

# The Effect of Parental Mediation and Television Co-Viewing on Adolescents Sexual Initiation in Kenya

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**Abstract-** This paper examines the effects of parental mediation and television co-viewing on adolescents' sexual initiation. Television plays an important role in the sexual socialization of adolescents. In Kenya, it has been established that sexual activity starts early, that 42 per cent of girls aged 15-19 years have had sexual intercourse and 17 per cent are sexually active. Early sexual initiation (before age 16) is likely to involve sexual risk-taking and expose young people to unwanted sex, sexually transmitted infections, and teenage pregnancy. Research has revealed that in Kenya early sexual behaviour is manifested in the youth's high incidence of pregnancies, abortions, stress and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. The paper sought to investigate the effects of parental mediation and TV co-viewing on adolescents sexual initiation by addressing the following three fundamental concerns, (1) how television influences early sexual initiation of adolescents, (2) the extent to which parental mediation and television co-viewing may influence adolescents sexual initiation, (3) whether television can play a major positive role in promoting adolescents sexual awareness. The paper revealed that Watching TV shows with sexual content apparently hastens the initiation of adolescents' sexual activity. TV shows with content about contraception and pregnancy can help to educate teens about the risks and consequences of sex and can also foster beneficial dialogue between teens and parents. The paper also revealed that parental TV co-viewing of sexual content serves as an endorsement of the material for adolescents, restrictive mediation is best in moderate amounts, and that active mediation is most effective when it is paired with an open, conversational delivery style. Overall this paper concluded that there exists a relationship between parental TV co-viewing of sexual content and the sexual initiation of the youth. The study therefore recommends that media literacy as a skill needs to be improved to enable the youth to interpret TV media content correctly in order to avoid the possible effects that are sometimes not intended by the media practitioners.

**Index Terms-** parental mediation, parental TV co-viewing, sexual initiation, adolescents

## I. INTRODUCTION

### T1.1 BACKGROUND

Television plays an important role in the sexual socialization of adolescents (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993; Pinkleton, Austin, Cohen, Chen, & Fitzgerald, 2008; Ward, 2003; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Adolescents who watch more sexual content are more likely to perceive less serious consequences of sex

(Farrar, 2006), become sexually active (Brown et al., 2006), and experience greater risk of pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008). Little research has examined parents' role in mitigating these effects. And yet, the work on parental mediation of television has shown that parents can play a significant role in reducing youngsters' susceptibility to other undesirable outcomes, like aggression and stereotype formation (Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice, & Fischer, 1983; Nathanson, 1999).

In Kenya, it has been established that sexual activity starts early, that 42 per cent of girls aged 15-19 years have had sexual intercourse and 17 per cent are sexually active (CBS, 2004). The median age in Kenya for first sexual intercourse rose from 16.8 years in 1998 to 17.8 years in 2003 (CBS, 2004). A study conducted by the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) (1993) among female adolescents in various schools in Kenya found out that majority of the school going female adolescents are sexually active and some of them had multiple sexual partners. A study by Kamaara (1996/1997) conducted in Uasin Gishu County in Kenya had similar findings with the other studies. According to the study, 51 per cent of the youth interviewed were sexually initiated before the age of twenty and about 65 per cent indicated that they were currently having sexual relationships with more than one partner.

Research done in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of the University of Nairobi, Centre for the Study of Adolescence (CSA) and the Family Planning private sector (FPPS) concurs that about 80 per cent of the youth between ages 15-25, are sexually active (CSA, 1994). Out of these, 4 per cent engage in sexual relations before the age of 10; about 55 per cent become pregnant by the age of 20 and 60 per cent of them have multiple sexual partners (Aggarwal & Mati, 1982).

The high incidence of premarital sexual behaviour is further manifested in the high number of youth being affected by HIV/AIDS. The Kenya National AIDS control council and the ministry of health in Kenya (NACC, 2010; Ministry of Health, 2001). They have established further that more than 75 per cent of the AIDS cases occur between ages of 15 and 45 years, with the peak for AIDS being 25-29 for females and 15-25 for males. The implication of this is that HIV infection is prevalent at the age group between 15-25 meaning that majority of the youth contract the virus when they are still in their adolescence. It is against this background that this paper sought to examine the role of parental mediation and television co-viewing on adolescents' sexual outcomes.

### 1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Sex is common on television and becoming more prevalent over time (Kunkel, Eyal, & Finnerty, 2005). Programs often

depict women as sexual objects, including presenting them in provocative clothing (Andsager & Roe, 1999) and as objects of sexual harassment (Grauerholz & King, 1997). Sexual content often lacks depiction of sexual planning, with few references to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), contraception, and abortion (Kunkel et al., 2001; Lowry & Towles, 1989; Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991). Sex is usually depicted as glamorous, with the bulk of sexual activity occurring outside of marriages (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002). The depiction of sex varies across genres (Franzblau, Sprafkin, & Rubinstein, 1977; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996; Greenberg & D'Alessio, 1985).

Ward (1995) found that more than one quarter of prime time programs popular among adolescents involved sex, and many promoted a recreational attitude about sex and stereotypes about sexual roles. Other work shows that exposure to sexual television contributes to earlier sex initiation (Collins et al., 2004; Martino et al., 2006), more sexual experiences and partners (Bleakly, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008; Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Brown et al., 2006), more negative attitudes toward the use of contraceptives (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005), and higher rates of teen pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008).

Kenyan domestic TV is dominated by foreign material such as soap operas, music and movies. (African Media Development Initiative: Kenya Context, 2007). Kenyan television music is laden with staggering sexual graphics. (Gakuha, 2010). Most songs include innuendo, partial nudity and sexual situations and behavior. The television media channels depict half-dressed women in sexually suggestive body movements and often play lyrics intended to inflame sexual feelings, (O'Toole, 1997).

According to Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen and Brook (1999), the average adolescent spends more time watching television than in the classroom. According to Donnerstein and Smith (2001), parents who openly communicate and actively co-view television may protect adolescents from potentially detrimental effects of exposure. Frequency of viewing (Malamuth & Impett, 2001) appears to be important as well. Although we might hope that parents would be the primary source of sexual guidance for their children, they often find it difficult to present timely and clearly expectations, or even accurate information. (Brown, Steele & Walsh-Childers, 2002). It is against this background that this paper examines the effects of parental mediation and television co-viewing on adolescents' sexual initiation.

## 1.2 Objectives

Generally the purpose of this paper was to examine *the effects of parental mediation and television co-viewing on adolescents' sexual initiation*. The paper specifically discusses how television influences early sexual initiation of adolescents, the extent to which parental mediation and television co-viewing may influence adolescents sexual initiation and finally the paper examines whether television can play a major positive role in promoting adolescents sexual awareness.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND (LITERATURE REVIEW)

### 2.1 Exposure to TV Sex May Hasten the Initiation of Sexual Activity Among Adolescents

In social learning theory (Bandura, 1971), young people can learn about sexuality from others depicted in the media. According to Albert Bandura's cross-species and cultural studies, human sexuality is governed primarily by social conditioning, rather than endocrinal stimulation (Chapin, 2000). The cultivation theorists say that television's consistent images and portrayals construct a specific portrait of reality. Gradually, viewers come to cultivate or adopt attitudes and expectations about the world that coincides with this portrait. Garner et al. (1998) underscores this observation by stressing that young people are most dependent on the media as a source of information when they lack personal experience and interpersonal advice in the area they are seeking knowledge.

The sexual content in television can affect any age group, adolescents may be particularly vulnerable (Ward, 2003) since they are still in the impressionable developmental stages and are attempting to establish their own identity. Adolescents may be exposed to sexual contents in the media because they are still at their developmental stages and hence cannot decipher good from bad media programming. Analysis of television media content in America indicate that, on average, adolescent viewers see 143 (Ward & Friedman, 2006) incidents of sexual behaviour on network television at the most important times each week, with portrayals of three to four times as many sexual activities occurring between unmarried partners as between spouses. As much as 80% of all movies shown on television stations have sexual content (Chunovic, 2000). Therefore, an analysis of television media content also shows that sexual messages on television are almost universally presented in a positive light, with little discussion of the potential risks of unprotected sexual intercourse and few portrayals of adverse consequences (Anderson, 2004).

Sexual television content affects attitudes and beliefs conducive to early sexual initiation, including more permissive sexual norms, more positive expectations regarding sex and greater safe-sex self-efficacy (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011; Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Martino, Collins, Elliott, Kanouse, & Berry, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). Several US longitudinal studies have found that exposure to sexual content in TV programmes predicts earlier timing of sexual behaviour (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008; Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Brown et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2004; Martino et al., 2006; O'Hara, Gibbons, Gerrard, Li, & Sargent, 2012).

Television may create the illusion that sex is more central to daily life than it truly is and may promote sexual initiation as a result, a process known as media cultivation. (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1994). Early sexual initiation (before age 16) is likely to involve sexual risk-taking and expose young people to unwanted sex and teenage pregnancy (Martinez, Copen, & Abma, 2011). Most sexually experienced teens wish they had waited longer to have intercourse and unplanned pregnancies are more common among those who begin sexual intercourse earlier. (Collins et al., 2004).

Adolescents with a high level of exposure to television shows with sexual content are twice as likely to get pregnant or impregnate someone as those who saw fewer programs of this kind over a period of three years. (Parkes et al., 2013). According to Martino et al. (2005), television brings about early sexual

intercourse. Brown et al. (2005) indicates that the early initiation of sexual intercourse is a risk factor for teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among adolescents.

## 2.2 Parent–Child Communication about Sex

Parents can be key agents in shaping adolescents' sexual outcomes (Handelsman, Cabral, & Weisfeld, 1987; Holtzman & Robinson, 1995; Jaccard & Dittus, 1991; Karofsky, Zeng, & Kosorok, 2000; O'Sullivan, Jaramillo, Moreau, & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1999; Rodgers, 1999). Parental discussion is related to later onset of sex (Fisher, 1987; Pick & Palos, 1995), fewer sexual partners (Leland & Barth, 1993), more effective contraceptive use (Fisher, 1987; Miller, Levin, Whitaker, & Xu, 1998; Thompson & Spanier, 1978), and reduced incidence of pregnancy and AIDS (Jaccard & Dittus, 1993).

Parent-child discussion conveys parental attitudes about sex (Dittus, Jaccard, & Gordon, 1999; Fisher, 1985, 1987; Meschke, Bartholomae, & Zentall, 2000). These types of conversations typically occur after "the big talk" about menstruation and reproduction, and may reveal parents' attitudes indirectly by discussing others rather than the teenager (Hepburn, 1983). Fisher (1986) found that the correlation between parents' and adolescents' sexual attitudes in high-communication families was stronger than that in low-communication families.

Similarly, Lewis (1973) reported that by discussing sex, parents can transmit sexual values to adolescents. Likewise, the absence of parent-child communication can send messages about parents' attitudes about sex (Darling & Hicks, 1982). However, Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg (1986) found little evidence that parental communication and monitoring discouraged sexual activity, while Furstenberg, Herceg-Baron, Shea, and Webb (2001) found no relationship between parent-child communication and contraception use. Others (e.g., Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1996; Widmer, 1997) have observed positive relationships between parent-child communication and sexual activity. The contradictory evidence suggests that researchers may be overlooking an important component of parent-teen conversations about sex.

## 2.3 Communication Styles

The style that parents use when communicating with their teens may be an important predictor of the success of these conversations. Although early studies have focused on frequency and content of conversations (Rosenthal, Senserrick, & Feldman, 2001), recent work has revealed that communication styles are important predictors of adolescents' sexual outcomes (Boone & Lefkowitz, 2007). Research on parenting styles makes the distinction between an open, warm communication style and one that is focused on asserting power (Baumrind, 1968), with the former being more effective than the latter (Baumrind, 1997; Hoffman, 1970). This distinction has also been made by scholars studying Family Communication Patterns (FCPs) (Fujioka & Austin, 2002; McLeod & Chaffee, 1972), with concept-oriented parents encouraging more openness and discussion and socio-oriented parents favoring family harmony by avoiding controversy and deferring to authority.

Parents who use an open style tend to have adolescents who experience positive outcomes. Open styles have been related to less sexual risk taking (Kotchick, Dorsey, Miller, & Forehand,

1999) and safe sex practices among adolescents (Mueller & Powers, 1990). Whalen, Henker, Hollingshead, and Burgess (1996) also found that parents who were less directive had children who knew more about AIDS. Finally, Lefkowitz, Sigman, and Au (2000) found that adolescent girls were able to learn more about AIDs from mothers who had been trained to communicate more effectively.

However, adolescents are often dissatisfied with how parents communicate about sex. Adolescents often feel that their parents are controlling and to use a lecturing style when discussing sex (Rosenthal et al., 2001). In fact, Pistella and Bonati (1999) found that more than half of teenaged girls wished their parents would listen more and talk with them on an adult level.

## 2.4 TV Can Also Inform Teens About Risks and Foster Communication with Parents

Researchers (Collins et al., 2004) concluded that entertainment shows that include portrayals of sexual risks and consequences can potentially have two beneficial effects on teen sexual awareness: They can teach accurate messages about sexual risks, and they can stimulate a conversation with adults that can reinforce those messages. Reducing the amount of sexual talk and behavior on television, or the amount of time that adolescents are exposed to them, could appreciably delay the onset of sexual activity.

According to Collins et al., (2004), increasing the percentage of portrayals of sexual risk and safety relative to other sexual content might also inhibit early sexual activity as well as increasing knowledge of sexual risks and how to be safe, and stimulating dialogue with parents. (Martino et al., 2005) The first RAND study, found out that reducing teens' exposure to portrayals of sex on television poses challenges, however, having parents view programs with their children and discuss their own beliefs regarding the behavior depicted can reinforce the benefits of accurate risk information and positive messages and may help to limit the negative effects of sexual portrayals that do not contain risk information.

## 2.4 Parental Mediation of Sexual Television:

Television may provide opportunities for parents to initiate discussions of sex in a less threatening setting. Because the focus is on characters' behaviors, parents may feel more comfortable and adolescents may feel less embarrassed or defensive. There are many possible types of parent-child discussion of television. Messaris (1982) studied three forms of communication: categorization (discussing how TV reflects the world), validation (endorsing or condemning television), and supplementing (supplying additional information).

Contradiction is often linked with positive outcomes (Austin, Pinkleton, & Fujioka, 2000; Nathanson, 1999), while validation of problematic content is often related to negative effects (Austin & Chen, 2003; Hicks, 1968). Supplemental mediation often produces more learning from TV (Collins, Sobol, & Westby, 1981; Corder-Bolz, 1980).

## 2.5 Co-viewing and Restrictive Mediation of Sexual Content

Co-viewing refers to parents and children watching television together (Valkenburg, Krmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999). Co-viewing could communicate that parents hold positive

attitudes toward the material, leading children to pay closer attention to and learn from programs that are co-viewed. Depending on the content, we can expect either positive or negative effects of co-viewing.

Positive effects include enhanced learning from educational television (Salomon, 1977), and negative effects include increased aggression after co-viewing violent TV (Nathanson, 1999), endorsement of stereotyped sex roles due to co-viewing gender stereotyped TV (Rothschild & Morgan, 1987), and perceived realism of TV characters (Messaris & Kerr, 1984). It is likely that co-viewing sexual content with adolescents would strengthen adolescents' perceived importance of the content.

This may lead adolescents to pay more attention to the material and learn from it, resulting in less accurate sexual knowledge and positive attitudes toward sex. In addition, adolescents may infer that co-viewing parents have favorable attitudes toward sex, which could lead to risky sexual behaviors. Restrictive mediation occurs when parents set rules about children's television viewing (Weaver & Barbour, 1992). The existence of viewing rules can decrease the importance of television for children (Nathanson, 1999). However, Nathanson (2002) found that adolescents were more likely to seek out restricted content elsewhere. Moreover, Nathanson (1999) found that the relationship between restrictive mediation of violent television and children's aggression was curvilinear, with very low and very high levels of restrictions triggering more aggression and moderate amounts of restrictions producing optimal effects.

Restrictive mediation of sexual content may generate unintended effects among adolescence, especially with regards to the "forbidden fruit" response, in which the restricted behavior becomes more tantalizing and pursued because it is restricted (Bijvank, Konjin, Bushman, & Roelofsma, 2009; Bushman & Stack, 1996). As a result, restricting sexual content can increase its attractiveness among adolescents (Cantor, Harrison, & Nathanson, 1997). This could lead them to watch more sexual content when parents are absent (Nathanson, 2002), which could increase acceptance of the stereotyped and recreational views of sex portrayed on television.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This paper was based on literature review related to the following specific objectives: To find out if television influences early sexual initiation of adolescents, the extent to which parental mediation and television co-viewing may influence adolescents sexual initiation and whether television can play a major positive role in promoting adolescents sexual awareness. Literature of journals were reviewed. Some of the journals include: International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, Volume 4, Issue 5, May 2014 1 ISSN 2250-3153 ; New Media and Mass Communication ISSN 2224-3267 (Paper) ISSN 2224-3275 (Online) Vol.27, 2014; The Journal of Education and Practice ISSN 2222-1735 (Paper) ISSN 2222-288X (Online) Vol 3, No 7, 2012; Journal Media and Communication Studies. Vol. 2(7), pp. 154-158, ISSN 2141 – 2545 August 2010; Nigerian Journal of Social Studies and Civic Education Vol. 4, Issue 1, pp 135-ISSN: 2315-6813 147, June, 2013.

### IV. CONCLUSION

The paper has made the following conclusions based on the reviewed literature:

Adolescents are the wheels of change than other segments of the population. Hence, the future fate of the society depends on the demographic and reproductive health of this segment of the population; hence they have to be free of risky sexual behaviour. Television viewing does have an impact on adolescents' sexual initiation for example watching sex on TV may predict and/or hasten adolescent sexual initiation. Alternatively, parents may be able to reduce the effects of sexual content by watching TV with their teenage children and discussing their own beliefs about sexual issues.

Parental behaviors surrounding sexual television do play an important role, with some behaviors exacerbating the negative effect and others mitigating it. Parent-adolescent co-viewing of sexual television content was related to engaging in sex at a younger age and having more sexual partners. This effect was found even when the adolescents' exposure to sexual media content was controlled. It is likely that parents who co-view sexual television unintentionally endorse the content and characters, thereby making the behaviors more acceptable to the adolescents.

This paper reveals that there is strong evidence that co-viewing of objectionable television content is related to undesirable sexual outcomes among adolescents. There is need for the education of students, parents, media organisations, government and the entire society on the negative effects TV has on adolescents sexual behaviour. This awareness will help in understanding of the problems as it affects the adolescents and may help delay sexual initiation among the youth.

### V. RECOMMENDATION

- Parents should use restrictive mediation with caution, especially with adolescents. Setting limits on viewing is effective in moderate doses; however, very low or very high levels of restrictions are related to undesirable outcomes. This finding underscores the importance of examining the ways in which parents communicate rules and expectations. It is likely that moderate amounts of rules are tolerable to adolescents and leave open the possibility of negotiation and discussion of restrictions. However, too few rules or too many rules leave adolescents more vulnerable to television.
- Parents should assist their children to become 'media literate' by discussing Television Content so that they can differentiate reality and fiction. This will go a long way to prevent the adolescents from becoming passive victims of TV content.
- Further research on Television viewing influence is necessary in order to enhance our understanding of communication systems in society.
- Parents have irreplaceable role in paving the way on how to help their children by teaching them the necessary skills and responsibility for maintaining and protecting their sexual health; to do this, parents should assess their level of knowledge related to reproductive

health and acquire the necessary knowledge to provide accurate and current information.

- Adolescents should be equipped with the necessary communication skills about sexuality issues in particular; concerned bodies especially those working on adolescents, should help both parents and adolescents in providing the necessary knowledge and skills.

Other important steps you can take to curb or mitigate adolescents exposure to sexual content on television include:

- Parents Watching TV with their adolescent children and discussing their beliefs about sex and about the sexual behaviors portrayed on TV.
- Developing TV-watching guidelines for adolescents and enforcing them.
- Limiting the amount of time children watch TV. Instead, one can use family movie reviews to rent movies with appropriate content.
- Encourage and reward adolescents for reading instead of watching TV.
- Encouraging adolescents to find and develop non-television related hobbies and interests.

In summary, research on parental mediation of sexual content can help us understand how parents can maintain their influence over adolescents in the face of undesirable sexual messages on television. In addition, it could help us understand how to increase the frequency and effectiveness of parent-adolescent conversations about sex. Although we are unlikely to change adolescents' desire to learn from sexual media, we could possibly inform parents about how to best mediate adolescents' exposure to this content so they can become socialized into a set of healthy and responsible attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

By taking these simple steps, one can help to ensure that adolescents' attitudes and beliefs about sex are more closely monitored and that their sexual initiation is delayed.

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