

Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

Volume 2010 *Proceedings of the 68th New York State
Communication Association*

Article 10

4-16-2012

“They Don’t Teach This in High School”: An Examination of the Portrayal of Teenage Pregnancy in the MTV Television Show 16 and Pregnant

Elizabeth F. Smith

New York University, liz.faye.smith@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Elizabeth F. (2011) ““They Don’t Teach This in High School”: An Examination of the Portrayal of Teenage Pregnancy in the MTV Television Show 16 and Pregnant,” *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2010, Article 10. Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2010/iss1/10>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.

"They Don't Teach This in High School": An Examination of the Portrayal of Teenage Pregnancy in the MTV Television Show *16 and Pregnant*

Elizabeth F. Smith
New York University

This paper examines the depiction of teenage pregnancy on the MTV show *16 and Pregnant*, a documentary-style reality show. Based on previous research and using a qualitative textual analysis, the author examines how the teen girls describe themselves, whether contraception was discussed (and if it was, how so), what options the teens discussed in regards to the pregnancy, the role of the father of the child, and the role of the mother. The author concludes that while *16 and Pregnant* is a step forward in realistic portrayals of the consequences of sex targeted at teens, the show could be doing much more in terms of providing valuable sexual health information to teens.

This study is a first of its kind for many reasons. To begin, studies of portrayals of teenage pregnancy in the media are nearly non-existent. Second, of the few previous studies done on the subject of portrayals of sexual health and teen pregnancy in the media, most have been quantitative in nature. Third, the show under examination, *16 and Pregnant*, is itself a first of its kind. The goal of the current study is to extend the limited research on teen sexual health portrayals in the media by examining the way teen pregnancy is portrayed in the MTV show *16 and Pregnant*. To my knowledge, few if any previous studies have ever undertaken a qualitative textual analysis of an entertainment media text that focuses specifically on teen pregnancy.

Literature Review

The portrayal of teen pregnancy in media targeted at adolescents has yet to be studied extensively. While media targeted at adolescents is laden with sexual scenarios, there are very few portrayals of teen pregnancy in this media and thus, until recently, there has been very little media content available for researchers to examine. The lack of portrayals of teen pregnancy in adolescent media is likely due to the taboo nature of the topic. However, in recent years there has been a slight rise in entertainment media depicting teen pregnancy with movies like *Juno* (2007) and the MTV show *16 and Pregnant* having been quite popular with adolescent teens—especially females. As these types of portrayals increase, it will be important for media researchers to begin examining them, in order to assess what messages teens are being sent regarding teen pregnancy.

While there has been nearly no research on media representations of teen pregnancy, there has been a fair amount of research on sex and sexuality in media aimed at teens. Most of the research on media and teen sexuality has been quantitative in nature and has consisted mainly of content analyses measuring the amount and type of portrayals of sex across mediums. In addition, several longitudinal survey based effects studies have been conducted on the impact of sexual media on teens. Of those media effects studies, only one has focused on the impact of sexual media exposure on teen pregnancy (Chandra, et al., 2008). This study will begin with an overview of these types of research.

The content analyses of sex and sexual health in the mass media have consistently found a gendered dynamic in the presentation of such information. Clarke (2009) examined magazine articles on sexuality and sexual health in popular magazines for teen girls published between 2000 and 2007. She found that sexual relations are presented as something to fear (Clarke, 2009). Pregnancy and STDs are consistently presented as possible, if not likely, outcomes of sexual intercourse (Clarke, 2009). When pregnancy is discussed, young women are portrayed as ultimately responsible since, unlike men, they cannot run away to avoid pregnancy (Clarke, 2009). Following on the idea that men can opt out of parenthood, young men are depicted in these magazines as undependable and in search of their own sexual pleasure at any expense (Clarke, 2009). The answer to the fear and danger related to sex in these magazines is a repeated emphasis on abstinence, (Clarke, 2009).

In his summary of findings on sexuality in teen media, Wright (2009) similarly emphasized the gendered differences in portrayals of sex on television. He states that studies have found that males in teens' favorite television shows are shown to be preoccupied by sex and that their masculinity is shown as directly related to their sexual conquests, while females in these shows are portrayed as willing participants in their own sexual objectification and desiring of men primarily for their wealth, power and status (Wright, 2009, p. 185). Overall, Wright (2009) concludes that research of teen sexuality on television consistently finds that popular teen shows are likely to portray sex as risk free, and recreational, and to stereotypically portray male and females' sexual roles and preferences.

Finally, Hust et al., (2008) in one of the most comprehensive content analyses of sexual health messages in teen media, found that while sex is portrayed in 12% of all the media they examined, less than one half of 1% of that media discussed or portrayed sexual health. When adolescent-targeted media did depict sexually healthy behavior, the focus was narrow and gender stereotypical. The Hust et al. (2008) study found three overall themes relating to sexual health in teen-targeted media: 1. Sexual health is funny and/or embarrassing, 2. Boys are obsessed with sex and sexual performance and 3. Girls are responsible for teen pregnancy, contraception and STD prevention (p. 14). In addition, the content about sexual health topics was often ambiguous and inaccurate, reinforced traditional gender stereotypes, and used humor to undermine sexually responsible

behavior (Hust et al., 2008, p. 19). The authors emphasize that, in light of the large amount of sex presented in media aimed at teens, the lack of information about possible negative consequences and methods to protect against those consequences is especially troubling (Hust et al, 2008).

Next is a review of two studies on the effects of teens' exposure to the content described above. Brown et al. (2006) completed a longitudinal study using survey methods that investigated the effects of exposure to sexual content in the media on teens' sexual activity. The study found that 12 to 14 year olds who had been exposed to a heavier "sexual media diet" were more likely to have engaged in sexual activity two years after the initial survey than those with lighter "sexual media diets" (Brown et al., 2006). Then, in the only study to examine the effect of exposure to sexual media content on teen pregnancy, the researchers found that frequent exposure to sexual content on television predicted early pregnancy, even when accounting for the influence of other known factors (Chandra et al., 2008). The study was based on a longitudinal survey using a national youth sample. Even though the study was the first of its kind and could not definitively establish a causal relationship between the variables, the authors stress that the magnitude of the association they found is strong enough that even if only a fraction of the observed result is causal, reducing exposure to sexual content in the media might substantially reduce teen pregnancy rates (Chandra et al., 2008).

While causality is always impossible to establish in empirical studies like those described above, many of the authors stress the importance of media scripts in shaping teens' conceptions about their sexual behavior and health. Hust et al. (2008) state that media characters may provide examples for teens on which to model their own behavior. They state that, "Sexual scripts in the media, often laden with cultural values and norms, convey how individuals 'should' act in sexual situations," (p. 5). Grisso & Weis (2005) examined teen girls' own descriptions of their sexuality on the message boards of a popular alternative, progressive website for teen girls. They found that many girls were reproducing the dominant, androcentric conceptions of sexuality found in the mainstream media in their talk online—even within the safe space of an all-girl website (Grisso & Weis, 2005). The authors conclude that contemporary media scripts are "important contributions to girls' conceptions of sexual behavior and identity," (Grisso & Weiss, 2005).

Although sparse, past research on teens' media use has found that sexuality is often portrayed stereotypically, that sexual health is rarely portrayed and that when it is, the burden of protection is always put on the female. While few, if any, studies have looked specifically at the portrayal of teen pregnancy in the entertainment media, the news media does provide us with an enduring and deeply embedded image of teen mothers. In their book, *The Mommy Myth*, Douglas and Michaels (2004) provide a broad, yet detailed, examination of the news media's portrayal of mothers in the U.S. They point out that both the news media and politicians held up the teen mom on welfare as the antithesis of

the perfection of motherhood that was simultaneously promoted by both the news and entertainment media.

In their discussion of the war on welfare mothers, Douglas and Michaels (2004) do an in-depth examination of the image of teen moms presented by the media.

The “Welfare Reform” Poster mother as she emerged in the late 1980s: She only had a first name, she lived in the urban decay of New York, Chicago, or Detroit, she was a teenager, black, not married, had a pile of kids each with a different absent father, and she spent her day painting her nails, smoking cigarettes, and feeding Pepsi to her baby (p. 178).

Douglas and Michaels (2004) emphasize that such portrayals of teen mothers in the news media silenced the mothers themselves, instead relying on experts to describe them as subjects. When the subjects of the news stories did speak, their words were often molded by the journalists to fit a “media-scripted role”:

She got pregnant by ‘not thinking,’ she regretted it now, she hated the father, it was very hard to be a good mother, welfare had made it all possible, and she had no idea nor could care less that taxpayers were footing her bill, and it was indeed costing ‘us’ a fortune (p. 192).

Thus the dominant image of teen mothers presented by the news media emphasized their race and poverty. This cultural image of teen mothers persists today.

According to the Guttmacher Institute (2010), 46% of all 15 to 19-year-olds in the US have had sex at least once and those who are sexually active and do not use a form of contraceptive have a 90% chance of becoming pregnant within a year. For the first time since the 1990s teen pregnancy rates increased in 2006 by 3% and each year almost 750,000 women aged 15 to 19 become pregnant, with black and Hispanic women having the highest rates of teen pregnancy (Guttmacher, 2010). In addition, 10% of all U.S. childbirths are to teens and in 2006 there were 42 births per 1,000 15 to 19-year-old women (Guttmacher, 2010). Teen mothers are still less likely than their peers to go to college (Guttmacher, 2010).

Besides exposure to sexual content in the media, there are other important factors leading to teen pregnancy. Chief among these is the state of sexual health education in this country. According to the Guttmacher Institute (2006), by 2002, one-third of teens had not received any formal instruction about contraception and 86% of the public school districts that had a policy to teach sex education required abstinence be promoted. Of those public schools, 35% required abstinence be the only option taught and half of all public school districts in the South had an abstinence-only policy compared with 20% in the Northeast (Guttmacher, 2006).

Given the complicated and contradictory state of teens' access to information about sex from the media and school, it is not surprising that many teens are unprepared to practice safe sex or to deal with the consequences of sexual activity. It is imperative that research continues to be done on teens' consumption of sex in the media, because for many the media may be the only place for them to get any information about sex. It is also important that findings from such research are used to push for more responsible portrayals of sex and sexuality in media aimed at teens. It is hoped that the current study will continue to expand our understanding of what teens see in the media in relation to sex and its consequences.

The current study is a qualitative analysis of the first season of the MTV documentary/reality television series *16 and Pregnant*. The show devotes each episode to a different teen girl's story of pregnancy and typically follows each girl from her 1st or 2nd trimester until a month or two after the birth of her child. The first season of the show contained six episodes with each episode focused on one teen's story. According to Nielson ratings, *16 and Pregnant* is extremely popular with teen girls. The season 2 finale was viewed by over 2.5 million people and was the most watched show among females aged 12 to 34 across all television including broadcast (Gorman, 2010). Due to its immense popularity and explicit focus on the consequences of teens' sexual activity, *16 and Pregnant* is an extremely important media text to examine.

Methods

The method chosen for use in this study was that of qualitative textual analysis. Because no previous research has been completed on portrayals of teen pregnancy and motherhood in entertainment media, this study aims to provide a broad understanding of the content and messages within the series *16 and Pregnant*. In the future the use of content analysis in the examination of portrayals should be used in order to provide a fuller understanding of the nature of portrayals of teenage pregnancy in the media. It is hoped that the current qualitative analysis will serve as a primary entry into this field of research, upon which further research can build and refine using a variety of methodologies.

The method of textual analysis employed in the current research "involves examining the formal internal features and contextual location of a text to ascertain what readings or meanings can be obtained from it," (Hartley, 2001, p. 227). In addition, a textual analysis looks beyond the text itself to the possible cultural and political implications of the representations found. By examining themes which emerge regarding teen pregnancy within each episode and across the series of episodes and comparing these findings to previous research on teen sexuality and the media, this research seeks to place these results in the current context of teens' sexual behavior and sexual education. The four main themes examined in each episode—discussion of contraception or safe sex, discussion of options with regard to the pregnancy, the role of the father and the role of the mother—are drawn from the findings of Hust, et al. (2008), Clarke (2009) and

Douglas & Michaels (2004) as detailed above. Additional themes and trends were drawn from the texts themselves.

In order to complete a qualitative textual analysis, it was first necessary to watch each episode in order to become familiar with the form, style and content of the show. Next, the episodes were viewed again and transcribed in detail. The episodes were then watched a third time to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Finally, the transcripts were assessed for general trends across episodes. In particular, how the teen girls described themselves, whether contraception was discussed, what options the teens discussed in regards to the pregnancy, the role of the father throughout pregnancy and post-birth, the role of the mother, and the role of the teens' families were examined. During the analysis other trends were noted and will be described in the following section. While numbers are provided in relation to the trends or themes discussed, they are meant only to give the reader a better understanding of the nature of such trends and not to serve as a valid statistical analysis.

All episodes of *16 and Pregnant* are available to view online on the MTV website. This proved convenient for two reasons: first, there was no constraint caused by having to wait for episodes to air on television and second, the author could pause, rewind and play back each episode, which helped enormously in the transcription process. Each episode followed the same basic format, beginning with a voice-over introduction by the teen mother. As the show progressed, it mixed recorded footage of events and conversations with voice-overs by the teen moms who served as narrators. Animated drawings served to break each episode into sections, which were demarcated by noting the week of pregnancy or age in days, or weeks, of the new baby. Because the voice over narration by the teen mothers was most likely added in post-production, it was important make sure to denote the difference between voice over narration and recorded "live" conversations in the transcription.

Results

Contrary to the dominant cultural image of teen mothers in the U.S. as African-American welfare recipients residing in the inner city, five out of six of the mothers profiled in the first season of *16 and Pregnant* were white and all 6 lived in rural or suburban settings. The only mother who was not white was Ebony, who identified as mixed race. In addition, all five of the fathers shown in the season were white. The father of Farrah's child was not shown because she chose not to have contact with him. All of the mothers carried their pregnancy to term and five of the six mothers kept their babies after birth. Catelynn was the exception and chose to give her daughter up for adoption. In their voice-over introductions, five out of six of the teen mothers described themselves as "typical teenagers" who played sports, were on the cheerleading team, shopped, hung out with friends, etc. The only mother who did not describe herself this way was Catelynn who emphasized her chaotic home life.

Discussion of contraception or safe sex

Five out of the six episodes featured at least one mention or some discussion of contraception use by the teens. All of the discussion of contraception occurred during filmed conversations between the participants and not during the mothers' voice over narration. Four of the conversations occurred between the teen parents and their own parents, one occurred in a conversation between one of the couples and one occurred while a teen father was talking with a friend. Maci was the only participant to state that her parents had not talked to her about sex before she became pregnant. Maci's boyfriend Ryan's parents, however, questioned how the pregnancy occurred since they had talked with Ryan. The parents of both Ebony and her boyfriend Josh stressed that they had talked with them about sex. In a conversation with Amber's mother, Amber's boyfriend Gary states that they "took most of the precautions," but Amber's mother states that is not what Amber told her. In a conversation between Amber and Gary, Amber states that she's pregnant because Gary doesn't like condoms and she was "too stupid" to make him put one on to which Gary replies, "I never said I don't like condoms." In a conversation with his friend Ashley, Catelynn's boyfriend Tyler states that Catelynn got pregnant because he used a condom that had been washed in the washing machine. Only the episode about Farrah did not include any mention of contraception or how she became pregnant.

Discussion of options with regard to the pregnancy

Four of the six episodes featured a discussion of the multiple options available to the mothers when they found out they were pregnant. Again, most of these discussions occurred in conversations rather than in voiceovers. Interestingly, two of the conversations occurred in classrooms between the teen mothers and other students. One of Maci's classmates asks her if she ever thought about not going through with the pregnancy to which Maci responds "I just put up with it. I mean every option crosses your mind but I never considered it. I was just like 'might as well make the best of what I've done.'" When students in her class question her, Ebony implicitly acknowledges that she had options when she states that she made a choice to have her baby because she wants to.

The other conversations regarding options occurred between show participants and their families or friends. Whitney is talking with her grandmother when she says, "It's hard to believe that I thought about giving it up because I thought I couldn't do it," and in a voiceover states that they thought about abortion and adoption at first. Whitney continues her conversation with her grandmother by saying, "When I decided that I would keep it for sure that's when I went to the doctor the first time and I saw it."

Catelynn and Tyler, the parents who eventually decide on adoption discuss their options more than any of the other teen mothers and fathers. Near the beginning of the episode

Catelynn is talking with her friend Tabitha and says, “I don’t really know what I’m going to do. Me and Tyler talked about keeping it but there’s not really a lot of good things about keeping it. Like there is, but there isn’t. You know? There’s scary things about adoption but parenting, I mean that’s even scarier.” In a later conversation between Tyler and Catelynn, Tyler states that keeping the baby or giving it up for adoption are the “last two options” and after discussion about their unstable home lives and lack of resources, they decide together that adoption is the best option.

The role of the father

As mentioned earlier, only five fathers are shown in the six episode series. The fathers who are shown differ widely in their roles. Maci’s boyfriend Ryan is the least helpful and most obviously miserable. Pre-birth Ryan seems completely uninterested in talking about anything related to the baby and seems to be avoiding dealing with reality. Post-birth Ryan continues to live his life the same way, going out with friends and barely helping with the baby. Maci says that sometimes she feels like she’s taking care of two babies.

At the opposite end of the fatherhood spectrum are Weston (Whitney’s boyfriend) and Tyler (Catelynn’s boyfriend). Like many of the other fathers, Weston works to support Whitney and their unborn child. When the baby is born Weston is the most hands on of all of the fathers. While Whitney is recovering from her C-section Weston takes care of the baby on his own and she repeatedly praises him saying things like “Thank God for Weston.” During her concluding monologue Whitney says, “To tell the truth having a baby is more than I can handle at my age so I have to rely on Weston to do a lot.”

Although Tyler does not get a chance to be a father after the birth of his daughter, because he and Catelynn put her up for adoption, he is extremely supportive throughout the entire pregnancy. He fully supports Catelynn’s decision to go through with adoption and is there in the delivery room when she gives birth. When the baby is born, Catelynn does not want to see her and Tyler steps in and hugs her immediately after the birth to block her view while telling her “I love you so much. We can do this, honey, I know we can do this [...] This is all for her. All for her. She’s going to have such a good life honey. And she’s going to be so happy.” It is clear that Tyler loves and supports Catelynn as they both cry through the entire adoption process at the hospital.

The role of the mother

All of the girls accept their pregnancies and begin the transition to being mothers. While each girl takes to being a mother in a slightly different way, all of them except for Catelynn, do become mothers in the traditional sense. One similarity among the five girls who keep their babies is their emphasis on their lack of choice as compared to the fathers. Both Maci and Ebony state that they “grew up” because they had to. For all of the teen girls, being a mother was not an option and thus they had to adjust their lives accordingly.

Other trends

Besides the major trends described above, there were several others observed during analysis of the transcripts. In particular, the importance of the role of the teens' parents became apparent. There were also cross-episode emphases on the difficulty of pregnancy and being a teen parent and on the changes in the teen parents' lives caused by their situations. In addition, one other minor trend was noted: mentions of virginity by two girls. Both Amber and Whitney state that they were virgins when they met their baby's fathers and Amber, in particular, phrases it by saying, "At least I'm with the guy I lost my virginity to."

The most interesting thing about the role of the teens' parents in this series was that, regardless of the disappointment and regret felt by the teens' parents, they all supported their daughters' choices, except for Catelynn and Tyler's (the couple who chose to adopt) parents. Both Catelynn and Tyler's parents are adamantly against the adoption, and surprisingly, the teen parents show more maturity and common sense than their adult parents. While talking to his father, Butch, Tyler says that his child deserves better than what he had, to which Butch responds, "All that baby needs is love." Tyler shows his maturity level when he responds, "No!! That's not all a baby needs is love, Dad. You have no idea what you're talking about. [...] You weren't even in my life [...] You made a stupid choice and you were in prison." Catelynn's mom responds to the decision to go through with the adoption by buying baby clothes and a bassinet in an attempt to change Catelynn's mind. For the rest of the teens, the main sentiment expressed with regard to their families is admission that they could not do it without them and gratitude for the support they provide.

The teens' emphasis on the difficulty of their situations centered on the births themselves, the amount of work that goes into caring for a newborn, the sacrifices the mothers must make, and providing for a baby. Both Maci and Whitney mention the hardship of labor, particularly the immense pain, like nothing either of them had ever felt. Farrah and Amber both state that they don't teach you anything you need to know as a new mother in high school and that parenting is a lot of work. Both Maci and Ebony reference the sacrifices they had to make when they became mothers. Maci had to quit dance, one of the few things she did for herself while also going to college and working, because Ryan would not help with the baby, and Ebony had to give up on her dream to join the Air Force. Finally, Amber and Whitney both extensively discuss their issues with money and how expensive it is to provide for a baby, especially when only the fathers are working.

In contrast to the other teen mom's descriptions of the difficulties they faced while pregnant and after their baby was born, Catelynn had to endure a completely different kind of hardship. When Catelynn and Tyler meet with their adoption counselor she warns, "Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is be selfless and let go. That doesn't mean it's easy. That doesn't mean it's not without grief and loss because I will tell you that it will be the hardest thing that you've ever had to do in your life." Watching Catelynn and

Tyler say good-bye to their baby daughter in the hospital was a gut wrenching moment. However, in her concluding voice-over Catelynn gives the viewer hope. Even though she reiterates “Giving my child up for adoption was the hardest thing I’ll ever have to do in my life,” she finishes by saying that she is at peace with her decision. Out of all the moms featured on the show, Catelynn had to endure the most when she gave up her baby with no support from her family, and only her boyfriend Tyler to stand by her side.

Related to their emphasis on the hardships they face as a result of their pregnancies, are the mothers’ emphases on how much having and providing for a baby has changed their lives. Often the changes to their lives were expressed through the teen moms’ comparisons to what other people their age were doing. For instance, Amber says, “Most kids are shopping for back to school stuff but I’m in the baby section shopping for baby stuff.” Another way the moms expressed the major changes in their lives was by reminiscing, like when Maci says “I can’t believe how much I miss my old life: Hanging out with friends, riding dirt bikes and cheerleading but those days are gone.”

At the end of each episode, each new mom does a concluding voice-over. The girls all end their episodes by asking open-ended questions about their futures. Will they stay with their baby’s father, will they finish school or go on to college, and are they going to be able to support themselves, are just some of the questions the teen moms ask themselves at the end of their respective episodes. *16 and Pregnant* only documents the first few months of the teens’ new lives as mothers and the girls make clear that only time will tell how the next 18 years of their lives will turn out.

Discussion

When the results of the textual analysis are compared with past research on sex, sexual health and pregnancy in teen-targeted media, it becomes clear that *16 and Pregnant* is, in some ways, a step forward in media portrayals of sexual health targeted at teens but also that there is also still much room for improvement. To begin, we see a similar finding to those of Hust et al. (2008) and Clarke (2009) in that pregnancy is still portrayed as ultimately a girl’s responsibility and the fathers are portrayed as having the ability to opt out and two of them do so.

The portrayals of pregnant teenagers in *16 and Pregnant* could be considered progressive in the sense that they do not reproduce the dominant cultural model of teenage mother as an inner-city, African-American welfare recipient, as found by Douglas & Michaels (2004). However, by focusing almost exclusively on white teens from rural and suburban areas, the show effectively silences the experiences of a whole range of different types of people. In addition, almost all of the teens presented on the show had the full support of their parents, most of whom had some form of resources with which they could support their kids. In this sense, the show reproduces a white, middle-class norm. It is unclear how MTV chose participants for the show, whether they were self selected or chosen by

the network. One possibility is that MTV deliberately chose the participants based on the demographics of their viewing audience.

Another major, positive aspect of the show is that, unlike other teen-focused media as described by Hust et al. (2008), *16 and Pregnant* shows in vivid detail the consequences of unprotected sex. In addition, it emphasizes the difficulties and life changing nature of having a child as a teenager. The show should also be lauded for its in depth look at the adoption process. However, *16 and Pregnant* does not provide any information within the show about safer sex practices and there is absolutely no mention of abortion as a viable option, or of contraception options available to teens. One explanation for this may be due to sponsorship issues. Companies may not want to buy ad time during a show that discusses abortion or contraception. However, as Hust et al. (2008) concluded, the lack of information about the prevention of pregnancy is very troubling, especially since this is a show specifically about unwanted teen pregnancy.

Knowing that teens turn to the media for sexual health information and that it is often hard for them to get that type of information, *16 and Pregnant* could provide a valuable service to teens nationwide by including information about safer sex practices. Its good that the show's website does have links to various other organizations that provide sexual health information and service. However, it is reasonable to guess that teens are less likely to see this information than they would if it was included in the show itself.

Another aspect of the show that may have an effect on teens' perceptions is its designation as a documentary-style reality show. Following Grisso & Weiss (2005) and Hust et al. (2008) we know that teens may model their sexual behavior based on sexual scripts found within media. Although the nature of the reality presented is unclear and we don't know the amount and type of editing used on each episode, the show is likely perceived as "real" by those who watch it due to its resemblance to other documentary styles. The viewer doesn't know how much of each teen's experience was changed to fit into a story, but because it is likely perceived as reality, or at least more real than a scripted drama, the portrayals of teen pregnancy and sexual health in *16 and Pregnant* may have a larger impact on teens perceptions and understandings of the risks associated with sexual intercourse.

Conclusion

First, it is important that some of the limitations of the present study are addressed. To begin, only one season of the show was analyzed. The second season, which has more episodes, should be analyzed in the future to assess any possible progress in the portrayals, as should the supplementary episodes consisting of follow-ups with some of the teen mothers and reunion specials. Also, because the show was viewed online, the commercials being shown during the original airing of the episodes could not be assessed. Finally, due to this study's qualitative nature, it should serve as a starting point

for further research, which should utilize a variety of methodologies, including that of quantitative content analysis.

When compared with previous research, this study shows that *16 and Pregnant* is different in that it does show, in vivid detail, the consequences of unprotected sex. However, in doing so, *16 and Pregnant* is like much other teen programming in that it reinforces the ideas of traditional gender roles, that teen girls are responsible for contraception and unwanted pregnancy, and that teen boys can opt out of parenthood. In addition, teens, and especially teen girls, may be taking the portrayals of teen sexuality and parenthood on the show seriously as a way to learn about the effects of unprotected sex and unwanted pregnancy. In this respect, the show does not go far enough in its discussion of pregnancy prevention and the options available to teens faced with an unwanted pregnancy.

Considering the state of teen pregnancy rates, the lack of comprehensive sexual education in many schools and the popularity of the program with teen girls, *16 and Pregnant* could be extremely beneficial in filling the information gap for teens if the producers were more proactive about inserting information about safe sex. In comparison to other television shows aimed at teen audiences that deal with sexual themes, *16 and Pregnant* treats teens' sexual experiences and the consequences of those experiences in a respectful and serious manner. While the show is not without its flaws, it may be providing much needed realistic portrayals of the consequences of sex to teens.

References

- Brown, J.D., et al. (2006). Sexy media matter: Exposure to sexual content in music, movies, television, and magazines predicts black and white adolescents' sexual behavior. *Pediatrics*, *117* 1018-1027.
- Chandra, A., et al. (2008). Does watching sex on television predict teen pregnancy? Findings from a national longitudinal survey of youth. *Pediatrics*, *122*, 1047-1054.
- Clarke, J. (2009). Women's work, worry and fear: The portrayal of sexuality and sexual health in US magazines for teenage and middle-aged women, 2000-2007. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *11* (4), 415-429.
- Douglas, S.J. & Michaels, M.W. (2004). *The mommy myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined all women*. New York: Free Press.
- Freeman, M. J. (Producer). (2009). *16 and Pregnant* (Television series). New York: MTV. (can be accessed online using the following link: http://www.mtv.com/shows/16_and_pregnant/season_1/video.jhtml?filter=fulleps)

Gorman, B. (21 April 2010). MTV's *16 and Pregnant* Season Two up from season one by Over 40% . Retrieved from <http://tvbythenumbers.com/2010/04/21/mtvs-16-and-pregnant-season-two-up-from-season-one-by-over-40/49379>

Grisso, A. D. & Weis, D. (2005). What are gURLS talking about? : Adolescent girls' construction of sexual identity on gURL.com. In S. Mazzarella (Ed.), *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the internet, and the negotiation of identity* (pp. 31-50). New York: Peter Lang.

The Guttmacher Institute. (2006) *Facts on sex education in the United States*. Retrieved from http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_sexEd2006.html

The Guttmacher Institute. (2010) *Facts on American teens' sexual and reproductive health*. Retrieved from <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/FB-ATSRH.html>

Hartley, J. (2002). *Communication, cultural and media studies: The key concepts*. New York: Routledge.

Hust, S. J. T., Brown, J. D., & Landin L'Engle, K. (2008). Boys will be boys and girls better be prepared: An analysis of the rare sexual health messages in Young adolescents' media. *Mass Communication & Society*, 11, 3-23.

Wright, P. J. (2009). Sexual socialization messages in mainstream entertainment mass media: A review and synthesis. *Sexuality & Culture*, 13, 181-200.