The Influence of Mass Media and Pop-culture on Young Heterosexual African, Caribbean, and Black Canadian (ACB) Men in Windsor, Ontario

Francisa I. Omorodion, Neema W. Jangu, Jelani Kerr, and Egbe B. Etowa

Abstract — Mass media and pop culture have contributed to unhealthy sexualities and irresponsible sexual behaviors. In these platforms, casual sex is normalized while minimizing its serious social and health consequences. Sexual contents and activities hype unhealthy sexual attitudes, which feed into African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) men's stereotypes as hyper-sexualized, irresponsible, reckless, and incapable of dealing with issues affecting their health. Based on 3 focus group discussions with 31 self-identified heterosexual ACB men, aged 16 years and above, the paper explores how mass media and pop-culture have impacted young heterosexual ACB men's social, and sexual attitudes and behaviors in Windsor, Ontario. The results suggest that exposure to sexual content and materials influence unhealthy and irresponsible sexual behaviors, especially among young heterosexual ACB men. Also, the negative portrayal of ACB men in the media and pop culture define and shape how ACB men conduct themselves.

Key words — Black men, Heterosexuality, HIV, Mass media, Pop-culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mass media are important sources of information especially when it comes to health promotion and education [1]–[4]. Past studies highlight the contributions of social media platforms and mobile technologies to casual sex encounters through dating apps and exposure to casual sex online [5], [6]. Accordingly, hook-up culture increases engagement in casual sex, including activities such as, “no-strings-attached-sex,” “one-night stand,” and “friends with benefits”. Hook-up refers to “having sex, or doing something less than intercourse, or just kissing or making out, fooling around beyond kissing, which includes sexual touching on or underneath clothing” and to involve casual sexual behaviors, in which there is no current relationship commitment and no expected future relationship [7]. Similarly, it has been defined as sexual relationships that last from a few days to a few weeks, as well as an ongoing, and potentially years-long, sexual relationships with a nonromantic friends (e.g., friends with benefits) or booty-calls that involves two persons primarily for sex [8]. These encounters are suggested to be fun and presented with no risks. Yet, past studies suggest that pop culture reduce the moral significance of sexual relations by portraying sex as a recreational activity [9]. With the combined influence of the mass media and pop-culture, more casual sexual activities involving multiple partners and nonuse of condom are common.

Researchers are also concerned with how sex is understood, represented and experienced, especially among young people. Young people are likely to view sex as fun, recreational and a form of personal liberation, without thinking of the consequences associated with it [6]. Often, unplanned pregnancies or STIs including HIV outcomes emanate from risky sexual behaviors, including casual sexual encounters with multiple sexual partners and non-condom use. Consequently, HIV disproportionately affects ACB communities in Canada. ACB communities account for 25% of HIV positive people in Ontario even though they are less than 5% of the Ontario population [10]–[12]. The majority of these transmissions are through heterosexual contact [13]. Various reasons are attributed to the higher infection rates among heterosexual Black men which are not limited to being reckless, oversexed, cultural norms, beliefs about masculinity, to mention a few [13], [14]. However, very few studies such as [1], [5], [15] have linked mass media and pop-culture with risky sexual behaviors, which may lead to HIV vulnerability. There has been less attention on the health risks associated with the content displayed on such media platforms. This paper focuses on how mass media and pop-culture have negatively impacted young ACB men's sexual attitudes and behaviors in Windsor, Ontario. We argue that the portrayal of sexual activities has contributed to unhealthy sexual attitudes among young ACB men, which may lead to vulnerabilities. Furthermore, media and pop culture have contributed to the negative portrayal of Black men and communities, as a result young ACB men internalize or find ways to resist such stereotypes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: INFLUENCE OF MASS MEDIA AND POP CULTURE

Several studies expressed their concern about the influence of mass media and pop culture on individual’s sexual attitudes, beliefs and behaviors [1], [5], [16]. These studies also note that mass media and pop-culture contribute to unhealthy sexualities and irresponsible sexual behaviors among young people. Although to a large extent mass media avenue have been used to promote health messages, they can also facilitate risk sexual behaviors [17]–[20]. This is however due to the reason that sex is most often presented as a casual activity without risks [15], [21], [22]. It is also argued that

Published on August 18, 2021.
Francisa I. Omorodion, University of Windsor, Canada.
(e-mail: omorodion@uwindsor.ca)
Neema W. Jangu, University of Windsor, Canada.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24018/ejsocial.2021.1.4.29

Jelani Kerr, University of Louisville, Kentucky, USA.
Egbe B. Etowa, University of Windsor, Canada.

Vol 1 | Issue 4 | August 2021
young people are becoming sexy too soon given what is displayed around them in music videos, social media, television etc. For instance, the use of music, novels, soap opera and videos on television and recently the internet and social media sites have strong influence on individuals’ attitudes, behaviors, also on gender and sexual development among young people [6]. Young people are exposed to various sexual incidents that range from touching, sexual activities and contents, portrayal of sexual feelings and impulses, provocative clothing and explicit sexual movements through television, movies and soap opera, music videos and other media outlets. All these could influence sexual attitudes and behaviors among individuals, especially the younger ones.

Some researchers have suggested exposure to sexual content may lead to early sex initiation among teens, which is also linked to unplanned pregnancies and STDs [15]. Young people are more vulnerable than any other group when it comes to media and how they use the information received. As teenagers, they start to learn about gender roles, sexual attitudes, and behaviors. So being exposed to several sexual images and messages around this time may influence their attitudes towards gender roles, sexual attitudes, and behaviors either positively or negatively. As noted, past studies focused attention on the positive influence of media and pop-culture among young people [23], however very few have focused their attention on the negative influence of media and pop-culture especially when it comes to risky sexual behaviors associated with HIV vulnerability. In addition, the media and pop-culture fail to teach young people about the risks and responsibilities associated with the contents and messages displayed, including positive role models whom they can learn from.

Young people use social media to get various information they need including sexually related information, information about diseases and how they should interact or behave around their peers. The cultivation theory has been used to explain how young people may become victims of what they consume. They suggest that mass media and pop culture socialize individuals in such a way that they accept presented attitudes, roles, and beliefs as social reality [24], [25]. It has been noted that “human live in a world cultivated by stories, and these stories socialize individuals into various roles, including gender, age, class and lifestyles” [24]. As a result, young people hold specific and distinct realities given what they consume and create their own reality and lifestyle. For instance, music videos often portray women as promiscuous, submissive, or passive [24], such portrayal could be translated into reality especially when it is the only thing they see. Invariably, what they see defines and shapes individual and social reality of young people. It is suggested that young people who watch, listen, or engage in social media activities are more likely to accept stereotypical sex roles as realistic [16]. It is also noted that “greater exposure to media leads to the adoption of values, beliefs and behaviors that are portrayed particularly when they are shown to be reinforced or are unaccompanied by adverse consequences” [16].

Additionally, a study showed how the media have reinforced certain sexual and relationships norms without depicting sexual responsible models [1]. The article, “When pop-culture sells dangerous myths about romance”, illustrates how the entertainment industry glorifies male patriarchal behavior from songs to television shows [26]. For instance, in music and some television shows, consent is not really shown to be an important thing. Also, male predatory behaviors are condoned and covered up. The author also notes, romantic movies can normalize certain behaviors such as stalking, rape culture and non-consensual sex. The author provides an example of a television show “General Hospital” (1979) which portrayed sexual assault not as a “definitive shattering of trust, but as a foundation on which a relationship can be built — a model embraced by other shows and films as well” (n.p). Other studies bear credence to this position [21], [27].

The internet has contributed to making sexually explicit, accessible unhealthy sites, which create unhealthy sexual attitudes and behavior especially among young people than the content that promote sexually responsible behavior [1]. It has also been viewed that there exists “a clash between the media’s depiction of sexual relations and real-life experiences of youth, which contributes to their difficulties in making healthy sexual decisions” [1]. In terms of HIV vulnerability, social media and pop culture have contributed on creating opportunities for casual sex. Hook ups or uncommitted sexual encounters are very common in pop culture, which opens the possibilities of premarital and uncommitted sex, and “pop culture is simultaneously representing aspects of actual contemporary sexual behavior and providing sexual scripts for emerging young adults” [28]. Thus, uncommitted sexual encounters, premarital sex and easy access to sexual partners may likely promote risky sexual behaviors that lead to increased STIs including HIV [29].

Pop-culture reduced the moral significance of sexual relations and caused sex to be one of the recreational activities among young people [9]. Similarly, pop-culture has normalized uncommitted sexual activities (including kissing, oral sex, and/or penetrative intercourse), and such sexual relations “transpire without any promise of, or desire for, a more traditional romantic relationship” [28]. Premarital and uncommitted sex are exalted and celebrated to the extent that marriage and monogamous relations are no longer important [28], [30]. It has been argued that social networking sites are source of sex relations, which are filled with various ways through which people can express their sexuality through – “no strings attached,” “booty calls”, “fuck-buddies” which all increase premarital and uncommitted sex [28]. These activities are becoming normative among adolescents and young people in North America.

There is also ample research in ethnicity and media access. Corneille et al. (2015) note that Black/African youth spend more than 5 hours of media consumption. Compared to White teenagers, Black teens spend much time on television and are much likely to choose fictional Black characters and may likely perceive those characters as realistic [16], [31]. The higher rate of television viewing by Black youth, make them more likely to see sexual related materials [16]. A study suggested that music videos by Black musician are more likely to see sexual related materials [16]. A study showed how the entertainment industry glorifies male patriarchal behavior from songs to television shows [26]. For instance, in music and some television shows, consent is not really shown to be an important thing. Also, male predatory behaviors are condoned and covered up. The author also notes, romantic movies can normalize certain behaviors such as stalking, rape culture and non-consensual sex. The author provides an example of a television show “General Hospital” (1979) which portrayed sexual assault not as a “definitive shattering of trust, but as a foundation on which a relationship can be built — a model embraced by other shows and films as well” (n.p). Other studies bear credence to this position [21], [27].

The internet has contributed to making sexually explicit, accessible unhealthy sites, which create unhealthy sexual attitudes and behavior especially among young people than the content that promote sexually responsible behavior [1]. It has also been viewed that there exists “a clash between the media’s depiction of sexual relations and real-life experiences of youth, which contributes to their difficulties in making healthy sexual decisions” [1]. In terms of HIV vulnerability, social media and pop culture have contributed on creating opportunities for casual sex. Hook ups or uncommitted sexual encounters are very common in pop culture, which opens the possibilities of premarital and uncommitted sex, and “pop culture is simultaneously representing aspects of actual contemporary sexual behavior and providing sexual scripts for emerging young adults” [28]. Thus, uncommitted sexual encounters, premarital sex and easy access to sexual partners may likely promote risky sexual behaviors that lead to increased STIs including HIV [29].

Pop-culture reduced the moral significance of sexual relations and caused sex to be one of the recreational activities among young people [9]. Similarly, pop-culture has normalized uncommitted sexual activities (including kissing, oral sex, and/or penetrative intercourse), and such sexual relations “transpire without any promise of, or desire for, a more traditional romantic relationship” [28]. Premarital and uncommitted sex are exalted and celebrated to the extent that marriage and monogamous relations are no longer important [28], [30]. It has been argued that social networking sites are source of sex relations, which are filled with various ways through which people can express their sexuality through – “no strings attached,” “booty calls”, “fuck-buddies” which all increase premarital and uncommitted sex [28]. These activities are becoming normative among adolescents and young people in North America.

There is also ample research in ethnicity and media access. Corneille et al. (2015) note that Black/African youth spend more than 5 hours of media consumption. Compared to White teenagers, Black teens spend much time on television and are much likely to choose fictional Black characters and may likely perceive those characters as realistic [16], [31]. The higher rate of television viewing by Black youth, make them more likely to see sexual related materials [16]. A study suggested that music videos by Black musician are more likely to see sexual content compared to White musician [32]. Furthermore, the literature takes note of the unintended consequences associated with media messages, especially those targeting Black youth. Stigma is one of the consequences associated with blaming, shaming and
othering, which leads to assumptions about Black people and their morality, values and lack of responsibility [31]. Stigma influences Black people to internalize such oppression and replicate them as versions of social reality. Thus, it is important to look at the impact of mass media and pop culture on ACB men living in Windsor, Ontario.

III. METHODS

This paper partially focuses on the weSpeak qualitative data on self-identified heterosexual African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) men aged 16 years and above living in Windsor, Ontario. weSpeak is a 5-year program of research and related activities with self-identified heterosexual ACB men living in London, Ottawa, Toronto, and Windsor--Ontario to engage and mobilize ACB communities for HIV prevention and promote collective resilience. This paper uses data from three focus groups conducted between March 2016 and March 2018. Outreach and the recruitment of participants took place through flyers/posters and word of mouth in various places especially those patronized by higher populations of ACB communities, including barber shops, Caribbean and African stores, restaurants, and social events. The focus group time ranged from 90-120 minutes. A focus group guide with several probes directed the discussions to ensure consistency on the topics covered and making sure that participants share their stories in every way possible. Topics in the focus group discussion guide included issues of sexuality, heterosexuality, masculinity, black identity, HIV vulnerability, and resilience. A total of 31 self-identified ACB men (20 youth and 11 adults), aged 16 years and above participated in the focus groups. Most of the participants were Africans 20 (64.5%), 8 Caribbean (25.8%), and 3 Black Canadians (9.7%).

Our research team comprised of three investigators, one community research coordinator, a research assistant, and a graduate student. The project staffs comprised females and male researchers from various disciplines and are all members of the ACB communities. A Local Advisory Committee (LAC), who are representatives from the three ethno-racial groups, from various community organizations and churches with a majority of ACB communities. LAC members acted as link line with community members and had experiences working with Black communities in Windsor. Our LAC played an advisory and participatory role in the protocol checks, recruitment of participants and in the interpretation and dissemination of results, as well as guiding future research directions with the research team. This research received an ethical approval from the University of Windsor Ethics Review Board.

One co-investigator and a research assistant, both males facilitated all the three focus group discussions to allow for comfort and openness of the participants. All the audio-recorded focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and coded using Nvivo software for qualitative data analysis. Coding was done using themes that guided the research project, which included: Black men in relation to HIV vulnerability, heterosexuality, masculinity, resilience, black identity, and sexuality. The site principal investigator (the second author), project coordinator (first author), two research assistants read the transcripts, maintain audit trail, and identified the emergent sub themes. Furthermore, the authors, research assistant and a graduate student examined the transcripts individually and as a group to discuss the salient themes and interpretations of the results.

IV. RESULTS

The results suggest that the exposure to sexual contents and materials influence unhealthy and irresponsible sexual behaviors especially among young heterosexual ACB men. The negative portrayal of ACB men in the media and pop culture also defines and shapes how young ACB men conduct themselves. In this section, we categorized the results into four main sections: One, the negative influence of social media and pop culture and social expectations; two, the exposure to sexual contents on social media and pop culture; three, impacts linked to negative portrayals of ACB men; and four, changes and transforming social media and pop culture to have a positive impact on ACB communities and promotion of health.

A. Changes and Transforming Social Media

Participants suggest that the media and pop-culture need to change from negative portrayal of Black men to positive roles and representations, as well as, creating awareness about STIs/HIV. One participant suggested making music to have a positive impact on young men through promoting messages that will help them fight unhealthy social and sexual behaviors including HIV. This approach would signal a departure from making music that are so sexualized and have a negative influence on young persons. A participant said, “make good music about this that can trend, people get more and start singing about HIV/AIDS and not having all those songs that give you HIV/AIDS [laughs]” (Ozi, 23 years old, African). According to the Task Force on Sexualization of Popular Music (2018) exposure to sexualized music is linked with risk sexual behaviors. By pointing at music that makes them get HIV, participant is showing how the consumption of music may have influence on their sexual attitudes and behaviors, which they can relate and engage in as part of reality. Thus, he sees the need of changes not only on the content of such music but also the way it is depicted.

Nonetheless, one participant said Black young men can be resilient despite the recognition that things may be out of hand now; he expressed hope of the future setting a new tone for the upcoming generations in the way that Black people are viewed in the media and pop culture. The participant said:

Like for our generation the media and how it portrays us, if anything has to change has to be the next generation, we have to be the ones to set the tone, because for us like everything is already open, the way that we are seen is already out there, the stigma is already out there... (Cain, 20 years old, Caribbean)

The sexual content and culture displayed influence young people, who are copycats of such contents as social reality. Of great omission in pop-culture and social media is the failure to teach young people the risks and responsibilities associated with sexual activities and the importance of having positive role models whom they can learn from.
V. DISCUSSION

Past studies show that mass media and pop culture genres used in health promotion activities and for entertainment purposes may have some unintended consequences for the people who use them [5], [22], [25], [36]. A number of studies have also discussed the unintended consequences associated with negative portrayals of Black people including stigma, risky sexual behaviors, and stereotypical representation of Black people [17], [19], [31], [37], [38]. Another study found that media messages aimed at health promotion activities were demeaning and stereotyping Black people, such that Black people were reluctant to adhere to the positive messages rather focused their attention on internalizing or resisting such representation [31]. The present study also shows ACB heterosexual men focusing their attention on mass media and pop culture genres aimed at entertainment, because such entertainment influences them to behave in certain ways.

Other studies have shown that the media have failed to take note of the negative consequences associated with sexual contents in the media as well as the failure of current pop culture to show possible ways of dealing with the negative outcomes, which are critical aspects for many consumers to discern bad and good things for their wellbeing [22], [36]. For instance, music artists have a huge influence on young people's sexual behaviors, attitudes and sexuality through their music and their lifestyles [20], [39]. Music artists and their music create social realities and sexual scripts by conveying certain expectations [40]. Although such expectations are stereotypical, our study shows that consumers emulate them.

It is also important that while looking at the positive images and sexual materials in social media and pop culture, sexual agency of young people be taken into consideration. There is a need to consider what young people consider to be healthy and how they make sense of their sexual agency [35], [41]. This means that mass media and pop culture are not solely bad influence on young people, there are good things that young people learn from such outlets including obtaining information for various use. Therefore, to make this effective, young people need to be taught about the risks and responsibilities associated with sexual contents including being sexually active [9], as well as creating more responsible media contents [1].

VI. LIMITATION

This study was aimed at exploring the impact of mass media and pop culture on young ACB youth; however, it is not free of limitations. One of the limitations is that social media and pop culture were some of the emerging themes associated with Black identity, vulnerability, sexuality and resilience, thus there were not much probing to understand how social media and pop culture impacts Black youth generally, but we rather relied on what participants said. Another limitation was the small sample size of the participants involved in this study, the majority of which were African ethno-racial group. Therefore, generalization of these findings is difficult and may differ from other settings including big cities. It would also be important to look at the unintended consequences associated with mass media and pop culture on young men generally and how young people navigate such systems.

VII. CONCLUSION

Mass media and pop culture are great avenues to promote health messages among various groups. However, they fail in some ways by displaying unhealthy sexual materials and having negative portrayals of ACB men, which have unintended consequences. In addition, they have failed to teach young people the risks and responsibilities associated with conforming to what is displayed and to provide good role models to learn from. The portrayal or expectation associated with ACB men affect their lives at various levels socially, economically, and politically. Therefore, there is a need for more sexually responsible media and pop culture contents and to teach young people to be critical consumers of what they see through the platforms.

DECLARATIONS

A. Funding

This work was supported by the [Ontario HIV Treatment Network] under Grant [334717]

B. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

C. Ethics Approval

Ethics approval and consent to participate. The study was approved by Ethics review Board at Ryerson University (REB #2015-118), University of Ottawa (Certificate # H06-15-23) University of Toronto (Protocol #31973), University of Windsor (REB #32485) York University (REB # 2015-217), and University of Louisville (REB #15.0453).

D. Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

E. Availability of Data and Material

Data analysis is still in progress and will be uploaded to a data repository in due course. To access the study data, contact the weSpeak Program nominated Principal Investigator by email at: jph.wong@ryerson.ca

F. Authors’ Contributions.

FIO and NWJ led conceptualization and design of the work including Data acquisition; FIO supervised the manuscript development, NWJ and EBE contributed to data analysis and interpretation, literature review and initial draft of the manuscript. All authors: FIO, NWJ and EBE contributed substantially to critical review for important intellectual contributions. All authors contributed to and approved the final version for publication.

REFERENCES

Jelani Kerr, PhD, MSHP Associate Professor, Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences, University of Louisville, Kentucky, USA. His research focuses on HIV vulnerabilities of young people in the African Diaspora in the US and Canada. Specifically, he investigates behavioral and social determinants that influence HIV/AIDS inequities.

Egbe B. Etowa, PhD, Postdoctoral Fellow, weSpeak Program, Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology, University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

Research Interests: Welfare and economics of the agrarian sector, Social determinants of health and welfare disparities in Black communities.