Exploring the Impact of MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* on Parents and Teenage Girls

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A Capstone Project

Presented to The Faculty of the School of Communication In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in Public Communication

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April 21, 2011
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Lauren Feldman for her guidance and support throughout this process. Professor Feldman’s research expertise, flexibility in reviewing drafts, willingness to help in any way that she was able, and in depth feedback without a doubt made this capstone project not only enjoyable but a valuable learning experience that could not be replicated by any other. This capstone project, under the supervision of Professor Feldman was a fabulous way to end my experience here at American University.
Abstract

While recent data suggest that teen pregnancy is at a two decade low (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011) teen pregnancy is not an issue that should soon be ignored. In an effort to reach teenage girls with messages about pregnancy and its consequences, MTV has created the documentary reality series 16 and Pregnant and later Teen Mom. But, despite MTV’s best efforts, the 16 and Pregnant series has recently inspired controversy. While the show has won praise within the entertainment community, some critics think that MTV is glamorizing teen pregnancy. This capstone project explores the balance of entertainment and education in this reality program. Through a series of focus groups with the show’s target audience and their parents, two questions were answered: (1) how does a small sample of teenage girls feel about the show as a whole, and (2) how does a small sample of parents of teenage girls feel about the show as whole and as a teaching tool?
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Exploring the Impact of MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* on Parents and Teenage Girls

**Introduction**

“...I got pregnant when I turned 15...now I have my 1 year old son and pregnant again because I got another boyfriend that I really love and he wanted a son, so I got pregnant for him...Now that he is in Mexico he wants another girlfriend and doesn’t want to wait for me. I don’t know what to do with two babies and I’m scared (Escalera, D., 2011, p.3).” - Daniela Escalera

While Daniela’s story is unfortunate, it is not uncommon. More than 700,000 teenage girls got pregnant in the United States in 2010; in fact, 3 out of every 10 girls in the United States will become pregnant before the age of 20 (Albert, 2010) and 1 in 10 new mothers are teenagers (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Thus, even while recent data suggest that teen pregnancy is at a two decade low (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011) it is not an issue that should soon be ignored. In an effort to reach teenage girls with messages about pregnancy and its consequences, MTV has created the documentary reality series *16 and Pregnant* and later *Teen Mom*. *16 and Pregnant* premiered in 2009 and according to The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned pregnancies, “Each hour-long episode follows a teen girl through her pregnancy and during her first few months of parenthood.

Viewers get a realistic look at the wide variety of challenges young mothers can face: tumultuous relationships, family involvement (or lack thereof), financial struggles, school and work stress, gossip, and more—all while learning how to care for themselves and their children (Suellentrop, Brown, & Ortiz, 2010).”

MTV’s use of an entertainment format to possibly educate teenage girls about the realities of pregnancy is suggestive of an “entertainment education” strategy. Entertainment Education, also called enter-
educate, edutainment, and infotainment, is formally defined by Singhal and Rodgers (1999) as the process of designing and implementing a media message both to intentionally entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, and create behavior change. The term has also been defined more narrowly as, “the use of prosocial messages embedded into popular entertainment media content” (Moyer-Gusé, 2008, p.408).

However, despite MTV’s best efforts, the 16 and Pregnant series has recently inspired controversy. While the show has won praise within the entertainment community, some critics think that MTV is glamorizing teen pregnancy. Not long after the show premiered, several of the show’s stars started appearing in popular entertainment tabloids such as US Weekly and People Magazine. Thus, reactions to the show have been mixed:

For example, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, an organization that supports MTV’s efforts, released a statement to E! News saying;

"MTV's No Easy Decision [a special presentation of the 16 and Pregnant series focused on one teen’s decision to abort]...serves as a teachable moment for parents and teens about the importance of open and honest communication. We at Planned Parenthood hope that more parents will have conversations about birth control and safer sex with their teens now that teen pregnancy and parenthood is in the pop culture spotlight (Grossberg, 2010)."

Penny Willis, Director of Generation to Generation: Teen Pregnancy Prevention Project and CEO and founder of Imago Dei (a faith-based sexual health education organization) expressed mixed feelings about the 16 and Pregnant series;

“My overall feelings about the show are mixed and complicated. While on one hand, I think it certainly reveals the challenges of being a teen parent, the complexity of issues that are faced
by the both the parents and their families, it shines more light on the girl’s experience than the male’s experience. It is often ‘male bashing’ in a sense, or at least the episodes that I have watched have proven to be somewhat ‘anti-male’ in that they have no positive teen male father examples. Furthermore, the show follows the lives of teen moms and sensationalizes the negative drama and challenges of teen parenting, family systems, and teen dating relationships. Its depiction of sex behavior without responsibility shows some aspects of the realities but not all (P. Willis, personal communication, March, 31, 2011)."

Conservative blogger Sarah Knoploh (2009) has argued;

“Virtually all of the increase in child poverty between 1980 and 1996 was related to the increase in nonmarital childbirth. So what does MTV do? It shows how cool teen pregnancy is with a new reality series called ‘16 and Pregnant’. Airing this summer, the show normalizes teenage pregnancy...the show should have been named ‘Pretty, Popular and Pregnant’.”

Yet another disapproving blogger, from The Californian, exclaims;

“The shows were supposed to reveal the hardships of being pregnant at a young age. But MTV is promoting teen pregnancy instead of stating it as a serious problem in America...MTV is implying that if a girl gets pregnant, then she has a one-way ticket to fame (Montalvan, 2011).”

Demetrius Parker from the CDC’s Entertainment Education Program stated, “The idea of 16 and Pregnant is admirable. The show is engaging and enlightening, and while I’m glad it’s there, the thing that’s missing is someone to connect the dots about the actions and consequences (D. Parker, personal communication, March 23, 2011).”
So, although entertainment-education is a widely accepted health communication strategy (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004), the controversy surrounding 16 and Pregnant highlights the delicate balance between the right amount of entertainment to include in an educational program and how much education to include in an entertainment program. This capstone project will explore this balance. Through a series of focus groups with the show’s target audience and their parents, two questions will be explored and answered: (1) how does a sample of the show’s target audience feel about the show as a whole, and (2) how do parents of teenage girls feel about the show in general and as a teaching tool? While 16 and Pregnant was evaluated by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies through a partnership with MTV, exploring the topic through the eyes of parents has yet to be accomplished.

This paper will first explore the current landscape of entertainment education and teen pregnancy prevention through a literature review covering the theoretical context of entertainment education, and an evaluation of current teen pregnancy prevention efforts. The literature review will be followed by a discussion of the methods used in the focus groups as well as the results. Concluding this paper will be an exploration of practical implications of the findings and recommendations for future research.

**Literature Review**

*Overview of Entertainment Education:*

Since its introduction into American entertainment decades ago, by way of shows like *All in the Family* (a controversial sitcom that addressed very political issues in a satirical manner) in the 1970’s and targeted projects like the Harvard Alcohol Project (a project that successfully placed designated driver references in a number of top-rated entertainment programs i.e. The Cosby Show, and Cheers) in the 1980’s,
entertainment education has now evolved into a formalized process based on developed theories and research.

As the general public becomes more and more aware of targeted health campaigns and other social marketing efforts, traditional campaigns are becoming less effective (Larson, 2009). Because of this overexposure, important messages are starting to get lost and buried with other advertisements and corporate messages and eventually dismissed as irrelevant. Given the challenges in reaching and persuading the general public, entertainment education can capitalize on the appeal of popular media in order to model healthy and prosocial behaviors (Singhal & Rodgers, 1999). The narrative structure of entertainment education messages promotes in-depth involvement in the storylines. This idea of deep engagement is unique to entertainment education and explains the decrease in resistance among audiences (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Furthermore, entertainment education provides opportunities to reach youth audiences (Moyer-Gusé, 2010). While youth audiences are particularly at risk for many health and social issues faced here in the United States (i.e. STD’s, unwanted pregnancies, drug/alcohol abuse, obesity, etc.), they are also one of the more difficult groups to reach with traditional advertising and social marketing techniques (Frankenberger, 2004). Youth audiences often times feel that they are invincible to health and social risks and tend not to respond well to most forms of authority or demands. However, one study revealed that adolescents rank the media as one of the top sources for information about sexual health (Bar-on, Broughton, Buttross, Corrigan, Gedissman, de Rivas, et al., 2001); entertainment education presents the ability to leverage this captive audience and allows for the potential to overcome resistance and break through the communication obstacles mentioned above.

*Theoretical context of Entertainment Education:*
Just as most communication tactics and tools are rooted in theory, entertainment education can be explained by communication theory as well. In the following paragraphs, several common theories that provide context and direction for entertainment education are explored. By far, the most common theory used to explain entertainment education is Bandura’s social cognitive or social learning theory (Singhal & Rodgers, 2002). However, the extended elaboration likelihood model (Slater & Routner, 2002) as well as Moyer-Gusé’s (2010) proposed entertainment overcoming resistance model will be detailed as well.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

The general premise of the social cognitive theory is that people learn from observing others’ actions and attitudes and the consequences they face as a result. This process is known as modeling and is a core premise of entertainment education. Other components of the social cognitive theory include outcome expectancies, perceived self-efficacy, environmental determinants, and reinforcements (National Cancer Institute, 2005). A character who is rewarded for his healthy/socially responsible behavior is in the position to positively motivate an audience by reinforcing the behavior. On the other hand, when a character is punished for not performing a certain healthy/socially responsible behavior the action is negatively reinforced (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). But, the social cognitive theory also dictates that not all behaviors observed will in fact be mimicked; rather, there are four conditions that must be met: attention, retention, production, and motivation. The audience must be paying attention to the message or intended behavior enough to know what to do, they must be able to recall the intended behavior at the point of decision, they must have the ability to produce the intended behavior and finally they must be motivated enough to perform the intended behavior despite possible deterrents. While the social cognitive theory is widely used in explaining entertainment education, it does have its limitations. This theory does not specifically explain the process by which messages may
overcome resistance (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). However, the extended elaboration likelihood model does.

**Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM)**

The general premise of the E-ELM is that when a viewer is totally immersed, or transported into the narrative of a program they are less likely to resist the embedded health/social messages being presented (Slater & Rouner, 2002). The original elaboration likelihood model offers two routes of persuasion: (1) central/systematic route and (2) peripheral/heuristic route (Petty, et al., 2002). The central route requires the viewer/consumer to be highly able as well as highly motivated to process and retain a message. In fact, this type of processing is essential for retaining intended messages after long periods of time. On the other hand, peripheral processing is explained by responsiveness to superficial message cues. This type of short-term processing occurs when both ability and motivation are low. The E-ELM as applied to entertainment education focuses primarily on the ability of entertainment education programs to reduce message scrutiny through peripheral processing by way of transportation (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Transportation is the process by which an individual becomes immersed into a story, losing track of the real world as he or she experiences the unfolding events in the story (Gerrig, 1993). Transportation can be measured by asking viewers the extent to which they forgot about their surroundings and instead felt present in the mediated environment they were viewing (Green & Brock, 2000). For example, when avid viewers of the hit sitcom *Friends* view an episode with embedded health messages about condom use, they are very likely to be so completely absorbed by the storyline and the characters actions that they will not realize they are in fact being influenced and persuaded themselves. In turn, the next time they are about to proceed with unprotected intercourse, they may recall the *Friends* episode and decide to use a condom (Collins, R. et al., 2003). However, like the social cognitive theory, the E-ELM is not completely comprehensive in explaining the process of entertainment
education either. The model is limited in the number of forms of resistance it explains; however, Moyer-Gusé’s new entertainment overcoming resistance model (EORM) helps address this deficiency.

**Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model (EORM)**

In an attempt to explain the ways in which entertainment education overcomes other forms of resistance such as reactance, avoidance, skewed norms and optimistic bias, Moyer-Gusé (2008) put forth the entertainment overcoming resistance model (EORM). In conjunction with the E-ELM, the EORM infers that transportation, identification, similarity and parasocial interaction, which are all fostered by entertaining narrative, can overcome various types of resistance, including those listed above.

Transportation, as detailed above, is the process by which an individual becomes immersed into a story, losing track of the real world as he or she experiences the unfolding events in the story (Gerrig, 1993).

Identification, similarity and parasocial interaction are all related concepts, but maintain empirical differences. Perceived similarity refers to a viewer’s judgment about the extent to which he or she and a character share common attributes (Eyal & Rubin, 2003), while identification involves a loss of self-awareness as a viewer takes on the perspective of a character (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Lastly, parasocial interaction refers to the bond that develops between a viewer and a liked character.

In a recent study by Moyer-Gusé & Nabi (2010) testing several aspects of the EORM, it was concluded that entertainment education has the ability to overcome various forms of resistance when strategically utilizing persuasive intent, parasocial interaction, and identification. More specifically, when targeting an audience where reactance is likely to be high (i.e. youth audiences) message developers should aim to keep perceived intent low and parasocial interaction high. On the other hand, when the communicator’s
focus is on increasing feelings of vulnerability, message designers should move beyond developing similar characters and attempt to create moving story lines where empathy is elicited.

The models explained above provide a comprehensive understanding and theoretical context for implementing and explaining entertainment education when used in conjunction with one another.

Teen Pregnancy Prevention

In 2006 teen pregnancy rates increased for the first time in more than a decade. A total of 3 in 10 teenage girls had become pregnant before the age of 20; and the problem is worse among communities of color with 1 in 2 girls becoming pregnant before the age of 20. The good news - we have started to see a downward trend within the last couple of years, and the CDC recently reported that rates are currently at a two decade low (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011); the bad news – teen pregnancy rates in the United States remain higher than any other developed nation, so there is still much work to be done (Suellentrop, K., Brown, J., & Ortiz, R., 2010).

So how do the teenagers themselves feel about teen pregnancy? According to recent surveys of American teenagers (Albert, 2010):

- Eight in ten teens (80%) say that it would be much easier for teens to delay sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.
- 78% of teens say they have all the information they need to avoid an unplanned pregnancy, nevertheless:
  - Half of teens (49%) admit that they know “little or nothing” about condoms and how to use them, and
One-third (34%) agree “it doesn’t matter whether you use birth control or not, when it is your time to get pregnant, it will happen.”

- About nine in ten teens (91% of girls and 87% of boys) and two-thirds of adults (66%) say that teen pregnancy is a “very important” problem in the United States.
- About nine in ten teens (95% of girls and 93% of boys) say it is important for them right now to avoid getting pregnant or causing a pregnancy.
- When asked how they would react to getting pregnant/causing a pregnancy, 24% of girls and 22% of boys said “it would make my life a little more challenging, but I could manage.” About seven in ten (69% of girls and 71% of boys) said “it would be a real challenge and I’m not sure how I would manage.”

As with many social issues, the comprehensive solution to preventing teen pregnancy has yet to be discovered. However, a number of federal, state, and local organizations have initiated teen pregnancy prevention efforts over the years. Community based programs like the Carerra Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program and Focus on Youth with Impact successfully fight teen pregnancy in specific communities by using curriculum based interventions. While programs like these have proven successful in some cases (Gilk, 2002) engaging teens at another level could prove just as successful. As alluded to previously, entertainment education presents an opportunity to first engage and then teach, allowing for optimal retention.

**Previous Evaluation of 16 and Pregnant**

The MTV docu-reality series, *16 and Pregnant* was first broadcast on June 11, 2009 (Wikipedia, 2011). Produced by Morgan J. Freeman and Dia Sokol Savage, the series follows the stories of teenage girls (starting when they are 4 ½ - 8 months pregnant) in high school as they deal with the realities of teenage pregnancy. Each hour long episode features a different teenage girl, and she serves as both the main
character and the narrator. An animation of an elaborate cartoon depiction of the characters on notebook paper as well as episode highlights precedes each commercial break. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies website,

“These stories offer a unique look into the wide variety of challenges pregnant teens face: marriage, adoption, religion, gossip, finances, rumors among the community, graduating from high school, and getting (or losing) a job. Challenged by incredibly adult decisions, these girls are forced to sacrifice their teenage years and their high school experiences.”

MTV premiered a spin-off of 16 and Pregnant called Teen Mom in December of 2008 (Wikipedia, 2011). Teen Mom chronicles the lives of four of the original teenagers from the 16 and Pregnant series as they make their way through the first couple years of motherhood. 16 and Pregnant is now in its third season, while Teen Mom just completed season 2.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies partnered with innovation, Research, and Training, Inc. (iRT) and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America to evaluate the MTV show 16 and Pregnant (Suellentrop, Brown, & Ortiz, 2010). A total of 162 teens aged 10 – 19 years old participated and completed both a pre- and post-test questionnaire. Eighty-five participants from the treatment group viewed episodes of the show and participated in group discussions led by adult group leaders; 78 participants from the control group neither viewed nor discussed the show, but did complete both questionnaires.

The findings of this study were indeed compelling and informative. A few of the main findings are listed below.

• Six in ten teens have watched at least some of 16 and Pregnant.
• Among those teens who have watched the show, 82% think that the show helps teens better understand the challenges of teen pregnancy and parenthood, compared to 15% who believe that it glamorizes teen pregnancy.

• The clear majority of teen boys (67%) and girls (79%) agree with the statement, “when a TV show or character I like deals with teen pregnancy, it makes me think more about my own risk (of becoming pregnant/causing a pregnancy) and how to avoid it.”

• The more teens talked about the show, the less likely they were to think that teen pregnancy and teen parenthood are commonplace, or to agree with the statement, “Most teens want to get pregnant.”

• The teens in this study enjoyed watching and discussing the 16 and Pregnant episodes and thought that the show was realistic. Neither the boys nor girls who watched the episodes wanted to imitate the teens in the episodes they watched. In fact, nearly all teens (93%) who watched the show agreed (53% strongly agreed) with the statement: “I learned that teen parenthood is harder than I imagined from these episodes.”

• Teens who saw and discussed the episodes reported that they enjoyed watching and talking about the show. The more they liked it, the more likely they were to have negative views about teen pregnancy.

Perhaps even more interesting than the data above, Figure 1 below reveals some of the positive effects that the show is having on its target audience.
In summarizing their results, Suellentrop and her colleagues identified several practical implications and recommendations: (1) These types of shows reach a large number of teens and can be used in a positive way, (2) Groups such as Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) can play a valuable role in efforts to reduce teen pregnancy, (3) Parents should use these shows to help them talk to their teens about sex, love, and relationships, (4) If teens express positive views about teen pregnancy, talk to them about the benefits of waiting to start a family.

As compelling as findings from this study are, there were some limitations. By choosing to work with Boys & Girls clubs, participants are already narrowed to a very limited subset of the show’s target audience. Additionally, all members of the experimental group were located in southern states. These demographical and geographical limitations in the researchers’ sample make it impossible to accurately project the results of their study to other members of the target audience.
While the focus groups detailed in the sections below in no way address all of the limitations of the National Campaign’s study, they do attempt to explore the feelings of a different subset of 16 and Pregnant viewers.

**Methods**

Original research was conducted to explore the feelings and perceptions in response to 16 and Pregnant of members of the show’s target audience and their mothers. The target audience focus groups were centered on the main premise of entertainment education: the idea that transportation into compelling story lines allows for minimal resistance to pro-social messages. Has this been the case for participants of these particular focus groups? Were they simply entertained or did they learn something useful? The focus of the parent focus groups was to unveil the differences and similarities of their perceptions of the show with the perceptions of the target audience. Do they agree or disagree with the premise of the show? Do parents think the show is a useful teaching tool?

To explore the ideas posed above, two focus groups were held on April 9; one with teenage girls (15 – 17), and another with mothers of teenage girls, respectively. By way of a convenient network sample, teenage girls and their parents were invited to participate through personal verbal invitations by the researcher. Girls aged 15-17 were targeted because this demographic that is portrayed in the 16 and Pregnant series. Their parents were targeted for convenience and ease of comparison. The researcher also served as the moderator for both focus groups and each session was audio recorded for accuracy in reporting.

The target audience focus group had five members, all female students at St. Vincent Pallotti high school (a small private catholic school) in Laurel, MD. There were 3 white participants and 2 black participants, representing mostly a middle socio-economic status. The parent focus groups consisted of five
members, all female parents of teen daughters. Four of the 5 participants were parents of the girls that participated in the target audience focus groups. As mentioned previously, this was intentional in order to make more direct comparisons.

Both focus groups lasted approximately forty-five minutes and participants responded to questions in four main areas. Participants in the target audience focus groups self-selected as viewers of the show, but since prior knowledge of 16 and Pregnant was not a requirement for the parent focus group, adult participants viewed one episode (Farrah – Season 1) before the discussion began. According to MTV’s website, “Farrah is a popular cheerleader from Council Bluffs, Iowa, but when her friends start gossiping about her becoming a single mom, she abandons her high school life and starts spending way too much time with her overbearing mother.”

The line of questioning was similar for both groups; opening questions were meant to start the conversation about the show in general, and to determine overall viewing habits of the participants. Next the discussions segued into more show-specific references. This part of the discussion was designed to initiate deep exploration of participant feelings about the show, including perceptions of the show; lessons learned, key messages, etc. Following this discussion, questions were asked about teen pregnancy, overall. Knowledge about the topic was the basis of discussion during this segment. Finally, concluding questions were meant to explore participant take-home messages, possible behavior change and/or intent to change behavior. While questions were similar for both groups, the teen group discussions were more focused on their perceptions of the show and their personal discussions surrounding teen pregnancy. In contrast, the parent focus group discussions were focused on the accuracy of the show and whether or not the show could be used as an effective teaching tool. See Appendix A-B for the full moderator guides for both groups.
Results

Target Audience Focus Groups

General Viewing Habits and Feelings about the Show
While all of the girls had at least seen a few episodes of the show, their regular viewing habits ranged from, “I’ve seen the show once or twice when I catch it on;” to “I never miss an episode!” Despite the variation in level of viewing, most participants agreed that their purpose for watching the show is purely for entertainment. “I watch it because it’s funny,” one participant expressed.

When asked what they thought MTV’s purpose was for creating the show, responses were mixed. One participant said, “To send a positive message about prevention.” Another participant said, “I think MTV made the show for the same reasons they made the Real World [another reality show on MTV], just for the drama!” In responding to the accuracy and realities of the show, all participants agreed that some aspects of teen pregnancy and motherhood seem to be missing. One resounding message was the apparent exclusion of the pains of pregnancy. “Pregnancy is not easy, you throw up every day, your feet hurt, they skip all of that,” a participant exclaimed. Furthermore, all of the participants adamantly stated that the show makes motherhood seem easy, besides the occasional financial burden. In response to the reaction of the parents of the teen girls, one participant asked, “Realistically what parent is ecstatic about their child that is 16 being pregnant?”

Conversations about the Show
Focus group participants admitted to watching the show primarily with their friends (sometimes boyfriends) and rarely, if ever, with their mothers (never with their fathers). Reasons for this varied from “I just don’t ever watch T.V. with my parents,” to “It can be awkward.” Responses were also mixed when asked what discussions surrounding the show sounded like. Most girls just talk about “the drama” with their friends and how “stupid” the characters’ decisions are. One participant that admits frequent
conversations with her mom about the show responded, “My mom doesn’t want the show to put any negative things in my mind. She always says, “Don’t get any ideas!” But the conversations can be really uncomfortable sometimes.”

Identification and Transportation
Although participants were not directly asked about transportation, perceived similarity, or parasocial interaction, the concepts were alluded to indirectly by the moderator and participants on several occasions. When asked if anyone could identify with any characters on the show, the response was a collective “No!” When prompted further, all of the participants stated that even though they could not personally relate to any of the characters, they could see characteristics and/or qualities of some of the characters in some of their friends. One girl said, “I don’t relate to any of them, when I watch the show I don’t listen to what they say because they are 16 and pregnant.” Another participant was more specific, “The girls are rude and disrespectful to their parents, and I don’t identify with that.” On the other hand, one girl empathetically stated, “I feel bad for Janelle, even though she has anger issues her mom never even gave her a chance to be a mom to Jace (Janelle’s son).” Another participant excitedly offered, “Watching Corey and Leah get married was so cute!” Still another criticized, “I can’t believe Chelsea got back together with Adam, how dumb! Clearly he isn’t good for.” So while the participants didn’t perceive any similarity between themselves and the characters of the show, the group’s discussions did indicate some level of identification.

Teen Pregnancy and Sexual Health
In response to the question, “Do you think that teen pregnancy is an issue in the United States,” all of the participants answered yes. One participant offered the explanation, “If there is a show on it, it must be an issue.” Other participants attributed the issue to an increase in the number of teens having sex as well as the portrayal of sexual issues on television. Participants also stated that they think the problem is greater in public schools than in private schools, since private schools are smaller and provide more
structure and discipline. While none of the participants have had any personal connections with a pregnant teenager or teen mom, one participant did identify a student that was pregnant at her school several years ago.

When asked about sexual health education in general and more specifically about teen pregnancy prevention, all of the participants stated that most of their knowledge comes from their friends and the Internet. Sex education at their high school is focused mostly on abstinence and morality and those discussions do not occur until their senior year. “We start at chastity, not contraception.” Expressing her feelings on this type of education, one participant said, “We should learn more about protection and what to do, although abstinence sounds pretty and nice on paper it’s not realistic.” On the other end, another participant countered, “But if the social mindset was focused on abstinence this [the realities of teenagers having sex] could be different.” In response to more specific prompts about sexual health (e.g. Who would you turn to for advice on STD’s, condom use, etc.), all participants cheerfully responded “Google!” Some participants offered more experienced friends or siblings as alternatives.

Lessons Learned
Each participant was asked to identify at least one lesson that they learned from watching the show. The main responses include; “It’s important to think about the consequences of your actions.” “Get your stuff straight and become an adult first.” “Be responsible, use a condom, take control!” “Sometimes when you see the show you’re like oh that kid is so cute! It’s like a puppy, you just want to play with it, but by the end [of the show] you realize the reality.”

As shown above, the participants were able to identify some teaching moments in the show, but when asked if the show is a good tool to teach pregnancy prevention, they all suggested both positive and negative consequences. “The show sends out both good and bad messages,” reasoned one participant. “Some people will look at this and think they are living the life,” suggests another. One participant
summed up the group sentiments well, “The show would work as prevention, with the presence of an adult to provide reason and facts.”

Parent Focus Groups

Viewing Behavior
About half of the parent participants identified themselves as occasional viewers of 16 and Pregnant and the other half had never seen an episode prior to the focus groups. All of those that previously watched the show had watched at least one episode with their daughter. One mom exclaimed, “We’ve [she and her daughter] watched it and we’ve discussed it. Openness is important!” By the end of the discussion, all participants agreed that they would watch the show more with their children and use it as a conversation starter about teen pregnancy.

Is 16 and Pregnant an Accurate Portrayal of Motherhood?
In short, all participants agreed that the show 16 and Pregnant is not a completely accurate portrayal of pregnancy and motherhood. Like the teen participants, the mothers expressed that there are several important aspects missing from the show. One mother explained, “Some of the true struggles are missing. The show needs more drama and rawness.” Another participant was even more specific, “It definitely makes pregnancy and motherhood look too easy. They don’t show any of the true financial burdens. How much do you spend on diapers a week, formula, etc? All of the parents just seem to take care of it. That’s not a reality for a lot of teen mothers.” Despite recognizing some omissions in the program, a few participants were able to identify several “raw” and truthfully revealing moments. “All the pain that was shown [during Farrah’s delivery], that was real,” one participant exclaimed.

Pregnancy and Sexual Health
When asked whether or not teen pregnancy is an issue in the United States, all of the mothers agreed that it is. But, most importantly all of the participants expressed the importance of continuing efforts to combat the problem despite what the actual numbers reveal. One mother echoed the group response,
“We should always worry about it [teen pregnancy] regardless of what the numbers are.” In response to what they think their daughters’ perception of teen pregnancy in the U.S., most participants admitted that they were not sure. A participant explained, “I don’t think they [the participants’ daughters] see teen pregnancy in real life, so they don’t think it’s an issue.” However, one mother clarified that she knows that at least one girl was pregnant in her daughter’s school during her freshman year.

Taking the discussion of teen pregnancy a step further, the participants were asked about any discussions surrounding sexual health that they may have had with their daughters. All of the mothers responded that they had indeed started discussions about sexual health at least at some level. These discussions ranged from one time “don’t do it” talks, to frequent open discussions about the topic. One mother stated, “Abstinence is the best way, but teens will have sex so we have to teach prevention.” Another mother agreed, “Schools may teach abstinence only, but as parents we have to present the realities of prevention.” Regardless of what the participants may have actually communicated about sexual health and teen pregnancy to their children, each mother had their own ideas about what the most important messages are. One mother exclaimed, “Teen pregnancy does change your life…things will be different!” Another participant said, “[If you get pregnant] there will be no opportunities, no new clothes, no new shoes, no more True Religion jeans and Uggs.” One participant expressed that it is important to express “The value of education and waiting until the right time to start a family.”

**Teachable Moments**

Despite participant opinions that the show did not completely portray the realities of pregnancy and teen motherhood, they were able to identify several teaching moments in the episode that they viewed. “Farrah alluded to some regrets, this is a good time to bring up the choices that she could have made and show that it’s [motherhood] not that easy. The most important thing that you should be worrying about at 16 is what you’re wearing to the prom,” one mother exclaimed. “Farrah also mentioned that
she did not think that her first all-nighter would be spent feeding her baby. This is a good moment to show the realities and difficulties of having a baby,” another participant added.

In general, the moms had the following to say about using the show as a teaching tool to prevent teen pregnancy. “The show only presents half of the story, there needs to be some balance, provided by a parent or adult.” One mom shared a story about a comment her daughter made, and said, “I can use the show and this conversation as an opening to follow-up on the comment that she made.” One mom summed up this part of the conversation, “I think that that the show has had a positive impact in at least opening their [the participant’s daughters] eyes a little to the realities.” Another mother agreed, “At least they have the show, we didn’t have that. We just had to rely on our friends and own assumptions.”

**Discussion**

The purpose of these focus groups was to begin the exploration into the feelings and reactions of teenage girls and parents of teenage girls to the MTV show *16 and Pregnant* and, more specifically, to explore the possibility of the *16 and Pregnant* series being used as an effective tool in teen pregnancy prevention. In the minds of both groups of participants, MTV has achieved one of its primary goals to entertain, but the question is does the show provide any educational value to its viewers. In general, teen and parent participants had the same overall reactions to the show: I/my daughter does not identify with the characters on *16 and Pregnant* (a key element to transportation and thus effective entertainment education), and something is missing. It may be possible that both teen and adult participants misunderstood the questions of identification to imply similarity. While the teen participants may not be similar to the main characters, they could indeed identify with them. But given the possible confusion, was there enough identification to foster transportation? Since both identification and perceived similarity were not achieved, transportation might not have been possible.
However, because the teen participants were able to empathize with the characters of the show, they unwittingly identified with the characters. This revelation suggests that *16 and Pregnant* is a promising vehicle for entertainment education.

In the matter of accurate portrayals of motherhood, the parents all agreed that some of the real struggles of being a young parent in general are missing from the *16 and Pregnant* series and that the show is too focused on some of the “drama” in the girls’ personal lives. In comparison, the teen participants felt that the real pains of pregnancy were left out.

Despite what participants decided might be missing from the show, everyone felt that *16 and Pregnant* could be used as a teaching tool if it were supplemented with some guidance and clarification from an adult. Furthermore, even though most of the parents had never watched an episode of the show with their children, they admitted that doing so would be helpful in opening the lines of communication about teen pregnancy and sexual health in general.

Although the parents may have left the discussion more willing to view the show with their daughters, the teens may not receive this new openness quite as well. Most of the teen participants expressed some level of discomfort and awkwardness in discussing those topics with their parents, and would prefer to get this information from their friends, the Internet, or television alone. So if teenage girls may or may not be open to this dual method of learning about teen pregnancy and sexual health, how can MTV better their programming so that teen viewers of the show can actually learn something that may prevent them from engaging in risky sexual behavior? In essence, how can MTV leverage their captive audience to do some social good?

Focus group findings point to several possible solutions: (1) Inclusion of more discussion surrounding healthy sexual behaviors, specifically pregnancy prevention, (2) Increased emphasis on the financial
struggles that the teen moms face and the burdens on their families, and (3) An extension of reflection moments that are already included at the end of each show.

Although actually modeling healthy sexual behaviors on *16 and Pregnant* might be out of the question, an increase in the discussion surrounding condom use, birth control, STD testing, etc. could be useful in increasing the perception of self-efficacy as well as shifting social norms. As the social learning theory points out, the viewer’s ability to retain a message and then have the motivation to make the socially responsible or healthy decision must be present (National Cancer Institute, 2005). But even if teenagers watching *16 and Pregnant* actually take away the desirable lessons learned from the show, the show must have left a strong enough impression so that the viewer can recall the message in the heat of compromising situations, and be motivated enough to act in a responsible manner as opposed to succumbing to the pressure of their peers.

As mentioned several times above, both teen and parent focus group participants expressed concern that important elements of pregnancy and motherhood are missing from the *16 and Pregnant* series. Financial struggles are depicted differently for each character, as each character obviously has different situations. Despite the individual differences in each character’s personal financial situation, the topic should never be glossed over. If the situation is simply that the parent provides for their child and new grandchild, perhaps some of the struggles that the parents face should be better documented. To further emphasize some of the financial difficulties that the characters experience, perhaps captions on the screen of the costs of certain items might be telling. For instance, if a girl is changing a diaper, a caption could pop up saying “Baby Isaac goes through about 40 diapers a week, which equals about $35/week in diapers alone!”

The current *16 and Pregnant* format includes a short segment at the end of each show in which the featured teen reflects on her decisions and experiences. Even though this moment of reflection provides
strong teaching moments and sheds light on some regret that each girl may have, it is too short to have a substantial impact. Possibly in an effort to further these moments of reflection, each season of *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* are followed by an extended finale hosted by Dr. Drew Pinski (a board-certified internist and addiction medicine specialist). These sessions include moments of reflection and even mini one-on-one therapy sessions with each girl, their families and Dr. Drew. The finale format with Dr. Drew is more conducive to learning and is a better depiction of the realities of teen motherhood. Dr. Drew is able to really pull out the raw emotions and feelings of each teen’s situation in a way that is not expressed during the weekly shows. Furthermore, this format allows for audience (usually comprised of teens and young adults) participation and discussion. The audience Q&A portion unveils information that at home viewers may have been curious about as well.

Another issue that should be addressed if MTV strives for effective entertainment education is possible identification and transportation issues. MTV may argue that the main characters of the series are indeed believable and representative of most typical teenagers; however, recent research does not suggest the same thing (Suellentrop, 2010). As both the E-ELM and the EORM point out, identification and perceived similarity with the show’s characters are imperative elements in true transportation (Moyer-Guse, 2008). And transportation is important to effective entertainment education. As the focus groups of this study suggest most viewers of the *16 and Pregnant* series may not feel any true connections to the characters, therefore the resistance barrier is still present.

Of course, MTV’s number one priority is ratings; entertainment first, education later. But by choosing to depict such a sensitive issue as teen pregnancy, many believe that MTV also has a responsibility to create a more equal balance of entertainment and education. Perhaps by incorporating some of the teachable moments found in the finale format with the weekly shows, and addressing the other concerns detailed above this balance can be achieved.
Limitations

Given the qualitative nature of this study and the limited timeframe in which it was to be completed, the results cannot be generalized to the broader population. In addition, because only one focus group was conducted with each set of participants, full saturation was not reached. Furthermore, several limitations are present within the sampling method alone. Due to convenience purposes, focus groups participants lacked some diversity and only represented a small portion of the full target audience. Target audience participants were all female students at a small Catholic high school. Given the more structured nature of private schools in general, their ideals and experiences may not be the norm. While their point of view is important, it is in no way generalizable to all teenagers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further quantitative research needs to be conducted to gain a more inclusive and generalizable understanding of the perceptions of teens and their parents about *16 and Pregnant*. First of all, since the original research about the show conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies was completed prior to the explosion of tabloid celebrity of the main characters; a replication of that experiment could possibly yield different, more up to date results.

Additionally, a controlled experiment based on this exploratory research is an essential step in true revelation of the effects that the *16 and Pregnant* series is having on its viewing audience, including parents. Since teen pregnancy affects teenagers from all social classes, race, education levels, family types, etc. a diverse sample is imperative.

Finally, in order to gain a better understanding on why transportation may or may not be occurring, an experiment testing just this concept is in order. It is important to understand if the components of the EORM (identification, similarity, and parasocial interaction) are being met. If transportation is not
occurring, perhaps additional qualitative research (focus groups, and/or interviews) should be conducted to explore what it means for teenagers to identify with characters as well as what kinds of characters they feel they do identify with.

**Conclusion**

Despite the recent decline of teen pregnancy rates in the United States, teen pregnancy prevention is still an important issue and should remain top of mind. As discussed throughout this capstone project, the MTV show *16 and Pregnant*, by way of entertainment education may provide a unique opportunity to open the eyes of teenagers and create a more engaging environment for learning. Whether or not the show itself glamorizes teen pregnancy is yet to be determined, but the *16 and Pregnant* series, coupled with adult discussion, shows promise in educating teenagers about some of the realities of teen pregnancy and motherhood.
References


Exploring the Impact of MTV’s “16 and Pregnant”

Parent Focus Group Questions

Introduction:

• Brief background on the capstone project requirement and why I chose this topic.
• Focus group method:
  o Safe place
  o Everyone’s opinion is important, differences of opinion are encouraged
  o All information will be kept confidential
  o If you feel uncomfortable with any part of the conversation, feel free to excuse yourself from the room or refrain from participating in that segment
• Participant Introductions: Name, kids ages, favorite hobbies, fun fact.[none of this information will be recorded, asked just for warm-up purposes]

[Before the discussion begins, parents will be shown one episode of the show]

Opening Questions:

1. Before today, have you ever watched the MTV show “16 and Pregnant”? answer by raising hands
2. Do you know if your daughter has ever watched the show?
3. If so, have you ever watched the show with your daughter?

Show Specific Questions:

1. How do you feel about the show in general?
2. Do you think that the show accurately portrays teen pregnancy and teen motherhood? [PROMPT] do you think the show makes motherhood look too easy?
3. Do you think that the shows main characters are believable? [PROMPT] do you think your daughter could identify with any of the characters?
4. Were you able to identify any teaching moments in the show?
5. What do you think about the way that parents are portrayed in the show?

Teen Pregnancy Questions:

1. Do you think that teen pregnancy is an issue or problem in the United States?
2. Do you think that your daughter thinks that teen pregnancy is an issue or problem in the United States?
3. Do you think that your daughter personally knows anyone that has had to deal with teen pregnancy? [CLARIFY] any of her peers?
4. Have you ever spoken with your teenager about sexual health and other related issues?
5. If so, what messages, if any, did you communicate about teen pregnancy?
6. What do you think are the most important messages to communicate about teen pregnancy?

Concluding Questions:

1. Do you think TV shows in general can be helpful for prevention efforts?
2. Do you think that the show “16 and Pregnant” is a good tool to promote teen pregnancy prevention?
3. If you haven’t already, can you see yourself watching the show with your daughter?
4. Would you personally use the show as a vehicle to start discussions of sexual health in general and more specifically about teen pregnancy?
5. All of your daughters have self-identified as viewers of the show, now that you have seen the show for yourself, do you think that show has had or will have a positive or negative impact on your daughter?
6. Do you have any additional comments about what we’ve been talking about?

Thank you!
APPENDIX B. TARGET AUDIENCE FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Exploring the Impact of MTV’s “16 and Pregnant”

Target Audience Focus Group Questions

Introduction:

• Brief background on the capstone project requirement and why I chose this topic.
• Focus group method: Safe place, everyone’s opinion is important, differences of opinion are encouraged, and all information will be kept confidential.
• Participant Introductions: Name, age, graduating class, something interesting about you.

Opening Questions:

4. Are you all familiar with the MTV shows “16 and Pregnant” and “Teen Mom”? answer by raising hands [everyone should answer yes as they all self identified as viewers of the show]
5. How often do you watch the show?
6. Why do you watch the show? [PROMPT] entertainment, etc?
7. What do you like about the show?
8. What do you not like about the show?
9. Who do you usually watch the show with? [PROMPT] friends, parents, siblings, and boyfriend?

Show Specific Questions:

6. Why do you think MTV created the show? [PROMPT] pure entertainment, educational, both?
7. At the end of a show, what are you left thinking?
8. Do you think that the show is realistic?
   o Do you think that the show makes teen pregnancy and parenthood look easy?
   o Do you think that the show makes teen pregnancy and parenthood look hard?
9. Can you identify with any of the characters on “16 and Pregnant” or “Teen Mom?” If so, who and why? [PROMPT what aspect of their lives can you identify with?]
10. Have you ever talked to anyone about the show?
    o Do you talk about the show with your friends?
    o Do you talk about the show with anyone in your family? If so who?
11. What do those conversations sound like? [PROMPT] do you talk about the issues that the girls on the show face? Do you talk about the clothes they were wearing?
12. If you don’t talk about the show with your parents, why not?

Teen Pregnancy Questions:
7. Do you think that teen pregnancy is an issue or a problem in the United States?
8. For those that answered yes, why do you think that is?
9. Do you personally know anyone who became pregnant as a teenager?
10. How do you feel, in general about teen pregnancy and being a mom at a young age?
11. How do your friends feel about it?
12. How do your parents feel about it?
13. Is teen pregnancy something that’s discussed in school?
14. Where else do you hear about teen pregnancy?
15. How comfortable do you feel in your knowledge about teen pregnancy?
16. If you had questions about teen pregnancy (how to prevent it), who would you go to or where would you get information?

Concluding Questions:

7. Can you think of any lessons that you have learned from the show?
8. Do you think that the show “16 and Pregnant” is a good tool to use in efforts to prevent teen pregnancy?
9. Do you think that the show accurately portrays teenage pregnancy and motherhood?
10. Who do you think should watch the show?
11. Who do you think actually watches the show?
12. Has anyone ever told you that you should or should not watch the show?
13. Are there other shows like it on TV that you watch? How does 16 and Pregnant compare to those other shows?
14. Do you have any additional comments about what we’ve talked about?

Thank you!