Quicksand and Quagmires of the Soul

The Subconscious Stimulation of Youth through Media

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Twenty-five years ago I read a report from Liverpool, England, in which a researcher established a high correlation between adolescent crime in Liverpool and its suburbs and American television programs. The report established a ratio between a crime committed and the portrayal of the crime in a television drama. Reports like this one on "copy-cat crime" are popular among sociologists and researchers. They show, however, a statistical correlation, not a causal relationship. Did young people, for example, watch violent television programs and then commit acts of violence, or were young people prone to committing acts of violence drawn to watching these shows on television? Keeping this in mind, and intrigued by the possible implications of this research, I kept a watchful eye out for research establishing a relationship between visual and audio impressions and how they make an imprint on the souls of young people.

The following represents some current research, much of which may seem intuitively obvious, that provides teachers and parents with research-based reasons to steer their offspring away from television violence, particularly as it is found in professional wrestling, and music with sexual lyrics.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

Consensus reports have now been released by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, the Surgeon General, the National Institute of Mental Health, and more than 1,000 reports and studies conducted by leading figures within medical and public health organizations. These studies point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children.

A connection has also been established between viewing acts of violence and the subsequent desensitization that occurs following that exposure, violence in real life, and the creation of an internalized climate of fear.

A published report claims that today's average American child watches 28 hours of television per week. That same child typically sits down to at least an hour a day playing video or computer games. Several more hours each week are spent watching movies and videos and listening to music, tallying far more hours than a child spends in school or with his or her family. By the age of 18 that same child will have watched more than 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 16,000 murders.[1]

If Music Be the Food of Sex

Music lyrics also influence the subconscious minds of youth. The average youth listens to music 1.5 to 2.5 hours per day.[2] A study, based on telephone interviews with 1,461 participants aged 12 to 17, in *Pediatrics*, released in August 2006,[3] and entitled "Exposure to Degrading versus Nondegrading Music Lyrics and Sexual Behavior Among Youth," was conducted by a team[4] from the RAND Corporation.[5] Among heavy listeners of music with explicit references to sex acts and lyrics[6] that depict women as sexual objects, 61 percent of teenagers began having sex within two years, versus 29 percent of those who said they never or rarely listened to such music. Federal statistics show that about 750,000 teens around the country become pregnant each year, and an estimated 4 million contract sexually transmitted diseases.[7]

"These portrayals objectify and degrade women in ways that are clear, but they do the same to men by depicting them as sex-driven studs,"[8] said Steven Martino, a RAND psychologist who led the study. Explicit lyrics are more likely to trigger early sexual behavior than those in which sexual references are more veiled and relationships appear more committed. In addition, exposure to sexually degrading music may also

have worrisome implications for what boys and girls come to expect from their future relationships.

Exposure to lots of sexually degrading music gives young people a specific message about sex. Boys learn they should be relentless in pursuit of women and girls learn to view themselves as sex objects. "We think that really lowers kids' inhibitions and makes them less thoughtful about sexual decisions," Martino said.[9] Martino explained that the researchers tried to account for other factors that could affect teens' sexual behavior, including parental permissiveness, and yet they still found that explicit lyrics had a strong influence.[10] David Walsh, a psychologist who heads the National Institute on Media and the Family, said the results make sense, and echo research on the influence of videos and other visual media. The brain's impulse-control center undergoes 'major construction' during the teen years at the same time that an interest in sex starts to blossom, he said.[11]

Benjamin Chavis, chief executive officer of the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, a coalition of hip-hop musicians and recording industry executives, said explicit music lyrics are a cultural expression that reflects social and economic realities.[12]

Another recent survey from the U.S Department of Health suggested that most sexually experienced teens wish they had waited longer to have intercourse; other data indicate that unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are more common among those who begin sexual activity earlier.[13]

The RAND study recommends that parents set limits on what music their children can purchase and listen to and be careful not to listen to sexually degrading music themselves when their children are around.

Professional Wrestling

A separate study by the Wake Forest University School of Medicine[14] also published in *Pediatrics*[15] found that teenagers who watched professional wrestling on television were likelier to behave violently than other youth and, surprisingly, girls seem to be more influenced than boys. The study found that teens of both sexes who watched wrestling more often were more likely to carry weapons, fight on dates, and exhibit other violent behavior. Robert DuRant, the leader of the study, said girls who watched wrestling six or more times over the two-week period had a 170 percent higher chance of starting a date fight than those who didn't watch wrestling. For boys, there was a 77 percent higher rate of initiating a fight among those who watched wrestling.[16]

Considered more entertainment than sport, professional wrestling pits colorful wrestlers portraying demons and heroes against each other in choreographed violence. It is dominated by World Wrestling Entertainment Inc., which airs shows such as RAW, Killer in the Cage, Smackdown, and SummerSlam. The WWE reported about $47 million in net income during its last fiscal year.

World Wrestling Entertainment spokesman Gary Davis rejected the findings of the Wake Forest study. "In contrast to the findings of this flawed study, many of our fans attest that watching World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) programming has been a positive experience for them and their children," he said. Vince McMahon, pro wrestling's promoter icon, blasted the study as "junk science"[17] and said the WWE is threatening the University with a lawsuit for doing the research.[18]

Be Awake

It should be clear that adults need to exercise renewed wakefulness and a high level of consciousness with regard to the well-being of their children because moral quicksand and ethical quagmires exist around every corner. One can never be sure today that young people will have solid ground upon which to walk.

Endnotes

1. http://www.babyzone.com/features/content/display.asp?TopicID=75&ContentID=968.
2. http://www.rand.org/news/press.06/08.07.html.
3. You can read the full study at: http://pedatricsaappublications.org/cgi/content/full/118/2/e430.
4. The researchers included Steven C. Martino, Ph.D., Rebecca L. Collins, Ph.D., Marc N. Elliott, Ph.D., Amy Strachman, M.A., David E. Kanouse, Ph.D., and Sandra H. Berry, M.A.

5. RAND Health, a division of the RAND Corporation, is the nation's largest independent health policy research program, with a broad research portfolio that focuses on health care quality, costs and delivery, among other topics.

6. Examples of degrading sexual lyrics include: "Half the ho's hate me, half them love me/The ones that hate me/Only hate me 'cause they ain't fu****** me/And they say I'm lucky/Do you think I've got time/To fu** all these ho's?" – from Ja Rule, "Livin' It Up."

7. http://www.rand.org/news/press.06/08.07.html.

8. http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/118/2/e430.

9. http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/118/2/e430.

10. "This study tests the prospective relationship between exposure to degrading and nondegrading sexual music content and subsequent changes in adolescent sexual behavior. We collected longitudinal data on adolescents' media use and sexual behavior, conducting three surveys. Music listening was assessed in the second of these three surveys and used to predict initiation of sexual activities in the following 2 years among participants, taking into account sexual experiences before the second survey. This design allowed for the possibility that sexual experience influences teens' selection of sexual music content and accounted for that possibility in testing for the effects of music on sexual behavior. The design also allowed us to take into account baseline characteristics that might contribute both to sexual behavior and exposure to sexual content in music, including several individual and family characteristics. By controlling for these possible confounding variables, we were able to more confidently attribute any differences in teens' sexual behavior to their exposure to sexual content in music.

Teens who said they listened to lots of music with degrading sexual messages were almost twice as likely to start having intercourse or other sexual activities within the next two years, compared with teens who listened to little or no sexually degrading music.

Among heavy listeners, fifty-one percent started having sex within two years, versus twenty-nine percent of those who said they listened to little or no sexually degrading music."

11. http://www.cnn.com/2006/HEALTH/parenting/08/07/sexlyrics.teens.ap/.

12. http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2006/08/07/lyrics_linked_to_teen_sex_in_study/.

13. http://www.cwfa.org/articledisplay.asp?id=6321&department=CWA&categoryid=pornography

14. A team led by Robert H. DuRant, a professor of pediatrics, social science, and health policy at Wake Forest's Baptist Medical Center, surveyed about 2,000 students in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County public high schools in the fall of 1999 and again in April 2000. Just over half the group was male.

15. You can read the full study at: http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/118/2/e265.

16. http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/118/2/e265.

17. http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2006/2006_08_07_v2.jsp.

18. The WWE also issued a brief press statement condemning the findings: "We find the study flawed and ridiculous and we are contemplating legal action."