Who’s to Blame:
A Study of the Influence of Sexual Content and Society on Adolescents

Amanda L. Callahan-Rodriguez

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Dr. Bellarmine Ezumah, Mentor, JMC

Dr. Barbara Cobb, Mentor, LBA Coordinator
# Table of Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Effects of Media on Sexual Knowledge and Behaviors</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Theories</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arousal Theory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivation Theory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disinhibition Theory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Practice Model</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Valve Theory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-learning Theory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Super-Peer Theory</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trigger Hypothesis</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Content</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen Viewing Time</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Effects of Society on Sexual Knowledge and Behaviors</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectancies</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of Developing Healthy Viewers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Mediation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen Pregnancy/Sex Prevention</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Cultural View of Sexual Content and Societal Values</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

This project analyzes the effects of television media and society on adolescents in order to show that both influence adolescent sexuality and that both should take greater responsibility to educate adolescents in order to prevent negative consequences of sexual behaviors. The countries analyzed in this project include the United States, France, and Thailand and compare the amount of sexual media content on television in each country to the societal beliefs and attitudes towards sex and sexual content in each country. It is concluded in this project that neither media content nor society is more influential on the behaviors of adolescents, both are required for healthy sexual behaviors.
Who’s to Blame:  
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Pregnancies amongst teenagers are a continuing and growing concern in many places throughout the world. A significant amount of blame has been cast toward the content shown in television media which shows sexuality and behaviors that may influence behaviors of the adolescents watching. Television media tends to reflect issues occurring in that particular country or area, so television may actually be helping to influence behaviors differently than are perceived by the general society. Looking at both sides it may be difficult to determine who really is to blame for the sexual behaviors of adolescents that may lead to teenaged pregnancy. In order to move this issue in a positive direction it is beneficial to examine the dynamics of a particular society with regard to sexuality against the sexual media content. By examining these dynamics it will be determined if society or sexual content is to blame for sexual behaviors of adolescents, but in reality it may reveal that both are equal in developing sexual behaviors of adolescents.

In 2007, up and coming actress Ellen Page starred in the title role of Diablo Cody’s film Juno about a pregnant teenager who is faced with the stigma of being young, unwed, and pregnant, and less than two years later the first episode of MTV’s “16 and Pregnant” hit the airways addressing the growing concern of parents and a growing controversy among teenagers. The intent of these types of movies and television shows was to educate and deter teenagers from engaging in unsafe sexual behaviors and becoming pregnant. However, with the growing popularity of shows such as Teen Mom, many are concerned that media is promoting the idea of gaining fame or popularity from being pregnant.

Blaming media for influences on the behaviors of children and adolescents is not a recent occurrence. Media has been the subject of persecution since the 1920s when movie going was a
regular occurrence among families, including approximately 40 million minors, 17 million of which were under the age of fourteen (Sparks, 2010). Near the end of the 1920s decade, the Payne Fund Studies were conducted in order to discover what impact, if any, the movies had on children and adolescents (Sparks, 2010). The studies sparked an interest in researchers and the community as a whole, resulting in several more studies and suggested guidelines for media producers and viewers. Decades later, the influences of media on particularly the younger generations remains a subject of interest, and the applied theories are relevant to studying the effects of television on sexual behaviors in adolescents.

**The Effects of Media on Sexual Knowledge and Behaviors**

Television has become one of the primary ways in which adolescents obtain information about sexuality and sexual behaviors. Like most media sources, television is a locus of controversy over the effects of its content and its targeting of and availability to children and adolescents. Many researchers and theories have focused on the topic of if and how television may be affecting society, believing “sexually related message content and behavior act over time as stimuli to change consumer psychological, physiologic, and behavioral function” (“Impact of the Media on Adolescent Sexual Attitudes.pdf,” n.d., p. 304). It has also been studied whether “young people start to explore their sexuality because they have consumed sexual media content,” (Watson & McKee, 2013, p. 467) or if children are attracted to sexual content because they have already explored their sexuality.

**Applied Theories**

Media effects have been the subject of many psychological and sociological studies, and thus many theories have been accepted and published. Some of these are:
**Arousal Theory.** People have individual levels of motivation, so, according to this theory, founded by psychologist Daniel Berlyne, it is possible for some children and adolescents to be motivated by sexual material even if the content is only suggestive. The effects may be immediate for these individuals.

**Cultivation Theory.** Heavy exposure to media results in attitudes similar to those portrayed by characters in the media. The perceptions of children and adolescents may be altered, according to this theory founded by George Gerbner, resulting in a perception of reality more similar to that portrayed in the media than the reality of the child’s or adolescent’s life.

**Disinhibition Theory.** Existing behaviors in children and adolescents “are inhibited by experiences,” however, consistent exposure to media can result in the disinhibition of these behaviors. L. Berkowitz’s theory suggests that children who are exposed to a behavior in the media could be accepting of the behavior.

**Media Practice Model.** The model, developed by Jeanne R. Steele and Jane D. Brown, focuses on the connection between the ways in which adolescents perceive themselves and their selection of the media. It examines the idea that adolescents choose and use media based on their own personalities and lives, or who they aspire to be.

**Safety Valve Theory.** This theory, created by A.O. Hume, suggests that individuals exposed to media that contains sexual content purge their sexual desires and behaviors because watching the sexual content satisfies these urges.

**Social-learning Theory.** “Television is seen as an increasingly influential agent of socialization that produces its effects through children’s propensity to learn by imitation,” according to Albert Bandura, a psychologist who contributed to the study of media effects on
children. His most famous theory suggests that children learn by imitation and experiences both direct and indirect (observations).

**Super-Peer Theory.** According to psychologist Lev Vygotsky, media can be a source of information for children and adolescents, especially if a character portrayed is close to the age, social class, or life experiences.

**Trigger Hypothesis.** Media, according to Katch’s hypothesis, particularly if containing sexual content, may cause a response in some individuals provoking them to act out the behaviors, which may be drastic and harmful such as rape.

Since the Payne Fund Studies were conducted in the 1920s, these studies and theories have been conducted. Many of these theories continue to be used in order to study the effects of media on adolescents and their behaviors. Most of these theories have focused on the content shown in the media as the reason behind certain behaviors in adolescents. These studies suggest that there is an issue with media content and the reason that television media is blamed for influencing the behaviors of adolescents.

**Media Content**

Television and other forms of media may be useful sex educators to adolescents and children. In a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2004 to 2005, 68% of the 1,154 television shows during that time talked about sex, while 35% included sexual behavior. In another study focusing on television shows with teenaged characters approximately 90% had sexual content (Kelly, 2010). Another study found that in television shows targeted at adolescents there were “seven scenes of sexual content per hour,” and another found that cable television had a “higher percentage of shows containing sexual behaviors, more frequent and explicit references to sex, and more frequent and explicit portrayals of sex,” (Ragsdale et al.,
This survey suggests that adolescents are exposed to sexual content at high rates even in programs that are meant to be targeted at younger audiences.

Surveys conducted on adolescents found that television was an important source of sexual information for them. In one study approximately 57% reported that they learned about sex from the media, while another study found that 21% of college student respondents learned that “sex is casual” and that what they perceived as the “positive nature of sex” from the media. While media may have inaccurate portrayals of sexual activity and the risks associated, it “offer[ed] the only positive information to young people about masturbation,” (Watson and McKee, 2013, p. 450) a sexual act that is stigmatized by society. These surveys show that television is not the only source of sexual information for adolescents, making clear that society does play a role as far as being a sexual educator for adolescents.

**Screen Viewing Time**

*Screen-viewing time*, the amount of time children spend watching television, is a concern that is continuously being researched. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends not exposing children under the age of two to screen media, managing the amount of exposure time (1 to 2 hours) for pre-school aged and older children, and avoiding placing a television in a child’s room (2014). Adolescents in one study (45% of 1,926), however, indicated that they have televisions in their rooms, and roughly the same number indicated watching television within an hour of sleeping (Pieters, De Valck, Vandekerckhove, Pirrera, Wuyts, Exadaktylos, Cluydts, 2014).

The presence of a television in the bedroom creates an environment in which children and adolescents are tempted to spend more time watching television than performing healthier behaviors such as sleeping. Having constant access creates a screen-viewing habit, but is only
one of a few causes for the habit. The number of televisions in the household, screen-viewing habits of other members in the household, especially the viewing time of a mother (Duch, Fisher, Ensari, & Harrington, 2013), and frequently having mealtime while viewing television have also been found to contribute to the amount of time viewing television content (Marsh, Foley, Wilks, & Maddison, 2014).

Screen-time viewing may be correlated with exposure to sexual content. Exposure may create the effects of cultivation theory, which suggests that adolescents may become sexually active based on exposure to sexual content, and for some teenagers there is a correlation with increased or earlier sexual activity and media consumption (Kelly, 2010). One study, though, found “adolescents who watched more sexual content on television were more likely to initiate intercourse a year later than youth who watched less sexual content on television,” (Ragsdale et al., 2014, p. 553) and another concluded that while “overall exposure to sexual content was not associated with engagement in sexual behavior, it was associated with particular genres of television, particularly exposure to sexual content in comedies” (Ragsdale et al., 2014, p. 553).

The fact that there is sexual content easily available to adolescents, even though these surveys suggest that sexual content itself is not the problem, still suggests screen-viewing time may be a problem. If not properly monitored, exposure to this content may lead to higher rates of sexually active adolescents.

**The Effects of Society on Sexual Knowledge and Behaviors**

An analysis of behaviors in children and adolescents would not be complete without evaluating another contributing factor in a child’s or adolescent’s life: society. Society contains many important factors that contribute to the development of children and adolescents, including values and norms, parents, and peers. The ways in which a society views sexuality may cause
adolescents to respond in a specific manner to sexuality. For instance, if sexuality is seen as negative by society, then adolescents may be more secretive about their questions or behaviors.

**Expectancies**

Expectancies are “an individual’s beliefs about the likelihood of positive and negative personal consequences of engaging in a specific behavior” (Ragsdale et al., 2014, p. 551). One study found that adolescents who had positive expectancies, such as their partner showing them how much he/she is loved, reported an earlier age of sexual activity, while social risk expectancies, including a potential bad reputation or causing disappointment to their parents or peers caused a decline in frequency of or lack of sexual activity. This shows that the values and role of society affected the ways in which adolescents viewed and valued their sexuality.

**Parents**

Potentially the most important people in a child’s or adolescent’s life are parents. Parents are to whom children look up and on whom they depend for everything such as feeding and nurturing to sheltering and education, and, for the sake of this research, guidance. Children need guidance to understand how society works, and ways in which to function physically, mentally, and socially. The primary source of guidance for most children are parental figures. A child’s behavior and choices are usually linked to the way in which he/she is raised: “[We have] long held a tendency to blame parents for how their children behave and develop… If [we are] good parents, our children will turn out okay. If [we are] bad parents, well, they [will not]” (Drexler, 2012, no p. #). It is no wonder, then, that parents are often blamed for the way a child behaves or for the things that happen to a child or adolescent such as pregnancy or becoming sexually active at a young age.
While it would be ideal for parents to be the main source of information about sex for their children, with the increase of the accessibility of television to children this is not always the case. In one study conducted by Bleakley et al. adolescents who learned about sex from parents represented only 60.9% barely above the number (57%) who learned about it from the media. Additionally, fewer than 1% learned that “sex is casual” and 71% of adolescents reported being talked to by a parent about the “positive nature of sex” (Ragsdale et al., 2014, p. 552). The problem many studies found was that parents “rarely talk[ed] in a timely and comprehensive way with their children about sex” (Sexy Media Matter, p. 1019), particularly masturbation, typically “their first sexual experience,” and the fact that many adolescents described talking to their parents about sex as “awkward” and “weird” (Watson & McKee, 2013, p. 457).

Peers

When adolescents are not learning about sex from television or from their parents, studies show, they typically discuss the matter with their peers. Ragsdale et al. (2014) indicated that more adolescents, 74.9%, reported learning about sex and 15% learned that “sex is casual” from their friends than they did from their parents. However, the “positive nature of sex” was learned from friends significantly less (21%) than was learned from parents. The fact that adolescents are learning from peers ties in to the expectancies, and the role of parents in teaching adolescents about sexuality. If adolescents expect that their parents do not want to talk about sex and adolescents feel it is “awkward” then they base their views of sexuality on the images they have seen on television or on the impressions they derive from their peers.

Methods of Developing Healthy Viewers

In order for children to become healthy consumers of media and, thus, develop healthy behaviors and knowledge of sex, it may be beneficial to utilize the information from both the
particular society and the content in media. While changes in sexual content in the media and changes in parents’ attitudes and beliefs toward talking about sex with their children are not likely to occur any time soon, there are measures that can be taken. Some of the measures are provided in subsequent paragraphs.

**Media Mediation**

Media mediation utilized by parents is an important practice for children to become well-balanced television media consumers. Mediation by parents can be restrictive, which means limiting the content and time of exposure, instructive which includes explanations by parents or guardians, or unlimited where there are no restrictions (Barkin, Richardson, 2006). Mediation occasionally consists of parents co-viewing with their children and being active participants by discussing the content that children are viewing (Ruh Linder & Werner, 2012). In one study, 85% of 1,926 adolescents claimed that their parents do not mediate their television use, which may result in an increase in frequency of television screen-viewing time (Pieters et al., 2014). Lack of mediation could also result in the media content influencing the behaviors of adolescents and exposing the adolescents to materials parents do not see as appropriate.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends using restrictive, instructive, or unlimited media mediation and the influences of the media positively as a way of bringing up the topic of sex, as well as creating an environment free from media in the bedroom. Mediation starting from an early age could have lasting effects on children and adolescents as they reach adulthood. Adults who were raised with a style of mediation are more likely to use the same method for their children (Barkin et al., 2006). This could develop a cycle and create healthier viewing of the media. Mediation could be a way for media and society to work together in order for adolescents to develop appropriate understanding of and attitudes toward sexuality.
Teen Pregnancy/Sex Prevention

Mediation practices in the context of risk behaviors (sexual activity) would equally serve as mediating media content by parents: by providing appropriate boundaries for children and adolescents, parents are able to provide children and adolescents with enough information about sexuality and the potential consequences of these behaviors so that they are able to make well-based decisions regarding these behaviors. Placing responsibility on parents or guardians of a minor is sometimes seen as excessive and harsh, because television media influencing the behaviors of adolescents is ubiquitous. It would not be fair to suggest the behaviors of adolescents are solely the fault of the parents. However, parents are important to the development of sexuality in adolescents so parents should take responsibility for the things that happen to adolescents such as pregnancy. It is a side of the argument with which members of abstinence only education (AOE) programs agree, especially since, to many of them, sexuality is considered private and personal (Silk & Romero, 2013).

It may be possible to apply the different styles of media mediation to the prevention of teen pregnancy, with limitations. While restricting the exposure to sexual content would be ideal, in some cases, it is unrealistic. Sexual content whether it is a shirtless male on a teen drama, Miley Cyrus twerking on stage, or the topic of teen pregnancy itself on Teen Mom is easily accessible. The unlimited mediation style would more than likely only make the rate of teenaged pregnancy increase. The more appropriate style of mediation for preventing teenaged pregnancy would be instructive mediation. Instead of avoiding the topic of sexuality and potential teen pregnancy with children and adolescents, which is the main aspect of restrictive and unlimited mediations, parents using instructive mediation would be able to discuss the matter. One of the most important factors in teen pregnancy prevention is the parent-child relationship, the Parent
Child Connectedness—the quality of the emotional bond between parent and child and the degree to which this bond is both mutual and sustained over time. The relationship can result in risky or healthy behaviors in children and adolescents (Silk & Romero, 2013). This is just another way to show the ways in which society can influence the behaviors and sexuality of adolescents even with the presence of sexual content in media.

Cross-Cultural View of Sexual Content and Societal Values

Cross-culturally, there are important differences in the ways certain topics are portrayed including sexual content. Most, if not all, countries have a standard that dictates which images or messages are appropriate to use for advertising or other media uses. Typically, these guidelines “speak directly to visual representations of prevailing standards of decency and social responsibility” (Nelson & Paek, 2005, p. 371). Political and economic systems also shape the values and policies that help influence the content in advertisements. This section provides a glimpse of how sexuality is portrayed in three countries: the United States, France, and Thailand.

United States

Media content in the United States is typically limited only by the ethical framework of social responsibility, as part of the libertarian ideals that underpin our social fabric. Social responsibility specifically focuses on ethically showing images or messages in media for the benefit of the society. In the United States explicit sexual content in advertisements or other forms of media is not well-accepted, because it is not appropriate for most viewers in particular adolescents and children.

Media in the United States continues to contain sexual content and material not appropriate for children and adolescents with the implementation and use of the television rating system and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) monitoring the content and
WHO'S TO BLAME

enforcing regulations, television and media are becoming more user-friendly by censoring material that is deemed inappropriate. Concerns regarding exposure of children and adolescents to media content viewed as sexual or otherwise inappropriate have prompted many debates and the FCC, since it was established in 1934, has developed and reinforced regulations regarding material that was deemed obscene, profane and simply inappropriate for younger viewers. In 1973, the United States Supreme Court began establishing criteria for what could be labeled as indecent. It was later concluded by the Supreme Court that “context, degree and time of broadcast” (*Federal Communications Commission, no page #*) would determine whether a work was offensive or indecent.

In 1996, the Telecommunications Act was established and continues to enforce provisions that require television networks themselves to rate programming that may contain sexual content. The act also requires all television receivers intended to be used in the United States to be equipped with a “v-chip” or other “circuitry that is capable of identifying all programs with a common rating and blocking of individual channels during selected time periods” (*Federal Communications Commission, no page #*). Section 505 of the act also prompts cable operators or distributors to block or scramble programming that is sexually-oriented so it is not accidently viewed. Whether or not the v-chips or other censoring devices are used is strictly on the responsibility of the owners of the devices but the media companies must provide them.

Even with the FCC and Telecommunications Act of 1996, children and adolescents are still capable of being exposed to sexual content or topics in the media. Since 2009, some focus has been on the hit MTV shows *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, which some parents fear are “glamorizing” the idea of teenage pregnancies and could result in more adolescents becoming pregnant. Research conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests that
contrary to these beliefs, *16 and Pregnant* is credited with causing a 5.7% reduction in the number of births to adolescents within two years after its premiere (Wilson).

In 2009, the birth rate amongst adolescents reached an average of 36 for every 1,000 adolescents between fifteen and nineteen years old (*World Bank*). Since then the birth rate has declined to 26.6 births, or 274, 641 (*U.S. Department of Health & Human Services*). It is unclear whether these popular television shows are the direct cause for the reduction or if other factors such as recession have contributed to the effect, but researchers and economists Phillip B. Levine and Melissa Schettini Kearney have shown that internet searches about birth control and abortion spiked when a new episode aired (Taylor).

**France**

When one thinks of France, romance typically comes to mind, along with sexual images. Generally, French advertisements tend to have sexual content. French consumers of these advertisements as a whole are not troubled by the content of these advertisements which typically include nudity. The advertisements are “so risqué” that they have been described as “porno-chic,” (Nelson & Paek, 2005, p. 373), but women in France do not view these images as degrading. Instead the images are seen as empowering.

Under the French Constitution freedom of speech is guaranteed. This applies to media content, including in television and cinema content. Media content is rarely censored, but there is a rating system applied that suggests which programs are appropriate for viewers of different age categories.

With media content being “porno-chic” or otherwise being filled with sexuality, it would be plausible to conclude that the children and adolescents in France would be more exposed to sexual content and thus more sexualized, and more susceptible to becoming pregnant at earlier
ages. However, statistics from 2002 to 2012 show a small number of teenaged girls in France become pregnant. In the past twelve years, the percentage of teenage pregnancies peaked at 0.9% in 2002, and has continued on a decline to 0.6% recently (Darrouch, *TheBodyPro.com & The World Bank Group*).

France does provide preventative measures which are readily available for most teenagers 15 to 18 years old. Some schools provide sex education programs to school age children, and other organizations such as the Planning Familial provide opportunities to learn about sex, contraception, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases outside of the classroom (*Teenage Pregnancy in France*). Contraceptive methods such as the birth control pill, but not condoms, are usually available for free after the initial fee of a medical visit or test which are anonymous (*Teenage Pregnancy in France*).

The low rate of teenaged pregnancies in France suggests that the way in which sexuality is viewed by the society in France is influencing the sexuality of adolescents more than the media content in France.

**Thailand**

Unlike France, Thailand, having an authoritarian/capitalist system, places more emphasis on controlling the messages of media content so they “conform to the social cultural and political order” (Nelson & Paek, 2005, p. 375). As the following information suggests, Thailand has concerns regarding media content and its effects on the children and adolescents of Thailand.

The Television Rating System was implemented in Thailand in 2006 after years of growing concern about media influences on children and adolescents, and national broadcasters have the final say in the ratings on public television (Karuchit, 85). A 2010 study conducted by researcher Aut Kupongsak concluded that the purpose of primetime television in Thailand was
purely for entertainment, and thus that it contained many instances of sexual content along with other concerning material. In the study an average of 2.63 inappropriate expressions were shown per program targeted toward children. This would suggest media is not taking responsibility, and could be influencing adolescents to develop sexuality at earlier ages.

Along with the rating system, Thailand has a strict censorship policy. The policy covers a wide range of content and focuses on protecting the reputation and principles of Thailand. In regards to sexual content, media especially television programs containing depictions of prostitution in Thailand including documentaries and depictions of promiscuity or otherwise obscene content may be banned or strongly censored (Fotiadis & Englander, *Film and Television Censorship Laws in Thailand*).

From 2010 to 2013, the teenage birthrate in Thailand has continuously increased and currently Thailand has the highest rate of teenage births in Southeast Asia behind its neighbor Laos (Lefevre). The Office of the National Economics and Social Development Board and the United Nations Population Fund concluded in 2012 that in Thailand one baby was born every four minutes to a teenaged female (*Thailand to take serious actions against teen pregnancy*), which means for every 1,000 live births in Thailand, 54 are born to teenage mothers—a percentage higher than in the U.S. (*Lefevre*). In the past decade the number of teenage mothers younger than fifteen years old increased by three times, and between 2000 and 2011 births to females aged 15-18 increased by 43 percent (*Thailand to take serious actions against teen pregnancy*) (*Lefevre*).

Some health experts are emphasizing that the cultural mores of Thailand are the cause of the rise in teenage pregnancies. Experts believe that the social views of Thailand such as sexuality being taboo or a private matter create difficulty for adolescents particularly females to
discuss sexuality. According to Visa Benjamano, a commissioner at the Thai National Human Rights Council (NHRC), “women are told to protect their virginity but Thai men who have multiple sexual encounters are seen as cool” (Lefèvre, no page #), and access to sexual education is limited in the school systems (roughly eight hours a year). Adolescents may be more sexually active and have higher pregnancy rates because of this lack of discussion about sexuality between parents and adolescents.

**Discussion**

With research occurring just shortly after the spike in popularity of cinemas, it is apparent that the media has been the scapegoat for behaviors in children and adolescents for decades. The genre of juvenile delinquency films of the 1950s may have contributed to an increase in concerns about the influences that the media may have on adolescents, considering that the media shifted its content to target adolescents, specifically. However, media content typically reflects social concerns, issues, occurrences, or events during the period which it depicts. Films such as *Eighteen and Anxious* (1957) and *Lolita* (1962) suggest that issues of sex and pregnancy amongst adolescents were enough of a concern to warrant address in the media.

These films also suggest that the issue of adolescents and sexual behaviors is nothing new, and raise questions as to the reason the media continues to be blamed. It is difficult to accept the idea that within three decades adolescents began to become more sexually active based on simply going to the movies. With the limited amount of time it took for researchers to begin conducting studies on the potential influences from the spike of popularity in movie going, it may be plausible that a stigma was placed on the media which may have continued to distort the perceptions of the public to the significance of the content and caused the public to view the media as something negative for adolescents. This demonstrates that society, instead of trying to
understand human nature in adolescents, chose to focus on something new and foreign as the reason for adolescents being sexually active.

Even today in the 21st century the media continues to be blamed for the ways in which adolescents behave in regards to sexuality. Research such as Bandera’s Social-learning Theory, Cultivation theory, the Super-peer theory, or the Trigger hypothesis show that a significant number of adolescents are sexually active and the significant number of adolescents with children of their own could be linked to exposure to the media. However, social-learning also happens when children and adolescents are exposed to society. Behaviors can be provoked as is stated in the trigger hypothesis in society as well, and instead of using television as a way of getting information about sex as the Super-peer theory suggests, adolescents can get information from other peers or society. Therefore, it would not be fair to blame media when society is equally at fault.

Approximately sixty years after the introduction of the juvenile delinquent film genre, adolescents continue to be an important target for the media. Networks such as MTV in particular base their programming on adolescents. Among its most popular programming are 16 and Pregnant, Teen Mom, and Awkward, all which explore the lives of sexually active adolescents and the hardships and consequences that come with being sexually active at such a young age.

Not unlike other television programs and films, these shows were scrutinized after premiering on this popular network. 16 and Pregnant in particular was criticized for glamorizing pregnancy and its spinoff series Teen Mom was criticized as only extending the amount of time adolescents are being exposed to such content. It was feared that the glamorization of being
pregnant would result in an increase of pregnancies amongst adolescent girls. However, the statistics do not support such conclusions.

In fact, as stated above, viewing these programs has been credited, but not proven, to helping to decrease adolescent pregnancies by about ten percent, because adolescents view them as a reminder to practice safe and healthy sexual behaviors. Twitter statuses from viewers of the show 16 and Pregnant suggest many adolescents are reminded to take birth control pills or to find out more ways of preventing pregnancy by researching. This may be due to MTV’s consistent promotion of an affiliate site, Itsyoursexlife.org, where adolescents may discover the importance of practicing healthy sexual behaviors, and adolescents can learn about alternatives to abstinence such as using condoms, birth control, etc. The site continues to maintain that abstinence is the most effective option.

The fact that the media is accepting the responsibility of educating adolescents about sexual behaviors means that the media is aware of the stigma associated with its content. With disclaimers and public service announcements being implemented into programs containing sexual content or topics, adolescents may be more influenced by the media to behave in more positive manners instead of the negative that has frequently been associated with the media. However, by using the media as a method for information adolescents are more likely to seek out the information themselves instead of discussing such content with educators or even their parents.

An observation that seems to be common in the cultures of France, Thailand, and the United States is that although information about sex is available, abstinence is strongly encouraged and emphasized, leaving few options for adolescents to consider. Contraceptives are discussed less frequently, but are easily available at pharmacies. Programs are typically available
to adolescents to learn about options for sexual behaviors as well, which means it does not appear as though adolescents have difficulty obtaining information or items themselves.

This would suggest a different factor is contributing to the sexual behaviors and activity of adolescents and children. Studies have suggested that a lack of communication between adolescents and their parents may result in the behaviors observed. As mentioned in many public service announcements, it cannot be assumed parents do not care about the sexual well-being of their children. The rate or type of communication may simply be due to cultural norms and the society that influences the behaviors of the citizens more than anything else to which adolescents are exposed.

Society does have an impact on the ways sexuality in general is perceived and discussed. For instance, citizens in countries such as France may be more open to discussing sexual content since sexuality is viewed as empowering and content tends to be more graphic in nature. People in Thailand and the United States, however, tend to be more limited in the discussion about sexual content, possibly because of the rating systems that cause more restrictions and limited exposure.

It may be due to basic values of the society that sets general guidelines, but whatever the main reason studies suggest parents are one of the most important factors for teaching adolescents and this resource is being underutilized. Adolescents have expressed desire for more open discussions with parents and adults about sexual content and behaviors, insisting that this is an issue that is influencing the ways in which adolescents obtain information and thus perceive sexuality.

In order to have a better understanding of the ways in which adolescent sexual behaviors are influenced by society and television media, further research should be conducted. For
example, in the survey shown in the Appendix, information regarding exposure to sexual content in television, the views of sexuality in general in the country chosen, and the ways in which the society responds to the material or topic of sexuality should be gathered in order to have a better understanding of the influences of sexual content in television media and society have on adolescents.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, influences on adolescents and children should not be shifted to the media nor the society. There is no right or wrong response to the question of which to blame over the other. It is a combination of everything in an adolescent’s life. If media were solely to blame for the sexual behaviors and activities in adolescents, then adolescents in France would be more sexually active, while adolescents in Thailand and the United States would potentially be less sexually active because of less graphic sexual content to imitate. In contrast, if society were solely to blame for these concerning sexual behaviors then the numbers reflected in the statistics of birth rates for the United States, Thailand, and France would possibly be similar to the percentages present recently.

Instead of focusing on with whom the blame should lie both the media and society should take measures to improve the quality of sex education amongst adolescents. The media should continue to improve standards for responsibility by providing programming to the appropriate ages at the appropriate times. Society, on the other hand, should find ways for adolescents to obtain information, and to provide its members with comfort about discussing topics such as sexuality in order to prevent adolescents from seeking out possibly inaccurate or inappropriate information themselves, which may harm them in adulthood.
There is simply not enough information to conclude whether media content or society is at fault for the sexual behaviors of adolescents. As a society, as parents, as television viewers and providers, and as human beings it is important to focus on the younger generation and the children to help them to develop healthy behaviors and attitudes towards important subjects such as sexuality. Further research such as the survey provided in the Appendix should be conducted in order to have a better understanding of these influences, and to develop better ways to inform adolescents about these behaviors. Without further research it may never be concluded which one is more to blame.
Appendix

1. What is your native country?
   - France
   - Thailand
   - United States
   - Other (please specify)

2. In the country chosen how accessible is/was television? (in homes, public places, etc.)
   - Easily
   - Fairly Easily
   - Fairly Difficult
   - Difficult
   - Not Accessible At All

3. Regarding television in the country chosen above, is there sexual content shown?
   - Yes
   - No

4. If yes, how often is sexual content shown?
   - Very often (most of the time)
   - Often
   - Sometimes
   - Rarely
   - Not at all

5. During which times is sexual content shown?
   - Morning (5am-12pm)
   - Midday (12pm - 6pm)
   - Evening (6pm-12am)
   - Night (12am-5am)

6. Describe the sexual content. (What makes it sexual in the standards of the country chosen above?)

7. In the country chosen above, how does the society view sexuality and sexual content? (Is it openly discussed, a private subject, or a taboo subject that is almost never discussed?)

8. In the country chosen above, what are the general arguments about sexual content? (Is it shown too much? Is it shown responsibly? Is the content believed to influence behaviors and attitudes toward sex?) More than one answer is possible.
   - It is shown too much
   - It is not shown responsibly
   - It is shown responsibly
   - It influences behaviors and attitudes towards sex negatively
   - It influences behaviors and attitudes towards sex positively
   - It has no influence on behaviors and attitudes towards sex
   - Other (please specify)

9. In the country chosen above, is sexuality or sexual behaviors an issue? (Is there teen pregnancy, issues with teen/premarital sex, etc.?)
   - Yes
   - No
   - Other (please specify)

10. In the country chosen above, how does it respond to this content and these issues? (Is content limited? Are there ways the society tries to mediate the exposure to the consumers? How are the issues being solved?) Explain.
References


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