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'I slept with 40 boys in three months' Teenage sexuality in the media: too much too young?

Overview

This chapter will outline the main messages about sexuality and sexual health in media outlets consumed by young people and offers some insight into how young people use and are affected by media sexual content. The extent to which the teen media deal with sex and related issues, such as contraception and STIs will be explored before focusing on the potential influence of the media on how young people think about sexuality and how they behave sexually. Finally the implications for using the media to improve sexual health are explored.

Key issues

- Attention to the diversity of form and focus within different media is crucial to understanding how teenage sexuality is represented.
- Young people are not passive dupes of media messages; they actively construct their own varied interpretations and understandings.
- Health educators need to be aware of both the richness and the limitations of current mainstream representation in order to work with and through the media.

Putting teen sex and the media in context

The mass media – television, magazines, newspapers, advertising, radio, music, films, and the Internet – play an integral role in young people’s lives. Six to 17-year-olds living in the UK spend around five hours per day with one form of media or another (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999). What’s more, evidence would suggest that this level of use is growing as forms of media proliferate (Livingstone, 2002). Young people today live in an increasingly complex, global media environment where new information and communication technologies – such as the Internet, digital television, interactive CD-roms and computer games – are becoming more personalised, more individualised and therefore less easy to regulate.

This diversification and multiplication of media forms means that while the mass media can play an important role in shaping young people’s knowledge and attitudes toward sexuality (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Greenberg *et al.*, 1992), the messages they present can often be conflicting and confusing. In the UK in recent years we have seen vigorous debate concerning the perceived proliferation of images of teenage sex and sexuality in the mass media, particularly in magazines aimed at girls and young women. Much of this concern has centred on the belief that the media encourage young people to think that heterosexual intercourse before 16 is the norm and that young people may copy what they see (Millwood Hargrave and Halloran, 1996; Millwood Hargrave, 1999).

Given that young people themselves rank the media as a key source of sexual information (Todd *et al.*, 1999), it is important that health professionals are aware of how, where and whether young people come into contact with sound, reliable information about sex.

Ways in which teen sexuality is presented in the media

Despite current levels of concern and media usage among young people, there has been little UK research into what the media actually provide in terms of sexual health information (Bragg and Buckingham, 2002). Focusing on two main forms of teen media – teen television dramas and teen magazines – this

section will examine what evidence there exists in the UK and research from elsewhere to establish diverse media *images* that teenagers are exposed to.

Much of the existing research in this area originates in North America, particularly the USA and, whilst providing a useful background against which an understanding of young people and the media can be developed, cannot be unproblematically projected onto the British context. That said, teenagers are perhaps the first truly globally-orientated audience sector (Langham Brown *et al.*, 1999) and many American-produced media are imported to the UK, particularly teen soaps. Another caveat we should note in reading the research findings that follow is that media sexual content is not fixed but varies substantially across formats and across time. Research focused on single forms of media and/or 'snapshot' samples does not address ongoing story lines or shifts in coverage over time, nor the ways in which particular media images are contextualised in relation to other media.

Teen drama

In their study of a one week sample of Scottish media, Batchelor and Kitzinger (1999) found that the predominant portrayal of teenage sexuality on television aimed at teens involved conversations about sex, that is, people talking about the 'opposite sex', flirting or dating, male bravado and/or teasing and sexual negotiation. In interactions between the sexes, the general picture was of boys/men as pursuers and girls/women as the pursued. Male characters initiated most sexual behaviour and conversation, whereas females were depicted as responsible for managing male wants and limiting their access (see Box 1). Girls were also portrayed as being more interested in emotions, boys in sex and, whereas female characters were able to talk to their friends about the decision to have sex, male conversations tended to centre on boasting about sexual prowess. Hence young male sexuality was portrayed as physical and self-centred, whilst teenage female sexuality revolved around issues of emotionality and relational context.

No references to the physical consequences of sexual intercourse were found within Batchelor and Kitzinger's television sample. Likewise, contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) were never discussed and the only reference to contraceptive use within the 88½ hours of television viewed consisted of a one-and-a-half second shot of an open condom packet lying on a bedside table. No disabled, gay or lesbian teenagers were represented in the sample.

This supports findings from research conducted in North America. In their content analysis of sexual messages in teenagers' favourite prime-time television programmes in the USA, Cope-Farrar and Kunkell (2002) found that only about one in nine of the programmes that included sexual content (11 per cent) mentioned possible risks or responsibilities. STIs other than HIV and AIDS were almost never discussed, and characters involved in sexual behaviour rarely experienced any negative consequences (e.g. unintended pregnancy) as a result of their actions. In other words, while 'television programming and advertising in general provide young people with lots of information about how to be sexy...they provide little information about how to be sexually responsible' (Hayes, 1987: 91).

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Magazines

Content analyses of magazines for girls and young women present a somewhat different picture. A review of the role of teenage magazines in the sexual health of young people carried out by Kaye Wellings for the Teenage Magazine Arbitration Panel (TMAP) found the quality of information provided commendable, particularly in features designed to help young people adopt routine safer sex behaviours. Wellings noted that, compared with other agencies (e.g. schools, official health education organisations), teenage magazines had an unparalleled 'capacity to discuss sex frankly and openly, to raise issues relating to sexual desire and pleasure and to provide role models with whom *young women* can identify' (Wellings, 1996: 17, emphasis added). Furthermore, she argued, 'magazines are in a strong position to be able to

empower women, enabling them to make effective choices and exercise control in their own lives. They can also provide a language with which sex can be discussed and offer guidance on a 'script' for use in sexual encounters (ibid.).

This conclusion was reiterated by Batchelor *et al.*, who found that 'amongst the humour and titillation some products provided useful information about sexual health and related issues' (Batchelor *et al.*, submitted). These authors noted, however, that the quality of advice offered in teen magazines varied according to the different publications (see Box 2). Agony and health pages in girls' and young women's magazines offered the most detailed sexual health data, but publications aimed at a male audience were far less detailed and explicit. What's more, in asserting young women's right to determine 'how far' they went, publications reinforced stereotypes about the 'natural' behaviour of young men and boys and in doing so depicted contraception, safer sexual practices and 'consent' as women's responsibility. A further reservation expressed by the researchers related to a failure to represent teenage diversity, since the young people depicted were overwhelmingly white, able-bodied, heterosexual and slim.

Content analyses of USA magazines present a similar picture. Comparing teen publications with magazines aimed at an older female audience, Walsh-Childers *et al.* (2002) found that teen titles were more likely to provide information on sexual health concerns. Among the sexual health topics discussed, pregnancy, contraception and HIV/AIDS were the most common, while abortion received very little attention. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the only sexual health topic that (adult) women's magazines were more likely to mention was planned pregnancy. The study also found evidence to suggest that the amount of space given to non-health sex topics versus sexual health articles had increased in both categories over the study period (1986-1996).

To summarise, then, content analyses show that the media are full of sex – often presented in ways that glamorise the pleasurable aspects but rarely focus on the consequences of sexual relationships. Also, they suggest that

sexual content is not uniformly depicted across media. This diversity makes the task of identifying media effects increasingly difficult.

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Young people's interpretation of media content

One of the key issues in debates relating to sex in the media is to what extent the media influences teenagers' attitudes and behaviours. Research on young people's *responses* to media sexual content is sparse. This is partly due to the difficulties involved in documenting the effects of media on people's behaviour (Buckingham, 1993), in particular difficulties in making causal links between viewing and behaviour (Zuckerman and Zuckerman, 1985). To do this effectively would require randomly assigning young people to watch specific programmes over long periods of time, while barring a comparable group from those shows – both improbable treatments given the pervasiveness of today's media sex content.

Consequently there is considerable debate concerning media effects, particularly their impact and influence upon young people. The media are now rarely conceptualised simply in terms of unidirectional impact on the audience. Emphasis is increasingly placed on how individuals construct their own meanings, in the diversity of reading and responses, and in how this then affects the communication process (Brown, 2000). Teenage audiences are particularly diverse and young people pick and choose from a variety of images and messages. (A selection of young people's views are expressed in Box 3.)

One of the few studies of teenagers' reading of media content (carried out in the USA) found significant differences in interpretation of Madonna's music video, 'Papa Don't Preach' (Brown and Schulze, 1990). Although most white girls thought the video depicted a young woman deciding to keep her unborn baby, black males said the woman was singing about wanting to keep her boyfriend, 'Baby'. Ward *et al.* (2001) also found discrepancies in the way in

which USA college students perceived sexual content in television sitcoms such as *Roseanne* and *Martin*. Compared with young men, young women in their study were more likely to think that the sexual scenes portrayed were realistic. The young men were less approving than the young women of relationship-maintaining behaviours (e.g. jealous husband protecting wife) and were more approving of relationship threats (e.g. man contemplating infidelity).

In her recent analysis of sexual self-expression on teenage girls' internet home pages, Stern (1999) found girls critiquing the images they saw of themselves in the mass media and producing alternative versions of what sex and sexuality might be. This ability of young people to 'resist' media messages is a common line of defence used by magazine editors against criticisms that their publications encourage young people to think that heterosexual intercourse before 16 is the norm. Drawing on the concept of the active audience, they claim that their publications are full of humour and that teenage readers are more 'knowing' than social commentators give them credit.

This is an argument taken up by McRobbie, who contends that 'the widespread use of irony and humour allows a space for distance and detachment from what is being normatively advocated, i.e. lots of sex' (McRobbie, 1996:192). In other words, teenage consumers read media products tongue-in-cheek and are aware that the sexualised nature of the magazines is 'just a laugh'. Yet the degree to which readers are capable of reading reflexively is likely to be related to age and/or level of maturity (Mitchell, 1996), since 'irony appears to be lost on the bog standard 16 year old' (Lacey, 1996). Regardless of the target audience, 'the fact is that magazines are read by younger readers than is stated and there may be evidence that they may take the views and behaviours of those magazines at face value' (Wellings, 1996:15).

Research carried out by the Glasgow Media Group has suggested that where people have no direct experience or other knowledge of an issue, the power of the media message is increased (Philo and McLaughlin, 1995). Conversely, people who have direct experience of an issue that conflicts with a media account are more likely to reject the media message (Philo, 1990). (An important exception to this is where media coverage raises great anxiety or fear, thereby overwhelming personal experience. See Philo, 1996.) This finding is supported by Brown *et al.* (1992), who found that girls with more actual sexual experience were more critical of media portrayals of sexuality, and Ward *et al.* (2002), who found that viewers who attribute a high degree of realism to television portrayals may be especially open to accepting accompanying messages.

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Conclusion

What are the implications of these findings for sexual health professionals? Ways of working with the media are covered in the next section. Here, it is enough to say that policy makers and practitioners need to move beyond a purely defensive approach and beware of sweeping generalisations about 'harmful media effects'. As we have seen, recent studies suggest that the range of media available to young people today have become increasingly specialised (Brown, 2000), offering different audiences different kinds of content from which they pick and choose a variety of images and messages (Brown, 1992). This points us to the importance of social context in understanding the influence of media content (Livingstone, 2002). Young people do not engage with the media in a vacuum, but rather the messages presented are mediated by personal experience and in interaction with significant others.

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Further reading and websites

Further reading

For a recent edited collection exploring the sexual content of USA mass media and its influence in the lives of adolescents, see: Brown JD, Steele JR, Walsh-Childers K (eds.) (2002) *Sexual Teens, Sexual Media: Investigating the Media's Influence on Adolescent Sexuality*. Mahwah NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum.

A useful review of the research on media effects can be found in: Livingstone S (1996) 'On the Continuing Problem of Media Effects' in Curran J, Gurevitch M (eds.) *Mass Media and Society*. London, Arnold.

Box 1: Teenage sexuality on TV

Excerpt from USA teen drama, 'Sweet Valley High'

Liz: Todd, wait... I've been thinking a lot about this and I'm just not sure. It's a big step for us. It would change everything.

Todd: Liz, I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do.

Liz: It's not just me - it's us. Do you really think we're ready for this?

Todd: Well, I don't know.

Liz: Don't you think it would be better if we had no doubts at all?

Todd: Maybe you're right. [They embrace]

Excerpt from British soap, 'Family Affairs'

Donna: We've been seeing each other for a week now. We should be past the stage of groping each other.

Benji: Yeah? Well, I'm game if you are!

Donna: [Slaps Benji's hand off her knee] No! I don't mean that! I mean talking to each other – like proper couples do. Getting to know each other.

[Source: Batchelor and Kitzinger 1999]

Box 2: Teenage sexuality in magazines

Article on kissing from teen magazine, 'Mizz', March 24-April 6 1999

When you are really comfortable with someone, you can get a bit more intimate and open your mouth a little bit. If you like the lad a lot and feel relaxed with him, you may want to go a little further and French kiss. French kissing is when you open your mouth and caress the other person's lips and tongue with yours. While you do this you may feel the inside of their mouth too. It may sound a bit gross now, but it can leave you all floaty and happy after you have done it! Remember, you should only do it if really want to, though.

Letter to problem page from lads mag, 'frOnt', April 1999

Letter to problem page: I find the thought of putting my mouth anywhere near her nether regions disgusting and she asks me to try it every time we're together. What should I do to avoid this fate worse than death?

Agony aunt: Do you think your nuts and bolts are so irresistible that she is drawn to them against her will? Or does she swallow her gagging instincts and pleasure your pendulum out of lurve and a sense of duty perchance? If you find women's organs so frightening then perhaps you too should call the above number [for the Lesbian and Gay Switchboard]. Otherwise get on your knees and do what she says.

Problem page 'Sexplanation' from teen magazine, 'J-17', April 1999

Sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 16 is illegal in Britain. This means that any boy or man is at risk of being prosecuted if there is enough evidence to prove he had sex with a girl under 16 years old - whether the girl wanted to have sex with him or not. And there have also been cases where older women have been sent to prison for having sex with boys aged under 16.

You can go to a clinic or GP surgery for help on any aspect of your health, regardless of your age. If you want advice on any aspect of sex, staff have to make sure that you are not a victim of child abuse. To do this, the doctor or

nurse may ask you some questions about your health and then specific questions to make sure you understand the various issues around sex. These may include questions on contraception, the risks and benefits of any treatment they might give you, and whether or not you are able to discuss sex or contraception with your parents. The doctor then needs to consider whether your physical or mental health might suffer if you *don't* get advice, help or contraception and finally, what would be in your best interests.

All patients have the same right to confidentiality, whatever their age. This means that doctors have to keep your personal information private unless there are exceptional circumstances. Only if something really awful were about to happen - like you were dying - would your doctor have to let your parents or other people know confidential details about you and your health.

[Source: Batchelor and Kitinger 1999]

Box 3: What young people say about media sexual content

'I read Bliss for a laugh. I don't take it very seriously... I do think that younger girls look to the problem pages for information and advice... If there are girls that are easily influenced the magazine has quite a strong message about not having underage sex.'

14-year-old girl (quoted in Woods, 1997)

'I think you feel uncool after reading such a magazine, but, there again, boys read all the girls' magazines...it's our favourite reading on the bus in the morning. We just sit down and read all the problem pages. It's really amusing...I think it's probably boys that need it more than girls to be honest, especially the boys I know.'

16-year-old boy (quoted in Forrest, 1997)

'You see all these love scenes on TV and they are all panting away and saying that's lovely. And you think "Oh!" But when it comes to the real thing it's a big disappointment. I think it's the mass media I get *all* my expectations from.'

Young woman (quoted in Kent and Davis, 1992)

'It's easy to point fingers at the media, I think. But there's also personal responsibility. Why should we blame magazines and TV and movies and books when they are a fine source of information? They're not lying about anything, but they're not giving us exactly what we want to hear. Well, that's why we need our parents, or that's when we need educators, teachers...things like that to help us.'

Young woman (quoted in Triese and Gotthoffer, 2002)