The influence of television on adolescent girls’ sexual attitudes and behaviour

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Abstract
This study explored how television influences the sexual attitudes and behaviour of adolescent girls in Mabopane, a black township in Gauteng, South Africa. Qualitative research was used as it allowed the first author to obtain rich data from the participants who were between the ages of 16 and 17 and enrolled for grades 11 and 12. Although the area of adolescent sexual behaviour has been widely researched, there appears to be a lack of information concerning adolescents’ sexual behaviour and attitudes relating to Africa, especially South Africa. The first author investigated adolescent girls’ experiences using in-depth individual interviews, and did a thematic content analysis of the textual data she gathered from the participants. The results of this study indicated that adolescent girls from Mabopane feel that television does influence their sexual attitudes and behaviour, and that television does not display the consequences of sex, thus influencing adolescents to engage in such behaviour. Furthermore, the participants indicated that television is not the only influence in their lives; other factors, such as parental guidance and peer pressure, also contribute to shaping their sexual attitudes and behaviour. Frequent television viewing was mentioned as resulting in adolescents changing their sexual beliefs and adopting behaviours seen on television.

Key words: adolescents; qualitative research; sexual attitudes; sexual behaviour; television; thematic content analysis

Television, radio, films, newspapers, magazines, books, and other media are becoming increasingly pervasive and influential in people’s lives. New technologies, such as the internet, cell phones, and chat rooms have changed the nature of the media
experience in significant ways (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Furthermore, television has had a large influence on people’s attitudes and behaviour (Lund & Blaedon, 2003). According to Greeson (1991), ‘television has been found to reflect and possibly shape the attitudes, values and behaviour of young people’ (p. 1908).

DEFINING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Television’s role as a sexual educator in modern culture is full of contradictions (Eggermont, 2005). On the one hand, television’s accessibility, frankness, and popular appeal are an excellent instructor offering a convenient way to learn about sex without embarrassment. While television’s sexual messages are not necessarily visually explicit, they often provide information which adolescents may not get elsewhere (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Through their dialogue, characterisations, storylines, and themes, television programmes present adolescents with numerous verbal and visual examples of how dating, intimacy, relationships, and sex are handled. On the other hand, concern is often expressed that the messages about sexuality broadcast via television are limited, stereotypical, and potentially harmful (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Haferkamp, 1999).

Research that has attempted to establish links between sexual content in the media and adolescent sexuality has been conducted in the United State of America (US) (see Eggermont, 2005; Ward 2003; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). However, it cannot be assumed that these links are similar for all cultures. For instance, in South Africa there is a concern with the dangers associated with sex, such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV and AIDS (Bakker, De Graaf, Hawk, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006). According to various studies (Brown, L’Engle, Pardun, Guo, Kenneavy, & Jackson, 2005; Brown & Pardun, 2004; Eggermont, 2005; Ward, 2003), white adolescents spend on average five to six hours a day engaging with some form of mass media, while black youths spend two hours more. The information for South Africa is not as extensive as that of the US, although the indications are that, at least for television, the same patterns of time usage are applicable here (Van Vuuren, 2004). For example, the South African Advertising Research Foundation’s (2003, 2005) studies indicated that very young toddlers (from nine months old) spend approximately 40 minutes per day in front of the television set, with the amount of viewing gradually increasing (by nearly two hours) to the age of about six years. Then, as they go to school, there is a slight dip in the consumption of television as school activities take up some of their time. During the primary school years, a steady increase in the time spent on viewing television again occurs, with a peak of about three hours per day at 10 to 12 years. During adolescence, other interests may take young people away from the television set, and a dip in the time spent on viewing occurs, until after the age of 20 (Van Vuuren, 2004).
Therefore, this study aimed at informing some of these gaps in past research by examining the extent to which adolescents in Mabopane watch television. Mabopane can be described as a black township community in which the vast majority of residents have a low socio-economic status. The township could be characterised as suffering from poverty and having a large unemployment rate. In families where both parents are working, the adolescents and children tend to be left to their own devices (Mr Dhlomo, personal communication). The adolescents and children therefore seek stimulation and activities outside of their homes and thus attend day care centres or organisations, such as Choose Life, in order to pass the time within a safe and secure environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescents are active consumers of messages broadcast on radio and television, printed in magazines, distributed on the internet, and presented in video games (LeVay & Valente, 2003). As technology has continued to advance, access to these different types of media has become common in American households: 98% have at least one television, 70% have more than one television, and 51% of households with children have a computer (Eggermont, 2005; Fay & Yanoff, 2000; Paik, 2001; Ward, 2003; Werner-Wilson, Fitzharris, & Morrissey, 2004). Wireless resources, such as radio/compact disc (CD) headsets, handheld televisions, portable video game players, and internet access via cell phones, add to the numerous sources of media access (Ward & Friedman, 2006). Thus, video cassette recorder (VCR)/Digital Video Disc (DVD) usage, which allows for repetitive viewing of movies and access to age-restricted movies, must be taken into consideration when studying sources of media access. With each additional source of access, popular media may replace more worthwhile activities (Carpenter, 1998). Furthermore, many adolescents seem to have sources of media access available in their private bedrooms (Larson, 1995).

Television, sexual behaviour, and attitudes

According to Brown et al. (2005), adolescents consistently refer to the mass media, including television, as the most important source of sexual information. The sexual content of many of the television shows to which these adolescents pay attention is frequent, glamorised, and consequence free (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996). In 2002, most of the television shows watched frequently by adolescents included sexual content, but very few of those shows included any depiction of sexual risks or responsibilities (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003; Brown et al, 2005; Ward, 2003). Research has also indicated that television viewing can cultivate a distorted world view and influence several behavioural domains, as has been amply demonstrated; therefore it is expected that it may also affect sexual learning (Aubrey
et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2005; Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995; Ward, 2003). Strouse et al. (1995) found that of 1,500 adolescents who participated in their study, 1,043 considered television to be their greatest source of behaviour modelling to become sexually active.

Brown et al. (2005) further stated that early initiation into sexual intercourse is a risk factor for teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Bakker et al. (2006) commented that both male and female adolescents who are younger at their first act of sexual intercourse are less likely to use a contraceptive method, which has resulted in the increase of teenage pregnancy as well as HIV and AIDS in South Africa. In addition, according to Ward and Rivadeneyra (1999), the use of media (television, internet, and magazines) seems to have an influence on adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviour.

Although research in the area of television and its influence on adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviour has been sparse, Ward and Friedman (2006) have stated that several findings do associate the amount of television viewing (both in terms of programmes and time spent) with viewers’ sexual attitudes and behaviour. Furthermore, they stated that greater television exposure has been linked to viewers’ attitudes about sex and sexual relationships. Strouse et al. (1995) argued that both heavy regular consumption of and experimental exposure to sexually-oriented genres, such as soap operas and music videos, have been related to adolescents expressing more liberal sexual attitudes, being more accepting of sexual improprieties, and encouraging increased negative attitudes toward remaining a virgin.

Greater television exposure has also been linked with viewers’ expectations about the prevalence of certain sexual outcomes frequently depicted on television (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993). For example, undergraduates who frequently view soap operas offer higher estimates of the numbers of real people who divorce or have illegitimate children than less frequent viewers do (Bryant & Thompson, 2002).

There has also been tentative evidence that exposure to sexually explicit television is linked to viewers’ sexual behaviour. Although the amount of general television viewing typically has not been related to viewers’ level of sexual activity (Bakker et al., 2006; Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996), links between exposure and greater sexual experience have emerged when more sexually-oriented programming is examined (Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996; Strouse et al., 1995). Together, these findings have provided tentative evidence of a link between the amount of time spent watching sexually-oriented programming and viewers’ own sexual attitudes, expectations, and behaviour.

One concern is that the prevalence of television shows with sexual content overemphasises the role of sex in male-female relationships (Chia, 2006). Of equal concern is the impression that television provides a one-dimensional picture of sexual relationships, one in which sex is only for the young, single, and beautiful, and
where sexual encounters are always spontaneous, romantic, and risk free (Bakker et al., 2006). As well as promoting heterosexual rather than homosexual relationships, this may also contribute to the dominant discourse regarding homosexuality. Thus, because of the prevalent yet limited nature of television shows with sexual content, researchers (Aubrey et al., 2003; Bakker et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Eggermont, 2005; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996; Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1996; Roberts, 2000; Villani, 2001; Ward, 2003) have become interested in whether heavy viewing of these portrayals is associated with distorted expectations, irresponsible sexual decision-making, and permissive or stereotypical sexual attitudes.

Studies of the effects of television on adolescents’ sexual beliefs have found that prime-time programmes and music videos focusing on sex outside marriage promote more permissive attitudes towards premarital sex (Huston et al., 1998; Ward & Friedman, 2006). They have linked frequent exposure to television shows with sexual content and transition to sexual intercourse. However, because time order was not clear in these studies, Ward and Friedman (2006) further stated that it was plausible to conclude that adolescents who were having sex were also those most interested in sexual content in the media rather than that exposure to sexual content in the media accelerated the adolescents’ initiation into sexual activity. Further studies (Chapin, 2000; Villani, 2001) on this topic found that adolescents (12 to 17 years old) who watched television shows with more sexual content were more likely than those who saw fewer shows with sexual content to have engaged in more advanced sexual behaviour, as well as sexual intercourse, up to one year later. That study, however, focused on only 25 television programmes, combined younger and older adolescents in the same analyses, and paid relatively little attention to race differences (Brown et al., 2005).

Therefore, it appears that more research needs to be done in terms of television’s influence on sexual attitudes and behaviours among South African adolescents. It is apparent that there is a gap in the literature regarding the influence of television on adolescents in South Africa as most research (Aubrey et al., 2003; Bakker et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Eggermont, 2005; Huit, 2004; Huston et al., 1998; Roberts, 2000; Ward, 2003) has been conducted in the US (Brown et al., 2005; Chapin, 2000; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996; Huston et al., 1998; Roberts, 2000), as well as Europe (Eggermont, 2005).

RESEARCH APPROACH

Whilst recognising international literature (Aubrey et al., 2003; Bakker et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Eggermont, 2005; Huston et al., 1996; Peterson, Moore & Furstenberg, 1991; Roberts, 2000; Strouse et al., 1995; Ward, 2003; Ward & Friedman, 2006) on sexual messages portrayed in a wide range of media, including television, this study was primarily interested in the influence of sexually related
messages to which adolescent girls from Mabopane are exposed when viewing television. The study further aimed at identifying the sexual content of television programmes aired by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC 1, 2, 3) and E-TV. DSTV was not considered in the research as it may not be accessible to most teenagers in Mabopane due to financial reasons, such as the costs involved (Z Dhlomo, personal communication, January 26, 2008). Furthermore, the first author did not identify specific sexual content of television programmes as it might have narrowed the study, and rather allowed the participants to explore the sexual content of programmes that they view and to work from their perspective.

For the purposes of this study, sexual content was defined as any depiction of sexual activity, sexually suggestive behaviour, or talk about sex, sexual risks, or responsibility, sexual health, or sexuality (Ward, 2003). The adolescent phase begins from age 13 until around age 19 (Chapin, 2000). However, this study focused on programmes that are viewed by adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17, because this is the age group with which the Choose Life Community Organisation (CLCO) works. The CLCO is an organisation within Mabopane which aims to provide a refuge for the adolescent youth of the township. It was the access point from which the researcher sourced participants.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the study was based on the Social Learning Approach. Bandura’s social learning theory emphasises the importance of observing and modelling the behaviour, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) stated that learning would be difficult, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do, and therefore most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling. Social learning theory explains human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1997). The component processes underlying observational learning are: firstly, attention, meaning various factors increase or decrease the amount of attention paid, including modelled events (distinctiveness, affective valence, complexity, prevalence, functional value) and observer characteristics (sensory capacities, arousal level, perceptual set, past reinforcement); secondly, observational learning relies on retention, that is, remembering what the person has paid attention to, including symbolic coding, cognitive organisation, symbolic rehearsal, motor rehearsal; thirdly, learning is affected by motor reproduction, referring to reproducing the image, including physical capabilities, self-observation of reproduction, and accuracy of feedback; lastly, it is necessary that there should be motivation, referring to a person having a good reason to imitate, including external, vicarious, and self reinforcement.
Thus, the most common examples of social learning situations are television commercials, movies, and music videos. The sexual content of these programmes may suggest that certain sexual behaviours make girls more attractive and admirable (Brown, Greenberg, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1993). Depending upon the component processes involved (such as attention or motivation), people may model the behaviour shown in the commercial and buy the product being advertised.

Social learning theory suggests specific mechanisms through which the observation of media (television) exemplars may shape people’s attitudes and beliefs (Huit, 2004). Firstly, observational learning is believed to be stronger when the behavioural modelling occurs frequently. Viewers who regularly observe similar exemplars of sexual request situations may begin to perceive the strategies used as the proper and normative approach. In this respect, content analyses have suggested that the rate of occurrence of sexual request situations on television is high. Research has shown that the most common type of sexual imagery on television is verbal insinuations that aim to communicate sexual desire. When television characters talk about sex, 59 to 74% of the conversations are about prospective appeal and attraction (Kunkel, Cope, & Colvin, 1996). When television actually displays sexual behaviours it most often does so with physical acts, such as flirting, hugging, kissing, and erotic touching, which are precursory to sexual intercourse (Kunkel et al., 1996; Ward, 2003).

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the social learning approach was used as a lens for the interpretation of data. The approach aims at emphasising the importance of modelling behaviour, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). According to Escoban-Chaves et al. (2005), television is seen as an increasingly influential instrument of socialisation that produces its effects through children’s tendencies to learn by imitation. The present study attempted to understand the perception of adolescents’ use of television as a guide. Qualitative information about the sexual content of television programmes, how they affect the emotions, attitudes, and behaviour of adolescents, and the kinds of sex or sexuality related stories adolescents are likely to encounter, as well as the messages those stories are sending was sought and collected from participants.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Procedure

The investigation was qualitative in nature and data were interpreted using thematic content analysis. The study was conducted in Mabopane (Block X-Extension) as the CLCO facilities are based there.
Purposive sampling

Keeping in mind that Mabopane is a large township, purposive sampling was used as a method of sampling. The first author recruited participants from the CLCO by sticking up posters inviting adolescent girls to participate. Most adolescents responded after hearing about the research from their peers and they made appointments to see the first author. She met the participants on three occasions, first to explain to those interested, adolescent girls, what the study is about and to make follow-up appointments. Potential participants then took the consent forms home to ask for their parents’ permission, and the following week they returned signed copies of consent as well as assent forms. The first author, who was also the interviewer, then set up a schedule for two days, with two interviews per day.

Data collection

The first author collected data from adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 17 using individual in-depth interviews, which were conducted with each participant. The main question that was asked was: ‘How does television influence the attitudes and behaviour pertaining to sexuality of adolescent girls in Mabopane Township?’.

Individual interviews with open-ended questions were used in order to achieve a deeper insight into adolescent girls’ thoughts and views about television and sexuality. An interview guide containing open-ended questions covering the following themes was used: reflections about television, common sources of sexual messages on television, possible influence on sexual behaviour and attitudes, feelings about sexuality, and television viewing habits.

The first author recorded and later transcribed the interviews. The recorded data were transcribed to provide textual data for the purposes of analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic content analysis is an approach to dealing with data that involves the creation and application of ‘categories’ to data. The data being analysed may take any number of forms – an interview transcript, field notes, or documentation. Thematic content analysis is about discovering themes and concepts embedded throughout the interviews (Neuman, 2006). Thus, this research aimed at uncovering themes that adolescent girls learn from watching television, and further explored how these patterns of themes influence their behaviour and attitudes (especially sexually). The first author summarised the adolescent girls’ stories, highlighting important details and the main themes that emerged from her experiences.

A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data. The first author built a valid argument for choosing the themes by consulting the relevant literature. By referring back to the literature, the first author gained...
information that allowed her to make inferences from the interviews (Constas, 1992). Once the themes had been collected and the literature had been studied, the researcher formulated theme statements to develop a story line. When the literature was interwoven with the findings, the interviewer had constructed a story that appeared to have value.

In order to ensure the validity of the research, the first author made every effort to make certain that the participants’ viewpoints, thoughts, intentions, and experiences were accurately understood and reported (Struwig & Stead, 2001). Emphasis was placed on the participants’ perspective and language rather than on the researcher’s interpretations and terminology. The investigation was transparent and explicit (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Potential participants were required to obtain a signed consent form from their parents or legal guardian before participating in the study. Only on the return of the signed consent form and assent form were they considered as participants. As a means of protecting their identities, participants were not asked to disclose their names. Furthermore, acknowledgement was made of the sensitivity of the context of the study; therefore, participants were assured of confidentiality of any information they provided.

DISCUSSION OF EMERGING RESEARCH FINDINGS

The themes that were identified came from the literature review, the phenomena being studied, the participants’ responses, as well as the researcher’s theoretical orientation (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The themes were clustered together as meaningful components for gaining insight into how television influences adolescent girls’ sexual attitudes and behaviour. The following six major themes were identified from the data:

1. Adolescents’ view of programmes (positive and negative programmes) that they like watching.
2. Adolescents’ perceptions of sex on television.
3. Adolescents’ view of the role of their peers and parents.
4. Other aspects that television influences.
5. Influence of television on sexual beliefs.
6. Television characters as role models.
These themes and interpretations were discussed, integrating the literature and giving plausible accounts of the challenges and influences posed by television on these adolescent girls when they watch it. The main theme that was identified from the interviews was sexual attitudes and behaviour. Various other themes also emerged, including programme content, sex on television, role models, parents and peers, and characteristics of models.

**Sexual attitudes and behaviour**

The findings provide some support for the research question whether television influences sexual attitudes and behaviour among adolescent girls, aged 15 to 17 years in Mabopane. However, the extent to which television influences the sexual attitudes and behaviour of adolescent girls still remains a question. The themes that emerged throughout the interviews indicated that even though participants regarded television as an influence in their sexual attitudes and behaviour, other aspects also play a role in shaping them.

**Programme content**

Another theme that emerged was adolescent girls’ view of programmes (positive and negative programmes) that they like watching and the frequency thereof. In describing the kind of television programmes that they like to watch and the frequency thereof, most of the girls indicated that they enjoy mostly soap operas, movies, and dramas. According to Kunkel et al. (1996), it has been reported that nearly seven in 10 television programmes contain a sexual message. Furthermore, participants indicated that they enjoy watching soap operas and dramas, which according to previous studies, tend to portray sexual scenes (Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Calfin, Carroll, & Schmidt, 1993; Chunovic, 2000; Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Durham, 1999; Flowers-Coulson, Kushner, & Bankowski, 2000; Strong & DeVault, 1994).

According to Participant 3: ‘Programmes that have two sides, there are positive programmes that one can enjoy and have something later as an influential aspect and there are negative ones that actually at the end of the day can destroy one’s life’.

Participant 2 commented that: ‘Ooh! It will depend on the kind of person, how they are. I usually watch eeh ... soapies [soap operas], yaah ... comedies, yaah ... that kinda programmes’.

**Sex on television**

With regard to adolescents’ perceptions of sex on television, Brown et al. (2005) stated that adolescents consistently refer to the mass media, including television, as the most important sources of sexual information. The sexual content of many of the television shows to which these adolescents pay attention is frequent, glamorised, and consequence free (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996).
Participants in this study also indicated that they view television as failing to portray the unpleasant consequences which could occur when engaging in sex, which is supported by previous studies. An analysis of media content showed 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; Donnerstein & Smith, 2001), thereby influencing adolescents to engage in sexual behaviours because they think there are no adverse consequences. Participant 2 stated:

There’s a lot of explicit sex on TV, which ... Each and every day you watch TV, you watch soapies, and you watch dramas there is always a sex scene, where as a young person you kinda go like I wanna see what that feels like, you know! I wanna experience that for myself. If Karabo on Generations can do that so can I, because as a young somebody you look at Karabo as an idol as a role model, you know. Everything about Karabo, if Karabo is your role model you see it as perfection, so now at the end of the day you wanna be like Karabo. So I think that is the one thing that can actually lead you astray.

Participant 1 agreed:

I think I would say more because every day when I watch television, there’s always, umh ... you know ... eeh ... there’s always intimacy between two certain people. Every day when I watch television somebody has to kiss someone, somebody has to do something intimate with someone and I think on everyday television, in a soapie, in a drama, or comedy, there has to be sexual scenes, you know contact between the two, you know ... it’s something that happens every day, I think on everyday television whether it’s a soapie or comedy.

Role models

The theoretical framework underlying this study, namely social learning theory, basically states that people observe and model what they have observed (Bandura, 1977, 1996). The next theme that emerged was that adolescents regard television characters as their role models. Thus, the participants commented that they look at the characters on television as their role models and it seems easier for them to do what these characters do because it seems acceptable and looks enjoyable. They indicated that they view television characters as their role models, thus, they are influenced by them and are susceptible to do what they are doing especially if there seem to be no consequences thereof. Furthermore, Huit (2004) and Ward (2003) argued that if individuals have learned some new behaviour, then they have the potential to produce it if or when they find themselves in a situation in which such a performance appears to be desirable, useful, or likely to serve their own purpose. Social learning theory states that vicarious or explicit reward usually leads to imitation of the modelled behaviour, whereas vicarious punishment leads to counter-imitation (Bandura, 1986;
The influence of vicarious outcomes on observers’ behaviour is mediated by their cognition. Thus, the vicarious results they observe provide them with information which they interpret and use in the light of the total situation and their previous experience (Bandura, 1997).

According to Bandura (1977, 1997), sexual modelling teaches affectionate techniques, reduces sexual inhibition, alters sexual attitudes, and shapes sexual practices by conveying norms, for instance, which behaviours are socially acceptable and which are not. Thus, sexual content may contribute to the re-shaping of sexual beliefs among adolescents as they watch programmes containing sexual messages on television. Participants also commented that television can influence their sexual beliefs, as voiced by Participant 3:

The problem is that we don’t know ... we don’t really know the real Karabo, the only Karabo we see is on Generations, so if ... if I like the way Karabo dresses and if I like the way Karabo does her things, actually I am gonna be like my role model is Karabo, my role model is so and so. And I will be like whatever so and so does, I wanna do that myself because I think for that purpose of living at the end of the day it doesn’t harm her as an individual, so I think if it doesn’t hurt why not!

Parents and peers

From the interviews it was apparent that there are other aspects that influence the shaping of adolescent girls’ sexual attitudes and behaviour. The participants strongly indicated that parents and peers also play an important role in shaping their sexual attitudes and behaviour. Miller and Fox (1987) stated that adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviour are also influenced by close relationships in family and peer groups. Leigh, Morrison, Trocki, and Temple (1994), and Werner-Wilson (1998) further stated that family structure has been of particular interest to most researchers, as more adolescents are being exposed to family disruption and are moving away from traditional lifestyles. These changes influence adolescents’ sexual behaviour and increase their acceptance of attitudes toward sexual activities (Haffner, 1997; Werner-Wilson, 1998). Participant 2 argued:

They’ve [peer groups] got a big role to play in our lives. I think even a much bigger role than our parents because they are the people we go to, we talk to a lot and then we ask for advice most of the time because you don’t ... we don’t wanna talk to our parents. So I think our friends have got a lot of influence because if you ask them how am I gonna do this?, you know ... how am I gonna say this, how am I gonna do this and then and then, they are the ones to tell you do this ... do that and don’t do that, but then most of the time it’s all about influence, ... it’s all about how your friends are. There are those friends, you know, that are there, you know, just to take something away from you and there are those friends who are there to be there for you when you need them. So it’s also about which friends do you have, which do you choose to have in your life and then how you choose your friends, you know, because it’s not everybody that comes in your life for just being
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in your life and being your friend. There are those who come as predators in your life so you gotta be careful who you choose as a friend in your life.

According to Wright, Peterson, and Barnes (1990), the strength of peer influence on sexuality is mediated by parent-adolescent communication. Although adolescents rate friends, school, and books as more important than parents as sources of information about sex, parents are rated as having more influence on sexual attitudes (Sanders & Mullis, 1988).

However, Eggermont (2005) stated that an adolescent’s perception of how peers behave may have some bearing on his or her intentions or actual behaviour. Eggermont (2005) and Heintz-Knowles (1996) further stated that this may be due to several reasons, including adolescents’ television viewing.

Therefore, this theme indicates that adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviour are influenced by different aspects of their life. Parents, peers as well as television and the media as a whole seem to be the major contributors to the shaping of adolescent girls’ sexual attitudes and behaviour in Mabopane.

Characteristics of role models

People learn behaviour from their family and peers, as well as observe it in their local community and in the community at large. This behaviour is reinforced by what adolescents see and hear on television, on the internet, in video games, movies, music videos, and music (Brown et al., 2005; Chapin, 2000; Eggermont, 2005; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996; Huit, 2004; Huston et al., 1996; Roberts, 2000). Furthermore, characteristics of role models, such as age, sex, status, and personality, in interaction with other factors, play a role in observational learning (Hall et al., 1985). A model with a high status or characteristics similar to those of the observer is more likely to be imitated than a low status model or one that is dissimilar. Thus, it is more likely that adolescents, as observers, would copy symbolic models, such as characters in television programmes, movies, music videos, the internet, or books.

One of the effects of such media saturation is the transmission of societal beauty ideals (Tiggemann, 2006). Formal content analyses of women’s magazines and television programmes have shown a predominance of young, tall, and extremely thin women (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999). Thus, these embodiments of beauty underscore the desirability of thinness at a level that is unrealistic for most women to achieve by healthy means (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999; Syypeck, Gray, & Ahrens, 2004). Participant 1 argued:

I think television also portrays something that you know ... like in terms of modelling you know that kind of stuff. I think that it tends to destroy young people because as a young person I also think ... . I’m a size 32 but I think I’m fat because I see a certain model wear a size 22 and everyone says she’s beautiful, she’s nice, she’s got money you know so I wanna look like that person and ... and to make myself feel better, so I think
that in terms of body size, I think that television contributes a lot in terms of young girls getting sick and forgetting that you know size doesn’t really matter, I’m not saying that you should be obese just because of ... you know ... I think that they should try to send a good message about eeeh ... an individual loving their own body and accepting that. If they are fat they are fat, if they are skinny they should accept that.

CONCLUSION

The authors recognise that this study has certain limitations and therefore make recommendations for future studies. Future studies should try to be more specific regarding television programmes (soap operas, dramas, and movies) as well as television channels (SABC 1, 2, 3, E-TV, or DSTV). Studies could investigate the types of sexual content of television shows, which television shows different groups of adolescents watch, and why they watch these shows. Furthermore, research is needed into the functions that viewing sexual content serves for different groups of adolescents, why adolescents select or avoid sexual content, and what the reasons for such viewing behaviour are.

Participants stated that they regard television as one of the major influences in their lives, not only towards sexuality, but in other aspects as well, such as aggression/violence, as well as experiencing contentment with their bodies. The participants acknowledged that television influences them both positively (shows that teach them about life; e.g., Take5, Thetha-Junction) and negatively (programmes that have sexual messages; e.g., soapies, movies, dramas). Therefore, studies could be done to view how television influences these other aspects, such as violence, body dissatisfaction, and so on.

Furthermore, participants mentioned that television is not the only factor that influences their attitudes and behaviour towards sex, and future studies could therefore consider addressing the influence of peers and parents on adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviour: How do different groups, such as parents and children, peers, and educators talk about sexual topics on television and in the media generally? What healthy sexual practices are discussed? What public health concerns are discussed? Do television and other media provide public health guidelines for audiences?
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Tebogo Moswang currently works as a contractor at the Ethics Institute of South Africa. She works as a call-centre consultant in their research project called South African Corporate Ethics Indicator. She has recently qualified as a Counselling Psychologist.

Ilse Ruane is passionately committed to issues concerning social justice and community mental welfare, and is enthusiastic about change. She is a self-proclaimed social activist and community psychologist. Ilse is involved in postgraduate training and the supervision of trainee psychologists at the University of Pretoria. In her current research she is exploring how the profession of psychology is responding to the diverse multicultural nature of the South African context in the training of postgraduate students.

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