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Title: **Representing young people's sexuality in the 'youth' media**

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Summary: A systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of how sexuality is represented and the level of sexual health information provided in UK magazines and TV programmes targeted at young people.

Key words: media, sex, sexual health, young people, magazines, television

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a content analysis of the main messages about sexuality in media outlets consumed by young people. It examines how sexuality is represented and the level of sexual health information provided in some UK magazines and TV programmes targeted at young people. Coverage included a vast range of useful discussion including information about health concerns and in-depth exploration of issues such as consent and examples of couples exploring whether or not they were 'ready' for sex. In particular, the right of girls to 'say no' was vividly fore-grounded in several teen dramas and magazines. However, coverage was characterised by certain limitations. A clear pattern was evident whereby contraception and managing 'how far to go' were depicted as women's responsibility. There was a limited range of representations for young men, a lack of positive images of lesbian and gay teenagers and a failure to represent diversity. There were also no examples of how people might raise concerns such as safer sex. In this context, health educators need to be aware of both the richness and the limitations of current mainstream representations in order to work with and through the media to improve the quality and range of material for young people.

Introduction

Growing concern over teenage sexual behaviour is apparent with all four UK countries developing and implementing strategies to tackle associated health outcomes. This concern is, perhaps, not surprising given the increase in reported sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among young people and the fact that the UK has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Western Europe.

Education alone may have its limitations. However, it is one of the key strands of sexual health policy aimed at reducing teen pregnancy and transmission of STIs. While sex education traditionally has been the domain of schools, there is growing recognition of other sources of information, including the media. While the role of media influence is complex and does not involve simply 'absorption' or 'mimicry' (Batchelor, 2003; Kitzinger, 1999), several studies have shown that the media can play an important role in shaping the knowledge and attitudes of young people and, in particular, can influence discussion around sexuality (Currie *et al.*, 1997; Davis and Harris, 1982; Forrest, 1997; Kehily, 1996; Millwood Hargrave, 1999; Thomson and Scott, 1991). It is against this background that we conducted our study to explore the types of messages that media outlets consumed by young people are offering and the implications these might have for sexual health and sexual health promotion.

Method

The research presented here is based on a content analysis of media outlets consumed by young people. In brief, content analysis is the study of the frequency with which certain identifiable elements occur in a given sample. We began, therefore, by developing a list of sexual content variables based on previous research conducted in North America (Sapolsky

and Tabarlet, 1991; Kunkel et al 1996; Lowry and Shidler, 1993) and applying these to a sample of UK/Scottish media. (For more methodological details see Batchelor and Kitzinger, 1999.)

Sample: [PUT IN TABLE FORMAT] We analysed a cross section of media during one randomly selected week: Monday 19th April to Sunday 25th April 1999. We examined nine top selling magazines for young people, 10 daily and eight Sunday newspapers (involving 68 newspaper editions over the seven days) and recorded all TV programmes between 16:00 and 18:00 on each terrestrial channel (BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4 and 5). We also recorded a series of programmes that fell outside the 16:00 to 18:00 time slot, but which have a large teenage audience. These included ‘teen dramas’ such as Dawson’s Creek and Hollyoaks, as well as a range of soap operas, including Eastenders and Brookside. Our TV sample involved a total of 88.5 hours of broadcasting.

The magazine sample consisted of five publications aimed at teenage girls/young women (Mizz, Sugar, Bliss, J-17 and 19), two music magazines (M8 and Top of the Pops), one computer gaming magazine (PlayStation Plus) and one ‘lad’s mag’ (frOnt). The majority of these targeted a teen audience, however frOnt, M8 and 19 were aimed at a slightly older age group (frOnt, for example, is aimed at 18-24 year olds). We included these magazines because, although their target audience may be older, younger teens do read them. The preponderance of female titles in our sample reflects the lack of magazines aimed at younger teenage boys, who tend to read ‘hobby’ magazines rather than lads’ mags.

The aim in monitoring all these outlets over a sample week was to gain a sense of routine, everyday coverage – providing a snapshot of patterns of coverage across a range of media.

That said, we should note the limitations of such a ‘snapshot’, which does not address ongoing story lines or shifts in coverage over time (Bragg and Buckingham, 2002). The paper that follows should therefore be read as an overview of coverage rather than a comment on individual programmes or titles.

Coding and analysis: From the above sample, every item involving sexual content relating to young people was collected. Sexual content was defined as any depiction of sexual behaviours, discussion of sex or sexuality, sexually suggestive behaviour/images/language, sexual health, or sexuality-related issues (e.g. sexual identity). In line with other researchers working in this area, we considered actions to be sexual where they conveyed a sense of sexual intimacy (Kunkel et al., 2003). So, for example, in our analysis of teen dramas we included kissing between characters with a discernible romantic interest, but not between friends or relatives. Sexual suggestiveness included flirtatious behaviours (intended to arouse sexual interest in others), sexual innuendoes and double entendres (composed of veiled references to sexual behaviour or sexual organs), and sexualised presentations of the body (such as a woman positioned on her back in a posture of sexual display, or with her head down, looking up into the camera submissively).

Our initial trawl generated a sample of 35 items from the press, 69 scenes on television and 196 items (advice, letters, short stories) in the magazines. Each item was coded (by a single coder) according to its content, type of discussion and/or reference, and its format (e.g. TV teen drama, magazine editorial, newspaper feature). This quantitative analysis was complemented by qualitative analysis designed to capture the subtleties of the various messages presented, for example was the behaviour portrayed as humorous or serious, positive or negative. Particular attention was also given to the ways in which gender roles

were portrayed and the depiction of different types of teenagers (gay and lesbian young people, those with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities).

Like all research techniques, content analysis suffers from certain limitations, one of which relates to the need for coders to interpret meaning. This can be particularly problematic where the aim is to impute latent rather than manifest content, for example traditional markers of masculinity and femininity (Bryman, 2001: 191). Previous studies have sought to overcome this problem by statistical monitoring of inter-coder reliability of judgments (see, for example, Kunkel et al., 2003: 10). Because ours was a relatively small study, one person was responsible for devising the coding scheme, collecting and analysing all the data. While this overcame the problem of inconsistency between coders, it remains questionable whether it is justifiable to assume a correspondence of interpretation between the producers of teen dramas or magazines and researchers, or teenage consumers and researchers. This points to the need for further research to clarify how media professionals perceive their role and judge their own products, as well as how young people relate to and interpret the messages presented.

Results

This paper is concerned with the type of messages consumed by young people themselves. We will therefore focus on the teen dramas and magazine samples only. (For discussion of the project as a whole – including analysis of TV news/documentaries and newspapers – see Batchelor and Kitzinger, 1999.) The findings are arranged in two parts: television teen dramas and magazines.

Representations of (hetero)sexual interactions, conversations about sex and sexual health issues in teen dramas

There were three implicit representations of teenagers engaging in consensual heterosexual intercourse in teen dramas. Implied intercourse is said to occur when sex is not literally depicted, but when scenes adjacent to an act of intercourse clearly infer the unseen action. No direct views of sexual intercourse were shown and there was no nudity. The predominant portrayal of teenage sexuality on television involved conversations about sex. This category included discussions about the 'opposite sex' (N=14), flirting or dating (N=9), sexual bravado and/or teasing (N=7) and sexual negotiation (N=5).

Clear gender differences were evident in the representations of how young men and women talked, felt about, and acted, in relation to sex. Whereas female characters were able to discuss with their friends the decision to have sex, male conversations tended to centre on boasting about sexual prowess. (A representation which may, of course, reflect many young people's experience, but does not necessarily reflect their *aspirations*, see Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999). Girls were also portrayed as being more interested in emotions, boys in sex. A vivid dramatisation of this 'gender divide' was presented in *Family Affairs*, for example, when 16-year-old Donna tells 15-year-old Benji that they should be 'past the groping stage'. He assumes she is referring to sex, but she actually means that they should be talking more, getting to know one another.

It was invariably young male, rather than female, characters who were portrayed at the initiators of sexual encounters. (A finding echoing research on US prime time television, see Sapolsky and Tabarlet, 1991.) The general picture was of boys/men as pursuers and girls/women as the pursued. At the same time, a strong theme running through the TV

programmes was that girls could successfully resist pressure to have sex and that ‘nice boys’ would respond positively to girls’ hesitancy. For example, a scene in ‘Sweet Valley High’ explored the different feelings of ‘Liz’ and her boyfriend ‘Todd’ about the possibilities of having sex together. The programme included a scene in which Liz was able to successfully persuade Todd that they were not yet ready. (See Example 1)

Example 1

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.

[Excerpt from Sweet Valley High]

There was a stark gap in all the scenes involving conversations about sex. Although young men and women (or talk between female friends) might address emotional needs (to a greater or lesser extent), consent and ‘readiness’, one topic was notable by its absence: contraception or protection against STIs was never raised. There was not even a single casual comment such as ‘be careful’ or ‘have you got anything to use?’ The only (in passing and non-verbal) reference to contraception in any scene was a one-and-a-half-second shot of an opened condom packet (Dawson’s Creek).

Representations of (hetero)sexual interactions, conversations about sex and sexual health issues in teen magazines.

It was harder to generalise about the sexual content of the magazines in our sample, primarily because individual publications varied so widely depending upon the age and gender of their target audience. Magazines aimed at a younger market tended to focus on non-sexual romance and implicit references to sex and/or sexuality ('Can boys and girls be just good friends?'), while the older publications included more explicit features on sexual acts (including vaginal, anal or oral sex).

Gender differences echoed the distinction in ascribed gender roles already noted in our summary of the TV dramas. An emphasis on emotions and focus on romance was a prominent feature in some of the girls' magazines in our sample – 44% of items focused on romance came from J-17 alone. By contrast the two magazines in our sample whose mode of address was primarily male-oriented included more textual and visual 'sexual suggestiveness'. Textual suggestiveness (e.g. provocative double-entendres) mainly appeared in the 'lad's mag', frOnt (54% of all examples) or the computer gaming title, PlayStation Plus (16%). These two magazines were also responsible for most examples of *visual* suggestiveness (66% originated from frOnt and PlayStation Plus). Female models (or computer characters that boys can 'play' with) in these publications were typically young, white, slim, and blonde with large breasts. They were often positioned on their backs in postures of sexual display/availability. The visual portrayal of boys/men in magazines for girls and young women was far less explicit, with readers often being invited to fantasise about having a relationship with the model/pop star/celebrity, rather than simply sexual intercourse.

Again mirroring the television sample, the assumption in magazines (whether targeted at male or female readers) was that boys/men were ‘only after one thing’. Similarly, the implication was that it was girls’/women’s responsibility to ‘draw the line’: ‘Get a lad going and he could find you irresistible. Be careful though – don’t be an April fool and let him go too far!’ (Mizz). The focus on female responsibility for contraception was emphasised in references to pregnancy and letters to problem pages centred on girls’ worries about getting/being pregnant. There was no mention of teenage fathers in the sample, apart from one passing reference in front.

As with the TV representations young people were, if over 16, assumed to be (hetero)sexually active. At the same time, magazines aimed at a female audience encouraged readers only to go as far as they felt comfortable and also emphasised that good men would be respectful of this. (See Example 2)

Example 2

‘Calm down,’ he said softly. I’m not going to seduce you or anything’.

‘It’s the ‘anything’ I’m worried about,’ I mumbled. ‘Dylan? You don’t mind about, like, me not wanting to, y’know, do it?’

Dylan paused mid nibble. ‘Well, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to,’ he confessed.

‘But I want to make you happy and if you’re not comfortable having sex, then it’s cool with me.’

‘I’m just not ready yet,’ I told him. ‘You know, it’s a really big thing. It’s like the biggest thing in the whole world and there’s all these things I still don’t know about you. And I haven’t even been round to you house and we haven’t even been on a

proper date yet or anything. And I'm not saying that once we've done those things, I'll have sex with you, I'm just saying...'

'Shush,' breathed Dylan. 'It's alright. If you want to have sex some time in the future, that's fine with me and if you don't, that's fine with me too.'

(Excerpt from 'Diary of a crush – French Kiss', J-17 April 1999)

Editorial or expert advice reiterated girls' right to determine what they did or did not want to do sexually. However, the message in *frOnt*, aimed at male readers, was somewhat different. A man who wrote in disturbed by his girlfriend's request for oral sex was given strict instructions to comply ('get on your knees and do what she says'). Whilst girls and young women were cautioned about engaging in sex before they were ready and were presented with strategies to keep overeager boyfriends at bay, young men were offered no such scripts.

Unlike in the TV sample, sexual health issues figured prominently in the magazines. References to sexually transmitted infections (N=12) covered scabies, pubic lice, HIV and AIDS. Several magazines included information about contraception, but the majority of these items were short news pieces or passing references (14 out of 16). The magazine sample had the same gap as the TV sample in that there was no discussion of how to negotiate the use of any contraceptive device or implement safer sexual practices. There was also no mention of contraceptive or safer sexual practices in any of the fictional love/sex stories published within our magazine sample.

Representing diversity, portraying minorities

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to one other pattern of coverage from across the TV and magazine sample. Most of the teenagers represented throughout our sample were white, thin, conventionally attractive, and had no evident disability. There was no example of a visibly disabled teenager engaging in sexual discussion/action. The only reference to disability and sexuality (in both the magazine and television samples) came in the form of a short news item. Under the headline 'THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT', front reported that a 'judge rejected the claim of a man on rape charges that he did not understand his victim's protests because she was deaf and made them in sign language'.

In the entire sample of magazine and teen drama representations, there were also no simple, in-passing positive portrayals of openly gay men or women. Being gay was, however, raised as a source of anxiety or an object of abuse (even if this was followed by a more neutral or 'reassuring' response, e.g. on the 'agony'/'problem' pages). Indeed, within the TV sample while there was not a single representation of a gay character, there were three examples of male characters disowning the imputation that they might be gay. One teen drama scene, for example, showed two male characters jumping apart embarrassed after being 'caught' practising dancing together.

Our study suggests that in spite of some high profile innovative representations of young gay men and lesbians in *some* contexts (e.g. the controversial but popular C4 series 'Queer As Folk', or the lesbian character in 'Buffy') within our sample male homosexuality was most likely to be portrayed as a source of embarrassment or target of teasing and lesbianism was completely invisible. This gap has important implications for health professionals, given

specific health information needs and continued problems of bullying, depression, isolation and self-harm among young people who fear they might be lesbian/gay. [INSERT REFS]

Discussion

In the context of current sexual health policy, the importance of the media to the development of young peoples' sexual attitudes and behaviour must be considered. This research has highlighted a number of important points including the positive support for young women who wish to 'say no', but also the reinforcement of existing stereotypes by both male and female magazines. For example, the notion that young women are responsible for patrolling sexual encounters and contraception counteracts work in sexual health promotion, which encourages both parties to take equal responsibility for their actions. It is important for health promoters to be aware of these mixed messages facing young people and give consideration to the confusion and gaps in cultural representations from diverse sources.

There are fierce debates about the extent to which the media can (or indeed should) simply reflect or actually actively help to create reality (e.g. Philo, 1999). However, even if the media can only reflect how people 'are' there may still be opportunities for new initiatives. For example, although the gender differences represented within our sample may reflect how young men and women often behave around emotions and sex, there is evidence from other research that sometimes other priorities, feelings and dynamics come into play. Some young men, for example, yearn to discuss sex honestly with their male peers, may seek romantic involvement rather than sexual satisfaction or, may indeed, sometimes prefer 'foreplay' to 'going all the way' (Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999; Burton *et al.*, 1998; Wight 1996). At present popular culture seldom reflects, explores or legitimates these desires.

Going further than this it is possible that the media can open up new ways of talking/relating about issues and prompt new conversations and interactions (Kitzinger, 2001). As we have shown, the teen media already present audiences with a number of ‘scripts’ or ‘stories’ about heterosexual sex, relationships, negotiation and consent. If these scripts were expanded, to include positive routine representations of young gays and lesbians accepted by their peers, for example, this could help challenge bullying and discrimination. Similarly media representations of young people negotiating safer sex might help people to ‘find the words’ to initiate such interactions themselves. This would be particularly valuable given evidence that prior discussion of condom use is the most important predictor of their use (Henderson *et al.*, 2002).

How might health professionals work with and through the media, to address some of the issues and gaps outlined above? There are three main possibilities. Firstly, the media can be used as a means of delivering preventative health messages. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines and the Internet are often regarded as appropriate ways to engage young people and, while they may not be very good at *changing* behaviour, research does suggest that they can be effective in raising awareness of, and providing information on, health-related matters (Moore and Rosenthal, 1993). Of course it is vital that the content of sexual health advertising is relevant and worthwhile in the eyes of the audience and so any campaign must be based on research into how young people *themselves* make sense of and use media sexual content. There needs also to be an attempt to portray marginalised groups and messages, and to work at a local as well as a national level.

In addition to working through the media, health professionals can work *with* the media (Raymond, 2003). This involves engaging with magazine editors and programme makers

about the nature of existing representations and how they might be challenged, improved or developed. Such engagement would be an important way of developing our research. In 1996, the self-regulating Teenage Magazine Arbitration Panel (TMAP) was launched, bringing together government representatives, teenage magazine editors and sexual health professionals. The panel established guidelines to cover the editorial sexual content of teen magazines and responds to complaints based on the guidelines. Adherence to the guidelines is on a voluntary basis and TMAP works to promote the use of guidelines in the production of teen magazines.

A third strategy is called media literacy. As well as working to provide a balance in the media, there is potential for developing work with media consumers to help access, analyse and evaluate media content. Media literacy work could enable young people to look beyond the face value message and be more critical of what is not as well as what is being said.

Again, such work has to be sensitive to the cultural practices of the target group and would be assisted by further research on young people's views and experiences of the ways in which they are represented in the media, and also how they actually use the media.

In the context of sexual health issues such as STIs, unwanted pregnancies, and the high attempted suicide rate among young gay men and lesbians there are clearly further contributions that the media could make to providing thought-provoking and positive images for young people. Those concerned about sexual health promotion need to acknowledge the expertise among magazine editors and programme makers in addressing young people, and work with them to develop more sexually responsible media content.

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