sexual content presented in tailored programming aimed at African American adolescents. Studies have documented a high prevalence of sexual content in programs viewed by the majority adolescent audience; however, no studies have analyzed the

prevalence of sexual content tailored to a minority adolescent audience. Current federal law prohibits broadcasters from airing obscene programs anytime or indecent programs between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. when adolescents are most likely to view them. However, in a 2005 news release by the Federal Communications Commission, consumer complaints of indecency and obscenity increased 23.5% between July and September in 2005 (Federal Communications Commission, 2005). It is hoped that the implementation of public policy can have major implications in improving the quality of life for Americans. However, as Escobar-Charves (2005) noted, public policies are developed based on scientific data and not "it seems self-evident" assumptions, and "we know basically nothing" (pg. 301) about the effects of mass media on adolescents' sexual behavior. Therefore, in order to advocate for policy reform and enforcement of laws to regulate sexual content presented on TV, we must know the explicitness of the content, the level of exposure, and the influence of that exposure on the behaviors and attitudes of adolescents, especially for at-risk minority populations.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Similar to recommendations provided by Escobar-Chaves in 2005, and based on this review, research is needed to:

- determine the prevalence of sexual content presented in tailored TV programs;
- determine the nature and extent to which programs are tailored to specific population groups, such as males/females, African Americans/Whites, and the sexual content presented;
- use sources such as Nielsen ratings for African American audiences or survey African American adolescents to determine what programs are of particular interest to them;
- use methodologically appropriate measures to determine the sexual content presented in these programs;
- utilize health education theory to develop instruments to survey African American adolescents to determine the influence TV has on their sexual attitudes and behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Little is known about the sexual content African American adolescents are exposed to through television. The Kaiser Family Foundation studies, *Sex on TV*, provide a framework which researchers can use to monitor the sexual content that African American adolescents are exposed to. In addition, the RAND study adds credence to the argument of media's influence on the sexual behavior of adolescents, especially African American adolescents. However, one study is not enough to affect policy reform to regulate sexual content presented on TV. Although TV is a significant influence, it is only part of the influence of mass media.

To gather accurate measures of the amount of sexual content African American adolescents are exposed to, all mediums must be monitored. A comprehensive approach must be taken to analyze the influence mass media exerts on the sexual attitudes and behaviors of African American adolescents. Due to technological advances, adolescents have access to various media outlets such as the Internet, palm pilots, iPods, and cell phones, in which information can be transmitted or received. Because little is known about the exposure of African American adolescents to sexual content through the media, television is an appropriate starting point due to the increased usage patterns of this group.

HEALTH EDUCATION RESPONSIBILITIES AND COMPETENCIES

Responsibility VIII — Apply Appropriate Research Principles and Methods in Health Education Competency A: Conduct thorough reviews of literature. Sub-competency:

- 4. Evaluate the research design, methodology and findings from the literature.
- 5. Synthesize key information from the literature.

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