“Let’s Get This Party Started!”: An Analysis of Health Risk Behavior on MTV Reality Television Shows

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Past research has examined portrayals of risk behavior in various media, including television, advertising, and film. To address an underexplored area, this study analyzed drinking, smoking, and sexual activities in MTV reality programming popular among adolescent viewers from 2004 to 2011. Cast members’ demographic attributes were also examined in relation to their risk behaviors. Results demonstrated that drinking and casual sexual behaviors were pervasive among cast members. Smoking and more intense sexual behaviors were also present, but to a smaller degree. Men and young adult cast members were more likely to engage in risk behaviors than women and teenage cast members. Also, ethnic/racial minority characters were shown drinking more often than were White cast members. Interpretations of these findings are discussed based in social cognitive theory and the concept of super peers. Implications for future research are provided.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012c), underage alcohol use is related to later-stage alcohol abuse, alcohol-related injuries, failing grades, and other risk behaviors, and is responsible for 4,700 deaths in the United States annually. Smoking is also associated with an extensive range of short-term health problems such as respiratory effects, addiction to nicotine, and the associated risk of other drugs, and long-term health problems including various lung, throat and mouth cancers, emphysema, stroke, and coronary diseases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012b). In addition, increased sexual activity among teenagers is related to higher teenage pregnancy rates and the number of sexually transmitted infections in the youth population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012a). In 2009, more than 400,000 teenagers ages 15–19 years gave birth and nearly half of the 19 million new STDs each year occur among 15–24-year-olds (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012a).

At the same time, these risk behaviors are commonly observable in various media content, including prime time television, film, and advertising. The media depictions also exert substantial influence on young people’s attitudes and behaviors, exacerbating the problems (e.g., Engels, Hermans, van Baaren, Hollenstein, & Bot, 2009; Gutschoven & Van den Bulck, 2005; Ward, 2003). In recent years, calls have been made for systematic research of reality television programs in terms of their depiction of the health risk behaviors and the consequences, in response to outlandish health risk acts shown on some reality shows that also tend to be very popular among the youth population (Christenson & Ivancin, 2006; Viacom, 2010).

To address this escalating concern, we analyzed a sample of MTV reality shows particularly popular among the young viewers. For example, two of the shows that we examined, MTV’s The Jersey Shore and The Real World, achieved top ratings in prime-time reality shows among 12–17-year-olds in 2011 (Parents Television Council, 2011). Alcohol consumption, tobacco use, and sexual activities featured in the shows were counted and linked to the demographic attributes of characters who engage in them. In addition, the rate of co-occurrences among alcohol consumption, smoking, and sexual activities were assessed to provide a more comprehensive picture of the risk behaviors featured in the reality programs.

Health Risk Behaviors in Reality Television

Research has shown that, for decades, consumption of alcohol and tobacco and sexual behavior have been depicted extensively in various media (e.g., Bahk, 2001; Cin, Worth, Dalton, & Sargent, 2008; Dalton et al., 2002; Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005; Kunkel et al., 2007; Pack, Reid, Choi, & Jeong, 2010; Russell & Russell, 2009; Sargent, Wills, Stoolmiller, Gibson, & Gibbons, 2006). Researchers also noted the ubiquitous portrayal of risk behaviors as highly problematic because it is often unrealistic and
rarely entails negative consequences (Pinkelton, Austin, Cohen, Chen, & Fitzgerald, 2008). Effect studies demonstrated that exposure to the rather glamorized representation of risk behaviors in media affects adolescents’ perception of drinking, smoking, and sex and increases the propensity to partake in the activities at a younger age (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008; Grube, 1993; Mastro & Atkin, 2002; Nunez-Smith et al., 2010; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009; Stacy, Zogg, Unger, & Dent, 2004).

In light of this, the phenomenal success of reality television programming in recent decades adds urgency to the need for systematic understanding of its content. Although it has become extremely popular among the younger American population subset in the past two decades (Wright, 2006), only a few academic studies have attempted to examine portrayals of risk behaviors in this format in general (e.g., Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007) and reality content consumed largely by adolescents in particular (e.g., Blair, Yue, Singh, & Bernhardt, 2005). The studies available found similar results to the research exploring scripted television content: alcohol and tobacco use occurred frequently in one reality program, The Osbournes (Blair et al., 2005), and up to 28% of reality television programming contained sexual talk and/or actions (Kunkel et al., 2005). However, researchers have yet to fully explore reality TV content geared toward adolescent viewers. For example, despite the enormous popularity of MTV reality programming with teen audiences (Parents Television Council, 2011; Viacom, 2010), previous research has not yet analyzed this content for drinking, smoking, and sexual behavior. In addition, prior studies have relied on either one specific program (Blair et al., 2005), one type of reality TV such as a dating show (Ferris et al., 2007), or one form of risk behavior such as sexual activity (Kunkel et al., 2005, 2007), none of which were selected because of their popularity with young audiences. Therefore, an analysis is needed that specifically addresses content popular with adolescent audiences as well as accounts for multiple forms of risk behavior.

Social cognitive theory suggests individuals who regularly watch reality programming may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of such content. Social cognitive theory posits that individuals learn appropriate attitudes and behaviors not only through direct experience, but through observational learning as well, and television serves as a common conduit for the observational learning, especially among young viewers (Bandura, 2009). Reality television featuring mostly young adults and adolescents may be uniquely apt for the social learning effect. Not only do the programs feature people who are similar to the audiences in terms of age and life stage, but the plots are also supposedly unscripted and comprised of impromptu interactions between cast members who are not professional actors. The enhanced perceived reality (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007), in turn, may further reduce the psychological distance between the characters and viewers, leading to more effective social modeling and vicarious learning (Christenson & Ivancin, 2006). It is interesting that studies have shown that the drive to learn about the self and others, and engaging in comparisons with others are primary reasons for teens to watch reality television (Godlewski & Perse, 2010; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Thus, a systematic investigation of the potentially negative health behaviors depicted, and perhaps glamorized on reality television will help to not only contextualize the existing findings on teens’ motivations to watch reality programming, but also to inform future media uses and effects research that addresses teen audiences and reality television. As the first step in exploring the content of reality programs popular among the young audiences, the following research questions are posed:

Research Question 1–1. How frequently do characters use alcohol or tobacco on screen in reality television programs popular among adolescents?
Research Question 1–2. What are the demographic attributes of those using alcohol and tobacco on screen?
Research Question 2–1. How frequently do characters engage in sexual activities on screen in reality television programs popular among adolescents?
Research Question 2–2. What are the demographic attributes of those engaging in sexual activities on screen?

The Relation Between Drinking, Smoking, and Sexual Behavior

While most media research focuses on the portrayal or the effect of a single category of risk behavior (e.g., substance use or sexual behavior), public health research has shown various risk behaviors occur concurrently (Anderson & Mueller, 2008; Bleakley, Romer, & Jamieson, 2014; Leigh & Stall, 1993; Poulin & Graham, 2001). In other words, adolescents who participate in one type of risk activity are likely to engage in other types of risk activity as well. Research has shown that alcohol consumption is positively associated with sexual activity among young adults (Cho & Span, 2010; Goldstein, Barnett, Pedlow, & Murphy, 2007; Wells, Kelly, Golub, Grov, & Parson, 2010). Similarly, previous scholarship has found a positive relation between not only alcohol consumption and sexual activity, but alcohol consumption, sexual activity, and smoking as well (DuRant, Smith, Kreiter, & Krowchuk, 1999; Whitbeck, Conger, Simons, & Kao, 1993). One recent study addressed the connection between media exposure and concurrent risk behavior. The authors found exposure to alcohol consumption and sexual behavior in films may predict similar behaviors in young audience members (O’Hara, Gibbons, Li, Gerrard, & Sargent, 2013). Therefore, three research questions are posited to explore this potential connection in reality television.

Research Question 3–1. Is there a significant relation between cast members’ substance use (alcohol and tobacco) and sexual activities?
Research Question 3–2. Are there differences based on demographic attributes in the relation between cast members’ substance use and sexual activities?
Method

Selection of Shows

This study analyzed the content of MTV reality programs popular among young audiences (Levine & Weisman, 2010; Parents Television Council, 2011). MTV has been the most watched cable network among 12–24-year-old viewers over the past 18 years (Viacom, 2010) and has defined what is young and hip in society today (Marks & Tannenbaum, 2011). Shows were selected based on whether or not they used the docuseries format, which combines the drama of traditional soap operas with a documentary style that follows the seemingly unscripted lives of the cast members. Unlike reality television programming that focuses on competition between individuals and groups (e.g., Survivor) or those focused on specific topics (e.g., Cops, Teen Mom), the docuseries records the lives of a cast of individuals from a fly-on-the-wall perspective for dramatic purposes. Docuseries may be designed to appear unscripted; however, researchers have drawn comparisons to traditional soap operas because what is portrayed is more of a constructed reality rather than true reality (Beck, Hellmueller, & Aeschbacher, 2012; Kilborn, 1994). Researchers have speculated that this format may be especially influence young audiences’ behavior (Baruh, 2009; Stefanone et al., 2010).

After an exhaustive search of all MTV/MTV2 docuseries, all programs with two or more seasons were selected for analysis. In total, five shows were analyzed: The Real World, Newport Harbor, Laguna Beach, The Hills, and Jersey Shore. To obtain episodes of the selected shows, a search was performed via MTV.com, hulu.com, and Netflix.com. There were 299 total episodes available from 2004 to 2011. All seasons were available for each show with the exception of one season of The Real World. On the basis of the total number of shows available, a stratified random sample of 91 episodes was selected, or approximately 30% of those available for each show. The sample totaled 47 hr or 2,820 min of MTV content, including 30 episodes from The Hills, 27 from The Real World, 15 from Jersey Shore, 15 from Laguna Beach, and 4 from Newport Harbor.

Unit of Analysis

Cast members served as the unit of analysis. Decisions for whom to include as cast members were based upon each program’s cast listing on MTV.com. The programs contained between 4 and 10 cast members, resulting in a total of 622 characters analyzed. Some characters appeared in multiple episodes of the same programs and each appearance was coded as a distinct unit.

Unit of Observation for Health Risk Behavior

Health risk behaviors were coded for characters during each scene. A scene was defined individually for each character by their outfit change: whenever a character changed outfits, he/she was coded for health risk behaviors. An outfit change occurred when a character was observed in an entirely new outfit. Each character’s outfit change constituted a new scene for that character. This rule enabled an accurate analysis of each character’s progression through the episode, from one environment to the next (e.g., at home, out to eat, at the bar/club). The mean score per episode was then calculated for each character who engaged risk behavior.

Coding Variables

Drinking

This was coded for each instance of explicit drinking behavior (e.g., drink in hand), explicit drinking comments (e.g., mention of consuming alcohol), implicit drinking behavior (e.g., at a bar/club and the character has a drink in front of them), and implicit drinking comments (e.g., character mentions “getting wasted last night”).

Smoking

An act of smoking comprised actual smoking (e.g., seen with a cigarette between lips or fingers, or exhales of smoke) as well as talking about smoking cigarettes (e.g., a character asking for a cigarette from someone else).

Sexual Behavior

Sexual behavior was broken down into four non-exclusive categories: flirting; causal kissing/touching; intimate kissing/touching; and intercourse. Because an intense sexual act (e.g., intercourse) sometimes accompanied a less intense act (e.g., intimate kissing/touching), characters were coded at times for more than one of these four categories during a given scene.

First, flirting was defined as playful banter or nonverbal signs of attraction (e.g., lingering eye contact, close distance between individuals) between two characters. Second, characters were coded as engaging in casual kissing/touching when they began to kiss or touch each other in a manner typically appropriate for display in public (e.g., holding hands, rubbing each other’s back, among others). Third, intimate kissing/touching behavior was coded when characters began to engage in highly sexualized kissing and touching. This behavior would most likely be considered inappropriate when displayed in public. Fourth, characters were coded as having intercourse when explicitly mentioning having sex or when sex was implied by having a scene end as two characters get into bed together after casual or intimate kissing/touching. Typically, the next scene would depict the two characters lying in bed together the next morning.

Gender

Each character was coded as either man or woman on the basis of descriptions on the programs’ websites.

Age

Because the selected shows featured young people almost exclusively, all characters were classified into one of these two categories: high school age, or college-age/young adults. Age was determined by each character’s description on the programs’ websites.

Race

Characters’ appearance (e.g., skin color, facial features, hair texture) served as the primary clue when identifying their race or ethnicity from the following five categories: White,
Black, Latino, Asian, and mixed. In addition, other information revealed during the episode or on the programs’ websites was also considered in the decision.

Coding Procedure
Three graduate students served as the coders. First, coders went through an extensive training process by viewing, coding, and discussing episodes of each program not included in the sample. They then viewed and coded 12 episodes (approximately 10% of the sample). Intercoder reliability scores were obtained for all variables (Krippendorff’s $\kappa = .91$ to 1.0). The remaining sample was divided into three equal parts to be coded independently.

Results

Demographics
Out of 622 total characters, there were more women ($n = 376$, 60%) than men ($n = 246$, 40%). The majority were young adults ($n = 491$, 79%), followed by high school aged characters ($n = 131$, 21%). The gender distributions between groups were fairly similar. The characters were predominantly White ($n = 544$, 88%), followed by Black ($n = 45$, 7%), mixed race ($n = 20$, 3%), and Hispanic/Latino ($n = 13$, 2%). No cast member was coded as Asian. While mean scores were used to answer the research questions, frequencies and percentages of risk behaviors engaged in at least once per episode are featured in Table 1 for the demographic variables.

Research Question 1–1. Frequency of Drinking and Smoking on Screen
More cast members were shown while drinking at least once ($n = 396$, 64%) than not at all ($n = 266$, 43%) (See Table 1).

Research Question 1–2. Demographic Attributes of Characters Who Drink or Smoke

Gender
Results from a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed the gender difference in mean drinking behavior per episode to be significant, $F(1, 621) = 3.868$, $p < .05$. Men were shown drinking on screen significantly more often than women were. The mean gender difference between men and women in smoking was not statistically significant, $F(1, 621) = 0.042$, $p > .05$ (see Table 2).

Age
One-way ANOVA results demonstrated a significant difference in mean drinking behavior per episode based upon characters’ age, $F(1, 621) = 108.279$, $p < .001$. High school age cast members drank alcohol significantly less often than young adults. Age was also a significant factor in smoking behavior, $F(1, 621) = 16.042$, $p < .001$. No high school age cast member was portrayed smoking, while young adults were depicted smoking on screen.

Race
One-way ANOVA results showed significant differences in mean drinking behavior per episode on the basis of race, $F(3, 621) = 7.802$, $p < .001$. Least significant difference post hoc analysis revealed that White characters ($M = 0.99$, $SD = 1.17$) drank significantly less often than did Blacks ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.54$, $p < .05$), Hispanics/Latinos ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.71$, $p < .01$), and characters of mixed race ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.52$, $p < .001$). No other significant relations emerged in the post hoc analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic attribute</th>
<th>Drinking</th>
<th>Smoking</th>
<th>Flirting</th>
<th>Casual kiss/touch</th>
<th>Intimate kiss/touch</th>
<th>Intercourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men (n = 246)</strong></td>
<td>146</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>59.3%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women (n = 376)</strong></td>
<td>210</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High school (n = 131)</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College/young adult (n = 491)</strong></td>
<td>340</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White (n = 544)</strong></td>
<td>303</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black (n = 45)</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62.2%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic/Latino (n = 13)</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mixed race (n = 20)</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Values shown are instances where each behavior was engaged in at least once per episode.
Table 2. Analysis of variance results for health risk and sexual behaviors, by demographic attribute (N = 622)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic attributes</th>
<th>Drinking M (SD)</th>
<th>Smoking M (SD)</th>
<th>Flirting M (SD)</th>
<th>Casual kiss/touch M (SD)</th>
<th>Intimate kiss/touch M (SD)</th>
<th>Intercourse M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men (n = 246)</td>
<td>1.19 (1.38)*</td>
<td>0.15 (0.51)</td>
<td>0.59 (0.98)*</td>
<td>0.87 (1.16)**</td>
<td>0.33 (0.75)**</td>
<td>0.09 (0.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (n = 376)</td>
<td>0.99 (1.14)</td>
<td>0.15 (0.47)</td>
<td>0.45 (0.82)</td>
<td>0.65 (0.96)</td>
<td>0.18 (0.56)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (n = 131)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.39)**</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)**</td>
<td>0.60 (0.93)</td>
<td>0.82 (1.15)</td>
<td>0.11 (0.33)**</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/young adult (n = 491)</td>
<td>1.31 (1.24)</td>
<td>0.19 (0.54)</td>
<td>0.48 (0.88)</td>
<td>0.71 (1.02)</td>
<td>0.27 (0.70)</td>
<td>0.09 (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (n = 544)</td>
<td>0.96 (1.17)**</td>
<td>0.14 (0.49)</td>
<td>0.51 (0.87)</td>
<td>0.75 (1.03)</td>
<td>0.24 (0.62)*</td>
<td>0.07 (0.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (n = 45)</td>
<td>1.38 (1.54)</td>
<td>0.16 (0.42)</td>
<td>0.42 (1.14)</td>
<td>0.49 (1.08)</td>
<td>0.11 (0.38)</td>
<td>0.04 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino (n = 13)</td>
<td>2.08 (1.71)</td>
<td>0.23 (0.44)</td>
<td>0.31 (0.63)</td>
<td>0.46 (0.96)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed race (n = 20)</td>
<td>1.90 (1.52)</td>
<td>0.35 (0.59)</td>
<td>0.60 (1.05)</td>
<td>1.15 (1.42)</td>
<td>0.60 (1.31)</td>
<td>0.10 (0.31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

There were no significant differences in mean smoking behavior per episode by characters’ age, F(3, 621) = 1.330, p > .05 (mixed race: M = 0.35, SD = 0.59; Latino: M = 0.23, SD = 0.44; Black: M = 0.16, SD = 0.42; White: M = 0.14, SD = 0.49).

Research Question 2–1. Frequency of Sexual Activities on Screen

Casual kissing/touching was the most common sexual activity with 270 (43.4%) characters participating at least once on screen, followed by flirting (N = 191, 30.7%), intimate kissing/touching (N = 100, 16.1%), and intercourse (N = 36, 5.7%).

Research Question 2–2. Demographic Attributes of Characters Who Engaged in Sexual Activities

Gender

Results from a one-way ANOVA demonstrated a significant gender difference in mean flirting per episode, F(1, 621) = 4.063, p < .05. Men flirted significantly more than women. Mean casual kissing/touching also differed by gender, F(1, 621) = 6.824, p < .01. Men engaged in casual kissing/touching significantly more than women. A significant gender difference emerged for intimate kissing/touching as well, F(1, 621) = 7.336, p < .01. Once again, men were shown engaging in intimate kissing/touching more frequently than women were. The occurrence of intercourse was not statistically different between men and women, however, F(1, 621) = 3.334, p > .05.

Age

One-way ANOVA results demonstrated significant differences in intimate kissing/touching on the basis of cast members’ age group, F(1, 621) = 7.177, p < .01. Young adult cast members engaged in intimate kissing/touching more often than high school age cast members. Age was also a significant factor for intercourse, F(1, 621) = 9.307, p < .01. Young adult cast members had more sexual intercourse than did cast members of high school age, who were not observed having intercourse at all. Age was not a significant factor for flirting, F(1, 621) = 2.027, p > .05, or casual kissing/touching, F(1, 621) = 1.214, p > .05.

Race

One-way ANOVAs were conducted for race and the mean sexual activities per episode. Significant race/ethnicity-based differences emerged for intimate kissing/touching, F(3, 621) = 3.356, p < .05. Least significant difference post hoc tests revealed that mixed-race characters (M = 0.60, SD = 1.31) engaged in intimate kissing/touching significantly more often than did Whites (M = 0.24, SD = 0.62, p < .05), Blacks (M = 0.11, SD = 0.38, p < .01), and Hispanics/Latinos (M = 0.0, SD = 0.0, p < .01). There were no significant differences for race and flirting, F(1, 621) = 0.232, p > .05, casual kissing/touching, F(3, 621) = 2.198, p > .05, or intercourse, F(1, 621) = 0.187, p > .05.

Research Question 3–1. Smoking, Drinking, and Sexual Activities

To answer Research Question 3–1, Pearson’s product-moment correlations were conducted between smoking, drinking, and sexual activities. Drinking behavior was positively related to all forms of sexual activity, which included flirting (r = 0.23, p < .001), casual kissing/touching (r = 0.22, p < .001), intimate kissing/touching (r = 0.31, p < .001), and intercourse (r = 0.16, p < .001). Smoking was significantly linked to intimate kissing/touching (r = 0.22, p < .001). Smoking and drinking were also positively correlated (r = 0.30, p < .001).

Research Question 3–2. Demographic Differences in the Relation Between Smoking, Drinking, and Sexual Activities

To answer Research Question 3–2, a series of factorial ANOVAs were conducted. Both drinking and smoking were converted into dichotomous variables with “0” representing no instances of the behavior and “1” representing one or more instances of the behavior.
Gender and dichotomized drinking were entered as independent variables and the four sexual behaviors were entered individually as dependent variables for a total of four factorial ANOVAs. Additional factorial ANOVAs were conducted for sexual behavior with different sets of independent variables: gender and smoking, age and drinking, age and smoking, race and drinking, and race and smoking. In each model, an interaction term was introduced to detect any potential interaction effect. Of the 20 tests conducted, only one significant interaction effect emerged. Men who smoked ($M = 0.92, SD = 1.16$) were significantly more likely to engage in intimate kissing/touching than men who did not smoke ($M = 0.25, SD = 0.65$); no such divergence was found between women who smoked ($M = 0.47, SD = 0.83$) and who did not ($M = 0.15, SD = 0.51$), $F(1, 621) = 4.29, p < .05$. No other significant interactions emerged for demographic attributes and sexual activities when accounting for gender.

Discussion

This study attempted to fill a gap in the literature by examining risk behaviors in reality television especially popular among adolescent viewers. With close to two thirds of cast members drinking at least once per episode, many smoking cigarettes, and their frequent engagement in sexual activities, risk behaviors were commonly depicted on MTV docusoaps. While the overall prominence of risk behaviors echoed past research of traditional television content (Diener, 1993; Kunkel et al., 2005), connections between risk behaviors found here also mirrored past research of behavior off screen. American adolescents who engage in one type of risk behavior are more likely to engage in other risk behaviors as well (Guo et al., 2002; Khan, Berger, Wells, & Cleland, 2012). Moreover, as previous research has suggested, the direction of influence may be such that greater exposure to risk behaviors on television enhance the potential combination of behaviors by decreasing perceptions of negative health-related consequences (Fischer, Guter, & Frey, 2008).

In addition, the significant results between demographic characteristics and risk behaviors add another dimension to the analysis from the social cognitive theory perspective. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009) suggests that television viewers tend to model the behavior of similar and desired others. By providing analysis of the gender, age, and race of characters who engaged in risk behaviors, this analysis also helped to identify characters who may serve as super peers for adolescent viewers. Super peers, also labeled substitute peers (Brown et al., 2005) can be described as media peers with the ability to influence behavior in younger viewers, especially when viewers or their off screen peers have yet to experience the behavior (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2013). Research has suggested that adolescents are especially vulnerable to the effects of risk behavior programming, because their real-life knowledge is rather inadequate (Fisher et al., 2004). Thus, the findings related to demographic characteristics and risk behaviors provide further insight into the behaviors teen audiences are likely to see, and potentially model off screen.

First, men were depicted drinking and, contrary to previous analyses, engaging in three out of four sexual activities significantly more than woman. These results stand in stark contrast to previous research finding that women tend to be portrayed as the more sexual gender in terms of objectification and sexual activities in other media (Ferguson, Kreshel, & Tinkham, 1990; Lin, 1997; 1998; Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008; Vincent, Davis, & Boruszkowski, 1987). However, the previous research has largely focused on advertisements or scripted content. MTV docusoaps, then, may present an alternative image of women and men in relation to sexuality and the prevalence of sexual activity, with men being portrayed as more sexualized than women. However, the gender disparity in sexual behavior revealed an interesting nuance. The gender differences were possible because the sexual encounters often involved a male regular cast member and a woman non–cast member. In other words, many of the sexual acts depicted in the reality shows were carried out in male-focused relationships in which the woman was easily replaceable. The male cast members would then oftentimes discuss their sexual exploits during personal confessions and/or with other cast members. So, even though men may have been coded more often for sexual behavior, scenarios such as these may actually support previous research that found women are more often represented as sexual objects than men (Lin, 1998). However, a more rigorous look into the gender disparity of sexual behavior would be necessary to fully support this interpretation.

Second, the inclusion of age in this study addressed a shortcoming of previous research. Prior health risk behavior studies have analyzed comparable content (e.g., sexual depictions) on prime time reality television, but they seldom address the age of cast members (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). The findings here demonstrated a progression of drinking, smoking, and sexual activity on the basis of cast members’ age. Although perhaps unlikely, if teens are exclusively identifying with their same-age peers on screen, young MTV reality show cast members represent relatively innocuous models as they are portrayed as less prone to drink, smoke, and participate in sexual activity than older cast members. However, teens desiring to be like older cast members, most of whom routinely engaged in risk behaviors, may be more susceptible to the negative influences of the media exposure found in previous research (O’Hara et al., 2013).

The high percentage of high school–age characters who were shown to engage in flirting and casual kiss/touch may normalize such behaviors for young viewers. Also, the rapid progression in the intensity of sexual activities from teen to young adult cast members may raise adolescent viewers’ expectations regarding their own sexual behaviors as they grow older. This finding is in line with the U.S. trends for sexual behavior. For example, 42% of younger (15–17-year-old) teens in the United States have had intercourse, compared with about 84% of older (18–19-year-old) teens (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

Third, race was found to be an important factor. Although White cast members were the overwhelming majority of regular characters, they were found to drink
alcohol significantly less frequently than other cast members. The small minority of Black, Hispanic/Latino, and mixed race cast members were shown drinking alcohol disproportionately more often than were Whites. However, recent research of American teens between the ages of 12–17 show that Black teens consume alcohol significantly less than do White, mixed race, and Hispanic/Latino teens (Wu, Woody, Yang, Pan, & Blazer, 2011). Previous research found that the perception of peers’ risk behavior is a strong predictor of engaging in risk behavior and suggested that media contribute to defining these perceptions (Brown et al., 2006). Therefore, it is possible that regular viewers who identify with minority cast members on MTV reality television, especially Black cast members, may develop skewed perceptions of their peers’ risk behavior norms. Additional research would be needed to support this assertion.

Although the results are noteworthy, this study has several limitations. First, this analysis targeted programming on one cable channel: MTV. MTV docusoap programming may be different from other reality content that appeals to youth. Although this is a potential limitation, MTV produces many of the most popular shows among young audiences and, as noted previously, is the most popular cable network among adolescent audiences. Also, a recent factor analysis demonstrated that the docusoap is a distinct format of reality TV that goes beyond MTV programming (Egbert & Belcher, 2012). Second, of the programs analyzed, only one show (The Real World) is currently still on the air. Although MTV no longer produces new episodes of Newport Harbor, Laguna Beach, The Hills, and Jersey Shore, older episodes are still available for streaming online and are sometimes shown on MTV and its sister network, MTV2. Moreover, MTV is still developing and producing reality programming, and more specifically docusoaps, geared toward an adolescent audience (Lefferts, 2014; Nordyke, 2014). Last, a potential limitation of the study was that the small percentage of non-White characters available to analyze. However, the limited presence of non-White characters was reflective of a typical audience members’ viewing experience of MTV docusoaps. In essence, teens seeking to engage in social comparison with minority cast members have a more restricted pool of characters to choose from on MTV docusoaps.

To build upon the findings of this analysis, several areas of future research should be considered. First, future research should continue to analyze concurrent risk behaviors on reality programming popular among young viewers. The first step toward this pursuit may be achieved by investigating docusoap content on additional cable channels. Second, a more encompassing analysis reality TV cast members that more subjectively selects non-White characters across cable and network programming may yield more insight into their representation on reality TV. While such an analysis would increase the subjectivity of program selection, it would also provide a deeper understanding of the on screen risk behaviors displayed by non-White cast members. Third, additional, yet complementary, theoretical perspectives may be useful to investigate the effect of risk behaviors portrayed in reality television. For example, research from the prototype/willingness model (Gerrard, Gibbons, Houlihan, Stock, & Pomeroy, 2008; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995), found that adolescents’ participation in risk behaviors were greater in those who commonly engaged in social comparison. Reality television cast members may serve as potential prototypes of young viewers’ perceived in groups, thus increasing the potential for social comparison. Quantitative examination from this complementary theoretical perspective may provide additional insight into the research topic. Future research should consider additional survey and experimental approaches to study this issue. Such research will help to assess the effect of reality television portrayals of risk behavior on teen viewers’ perceptions and behaviors.

References


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