

Boys Will Be Boys and Girls Better Be Prepared: An Analysis of the Rare Sexual Health Messages in Young Adolescents' Media

Stacey J. T. Hust

*Edward R. Murrow School of Communication
Washington State University*

Jane D. Brown

*School of Journalism and Mass Communication
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Kelly Ladin L'Engle

*Behavioral and Social Sciences
Family Health International*

Despite concerns about high rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease in the United States, the mass media adolescents attend to most frequently include little accurate information about sexual health. In this study, a preliminary

Stacey J. T. Hust (Ph.D., UNC-Chapel Hill, 2005) is an assistant professor in the Edward R. Murrow School of Communication at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. She conducts health communication research in the areas of sexual health and substance abuse prevention, and her research explores whether mass media can be used for health promotion through strategies such as entertainment education and media advocacy.

Jane D. Brown (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, Madison) is a James L. Knight Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. She was PI on the Teen Media Grant (RO1#HD38505) from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development that supported the project described here. Her research focuses on the effects of the media on adolescents' health and how the media can be used effectively for healthy communication.

Kelly Ladin L'Engle (Ph.D., UNC-Chapel Hill, 2005) is a scientist at Family Health International in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. Her research interests relate to adolescents' sexual and risk behaviors, and health communication on theory and methods.

Correspondence should be addressed to Stacey J. T. Hust, Edward R. Murrow School of Communication, P.O. Box 642520, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 999164-2520. E-mail: sjhust@wsu.edu

quantitative analysis of the sexual content in four media (television, magazines, music, and movies) popular among 3,261 Black and White adolescents (12–14 years old) found that less than one half of 1% of the content included information about or depictions of sexually healthy behavior. A qualitative analysis of the relatively rare instances of sexual health content revealed that across all four media the sexual health content was ambiguous and/or inaccurate, reinforced traditional gender stereotypes that males seek sex and females are responsible for protection against pregnancy, and presented puberty as funny and contraception as embarrassing or humiliating. These analyses suggest that significant changes in the media's presentations of sexuality would be required if the media are ever to be considered a healthy part of adolescents' sexual socialization.

The United States has the highest rate of sexually transmitted infections of any industrialized nation (Glazer, 2004). In 2000, 9 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases, which are almost half of the nation's total, occurred in young adults (Weinstock, Berman, & Cates, 2004). The U.S. teen pregnancy rate is still nearly double that of the rates in Canada and Great Britain and is approximately four times the rates of France and Sweden ("Teenagers' Sexual," 2004). The mass media have been criticized for playing a role in these unfortunate trends by promoting early and precocious sexual activity (Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998).

Although sexual content in the media is frequent, a few previous studies suggest that sexual health content is rare (Kunkel et al., 2003; Walsh-Childers, 1997). Quantitative analyses of television, magazines, and newspapers have found little content that might promote healthier sexual behavior. Only a few of these studies, however, have included the media used primarily by adolescents or have examined more thoroughly the sexual scripts and norms associated with sexual behavior that might support or proscribe sexually healthy behavior among young people.

In this study we used a large-scale quantitative content analysis of four media popular with a diverse sample of early adolescents to identify depictions of potentially healthy sexual behavior, and then we qualitatively analyzed a sample of those television and movie scenes, music lyrics, and magazine articles. We used the standards suggested by a national panel of sexual health educators as guidelines for what should be included, and asked, What might adolescents be learning about sexual health from the media they use most frequently?

SOURCES OF SEXUAL SOCIALIZATION FOR ADOLESCENTS

Although early adolescents consistently report that they would prefer and do learn about sexual topics from their parents, the media, school, and friends are also im-

portant sources for sexual information and norms (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002). Many parents, however, still find it difficult to talk with their children about sex, and schools are increasingly limited in what they may say about sex, as many have turned to abstinence-only education (Glazer, 2004). By 2005, 35% of public school districts had accepted federal funds that required teaching that abstinence until marriage is the only safe option and that contraception can be discussed only in terms of failure rates ("Teenagers' Sexual," 2004). According to the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Grunbaum et al., 2004), the percentage of teens reporting that they were taught about AIDS or HIV infection in school has continually decreased since 1997. In this context of reticent parents and abstinence-only education in schools, the media are important sources of sexual information as well as norms about inappropriate and appropriate behavior and what other teens are doing sexually (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005; Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002).

SEXUAL SCRIPTS

An examination of the depiction of sexual health in the media is important because various theories predict and research has shown that the media can affect adolescents' ideas of appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Bryant & Zillmann, 2002). Social cognitive theory posits that observers can model the behavior of someone they see in real life or in the media if the model is attractive and is rewarded and/or not punished for behaving that way (Bandura, 1977). Recent studies have found that more frequent exposure to sexual content in the media during adolescence predicts earlier initiation of sexual intercourse (Brown et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2004). Media characters who model sexual interactions may provide young people with ideas and templates for their own romantic and sexual behavior. Sexual scripts in the media, often laden with cultural values and norms, convey how individuals "should" act in sexual situations. If sexually healthy behavior is not modeled in the media used by teens, it is less likely that young people will adopt sexually healthy behavior themselves.

In the 1990s, the Sexuality and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) convened a national task force to develop guidelines for adolescents' sexuality education (*National Guidelines Task Force*, 2004). Among other recommendations, the task force suggested that both boys and girls should learn to take responsibility for their sexual health, which includes using contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Teens should be made aware of the high incidence rates of STDs, should know how to identify potential symptoms of STDs, and should be taught how to take preventive measures. The guidelines also recommended that younger children should know about the process of puberty, what to expect as their bodies mature sexually, and

that masturbation could be discussed as a normal part of sexual development and perhaps as a preventive measure.

SEXUAL HEALTH IN THE MEDIA

Given that the media have become important sources of sexual information for young people, we might hope that the media would be mindful of what kind of content would best help their young audiences live healthy sexual lives. Evidence from a few previous studies, mostly of television programs, however, suggest that the media do not consider themselves in the business of health education. Health content and images in the mass media are characterized by missed opportunities for health promotion (Kline, 2006; Sharf & Freimuth, 1993).

Most analyses of sexual content in the media have focused on television (Kunkel et al., 2003; Lowry & Shidler, 1993; Lowry & Towles, 1989), and only a few have focused on television shows or other media of interest primarily to teens (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2004; Kunkel et al., 2003; Walsh-Childers, Gotthoffer, & Lepre, 2002). These studies of sexual content on television consistently have found that sexual precaution messages are very rare and, when found, focus on condoms and other forms of contraception (Fisher et al., 2004; Kunkel et al., 2003) to the exclusion of other aspects of sexually healthy behavior. Only about 10% of sexual scenes in television programs popular among teens in 2005 contained a sexual precaution message (Kunkel et al., 2005). Analyses of entertainment media show that when sexual health messages are presented, however, they do have a positive effect on viewers' behavior (Collins et al., 2003; Shapiro, Meekers, & Tamashe, 2003).

In one of the few analyses of television programs that have gone beyond counting the frequency of sexual behaviors to consider underlying norms, Ward (1995) found that birth control typically was depicted as an undesirable aspect of sexual intercourse. On television programs popular with adolescents, masculinity was equated with being sexually active, and females talked about sexual responsibility more than males. A study of prime-time television programs that featured young adult characters (ages 12–22) also found that negative emotional, social, and punitive sexual consequences were more frequent when female characters initiated sexual activities (Aubrey, 2004). Faced with such gendered sexual scripts, girls and boys might come to believe that these are the norms to which they, too, should adhere.

A study of four teen girl magazines (*Seventeen*, *Teen*, *Sassy*, and *YM*) in the mid-1990s found that the magazines tended to focus more on sexual pleasure than sexual health, and less than half of the frequent sexual content included health information. The magazines' rare sexual health content was focused mostly on helping young women decide whether to have sexual intercourse (Walsh-Childers, 1997; Walsh-Childers et al., 2002).

In sum, only a few previous studies have examined the sexual health content in the media to which adolescents attend. These studies do suggest that the media rarely depict sexually healthy behavior, but when they do the focus is relatively narrow and gender stereotypical. In this study we look briefly at the frequency of sexually healthy content across four media popular with teens. Based on the SIECUS guidelines, we consider a broader definition of sexual health than has been used in previous studies. We include not only television and magazines but also movies and music, two other media that are prominent in adolescents' media worlds (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2004). We then look more closely at a subsample of the depictions found in these four media to see in what context and with what underlying values and scripts such sexual health topics are presented. We ask, "What could early adolescents be learning about sexual health norms and behavior from the media they attend to most often?"

METHODS

Student Sample

In fall 2000, students from 14 public middle schools in the southeastern United States, representing urban, suburban, and rural populations, were recruited to participate in a study of teens' media use and health behavior. Of the 5,029 seventh and eighth graders eligible for participation, 3,261 (65%) completed a 36-page mail-back media use survey with parental consent. Almost all respondents (95%) were 12 to 14 years old, 55% were female, 50% were White, 41% were Black, and the final sample of adolescents was representative of the entire school population from which the sample was drawn. For more information about recruitment, strategies used to maximize the response rate, and data collection, please see L'Engle, Pardun, and Brown (2004).

Media Sample

The media use survey included questions about television, movies, magazines, and music. Respondents were provided with an extensive list of currently popular vehicles (i.e., *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, *American Pie*, *Seventeen*, and *OutKast*) for each medium and instructed to circle all of the vehicles they "regularly watched, listened to, or read." Based on responses to the media survey, a sample of 308 vehicles that were used regularly by at least 10% of any demographic subgroup (Black boys, White boys, Black girls, and White girls) was selected for analysis of sexual content. The final coding sample included one episode of each television show (with embedded commercials), each movie (including trailers), one issue of each magazine (including all advertisements and photographs), and all songs on the most recently released album of each music artist. Two episodes of each television

program were recorded over a 2-week period, and coders randomly selected one episode to analyze. One issue of each magazine during the same time period (fall 2001) was purchased and analyzed by the coding team. Only one episode of each television show and one issue of each magazine was selected for coding because of the magnitude of this cross-media content analysis and the consistency of the types of sexual imagery presented within TV shows and magazines.

Quantitative Content Analysis

The quantitative content analysis was conducted at a small unit level (e.g., camera shot or paragraph) to ensure comparability across the four media. For television and movies, the unit was defined as each nonbreak sequence or camera cut. In magazines, the paragraph, headlines, and photos were treated as individual units. Each lyric paragraph of each song was the unit of analysis for music. A total of 236,066 units across the four media were thus coded.

Each unit was initially analyzed for inclusion of sexual content, and each unit that contained sexual content was further analyzed to identify specific characteristics. The analyses for this article focus on the sexual health content as defined by the SIECUS guidelines, including information about or depiction of puberty, masturbation, pregnancy, STDs, and condoms (see Table 1). Other characteristics of the sexual content that were coded but are not the focus of this analysis included sexual body parts, relationships, unhealthy sexual messages (e.g., promiscuity, unusual behavior), and sexual violence (e.g., rape). Interrater reliability for all four media was met (average Scott's $\kappa = .73$). (For further details about the entire quantitative content analysis, see Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005).

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SEXUAL HEALTH CONTENT

Qualitative content analysis was used to look more closely at the themes present in the sexual health content. Of the 308 vehicles included in the quantitative sample, 5 vehicles that had a high proportion of sexual health content from each of the four media were selected for further qualitative analysis (see Table 2). Some of the vehicles not selected for further analysis had an equal proportion of sexual content as vehicles that were selected, but they were actually read, watched, or listened to by a very small proportion of the adolescents in our sample, so we considered the age appropriateness and popularity with teen audiences in choosing vehicles for the qualitative content analysis. For example, *Seventeen* (1% sexual health content) was selected for analysis instead of *Playboy* (1% sexual health content) because few of the early adolescents in the sample reported reading *Playboy* whereas a majority of the girls as well as many boys read *Seventeen*. The vehicles included in the qualitative analysis contained a significant proportion of all the sexual health units

TABLE 1
Sexual Health Content in Media Used Frequently by Adolescents

<i>Content</i>	<i>No. of Units</i>	<i>Definition: Talk or Depiction of ...</i>	<i>% of Sexual Health Content^a</i>	<i>% of Sexual Content^b</i>	<i>% of All Content^c</i>
Masturbation	138	A person stimulating his/her own genitals for pleasurable sensations and/or paraphernalia used for self-pleasure.	31	.49	.06
Pregnancy	113	Either unplanned pregnancy and/or the risk of getting pregnant as a teen, or active planning for pregnancy.	25	.40	.05
Condoms and contraception	83	Includes the mention of any contraception, such as condoms, even if not connected to a sexual act. Contraception was considered any procedure or method intended to avoid pregnancy or STDs, such as birth control pills, vasectomy, and the rhythm method.	19	.30	.04
Puberty	61	Puberty issues as they relate to the reproductive system or physical/sexual development, such as breast size, menstruation, erections, ejaculation, and how conception occurs.	14	.22	.03
STDs	51	Discussion or depiction of STDs.	11	.18	.02

Note. STDs = sexually transmitted diseases.

^a*n* = 446. ^b*n* = 28,281. ^c*N* = 236,066.

TABLE 2
Popularity of the Vehicles Included in the Qualitative Content Analysis

<i>Media</i>	<i>Vehicle</i>	<i>% Sexual Content</i>	<i>% Sexual Health Content</i>	<i>Popularity of Vehicle^a</i>
Television shows				<i>Viewers in millions for the 2001–02 TV season</i>
	<i>Penetration</i>	.34	.03	Less than 1.9
	<i>Friends</i>	.29	.03	24.5
	<i>South Park</i>	.25	.02	Less than 1.9
	<i>Ricki Lake</i>	.18	.02	Less than 1.9
	<i>Whose Line Is It Anyway?</i>	.10	.01	8.0
Movies (MPAA rating)				<i>Cumulative domestic box office</i>
	<i>American Pie (R)</i>	.52	.05	\$101,800,949
	<i>American Pie II (R)</i>	.35	.03	\$145,103,595
	<i>There's Something About Mary (R)</i>	.26	.02	\$176,484,652
	<i>Save the Last Dance (PG-13)</i>	.29	.01	\$91,057,006
	<i>Big Mama's House (PG-13)</i>	.08	.01	\$117,559,438

(continue)

Magazines ^b				Average circulation in 2001 (Rank among the top ABC magazines)
	<i>Crucial</i>	.10	.03	814,544 (116)
	<i>Glamour</i>	.12	.01	2,170,476 (31)
	<i>Seventeen</i>	.09	.01	2,351,570 (28)
	<i>Teen People</i>	.06	.01	1,625,343 (48)
	<i>Vibe</i>	.11	.01	788,666 (rank not available)
Music artists (album)				Peak position of album on the <i>Billboard 200</i> (date)
	OutKast (<i>Stankonia</i>)	.47	.04	2 (Nov. 18, 2000)
	Eminem (<i>The Marshall Mathers LP</i>)	.45	.03	1 (June 10, 2000)
	DMX (<i>Great Depression</i>)	.36	.02	1 (Nov. 10, 2001)
	Nelly (<i>Nellyville</i>)	.30	.01	1 (July 13, 2002)
	Madonna (<i>Music</i>)	.19	.01	1 (Oct. 7, 2000)

^aTelevision programs: Nielsen ratings of top shows (“How Did Your Favorite Show Rate,” 2002); movies: domestic box office cumulative receipts (“Box Office,” 2001); magazines: total paid circulation and ranking among the top ABC magazines (Magazine Publishers of America, n.d.); albums: highest ranking on Billboard top music charts (n.d.). ^bOther magazines targeted to Blacks and young men did not include sufficient sexual health content to be included in the qualitative sample.

that had been identified in the quantitative content analysis for each medium (66% of the sexual health content identified in movies was included, 64% of the units in music, 62% of the television sexual health units, and 50% of those identified in magazines). Overall, the 20 vehicles included in the qualitative content analysis contained 59% of the sexual health content that was identified in the larger quantitative sample. Besides containing the most relevant content for our investigation, these media vehicles were also frequently used by the 12- to 14-year-olds in the sample, and by audiences in general, according to traditional audience measurement services (see Table 2).

Qualitative content analysis emphasizes the role of the investigator in interpreting, constructing, and analyzing the format, themes, or frames that are present in media texts. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) identified qualitative content analysis as "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278).

After selecting the 20 media vehicles for qualitative analysis, the full media vehicle (the television program, the movie, the whole magazine article, or the song) was read or watched. A complete description of each sexual health unit present in the vehicle was documented, including summaries of visuals, character interactions, factual information, and relevant quotations. The gender of the characters, tone (positive or negative), and prominence (central to the plot) of the health message within the program were also noted. These written descriptions served as initial codes of both the broadcast and print content.

Using the constant discovery tenet of qualitative content analysis, after initial coding, commonalities began to emerge. For example, humor (such as laughter, puns, or jokes) was identified as a key aspect of much of the sexual health content. All units were then viewed again to see whether humor was present.

In a second classification of the data, the written descriptions produced from the initial qualitative coding were classified into subthemes (categories) of similar content, regardless of medium (see Table 3). For example, a sexual health unit from television that emphasized loss of virginity was grouped with a similar unit from a movie that associated losing virginity with manhood. The resulting categories were then compared to each other in a third classification of the data that resulted in more encompassing themes, regardless of the type of sexual health (see Table 3). To continue with the example, units focused on masturbation that associated virginity with manhood were identified as being similar to units focused on pregnancy that emphasized that boys left girls after getting them pregnant because both units emphasized that boys are obsessed with sex but not responsibility. The qualitative themes moved beyond the terms identified in the quantitative data to provide more description of *how* sexual health content was presented. Each media vehicle was watched or read multiple times to ensure that the final themes applied across all four media. The most typical and/or illustrative examples are included in the description of the key themes.

TABLE 3
Qualitative Content Analysis: Themes and Examples

Main Theme	Subthemes	Examples
Puberty is humiliating and humorous	Emphasis on embarrassment or humiliation; Presence of joke, ridicule, or laughter; Presence of humorous or satirical visuals in print formats	In a <i>South Park</i> TV show, a prepubescent boy purchases pubic hair from a young man, tells his friends that it is his own pubic hair, and is embarrassed when the friends learn the truth. In a <i>CosmoGirl</i> magazine advice column, a young woman receives sound advice about hair growing on her breasts, but the accompanying graphic is a hairy stuffed monkey with the caption, "Be honest, do my breasts look hairy?"
Boys are obsessed with sex and sexual performance	Emphasis on loss of virginity; Loss of virginity associated with manhood; Boys focused on masturbation; References for shock value; Boys leaving girls after they are pregnant	In the <i>American Pie</i> movie, a leading male character masturbates into a pie when friends tell him having sex feels like "warm apple pie." In the <i>There's Something About Mary</i> movie, the male lead masturbates prior to his date to improve his sexual performance that evening, with ejaculate landing on his ear. When he answers the door for his date, she thinks the ejaculate is hair gel and grabs it from his ear to style her hair.
Girls are responsible for contraception, teen pregnancy, and STD prevention	Condoms and contraception as a girl's responsibility; Teen pregnancy as an obstacle to life goals; Absence of men during pregnancy, birth, or child rearing; Females supply condoms; presence of STD information mainly targeted to girls; AIDS in the context of celebrities	In the <i>American Pie</i> movie, four young men are variously shown possessing condoms, but condoms are connected directly to sexual intercourse in only one scene in which a young woman gives her partner two condoms to use during sex. In the DMX song "Shorty Was Da Bomb," the "rubber bust" and the young woman gets pregnant. The young father leaves and rationalizes his abandonment because the young woman was dishonest about the timing of her pregnancy.

Note. STD = sexually transmitted disease.

FINDINGS

Sexual Health Content in Teens' Media Is Rare

The quantitative content analysis found little sexual health content in the media popular with this sample of early adolescents. Although 12% (28,281 units out of 236,066 total units) of all media content was sexual in nature, less than one half of 1% (.19%; 446 units) discussed or portrayed sexual health.

A variety of sexual health issues were discussed in the 446 units of sexual health content identified (see Table 1). Thirty-one percent ($n = 138$ units) discussed or portrayed masturbation, and 25% ($n = 113$ units) discussed pregnancy. Condoms and other forms of contraception were the focus of 19% ($n = 83$ units) of the sexual health content, whereas puberty was the focus of 14% ($n = 61$) and STDs were considered in only 11% ($n = 51$ units).

The qualitative content analysis revealed that sexual health topics were addressed similarly across the four media but rarely in a way that would promote adolescents' sexual health. Three overall themes emerged from this analysis. First, sexual health is a funny and/or embarrassing aspect of adolescents' exploration of sexuality and rarely a natural part of a romantic relationship. Second, boys are obsessed with sex and sexual performance, and, third, girls are responsible for teen pregnancy, contraception, and STD prevention.

Sexual Health Is Humiliating and Humorous

The media included in this sample presented sexual health as funny and/or embarrassing. Even in the most serious discussions of pubertal development, such as advice columns, the media tended to poke fun at the physical changes that accompany puberty. In one *South Park* episode, a prepubescent boy was concerned that he had not grown pubic hair. He decided to purchase hair from an older boy and told his friends that it was his pubic hair. He was embarrassed after his friends realized the truth. Although it is beneficial for teen media to tackle even the most sensitive issues, such as the growth of pubic hair, the episode's humor may have discouraged young viewers from asking appropriate questions or feeling good about their developing bodies. Fear of humiliation or embarrassment may keep teens from seeking the sexual health information they need (Guzman et al., 2003).

The media consistently relied on humor to ease potential discomfort with pubertal topics. For example, in one *Cosmogirl* magazine advice column ("A Hairy Situation," November 2001) a young female reader expressed concern about the hair growing on her breasts. The columnist replied that although everyone has some hair on their chests, sudden hair growth may be due to hormone changes or medication and encouraged the teen to visit a doctor. The accompanying graphic

was a furry stuffed monkey with the caption, “Be honest, do my breasts look hairy?” Although the text of the advice column could be helpful and provided accurate and responsible information, the accompanying visual undercut the seriousness of the question and made fun of the question writer.

Boys Are Obsessed With Sex and Sexual Performance

The media typically portray men in stereotypical ways as physically strong and mentally dominant, especially in interactions with females (Hedley, 1994; Vigorito & Curry, 1998). These same stereotypes were prevalent in the content analyzed here, especially when the content focused on male masturbation. These depictions tended to portray males as obsessed with sex and sexual performance rather than sexual health or even personal pleasure.

In this media sample, masturbation was almost always depicted as a way boys could improve their sexual abilities (i.e., increase their endurance), rather than as a way to have risk-free sexual pleasure. Male media characters joked openly about masturbation with their friends, but in situations where they were discovered they were embarrassed and humiliated. For example, the masturbation scenes in the first two *American Pie* movies implied that the leading male character, Jim, who is uneasy around girls, is masturbating to learn how to perform better sexually. In the scene that sparked the movies’ titles, Jim masturbates into a pie after his friend tells him that having sexual intercourse feels like “warm apple pie.” Typical of the masturbation scenes in the *American Pie* movies, Jim is caught masturbating by his father and then is mortified when his father tries to give him advice about sexual intercourse.

In *There’s Something About Mary*, another popular movie among these early adolescents, the leading man, Ted, masturbates so that he can perform better because he expects to have sexual intercourse later that night with his date, Mary. In an embarrassing moment, Ted goes to the door with ejaculate hanging from his ear, and Mary, who thinks it is hair gel, grabs it and uses it to slick back her bangs. In all three movies, the main scenes depicting masturbation are linked to the male’s inability to masturbate discreetly and/or effectively and by extension to his failure to perform sexually. Similarly, the sexual health content tended to suggest that boys need to achieve sexual prowess to be accepted by their peers. The main objective in both *American Pie* movies was for the boys to lose their virginity to secure higher social status.

Some references to male masturbation were unrelated to the plot or theme of the program, article, or song, so likely were included for their shock value. For example, in an Eminem song that describes what it is like to get high, the rapper sings “jackin’ my dick off in a bed of barbed wire.” The remainder of the song did not include any references to masturbation or sexual intercourse. In a number of the

movies, telling someone to (or calling them a) “jerk off” was a common insult that was otherwise not associated with sexual behavior.

Girls Are Responsible for Teen Pregnancy, Contraception, and STD Prevention

In the United States, teen pregnancy often is considered a “girl’s problem,” and in this sample of teens’ media, too, girls were portrayed as being solely responsible for their children. Pregnancy content emphasized the absence of the teen father, and girls were responsible for preventing pregnancy and STDs.

Teen pregnancy. Teen mothers were portrayed as being ultimately responsible for taking care of their children and for trying to encourage the often absent teen father to pay some attention to both them and their children. Fictional accounts were more optimistic than the nonfictional. For instance, in the movie *Save the Last Dance*, a complicated subplot depicted the life of two unmarried teenage parents. The teen mother struggled to make the father take part in the baby’s life. Despite her complaints and his absence throughout the movie, the rather ambiguous ending suggested that the teenage couple would become a happy, intact family.

Similarly, in an episode of the television series *Friends*, Rachel dealt with an unplanned pregnancy and the difficulty of telling the baby’s father. She commented frequently about the difficulty of raising the child as a single mother. In later episodes, Ross, who fathered the child when a condom broke, does help raise the baby. Both of these fictitious depictions of unmarried, pregnant women suggest that despite struggles and inconsistency, the baby’s father ultimately will attempt to be a part of the new family and share in the responsibility.

In contrast, in one nonfiction account of teenage pregnancy, the absence of the teenage father was depicted more realistically. The only feature-length magazine article about teen pregnancy in the sample highlighted how the father of the young woman’s baby had left her. A pull-quote declared: “My mother kept telling me ‘teen boys don’t stay around forever.’” This story, unlike the fairy tale endings on television and in the movies, revealed that the young man did not return to be a part of the new family. Instead, the story framed teenage pregnancy around the obstacles and pain the young mother faced.

In real life, single motherhood is the more probable outcome (*Science Says*, 2003), but it may be difficult for young people to figure out which scenario is more realistic. One study of college soap opera viewers found that more frequent viewers were more likely than those who watched less often to believe that single parenthood was relatively easy (Larson, 1996).

A few of the songs analyzed also clearly depicted the burdens of teen pregnancy on young women. Outkast’s “Toliet Tisha,” for example, told the story of a young

mother who commits suicide and/or infanticide. The 14-year-old cannot turn to anyone for help as she delivers her baby over the toilet:

... On this precious mother earth, you see Tisha had issues
And her decision making skills were still in its early stages
You know what I'm talking about
Therefore she could not properly handle a blessing ...

The song highlighted Tisha's immaturity and naiveté, yet also suggested again that it is the girl's responsibility to deal with her pregnancy.

In "Shorty Was Da Bomb," DMX sang about sexual intercourse: "That night was right, she let me get that, hit that / Rip that, bounce it off the walls, flip that." Perhaps not surprisingly, during the sexual encounter "the rubber bust" and the girl got pregnant. Even though the young man clearly was in charge of the sexual act, he was not in charge of the resulting pregnancy. The young man left the young woman with the consequences:

Let her have the kid, she said it was premature (uh-huh)
Found out, she was six months, when she said she was four (uh-huh)
So I left her with the pressure on the next man's arm
But she'll be alright, 'cause shorty was the bomb (f'real).

Thus, the father rationalized his abandonment because the young woman might have been dishonest, even though he did not deny that he might be the father. He argued that she will not mind, because he was a good lover ("shorty" refers to the singer's penis).

In another song, the burden of teen pregnancy was resolved more violently. In Eminem's song "Stan," a young man who is obsessed with Eminem kills his pregnant girlfriend. Eminem raps about how the young man sends him letters describing how much he dislikes his girlfriend. Although Eminem tells Stan to take better care of his girlfriend, it is too late. By the end of the song, the young man has suffocated his pregnant girlfriend in the trunk of his car and has driven off a bridge, killing himself as well.

Condoms. In the rare instances when condoms were discussed or depicted, boys had condoms as a kind of toy, whereas girls were more knowledgeable and more likely to have a condom when it was needed. In the movie *American Pie*, four high school senior boys successfully completed their pact to lose their virginity before they graduated. Although all four boys had condoms in various scenes throughout the movie, the only condom actually used in connection with sexual intercourse was supplied by a young woman. In the movie, Jim ejaculated prema-

turely each time he had a sexual encounter. At the end of the movie, his prom date, Michelle, gave him two condoms to wear simultaneously so he could last longer. Although the mere mention of condoms has been identified as a sexual health message in previous studies, this example shows how exposure to a potentially healthy message may be compromised by reinforcing gender stereotypes and emphasizing sexual prowess.

Although there were few references to condoms or any other contraception in any of the teens' media, a few magazine articles did encourage young women to learn more about condoms. In a one-paragraph "health kick" item in *Cosmogirl* magazine ("Play it Safe," November 12, 2001), readers were told that boys know less about condoms than girls. The accompanying graphic showed a male cartoon character trying to use a condom as a hat. Although the article did not tell girls how to put condoms on, it did refer them to a Web site where they could "check out the facts."

STD prevention. Little of the sexual health content focused on STD prevention; when STD prevention was discussed, it too was most often depicted as the girl's responsibility. In a *Teen People* article (November 2001), oral sex was described as an "intense sexual act" that could lead to both emotional and physical consequences including infections of genital herpes and gonorrhea. The article encouraged girls to use condoms to avoid contracting or transmitting infections.

Although this article included information about STD prevention, the accompanying visuals conveyed a different message. The first illustration focused on a woman's lips with the text: "This will keep him interested." The second illustration focused on a man's crotch: "Hey, it's not real sex anyway!" In magazines, visuals are used to catch the reader's attention and draw them into the text, but sometimes readers may scan the visual and bold text without reading the article. In this case the nonreader likely would conclude that oral sex, which is not "real sex," will please a boyfriend. She would not learn anything about protection against STDs unless she read the article.

Although AIDS was rarely mentioned, when it was referenced it was typically within the context of a celebrity's death or AIDS activism. These references, most often in print media, were largely removed from the lives of adolescents and could not be construed as health promoting. For example, in *Vibe* magazine, a music magazine targeted to African Americans, AIDS was mentioned in a tribute to singer Kenny Greene, who died from the disease. AIDS was mentioned three additional times in this issue of *Vibe*, all in regard to artists involved in projects to raise awareness of the AIDS crisis.

DISCUSSION

In this study of four different kinds of media used by early adolescents, sexual health content was extremely rare. Using the SIECUS National Taskforce guide-

lines as the standard for analysis shows that the media do little to promote sexual health among teens. The infrequent content about sexual health topics was often ambiguous and inaccurate, reinforced traditional gender stereotypes, and used humor to undermine sexually responsible behavior. In the context of regular discussion and portrayal of sexual characters and situations in the media, this lack of information about the normal process of sexual development, possible negative consequences, and methods to protect against undesirable outcomes is troubling.

Perhaps of most concern are the mixed messages that young men and women receive in the media about sexual health decision making. By reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes of males as sexually obsessed and females as responsible for access and consequences, such content may reinforce the cross purposes at which many young men and women approach their romantic and sexual relationships, especially for those adolescents who model their behavior on such media portrayals (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Even though much of the content emphasized that young women are responsible for taking care of their children, a few of the fictional media programs, such as *Friends*, did show the father playing an important role in childrearing. It is important to note that this modeling of male responsibility was wholly absent from nonfiction accounts of teenage pregnancy.

Condoms were also rarely discussed or shown and when used were more for comic relief than protection against disease or pregnancy. In addition, the sometimes violent solutions to teen pregnancy and the burdens of romantic relationships that were discussed in rap music may normalize sexual violence. In other studies, sexually violent rap music lyrics have been found to increase young men's beliefs that sexual relationships are exploitive (Wester, Crown, Quatman, & Heesacker, 1997).

It is surprising that, given the age (12 to 14 years old) of the audience using the media analyzed here, so little media attention was allocated to pubertal development. This may be in part because many of the programs are also geared to a young adult (or even adult) audience. Although some healthy messages occurred, the primarily contradictory messages for boys and girls and the humiliation associated with pubertal changes are unlikely to help young teens who turn to these kinds of media because they are too embarrassed to seek information elsewhere. The type of content found here may help only to normalize shame and confusion about puberty and sex among adolescents. Such potential confusion is of particular importance for health content directed at adolescents, given that most teens have not fully developed cognitively and cannot be counted on to take the time to untangle contradictory visual and textual cues (Austin, 1995). Although parental mediation could assist adolescents in processing this confusing information, adolescents increasingly use media in the privacy of their bedrooms and so may not have the opportunity to discuss what they are seeing or listening to with a parent (Roberts et al., 2004).

The media might be applauded for addressing such previously taboo topics as masturbation. However, this analysis suggests that it is unlikely that the teen audi-

ence will be moved by these portrayals to think of masturbation “either alone or with a partner, [as] one way people can enjoy and express their sexuality without risking pregnancy or an STD/HIV” as the SIECUS guidelines suggest (National Guidelines Task Force, 2004, p. 52). In the media examined here, masturbation was seen instead as something males do to improve sexual performance. Such portrayals may increase the pressure young men feel to become sexually active and high-performing lovers.

This study confirms previous research showing that television content rarely includes sexual health messages (Kunkel et al., 2005), and it extends these conclusions to teens’ movies, magazines, and music as well. Despite the broader conceptualization of sexual health that included puberty, masturbation, and pregnancy used in this study, we must conclude that the media are not providing much sexual health content for their adolescent audiences. These findings are important for educators and policymakers who are working to address the sexual health needs of U.S. adolescents.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, although the examination of four media is an improvement over other studies that have tended to examine only one kind of medium at a time, other media such as the Internet and newspapers were not included. Adolescents may now be turning to the Internet to seek sexual health information, as some have suggested (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001). Second, these findings are based on the sexual health content in media used by this particular sample of Black and White early adolescents living in the southeastern United States in 2001. The media used more recently by other ethnic groups, by older adolescents, and by adolescents in other geographic regions may be different. Considering how fast the media landscape is changing, new media vehicles may portray sexual health in different ways. Third, although the vehicles selected for content analysis in this study were examined more closely than in traditional content analysis studies, such a close analysis precluded analysis of additional episodes of the television programs and/or multiple issues of the magazines. Finally, we can only speculate about the possible effects of this content given that we have looked only at content and not at how adolescents interpret or apply the content in their own lives.

CONCLUSIONS

Given that the media are important sources of sexual information for adolescents, that other potential sexual socialization agents are often reticent or restrictive, and that adolescents are engaging in risky sexual behavior, it is unfortunate that healthy

sexuality is so rarely depicted or discussed in teens' media. As even some of the content analyzed here suggests, it *is* possible to include relevant and accurate sexual health information in an entertaining way in teens' media. We know that entertainment education can be effective in promoting reproductive health (Brodie et al., 2001; Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003; Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Although some organizations, such as the Kaiser Family Foundation, have been successful in working with teen media producers to include more sexually responsible portrayals in their entertainment content, much more could be done to ensure that adolescents are getting the kind of information they need to live sexually healthy and responsible lives.

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