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### The Media: Influence Defining Teenagers

In recent years, parents and researchers have raised concerns about the harmful impact on teenager's exposure to media content. Media plays an important role in our society; every day teens interact with media through several different forms. They are challenging and easy to persuade. Thus, media has figured out how to target this specific group. Teens view massive amounts of ads on television and are increasingly being exposed to advertising on the internet, music videos, magazines, and movies. This exposure may contribute significant negative affects to their behaviors, choices, and health issues.

Media contributes to a teen's aggressiveness, desensitization to violence and emotional feelings, and risky behaviors. Studies show that teenagers who extensively view violent programs demonstrate higher levels of aggressiveness. The impact of violence from media has become more graphic and realistic. According to Anderson and Bushman's study, there is sufficient research to conclude that repeated "Exposure to violent video games increases aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, increases arousal, and decreases helping behavior." The results were the same for young males and females as well as older participants. Furthermore, music videos also promote adolescent aggression. The content of music videos today reveals an extensive amount of violence. "Violent videos showed a mean of six acts of violence per 2-3-minute-long segment -- a total of 462 shootings, stabbings, punchings, and kickings in 76 videos" (Williams). The recent shootings at middle and high schools by teenagers

have exploded into public consciousness. It seems that teens have become more desensitized to violence. By viewing all of these violent scenes on television or movies, teens lose their empathy and as a result make them less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others. As stated by American Medical Association and many other researchers, teenagers are no longer disturbed, no fear or disgust by the images they see. For instance, movies like *Saw*, *Hostel*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and many more can be seen as heroes for our teens. Today our teens are not only desensitized by viewing violence on television, but violence has become popularity (WordPress). A further study conducted by Kaiser Family Foundation stated that “by the time a child is eighteen years old; he or she will witness on television 200,000 acts of violence including 40,000 of murders” (Groat). To make matters worst, media advertising has significantly impacted teenagers to engage in risky behaviors. One of the risky behaviors includes alcohol use. Alcohol use can lead to fatal accidents. The statistics compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show stunning facts about drunk driving.

Out of 12,998 drunk-driving fatalities in the United States in 2007, 1,393 were caused by teenagers. Most of the drivers forget to use their seat belts after consuming alcohol. It also reported that the fatalities caused by teens drinking and driving constituted 40% of all alcohol-related fatalities in the United States.

(Abhijit Naik)

A good example of this statistic happened in 2009; Jessica Rasdall and Laura Gorman, both eighteen year olds, went to a night club and got drunk. They got in the car to drive back home and drove off the road and crashed into a tree. Laura died and Jessica lived to recall her horrible risky behavior that night. This is one of hundreds of similar stories that support the affects portrayed by the media (Goldberg).

Teenager's sexual choices are highly manipulated by the messages and images from media. For instance, teens who watch too much sexual images on television or movies are more likely to engage in sexual activities at an earlier age. The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a statement explaining the role of the media in shaping attitudes about sexuality. "The notion that television may play the role of a 'sexual super peer,' influencing the sexual decision-making of youths, is supported by a study that established a prospective link between exposure to television sexual content and earlier initiation of sex." Movies like *American Pie* show teenagers having sex for fun and without any worries or consequences. These types of movies send the wrong message about losing virginity before graduating from high school. Due to the lack of judgment and accurate knowledge about sexuality, the messages persuade teenagers to explore and as a result teenage pregnancies have increased. Dr. Ryan of Child Trends observed that

Hispanic teen pregnancy had the highest teen birth rate in 2003, with 82.2 births per 1,000 teen females aged 15 to 19. In comparison, the birth rate for teens of all backgrounds was 41.7, while the birth rate for non-Hispanic white teens was 27.5 and the birth rate for non-Hispanic black teens was 64.8.

Parents should talk to teens more often about the consequences of getting into sexual activities too soon. Parents need to make sure teens understand the high probability pregnancy and diseases. Besides movies and television, the internet has also played a major role in influencing sexual habits. Online games can be a place where teenagers fulfill their sexual fantasies as well. Recently, online role-playing games that offer second life attract vast amounts of players; it is also a controversial topic that law makers want to investigate. What is Cybersex in second life? As indicated in the book *What Is the Impact of Cyberlife*, "Sex in Second life starts with text chat. Participants describe what they're imagining doing with each other in graphic terms. Sometimes

they talk to each other over Skype, or the phone” (Wagner, 41). Teenagers can be easily addicted to Cybersex or role-playing games because it allows them to be any gender and even animals. Unfortunately, almost all new technologies are quickly applied to sex and advertisers know that sex sells. In fact, Cybersex has negative reaction in adults as well. “Cybersex in Second Life involving adults playing the role of children has been a controversial part of the virtual world for a long time” (Wagner, 45). As second life becomes more popular and easily attainable, teenagers will be likely to experiment with this new trend.

Research points out that television ads and magazines have a variety of negative impacts on teen’s health, such as depression and eating disorders. Teenagers who spend extensive amounts of time watching television are very likely to develop symptoms associated with depression early in their adult life. Archives of General Psychiatry stated that “an average of 5.68 hours of media exposure per day, including 2.3 hours of television, 0.62 hours of videocassettes, 0.41 hours of computer games and 2.34 hours of radio” develop symptoms consistent with depression (Nauert). Depression can be a serious problem for teenagers because it can cause them to lose interest in life. In some cases, teens may try to kill themselves to escape from depression. Along with depression, media also causes many teens to have eating disorders. Television and magazines give teens the wrong idea about perfect personalities, perfect body image, and styles. Sadly, teens absorb all this information and they blindly take it seriously. Teenage girls normally take their physical appearance extremely critical and are afraid of being overweight; they see themselves not glamorous or stylish enough if they are fat. In their effort to lose weight and look great, teenage girls sometimes shift their entire focus into losing weight and start starving themselves and become anorexic. Researchers believe that advertisers purposely emphasize thinness as a standard for female beauty. The wide spread acceptance of this unrealistic body

type creates an impractical standard for the majority of teenage girls. According to a poll conducted by Body Image and Gender Identity, “forty percent of nine and ten year-olds had tried losing weight and at age thirteen.” To further support the findings, “The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that eating disorders affect more than five million Americans a year, with disorders usually beginning in the teens or as early as eight” (Teen Ink). Anorexia is one of the major diseases that have overwhelmed teens for decades. Each year many teenagers, fall victim to this eating disorder.

Anorexia is the 3rd most common chronic illness among adolescents. Ninety five percent of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25.

Fifty percent of girls between the ages of 11 and 13 see themselves as overweight.

Eighty percent of 13-year-olds have attempted to lose weight (South Carolina Department of Mental Health).

Some of the most famous and well known celebrities who suffered from eating disorders are Jane Fonda, Tracey Gold, Christina Ricci, Fiona Apple, and Mary-Kate Olsen. Another eating disorder that caused by media is obesity. Excessive television viewing can lead to inactivity and may cause teens to gain weight. This is a significant health problem today in America. Teenagers are bombarded with commercials that encourage them to eat unhealthy foods like fried chicken, potato chips, pizza, and soft drinks; these foods often become their favorite snacks. Teens are specifically targeted by large amounts of advertisements and are even more vulnerable than adults to their influence. Based on the survey from National Health and Nutrition Examination, “the prevalence of obesity among pre-school age children 2-5 years of age has increasingly double the amount from 5 to 10.4% between 1976-1980 and 2007-2008 and from 6.5 to 19.6% among 6-11 year olds. Among adolescents aged 12-19, obesity increased from 5 to 18.1%

during the same period” (CDC). The increasing profile of overweight celebrities, like James Corden, Eamonn Holmes, Beth Ditto and Gabourney Sibide, gives the idea that being overweight should now be perceived as being ‘normal’ in the eyes of the public. As per Children's Television Act of 1990, “by the time the average child is 18 years of age; he or she has spent between 10,000 and 15,000 hours watching television and has been exposed to more than 200,000 commercials” (FCC). Parents should restrict or persuade teens to reduce television viewing time and involve them more in physical activity such as, join soccer or basket ball teams, swimming, or tennis and encourage them to donate time to help out at church events or other organizations.

Clearly, media has seemed to replace reading storybooks or playing sports as the average American teenagers’ favorite pastime. Obviously, media is a powerful tool that can change teenagers’ ideas about the world and even impose how teenagers in our society behave, make choices, and evaluate themselves. As teens’ see more violence, sex, inappropriate material, and unrealistic self-images, they will continue to make poor choices that can lead to escalated aggression, risky behaviors, and eating disorders. The media may be an influence, but people have free will. They can follow the influence or create their own course. Parents need to teach their teens how to choose appropriate forms of media and guide them away from harmful influences. If teens don't have good role models, they will lean more towards the media for guidance. It is important to teach teens to think for themselves, define themselves as important individuals, regardless of the influences around them.

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