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The Relationship Between Parental Mediation of Adolescent Media Use and Ugandan Adolescents' Sexual Attitudes and Behavior

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ABSTRACT

In sub-Saharan Africa, research about the role of media as an influence on adolescent sexual behavior has focused almost exclusively on the effects of health communication campaigns. Little research has explored the association between parents' attempts to guide their children's entertainment media intake, and adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors. The authors surveyed 360 Ugandan high school students regarding their parents' mediation of their media use; their attitudes about stereotypical gender roles in sexual relationships and casual sex; and their sexual behaviors. Co-using media with opposite sex friends was associated with higher endorsement of casual sex. Adolescents who reported their parents limited the amount of time they spent with media were less likely to report having ever had sex. However, both effects were smaller than the effects of relationship and demographic variables.

KEYTERMS

parental mediation of media use; sexual media content; Uganda; adolescent media use; sexual debut; sexual attitudes

Evidence is growing that entertainment media influence adolescents' sexual socialization and sexual decision-making (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011; Brown et al., 2005; Gottfried, Vaala, Bleakley, Hennessy, & Jordan, 2013; O'Hara, Gibbons, Gerrard, Li, & Sargent, 2012; Vandenbosch, 2014). Research also suggests that parents' involvement in their children's media use can make a difference in how adolescents select, process and respond to sexual media messages (Nathanson, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). Some research indicates that this type of parental action can even be a protective factor for early sexual intercourse (Parkes, Wight, Hunt, Henderson, & Sargent, 2013). However, nearly all of this research has been conducted in Western contexts. In sub-Saharan Africa, research about the role of entertainment media in adolescent sexual behavior has focused almost exclusively on the effects of health communication campaigns. Little research has explored the association between parents' attempts to guide their children's entertainment media intake and

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adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors. This issue is particularly relevant in a nation like Uganda, where the limited evidence available suggests that the level of sexual content in media has dramatically increased in recent years (Gatsounis, 2011; Wabwego, 2012). The present study constitutes an initial investigation of those issues among high school students in Mukono District, Uganda.

Literature review

The Ugandan media environment

The number of media outlets has expanded exponentially in Uganda as media policy has liberalized. Between 1993 and 2015, the number of television (TV) stations increased from one government station to 67 operational public and private stations. Radio has expanded even more dramatically, from a single radio station to 292 (Uganda Communications Commission, 2015). The Internet, prohibitively expensive 10 years ago, is increasingly accessible to urban young people (Ogilvyafrika, 2015). Anecdotal evidence indicates the proliferation of media outlets has been accompanied by an upsurge in sexual content in both locally and internationally produced programming. The change has been so apparent that the popular press has begun to express concern (Gatsiounis, 2011; Wabwego, 2012). A nationwide survey of public perceptions of media revealed that Ugandan adults had a broad-based uneasiness about disregard for Ugandan cultural values in TV programming, and they believed that TV had negative effects on children and adolescents (Chibita & Kibombo, 2014). A substantial proportion of TV content in Uganda is imported from the United States, where studies show that the amount of sexual content has steadily risen in recent years (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009; Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005). Few if any empirical studies have been published regarding locally produced sexual content in Ugandan media. However, Gakahu's (2010) investigation of music popular with young people in neighboring Kenya found that locally produced Kenyan music videos were replete with sexually suggestive clothing and body movements.

Evidence from the United States and Europe reveals that viewing sexual TV content predicts adolescents' attitudes and sexual behavior (Bleakley et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2005; Gottfried et al., 2013; O'Hara et al., 2012; Vandenbosch, 2014), including early sexual initiation and teenage pregnancy up to 2 years later (Brown et al., 2006; Chandra et al., 2008; Collins et al., 2004). Research on this issue in sub-Saharan Africa is scant, but Onyeonoro et al. (2011) found that among female adolescents in southeastern Nigeria, media and peers were the main sources of sexual information and their influence inclined students toward earlier sexual debut. Likewise, a multilevel analysis of demographic and health survey data of 20 African nations found that, contrary to predictions of the researchers, greater media exposure in general was associated with higher risk behavior (Uchudi, Magadi, & Mostazir, 2012). A multinational study by Stephenson, Simon, and Finneran (2014)

reported mixed findings, with higher media exposure associated with early sex among girls in Burkina Faso, but with later sex among girls in Malawi and Uganda.

Parental mediation and adolescents' exposure to sexual media content

At the same time the Ugandan media are, by some accounts, becoming increasingly laden with sexual material, urbanization and modernization have resulted in the weakening of family systems for the sexual socialization of children. In most Ugandan cultural groups, the role of helping children navigate the struggles of adolescence traditionally fell to same-sex aunts and uncles (Nobelius et al., 2010). Some of these structures have begun to break down (Kinsman, Nyanzi, & Pool, 2000; Muyinda, Kengeya, Pool, & Whitworth, 2000). Urban young people especially may rarely get to spend time with relatives who in the past would have provided critical sexual information. Parents are faced with the related challenges of not only stepping into the unaccustomed role of sex educator for their children (Mwakulemu, 2011), but also of responding to a media environment that is changing at a dizzying pace. How Ugandan parents adapt to these tasks may have a significant influence on their teenagers' sexual health.

Research in the United States and the Netherlands suggests parents can mitigate the exposure to, and impact of, some media messages on their children (Nathanson, 2001a; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010; Parkes et al., 2013). Termed *parental mediation* of media use, three types of strategies parents can use have been identified in previous literature (Nathanson, 2001b): *active mediation*, or talking with children about the content of media they are watching or listening to; *restrictive mediation*, or setting rules and regulations about media use in the home; and *coviewing* or *co-use*, simply using media together. The strategies parents choose to influence their children's media use appear to vary between cultural contexts (Clark, 2012; de Morentin, Cortes, Medrano, & Apodaca, 2014). Children's age and sex, and possibly parents' marital status and educational level, have been found to predict the type of strategy used (Gentile, Nathanson, Rasmussen, Reimer, & Walsh, 2012).

Researchers have found that restrictive mediation may lead to lower consumption of aspects of media content (de Leeuw et al., 2011; Gentile et al., 2012). It has also been tied to mitigation of the association between media use and risky sexual behavior (Bersamin et al., 2008; Parkes et al., 2013). There is, however, some evidence that children of overly restrictive parents may develop more positive attitudes toward antisocial TV content and view more of the restricted material (Nathanson, 2002; Nikken & deGraaf, 2013).

Investigations of active mediation and sexual media content are rare. However, research about violent TV content has shown that when parents dialogue with children about it, children may be more skeptical toward media messages and have a better understanding of televised plots (Nathanson, 1999), as well as exhibit lower levels of aggression (Nathanson, 1999) and approval of aggressive behavior (Ruh Linder & Werner, 2012).

The effect of parental co-use of media, that is, watching or listening to media together with children, is unclear. Parental coviewing of TV has been found in some studies to have a protective effect (Bersamin et al., 2008), but when parents do not express disapproval of problematic content while they are coviewing it children may think parents are endorsing that content (Nathanson, 2001b). Adolescents begin to look toward peers to shape their values, and they also have the freedom of movement to seek out friends with whom they can co-use media. Coviewing with peers may have negative effects (Nathanson, 2001a; Parkes et al., 2013), especially if quality of communication with parents is not good (Appel, Stiglbauer, Batinic, & Holtz, 2014).

The current study

Only one study of parental mediation in sub-Saharan Africa was located at the time this study was undertaken, Ngula, Miller, and Mberia's (in press) examination of the association between intake of sexual TV content and parental mediation strategies among public high school students in Nairobi. Ngula et al. found that more coviewing with opposite sex peers was related to higher exposure to sexual TV content, and this effect was stronger among boarding school students than day school students. No restrictive or active mediation variables were significant predictors of exposure to sexual media content. Thus, coviewing was related to the proximate outcome of the amount of sexual media content taken in. However, these researchers did not investigate the effect of parental mediation on adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors.

No information is available describing characteristics of sexual content in locally produced Ugandan programming. However, Ward (1995) analyzed sexual themes commonly portrayed in U.S. TV programs. She coded content in the 10 most popular prime-time programs among adolescents for one broadcast season. Three themes about sexual relationships were found to occur most frequently on prime-time youth-oriented programming. The most common of these was that men are sex driven and have trouble being faithful. The second most frequently conveyed theme was that women are sexual objects whose value is based on their physical appearance. The most common nongender-related theme was a recreational or casual approach to sex. These three themes have been confirmed in subsequent research (see Wright, 2009, for a review). Given that a large proportion of programming in the Ugandan market is imported from the United States, use of these same categories was deemed appropriate. Therefore, we posed the following research question about the association of parental mediation to adolescents' attitudes about sex:

RQ1: To what extent are parental mediation and coviewing associated with adolescents' endorsement of the following attitudes: (a) men are sex driven and have trouble being faithful; (b) women are sexual objects whose value is based on their physical appearance; and (c) recreational or casual sex is OK?

Our second research question addressed parental mediation and adolescents' sexual behaviors:

RQ2: To what extent are parental mediation and coviewing associated with adolescents' (a) ever having had sex, and (b) total number of sexual partners?

Method

This study was part of a larger data collection effort on factors related to Ugandan adolescents' media habits and sexual attitudes. Prior to commencing data collection, the researchers obtained a research permit from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology and approval from the institutional review board of the lead researcher's home institution.

Sample

Data collection took place in four purposively selected high schools in Mukono District. Mukono District is adjacent to the capital city of Kampala and is characterized by a mixed peri-urban and rural environment. A purposive sample of 360 students from four high schools was drawn to maximize variation among students: a lower socio-economic status (SES) private mixed boarding and day school (113 participants), a high SES private religious boarding school (64 participants), a lower SES private boarding school (82 participants), and a public mixed boarding and day school (101 participants). All schools were mixed gender, which is the most common configuration in the district. Two hundred sixty-one students indicated they were boarders and 79 said they were day scholars. One hundred eighty-nine participants were female, 167 were male, and four did not indicate their gender. With respect to level in school, 138 were in the first year of high school, 91 in the second year, 95 in the third year, four in the fourth year, and 25 students were in their fifth year. Mean age for the sample was 14.81 ($SD = 1.58$). Regarding religious affiliation, 318 were Christian, 37 were Muslim, one was Jewish, and two indicated "other." This is approximately reflective of religious diversity in the district. Most Christians (72.1%) indicated they were born again.

Procedure

Permission was obtained from school principals and class teachers to administer questionnaires in the sampled schools. School administrators gave instructions to prefects in charge of each grade level to select the required numbers of students from classes. They were requested to locate first-, second-, and third-year students for a target age of 14 to 16, but a few students in higher grades also ended out being called. After participants were identified, school administrators directed them to a room where they were seated in preparation for survey administration. Members of the research team introduced the respondents to the purpose of the research, after which data collection commenced. Questionnaires were formulated in English, the language of education in Uganda, and self-administered. Prior focus group research had confirmed that students preferred to have questionnaires in English as

compared to local vernacular languages. Two to four researchers were on standby to respond to queries from respondents as they filled out the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained additional items beyond those addressed in the current study and took about 45 min to complete, including time spent answering students' questions. Researchers collected the questionnaires, and if they noticed missing data they asked participants if they would complete the relevant items. At the end of the process, researchers thanked study participants and left an address in case they had further questions.

Measures

Data were gathered from participants about demographic and relational variables that have been shown to operate as covariates in the relationship between sexual attitudes and behavior in previous research (see Wright, 2011, for a summary). These variables were gender, age, class level in school, religious affiliation of school, socioeconomic status of school, religiosity, whether most friends were older or younger, family structure (living with both parents, one, another guardian), quality of relationship with father and mother, educational level of father and mother, and whether the participant was currently in a romantic relationship. Among these, only gender, age, class level in school, socioeconomic level of school, and whether the participant was currently in a romantic relationship had statistically significant correlations with dependent variables in this data set. Therefore, only these demographic and relational variables were retained in the final analyses.

Restrictive and active mediation

Participants were presented with a checklist of potential types of parental mediation strategies adapted from Valkenberg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, and deLeeuw (2013). They responded *yes* or *no* as to whether their own parents monitored media in that way. Restrictive mediation items addressed limits on when media could be used ("My family has rules about when we can watch TV, listen to radio or go on the Internet"), limits on how much time media could be used ("My family has rules about how much time I can spend watching TV, listening to radio, or going on the Internet"), and limits on content of media ("My family has rules about what kind of programmes I can watch or listen to"). Active mediation was measured by two items ("My parent(s) sometimes talk to me about the story or messages in the programming I watch or listen to, and about why it is or isn't good," and "If my parent(s) object to programming I am interested in they explain to me why it is a problem"). Pearson's product moment correlations (ranging from .20 to .38), indicated items had insufficient internal consistency to be combined for restrictive and active mediation, so variables were used as single-item measures.

Parental and peer co-use of media

Participants were asked, "How often would you listen to or watch programs together in each of these situations." They responded on 4-point scales ranging from 1 (*rarely*)

to 4 (*extremely often*), how frequently they watched sexual TV content with parents, same-sex friends, and opposite sex friends.

Sex-related attitudes

To measure sex-related attitudes, we adapted Ward and Rivedeneyra's (1999) dating attitudes scale. The scale asks participants to respond on 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) to items assessing three types of sexual attitudes: guys as sex-driven, girls as sexual objects, and endorsement of casual sex.

Cronbach's alphas indicated reliability was insufficient in this sample to treat the attitude items as scales (guys are sex driven, $\alpha = .47$; girls are sex objects, $\alpha = .50$; casual sex, $\alpha = .32$). Therefore, the two items from each scale that loaded most heavily onto the original factor were employed as single-item measures. Items measuring attitudes toward guys as sex-driven were "Guys are sex driven and have trouble being faithful" and "It is difficult for guys to resist sexual urges and remain faithful." Girls as sex objects was assessed by the following: "Women are sexual objects whose value is based on their physical appearance" and "Using her body and looks is the best way for a woman to attract a man." Items addressing attitudes toward casual sex were: "You should have sex as soon as you can once you have a girlfriend or boyfriend" and "You don't need a relationship to have good sex. All you need are two people who are attracted to each other."

Sexual behavior

A single item asked whether participants had ever had sexual intercourse. They responded by indicating "yes" or "no." Participants were then asked "If you have had sexual intercourse, how many different people have you had sex with?" They checked boxes for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 or more. Participants who indicated they had never had sex were assigned the value "0."

Pilot testing

The questionnaire was pilot tested with 20 students at each of three schools where final questionnaire data were not collected. Minor changes to wording were made.

Results

Descriptive statistics for variables of interest are presented in [Table 1](#). The proportion of students who said they had ever had sexual intercourse in our sample (14.2%) was comparable to national figures. According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (2011), 12.2% of 15 to 19 year olds report having sexual intercourse before age 15.

RQ1 asked to what extent parental mediation and covieing practices would be associated with adolescents' endorsement of attitudes about guys as sex driven, girls as sexual objects, and casual sex. RQ2 asked what relationship these variables would

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Sexual attitude item	<i>M</i> ^a	<i>SD</i>	Yes	No
Attitudes about guys as sex driven				
Guys are sex driven and have trouble being faithful	3.17	1.72		
It is difficult for men to resist sexual urges and remain faithful	3.04	1.61		
Attitudes about girls as sex objects				
Women are sex objects whose value is based on physical appearance	2.82	1.71		
Using her body and looks is the best way for a women to attract a man	2.73	1.70		
Attitudes about casual sex				
You should have sex as soon as you can once you have a girlfriend or boyfriend	1.43	1.07		
You don't need a relationship to have good sex. All you need are two people who are attracted to each other	2.95	1.68		
Sexual behavior variables				
Number of sexual partners among sexually active respondents	2.44	1.58		
Ever had sex			14.2%	85.8%
Parental mediation variables				
Restrictive mediation: amount time spent on media			63.6%	36.4%
Restrictive mediation: when to use media			49.2%	50.8%
Restrictive mediation: kind of programs allowed			65.3%	34.7%
Active mediation: parents explain objections			68.1%	31.9%
Active mediation: parents discuss media messages			76.9%	23.1%
Co-using media ^b				
With parents	1.93	1.14		
With same sex friends	2.29	1.26		
With opposite sex friends	1.67	1.24		

^aMeans on a scale of 1 to 5. ^bMeans on a scale of 1 to 4.

have with sexual behavior. Both RQs were examined via a series of hierarchical regression analyses. Correlations were first run between all demographic variables, relational variables, and dependent variables. Results are presented in [Table 2](#). In each regression analysis, demographic and relational variables were entered in the first block of variables. Parental mediation variables were entered in the second block. To examine the relationship of parental mediation to ever having had sex, we ran a logistic regression with demographic and relational variables in the first block, and parental mediation variables entered as predictors in the second block.

Regression models were successful for only three dependent variables: the two items assessing attitudes toward causal sex, and whether the participant had ever had sex. Results of these analyses are presented in [Table 3](#). Among demographic and relational variables, being male positively predicted all three dependent variables. Students at low income schools in comparison to high income schools endorsed the attitude that sex should happen as soon as possible in a relationship more highly. Older students and those currently in a relationship were more likely to have ever had sex.

The addition of the block of parental mediation variables did not significantly increase the predictive value of the models for any of the dependent variables, even though some individual predictors were statistically significant. Students who reported higher levels of coviewing with opposite sex peers also more highly endorsed the attitude that sex should happen as soon as possible in a relationship.

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Between Study Variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Age		.69																			
1. Male		-.21	-.15	.20							.21				-.15	-.11					
2. Year in school				.17	.11			.13	.18		.23			-.12	-.15	-.14	-.14				.12
3. School SES									.12		.12										
4. Currently in relationship						-.13	.12				.31			-.15	-.15						.20
5. Guys sex driven						.21				.14											
6. Different men to be faithful										.15											
7. Women sex objects								.17	.11												
8. Women attract men w/bodies									.10	.11						.14	.16				
9. Have sex ASAP											.22						.12				.12
10. Don't need rel. for good sex											.12										
11. Ever had sex												-.16	-.11								.21
12. Number sexual partners																					
13. Rules how much media														.36	.22	.16	.13				
14. Rules when use media															.25	.13	.14				
15. Rules what programs																	.15				
16. Parents discuss																	.39	.15			
17. Parents explain objections																		.11			
18. Co-use w/ parents																					
19. Co-use w/same sex friends																					
20. Co-use w/opposite sex friends																					.23

Note. Only coefficients with $p < .05$ are shown.



Table 3. Results of Successful Models in Regression Analyses.

Predictor variables	Don't need a relationship to have good sex		Should have sex soon as possible in relationships		Ever had sex	
	SEB	β	SEB	β	SEB	Wald
Model 1						
Age	.10	-.10	.06	-.02	.19	5.07*
Gender (male)	.22	.16*	.14	.22**	.50	11.91**
Year in school	.13	.18	.09	-.03	.24	.13
School SES (low income school)	.21	-.04	.14	.20**	.44	.81
Currently in relationship	.24	.08	.16	.06	.42	15.05***
		Adj. $R^2 = .04^*$		Adj. $R^2 = .07^{**}$		Cox & Snell $\Delta = .18^{***}$
Model 2						
Age	.10	-.11	.06	-.03	.20	5.54*
Gender (Male)	.22	.16*	.15	.25***	.53	9.98**
Year in School	.14	.18	.09	<.01	.27	.08
School SES (low income)	.22	-.02	.14	.18**	.49	.72
Currently in Relationship	.24	.08	.16	.05	.47	12.34***
Rules about amount time w/media	.24	-.09	.16	.06	.48	4.60*
Rules about when use media	.22	.02	.15	.06	.49	.25
Rules about what programs	.24	-.13	.16	.04	.52	3.38
Parents discuss programming	.28	.06	.19	.01	.61	.83
Parents explain objections	.24	.01	.16	.05	.51	.64
Co-use media with parents	.11	.01	.07	.06	.24	.02
Co-use media with same sex friends	.10	.05	.07	<.01	.22	.63
Co-use media with opp. sex friends	.10	.05	.08	.13*	.20	3.75
		$R^2 \Delta = .00$		$R^2 \Delta = .00$		Cox & Snell $\Delta = .05$
		Adj. $R^2 = .04^*$		Adj. $R^2 = .07^{**}$		Cox & Snell $\Delta = .23^{***}$

Note: SES = socioeconomic status.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Participants who reported that their family had rules about how much time they spent with media were less likely to have ever had sex than those who reported their families did not have such rules. The proportion of variance explained for all variables was small; only the model for ever having had sex achieved a moderate-sized effect.

Discussion

Adolescents surveyed in this initial exploratory study indicated that as a whole their parents were involved in all of the theoretically identified aspects of mediation of children's media use. Small relationships emerged between parental mediation and participants' sexual attitudes and behaviors. The more time participants reported co-using media with members of the opposite sex more highly they endorsed a positive attitude toward casual sex. In a cultural context where some aspects of group life are privileged over individual needs and goals, it is perhaps natural that the presence of other in-group members would moderate the impact of media. Our study was not designed to tease out reasons for this association. It may be that the simple fact of peers versus parents being in the room led to different patterns of internalization of media messages. (Ngula et al.'s (in [press](#)) findings provide some support for this latter interpretation. In their sample of Kenyan secondary school students, co-use with opposite sex peers was associated with taking in higher levels of sexual media content, and co-use with parents was associated with taking in lower levels of sexual content. Alternatively, it may be that youths who came from less conservative families were also likely to have fewer constraints about persons with whom they could view/listen to media.

Participants who reported their parents had rules about how much time could be spent with media in the home were less likely to report ever having had sex. Again, our study was not designed to identify the reasons for this association. It is possible that lower exposure to media messages about sex made them less likely to engage in the behavior, but it could also be that parents who limited media use were also stricter about other aspects of adolescents' lives. It is important to note that stronger effects were associated with the relational and demographic variables than with parental mediation variables. Being male and being currently involved in a relationship were the most influential predictors in the models.

Parental mediation of adolescent media use is just one small component of parents' efforts to deal with increasingly pervasive messages in society about sex. Most parents maintain in an entire toolbox of parenting techniques designed to raise their children with healthy beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Parkes et al., 2013). This study investigated means by which parents directly influence adolescent media use applying categories of action that have been identified in theorizing in Western nations (Nathanson, 1999, 2001b). Qualitative research could help identify culture specific techniques and determine how they are integrated into the larger fabrics of adolescents' family lives and socialization.

Like all purposively sampled self-report studies, results of this study cannot be generalized, especially to either highly urban or highly rural areas, and answers were subject to failures of memory and social desirability on the part of participants. The fact that the researchers relied on teachers and prefects to select students for participation could also have biased the sample. The study was limited by the failure of existing scales to achieve adequate reliability in the sample. Culturally appropriate scales for these variables need to be constructed for future research.

In conclusion, although researchers have assessed the impact of multi-media campaigns targeting sub-Saharan youths, research is nearly silent on the impact of the multiple hours young people spend daily with entertainment media, and how parental mediation of youths' media use can influence their processing of media messages about sex. Results of this study indicate that the social context in which adolescents take in media is a significant factor in decisions they ultimately make about their sexual behavior. To establish a complete picture of what is happening in Ugandan homes with respect to mediation of adolescents' media use and co-use in particular, future researchers should employ observation, and also interview parents, whose perspectives are likely to vary from those of their children (Gentile et al., 2012; Nathanson, 2001b). Results could assist parents with thinking through their interaction about media content and their co-use of media with their children, and might hold potential as a protective factor against risky sexual behavior.

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