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The Relationship Between “Teen Mom” Reality Programming and Teenagers’ Beliefs About Teen Parenthood

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A survey was conducted with U.S. high school students ($M = 16.57$ years of age) from the Midwest to examine whether exposure to “teen mom” reality programming (e.g., *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*) was related to teens’ perceptions of teen parenthood. Contrary to our hypotheses, analyses revealed that exposure to teen mom reality programming was related to an increased tendency to believe that teen mothers have an enviable quality of life, a high income, and involved fathers. Teens who perceived reality television as realistic were most likely to hold these perceptions. The findings are discussed in terms of cultivation theory.

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INTRODUCTION

Teenage parenthood introduces a number of complications into the lives of individuals and societies at large. Although teen childbearing has been in decline since the 1950s (Ventura & Hamilton, 2011; Ventura, Mathews, & Hamilton, 2001), the United States still has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and birth among comparable countries (Martin et al., 2010; United Nations Statistical Division, 2007). In the United States, nearly half of all teen mothers fail to earn a high school diploma (Maynard & Hoffman, 2008). Consequently, teen mothers earn low salaries, averaging just under \$6,500 annually over their first 15 years of parenthood (Maynard & Hoffman, 2008). Teen fathers face similar challenges. In general, teen fatherhood is associated with lower levels of schooling, lower occupational income, and fewer hours worked in the labor market (Brien & Willis, 2008). Thus, the effects of teen pregnancy come at a significant cost not only to teen parents and their children but also to U.S. citizens. U.S. citizens pay more than \$7 billion in taxes each year to support welfare, health care, and lost tax revenue related to teen childbearing (Maynard & Hoffman, 2008).

Given this evidence, much research has been dedicated to delineating variables that may discourage childbearing among teenagers such as access to comprehensive sex education (e.g., Kohler, Manhart, & Lafferty, 2008) and reduced consumption of televised sexual content (e.g., Chandra et al., 2008). Another variable that has received some recent empirical attention is whether exposure to popular television series like *16 & Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* aide in teen pregnancy prevention (see Aubrey, Behm-Morawitz, & Kim, in press; Wright, Randall, & Arroyo, 2013). Indeed, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (NCPTUP) has argued that these reality programs are great “teaching tools” to prevent teen pregnancy (Sullentrop, Brown, & Ortiz, 2010). The current study builds this growing body of literature by utilizing cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) to analyze a survey of U.S. high school students ($N = 172$) about their consumption of teen mom reality programming and their perceptions of what it is like to be a teen parent.

REALITY TELEVISION AND CULTIVATION THEORY

Reality television programming has been defined “as a distinct genre made up of entertainment-oriented programs that feature nonprofessional actors playing themselves whose words and behavior are presented as being unscripted” (Hall, 2009, p. 431). The genre covers a wide range of

programming formats, including competition shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, voyeuristic-type productions like *Big Brother*, and documentary-style programming such *16 & Pregnant*. Reality TV's popularity with viewers, coupled with its low production costs (i.e., limited reliance on writers and actors), make this genre appealing to the television industry (Hall, 2009). As a result, this genre is now a staple of television programming. Indeed, every U.S. broadcast network had at least one reality program as part of its 2012–2013 prime-time lineup (Dietz, 2013). In fact, half of the 10 most-watched programs in the 2011–2012 season were reality shows (de Moraes, 2012). Teen mom reality shows are equally popular, with the Season 3 premiere of *Teen Mom 2* proving to be the most popular original cable program among viewers aged 12 to 34 (Bibel, 2012).

Due, in part, to its intense popularity, reality television has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. Researchers have examined the specific content of reality-based programs (Baruh, 2009; Oliver, 1994), as well as predictors of audiences' exposure to these shows (e.g., Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). Several studies have also investigated viewers' enjoyment of reality television. In investigations of the British version of *Big Brother*, for example, both Hill (2002) and Jones (2003) found that watching ordinary people as cast members was an important part of the program's charm.

Recent media reviews and commentary suggest that teen mom reality programming may be popular among viewers for some of these same reasons (Ostrow, 2012; Roston, 2011). In an interview with *USA Today*, the entertainment director for *US Weekly* argued that teen mom reality shows are successful because viewers feel that they are getting a look into laypeople's unscripted lives (Thompson, 2010). But aside from anecdotal evidence regarding the shows' appeal, we know little about the impact these particular programs have on viewers who watch them. This omission is especially striking in light of the shows' aim to curtail teen pregnancy by showing young people "the honest, unpleasant truth about teen pregnancy" (Dolgen, 2011, para. 8). Rather than assuming that young people are interpreting these messages in the ways they were intended, we put these assumptions to a systematic test by examining whether exposure to such shows is related to an accurate understanding or "truth" about what it is like to be a teen parent.

Although no evidence to date links reality television to perceptions of teen parenthood, cultivation theory provides for this possibility (Gerbner et al., 1986). Cultivation analysis examines the role that television exposure, independent from other variables, plays in shaping individuals' sense of social reality (Morgan, 2009). Cultivation theory posits that those who spend more time watching television (i.e., "heavy viewers) are more likely

to perceive the real world in ways that are consistent with the recurrent messages of the television world, compared to people who watch less television (i.e., “light viewers”), irrespective of the specific programs or genres viewed (Gerbner et al., 1986). Since this first investigation, hundreds of studies have been published testing the cultivation hypothesis in a variety of contexts, including violence (see review in Potter, 1993), rape myth acceptance (Kalhor & Eastin, 2011), and alienation (Morgan, 1986).

Despite cultivation theory’s utility, there remains some concern about its emphasis on overall exposure as opposed to exposure to specific programs or genres. Potter (1993) noted that “empirical tests have continually demonstrated that when exposure is defined in terms of genre viewing, the evidence for a cultivation effect is as stronger or stronger than when conceptualized globally” (p. 589). Indeed, studies have found that exposure to specific genres, but not exposure to television overall, significantly predicted the outcome of interest. Oliver and Armstrong (1995), for instance, found that repeated exposure to reality crime shows was positively correlated with estimates of criminal activity. More recently, Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, and Smith (2007) observed that watching reality dating programs was significantly related to perceptions of relationships consistent with those modeled on television. By way of response, scholars have called for a revision to cultivation theory to account for genre differences (see Potter 1993; Williams, 2006).

A (revised) cultivation theory would predict that exposure to programs that feature the realities of teen parenthood may cultivate realistic beliefs about teen parenthood, thereby serving as a potential deterrent to unprotected sex. By “realistic beliefs” we refer to portrayals that include, for example, a teen mother falling asleep while doing her homework, or using food stamps to purchase groceries. No published content analysis has specifically looked at and identified key themes in these programs. However, according to MTV’s (2012) website for *16 & Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series, these programs all feature reoccurring themes that include quality of life, finances, and managing relationships. These themes are discussed next.

One of the most immediately evident themes introduced in teen mom reality programming concerns the teen mother sacrificing her teen lifestyle in order to care for her baby. In one episode of *16 & Pregnant*, for instance, Jennifer is forced to forgo her passion—competitive sports—when she becomes pregnant with twins in high school. In another poignant example, Catelynn is brought to tears as she shops for a prom dress big enough to accommodate her pregnant stomach. Finally, Maci laments to her boyfriend that she is sick of doing nothing but feeding, changing, and cleaning up after their newborn.

Indeed, teen moms do not live the life of a typical U.S. teenager. Research demonstrates that teen mothers report having virtually no time to themselves, experiencing inordinate amounts of stress trying to balance parenting duties with school and work responsibilities (Leadbeater & Way, 2001), and having access to limited or nonexistent social support networks (Reid & Meadows-Oliver, 2007), even in terms of the baby's father (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). In addition, research suggests that teen mothers are at an increased risk for victimization via intimate partner violence, perhaps because they are less likely to be in a long-term stable relationship and/or are more likely to be in relationships with drug- or alcohol-addicted individuals (Harrykissoon, Rickert, & Wiemann, 2002). Cultivation theory would predict that heavy viewers of these programs would be more likely to believe that teen parenthood comes with many sacrifices and risks as compared to lighter viewers of such programs.

A second common portrayal concerns teen parents' income levels. In an episode of *16 & Pregnant*, Sarah's boyfriend, Blake, decides to take work on a shrimping boat (away from Sarah and their new baby) so that they can make ends meet. In Season 2 of *Teen Mom 2*, Kailyn—who is living with her baby's father because of her financial limitations as a teen mom—is forced to either break up with her new boyfriend or move out of her ex-boyfriend's parent's house. These examples seem to reflect the economic reality of adolescent pregnancy and parenting. A child born to an unwed teen mother who has not finished high school is nine times more likely to grow up in poverty than a child born to a married mother who has graduated from high school (Committee on Ways and Means Democrats, 2004). The issue of poverty is exacerbated by the fact that children born to teen mothers have little financial support from the child's father, often because the fathers are poor themselves (Brein & Willis, 2008). Also, teen mothers rarely earn high school and college-level diplomas, which negatively impacts their lifetime earnings (Maynard & Hoffman, 2008). Thus, cultivation theory would also predict that heavy viewers of these programs would be more likely to believe that teen mothers have low incomes compared to lighter viewers.

One last portrayal common on these programs concerns a lack of involvement from the baby's father. Research demonstrates that less than half of first-time teen fathers (44%) live with their babies at their birth (Scott, Steward-Streng, Manlove, & Moore, 2012). Evidence also indicates that very few young fathers provide substantial direct financial support to their offspring (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). A narrative portrayal of these statistics is played throughout *Teen Mom 2*, when teen mom Jenelle receives no support—financial or otherwise—from her baby's father. Similarly, in an episode of *16 & Pregnant*, Briana's boyfriend breaks up with her

when she tells him she is pregnant. When she has the baby, he visits the little girl rarely or not at all and is unwilling to provide more than an occasional box of diapers to help support her. Once again, cultivation theory would predict that heavy viewers of such programs would be more likely than lighter viewers to think that teen fathers are not involved in the lives of children born to teen mothers.

To review, thus far we have argued that cultivation theory would predict that heavy viewers of teen mom reality programs will be more likely than lighter viewers to believe that teen mothers have a negative or compromised quality of life, low incomes, and uninvolved fathers. Yet, without a content analysis of these shows, it is important to note that any cultivation-type predictions are tenuous. The preceding review assumes that teen pregnancy is presented as homogeneous and negative on these programs, but this is an empirical assumption that needs testing.

Although there is no empirical testing of the show's content as of yet, there is growing secondary evidence that these shows may not be portraying adolescent pregnancy in entirely accurate ways. For instance, Aubrey and colleagues (in press) conducted an online field experiment with 137 female adolescents to examine the effects of *16 & Pregnant* on pregnancy-related attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral intentions. The results revealed that viewers of this program reported a lower perception of their own risk for pregnancy and greater endorsement of the idea that the benefits of teen pregnancy outweighed the risks as compared to the control group. In another study that examined the effects of exposure to both *16 & Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, Wright et al. (2013) found that exposure to these programs was associated with a 1.32 increase in the odds of recent intercourse. Indeed, these two studies support the findings of an experimental study conducted by NCPTUP to examine the impact of *16 & Pregnant* on 162 teens enrolled in Boys and Girls Clubs. Members of Boys and Girls Clubs were randomly assigned to watch episodes of *16 & Pregnant* or to a no-exposure control group. Counter to NCPTUP predictions, teens in the exposure condition believed that the teens featured on these shows wanted to get pregnant as compared to the control. In addition, among teens who never had sex, those who viewed the programs believed that most teens want to get pregnant and, if they were to get pregnant, will "be with the baby's father/mother forever," as compared to those in the control group. These findings prompted NCPTUP to caution that viewing *16 & Pregnant* could have an "undesirable effect" on some viewers (Suellentrop, Brown, & Ortiz, 2010, p. 3).

In light of this recent evidence that exposure to *16 & Pregnant* and/or *Teen Mom/Teen Mom 2* may be related to beliefs that promote rather than prevent teen pregnancy/parenthood, even though the stated purpose of

these shows is teen pregnancy prevention, we pose the following non-directional research question:

- RQ1: Will heavy viewers of teen mom reality programming be more likely than lighter viewers of such programs to believe that teen mothers have negative or compromised quality of life, low incomes, and uninvolved fathers?

INTERPRETING REALITY TELEVISION: PERCEIVED REALISM

Thus far, we have argued that cultivation analysis may provide a theoretical mechanism for explaining how the amount and nature of television exposure impacts viewers' perceptions of social reality. Correspondingly, research also demonstrates that the extent to which audiences perceive television content as an accurate depiction of reality (i.e., perceived reality) makes these effects stronger (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007). Perceived reality of television refers to the extent to which a viewer believes television content is similar to real life (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). In regard to perceptions of television generally, research indicates that viewers are more likely to learn from television content that they perceive as similar to the real world (Ferris et al., 2007; Greenberg & Reeves, 1976; Taylor, 2005).

Although no study to date has linked perceptions of reality television to opinions of teen parenthood, it seems reasonable to expect that the perceived reality of reality programming would significantly moderate the relationship between exposure to teen mom reality programs and perceptions of teen parenthood, given the modest evidence just cited. In accord, the first hypothesis was advanced:

- H1: The relationship between exposure to teen mom reality television and teens' perceptions of teen parenthood will be stronger among those teens who perceive reality television as more realistic.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Once Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, we contacted five school districts in four different counties by U.S. mail and e-mail to inquire if their high schools would be interested in participating in the study. These

schools were chosen because, demographically, the median household income and racial makeup of each school was consistent with U.S. national averages (e.g., household income approximately \$52,000; 80% White). In the letter and e-mail, it was explained that we were interested in examining the relationship between exposure to teen pregnancy programs and teens' beliefs concerning teen pregnancy. We explained that the survey could be administered at a time that was convenient for the teachers and the students, and all responses were anonymous and voluntary. In exchange for their participation, a small donation (\$100) would be made to the school as a thank-you. Of the 10 high schools we contacted, two schools agreed to participate. The two schools came from neighboring Midwestern counties.

Ninety students from one school and 95 students from the other school participated for a total of 185 students. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years ($M = 16.57$, $SD = 1.55$). There were nearly equal numbers of male (51%) and female (49%) adolescents in the sample. The majority of the students were Caucasian (84%), with the remainder self-identifying as African American (5%), Asian American (3.5%), American Indian (.5%), or Hispanic (2%). Five percent of the sample did not report their race. Compared to U.S. census figures, Caucasians were slightly overrepresented in our sample and African Americans and Hispanics were underrepresented (Caucasians, 79%; African Americans, 13%; Hispanics, 3%; Asians, 5%; Native Americans, >1%). Most of the participants lived in households with middle and upper-middle incomes (less than \$24,000 = 6%; \$25,000–\$34,000 = 8%; \$35,000–\$49,000 = 12%; \$50,000–\$75,000 = 29%; more than \$75,000 = 32%; did not disclose income = 12%).

All students were granted parental permission and signed their own assent forms before participating. The survey was administered during participants' study period. Two orderings of the questionnaire were created so that half of the participants were asked about their television exposure and perceptions of reality TV first and then about their perceptions of teen parenthood, whereas the other half were asked about perceptions of teen parenthood before being asked about their television exposure and perceptions of reality television. There were no effects of order. Moreover, one-way analyses of variance were conducted to examine the effect of school on each of the major control, predictor, and criterion variables. There were no statistically significant differences between the two schools on any key variable.

Perceptions of teen motherhood. Given that perceptions of teen motherhood is a relatively unexplored area of research, we created an original measure for this study. We constructed items describing the difficulties associated with being a teen mother or father. Each item was taken word for

word from the National Center for Health Statistics fact sheets that detail social issues that can be addressed through a reduction in teen pregnancy. We asked participants 10 questions about being a teen parent that matched up with the themes that occur in teen mom reality programming (i.e., quality of life, income, father involvement). For each statement, students indicated their agreement on 5-point Likert scales from 0 (*not at all true*) to 4 (*very true*). The first theme, *quality of life*, was comprised of three items: "Most teenage mothers complete high school," "It is easy for a teen mom to find child care to go to school or work," and "Teen moms have a lot of time to themselves (to shop, watch TV, etc.)" ($\alpha = .70$). To assess the second theme, perceptions of *income*, participants indicated their agreement with five items: "Teen mothers can afford reliable child care," "Teen mothers have affordable access to health care (i.e., they have health insurance)," "A teen mom lives in her own home or apartment rather than with her parents," "Teen moms finish college," and "Teen mothers have better than minimum-wage-type jobs" ($\alpha = .71$). Finally, to assess *father involvement* participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statement "Teen mothers receive adequate child support from the baby's father" and "Teen fathers are helpful in caring for their new baby (i.e., change diapers, assist with feedings)." The intraclass correlation analysis for this two-item measure was statistically significant ($r = .45, p = .000$) indicating that the measure had "fair to good" reliability (Fleiss, 1986). Across all three themes, the scores were summed and averaged to create a composite score for each variable.

Exposure to teen mom reality programming. Adopted from Harrison (2000), participants were presented with a list of 30 reality television programs and asked to indicate how often they watched each one: 0 (*never*), 1 (*sometimes*), or 2 (*always*). Participants were instructed to answer *never* if they have never watched the show, *sometimes* if they have watched occasionally, and *always* if they watch the show every time it airs. Among these were three programs that focused specifically on teen parenthood: *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*. A composite viewing index was created based on the average viewing frequency of these three shows and excellent reliability ($\alpha = .90$).

Perceived realism. We used a three-item version of Rubin, Palmgreen, and Sypher's (1994) Perceived Realism Scale, but we modified the subject from television content in general to reality television (e.g., "The same things happen to people on reality television happen to me in real life"). Response options ranged from -2 (*strongly disagree*) to 2 (*strongly agree*). The data from these questions were averaged to create a perceived realism score for each participant ($\alpha = .82$).

Overall television viewing. Adopted from Nabi (2009), daily television viewing was measured by asking students to report how many hours of TV they watch during each of four periods (6 a.m. to noon, noon to 6 p.m., 6 p.m. to midnight, and midnight to 6 a.m.) during an average weekday and weekend day. The data were summed (weighting the average weekday score by a factor 5 and the average weekend day score by a factor 2) to create an average TV-viewing-hours-per-week measure. A histogram of the television viewing variables revealed that the distributions were normal until the 85-hour point (approximately 12 hours of viewing per day), after which it was positively skewed. Due to the strong possibility that their responses to the rest of the measures would be unreliable, the participants who reported viewing an average of more than 85 hours of television per week were dropped from further analyses, which reduced the sample to $N = 172$.

Control variables. We controlled for several variables known to predict both television viewing and early sexual activity. *Parent education* was measured as schooling completed by the participant's mother and father (1 = less than high school to 6 = graduate or professional degree). *Household income* was measured by asking participants to report parent(s)' total household yearly income (1 = less than \$15,000 to 7 = \$100,000 or more). Teens were asked to report their *mother's age at pregnancy* (1 = under 18 years of age to 5 = over 30 years of age). Participants' *deviant behavior* was assessed with a five-item measure developed by Collins and colleagues (2004). Teens were asked to report (1 = not at all to 4 = more than 10 times) how many times in the past 12 months they had broken into a house, school, or place of business; skipped school; cheated on a test; damaged something on purpose; or stolen something ($\alpha = .83$). Finally, participants self-reported their *grade point average (GPA)*.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

The descriptive statistics for each major control, predictor, and criterion variables are presented in Table 1. Notably, the data revealed that overall television viewing was not correlated with any key variable. However, exposure to teen mom reality programming was significantly correlated with perceived quality of life and father involvement, and marginally correlated with income. Perceived realism was also correlated with all three outcome variables.

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations Key Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	6	7
1. Sex	—	—						
2. Hours of TV/week	31.77	18.44	.10					
3. Teen Mom TV	.91	1.20	.29***	.09				
4. Perceived Reality	-2.37	3.04	.09	.18	.21*			
6. Quality of life	1.23	.48	.01	-.08	.18*	.23**		
7. Income	1.05	.60	.05	.05	.14†	.33***	.47**	
8. Father involvement	1.58	.81	-.10	-.03	.18*	.18*	.09	.30***

Note. N = 175. Codes assigned to the sex variable were males = 1 and females = 2. Hours of television viewed per week ranged from 0 to 85.

†p < .1. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

More differences emerge when the sample is divided into groups based on gender (Table 2). A preliminary multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) comparing all three media variables by gender was significant, Pillai's $F(3, 167) = 6.40, p = .000, \eta^2 = .10$. Further analysis of the between-subjects effects on the dependent variables showed that female adolescents watched significantly more teen mom reality programming than did male participants. Indeed, 80% of the male adolescents reported that they "never" watched *16 & Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, or *Teen Mom 2*. In contrast,

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables by Gender

	Male ^a				Female ^b				F
	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Min.	Max.	M	SD	
Demographic variables									
Age	14	18	16.40	1.46			16.86	1.65	1.80
Predictor variables									
Hours of TV/week	0	85	32.98	20.11	0	68	28.92	16.88	2.04
Teen Mom TV	0	4.67	.54	1.03	0	4.67	1.38	1.36	15.39***
Perceived reality	-6.00	6.00	-2.53	3.21	-6.0	6.00	-2.03	2.79	1.22
Outcome variables									
Quality of life	0	4	1.23	.47	0	4	1.23	.48	.00
Income	0	3.8	1.04	.60	0	3.8	1.07	.60	.06
Father involvement	0	4	1.71	.72	0	4	1.41	.74	7.04**

Note. For Teen Mom TV, actual maximum = 6. For income, actual maximum = 4.

^an = 83. ^bn = 87.

p < .01. *p < .001.

58% of the female participants reported that they “sometimes” or “always” watched *16 & Pregnant*, 40% of the female participants “sometimes” or “always” watched *Teen Mom*, and 39% of the female participants “sometimes” or “always” watched *Teen Mom 2*. However, there was no significant difference between male and female participants in exposure to overall television.

A second MANOVA was conducted to examine significant gender differences across the three outcome variables of interest: quality of life, income, and father involvement. The MANOVA was significant, Pillai’s $F(3, 169) = 2.74, p = .05, \eta^2 = .05$. Further analysis of the between-subjects effects on the dependent variables showed that male participants were significantly more likely than female participants to think that teen fathers were involved in their baby’s life. There were no significant differences between male and female participants on perceptions of a teen mother’s quality of life or income.

Main Analyses

To test the hypothesis that viewing teen mom reality programming would predict perceptions of what it is like to be a teen mother, three multiple hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, one for each theme (quality of life, income, father involvement). In each analysis, 10 predictor variables were entered into each analysis in five steps. We controlled for gender in the first block, given the significant gender differences in exposure to teen mom reality programs and teen pregnancy perceptions. The second block (household income, mother’s education, father’s education, mother’s age at time of pregnancy) and the third block (GPA, deviant behavior) contained variables that are related to teen’s early sexual activity. The fourth block included teen’s overall exposure to television to control for the possibility that programming other than televised depictions of teen parenthood might contribute to teen’s perceptions of teen moms. After eliminating all of these sources of variance, the final block contained teen’s exposure to teen mom reality programming to provide a conservative test of the hypothesized relationship. Given the skewed distribution in male and female adolescents’ exposure to teen mom reality programs, this variable was standardized, and the z -score was used in the final block of the regression analysis.

We used *gpower* to better understand the power of this design (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996). As recommended by Cohen (1988), analyses were conducted ($\alpha = .05, \kappa = 11, N = 172$) for three standard effect sizes: small ($f^2 = .02$), medium ($f^2 = .15$), and large ($f^2 = .35$). The results revealed that the regression analyses had excellent power to detect a large (1.00) or medium effect (.99), and modest power to detect a small effect (.58).

Quality of life. RQ1 asked whether heavy viewers would be more likely than light viewers of teen mom reality programming to think that teen moms have a negative or compromised quality of life. None of the controls or overall television viewing significantly explained variance in such perceptions (Table 3). The only significant predictor of perceptions of the quality of life of a teen mother was exposure to teen mom reality programs, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 156) = 3.61, p = .05$. Heavy viewers of teen mom reality programs were more likely to think that teen moms have a lot of time to themselves, can easily find childcare so that they can go to work or school, and can complete high school than were lighter viewers of such shows.

Income. RQ1 also asked whether heavy viewers would be more likely than light viewers of teen mom reality programming to think that children of teen mothers have low incomes. The contribution of personal characteristics (Step 3), significantly contributed to teens' perceptions of a teen mother's income, $F_{\text{change}}(2, 156) = 6.97, p = .001$. In particular, teens with lower GPAs were more likely to think that teen moms had higher

TABLE 3
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Quality of Life, Income, and Father Involvement

	<i>Quality of life</i>			<i>Income</i>			<i>Father involvement</i>		
	<i>b (SE)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>R²Δ</i>	<i>b (SE)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>R²Δ</i>	<i>b (SE)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>R²Δ</i>
Step 1									
Gender	-.01 (.08)	-.15	.00	.01 (.09)	.13	.00	-.4 (.67)	-2.04	.01
Step 2									
Household income	-.01 (.02)	-.46		.02 (.02)	.69		.10 (.61)	1.67	
Mother's education	-.01 (.02)	-.30		-.02 (.02)	-.72		-.16 (.06)**	-2.84	
Father's education	-.00 (.02)	-.12		-.01 (.02)	-.67		.01 (.06)	.02	
Mother's age at pregnancy	-.02 (.03)	.55	.03	.03 (.03)	.92	.02	.12 (.09)	1.33	.06*
Step 3									
Delinquency	.01 (.01)	.82		.01 (.01)	.86		-.29 (.19)	1.61	
GPA	-.02 (.06)	-.30	.02	-.16 (.07)*	-2.38	.08**	-.29 (.19)	-1.50	.04*
Step 4									
Total TV	-.00 (.00)	-1.89	.01	-.00 (.00)	-1.38	.00	-.01 (.01)	-1.39	.01
Step 5									
Teen Mom TV	.10 (.04)*	2.00	.02*	.09 (.05)*	1.99	.02*	.41* (.13)**	3.03	.05**
Step 6									
Perceived Reality	.03 (.01)**	2.75	.10**	.21 (.04)**	4.62	.12**	.24 (.13)	1.89†	.02*
Step 7									
Perceived Reality × Teen Mom TV	.12 (.04)**	3.41	.10**	.12 (.04)**	2.85	.04**	.11 (.11)	.96	.01

Note. All coefficients are from the full model.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

household incomes than were teens with higher GPAs. Once again, overall television exposure was not a significant predictor of quality of life. Exposure to teen mom reality programming was a positive predictor of perceptions of a teen mother's household income, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 154) = 3.65$, $p = .05$. Heavy viewers of teen mom programs were more likely to think that teen moms have affordable access to healthcare; could afford good, reliable child care; finished college; lived on their own; and hold better than minimum-wage jobs than lighter viewers of such programs (Table 3).

Involvement of fathers. RQ1 asked whether heavy viewers of teen mom reality programming would be more likely than light viewers to think that teen fathers do not financially contribute or care for the child. The contribution of environmental factors significantly predicted additional variance in perceptions of fatherhood, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 160) = 2.38$, $p = .05$. In particular, teens born to mothers with little education were more likely to think that teen fathers were more involved in child care than teens with mothers that were highly educated. The analysis also revealed that as a set, teen's GPA and delinquency significantly predicted perceptions of teen fatherhood, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 158) = 3.58$, $p = .03$. Students who were doing poorly in school and involved in delinquent activities believed that teen fathers financially contributed to their child's care and were active caregivers. Exposure to teen mom reality programming was significantly related to perceptions of teen fatherhood, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 156) = 9.19$, $p = .00$. Heavy viewers of teen mom reality programming were more likely to think that teen mothers receive financial support from the baby's father and that teen fathers are helpful with the baby's childcare than were lighter viewers of such programming (see Table 3).

Perceived reality. H1 posited that the relationship between exposure to teen mom reality television and teens' perceptions of teen parenthood would be stronger among those teens who perceive reality television as more realistic. To test whether perceived reality was a significant moderator, additional hierarchical regressions were conducted. The predictors in the analyses were identical to those just reported, only now they incorporated the moderating variable of perceived reality (Step 6) and the interaction term in the last step (Step 7). To ease in interpretation, moderating variables were mean centered prior to computing the polynomial term (Cronbach, 1987). Interactions were analyzed using probing procedures outlined by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006).

For quality of life, the interaction between exposure to teen mom reality programming and perceived reality was statistically significant, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 144) = 13.85$, $p = .00$. To probe the interaction, exposure was examined at

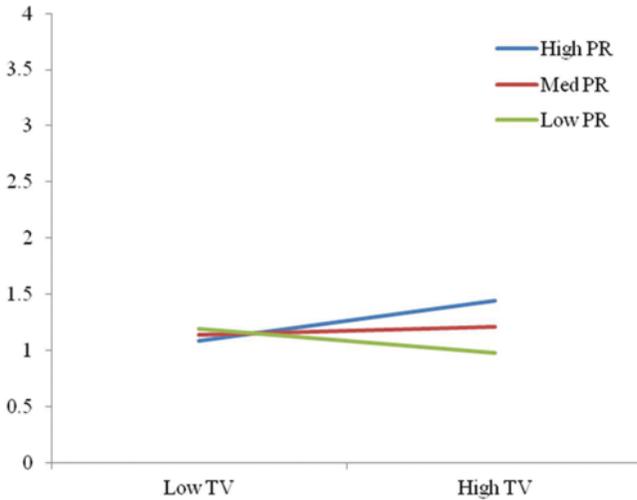


FIGURE 1 Interaction between exposure to teen mom reality programs and perceived reality (PR) of reality television on perceptions of quality of life. *Note.* Perceptions of a teen mother's quality of life were highest among those teens who consumed heavy amounts of teen mom reality shows and thought reality programs were realistic.

three different intervals of perceived reality (the mean and ± 1 *SD*). The effect was statistically significant at 1 standard deviation above the mean ($b = .18$, $SE = .18$, $p = .02$) but not at the mean ($b = .03$, $SE = .03$, $p = .33$) or below the mean ($b = -.11$, $SE = .08$, $p = .21$; see Figure 1).

For income, the interaction between exposure to teen mom reality programming and perceived reality was statistically significant, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 139) = 8.16$, $p = .005$. To probe the interaction, exposure was examined at three different intervals of perceived reality (the mean and ± 1 *SD*). The effect was statistically significant at 1 standard deviation above the mean ($b = .17$, $SE = .08$, $p = .04$) but not at the mean ($b = .03$, $SE = .04$, $p = .49$) or below the mean ($b = -.11$, $SE = .08$, $p = .19$). Once again, the analysis revealed that the effect was strongest among those who *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that reality television content was realistic (see Figure 2).

For father involvement, the interaction between exposure to teen mom reality programming and perceived reality was not significant.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate associations between exposure to teen mom reality programs and teens' perceptions of teen motherhood.

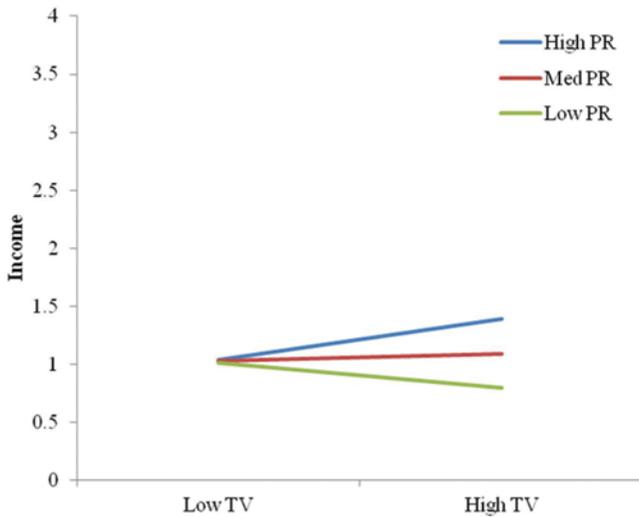


FIGURE 2 Interaction between exposure to teen mom reality programs and perceived reality (PR) of reality television on income. *Note.* Perceptions of a teen mother's income were highest among those teens who consumed heavy amounts of teen mom reality shows and thought reality programs were realistic.

We found that most of our sample watched teen mom reality programming, but these shows were more popular with female adolescents than male adolescents. We also found that watching these shows significantly predicted perceptions of what it is like to have a baby as a teenager. Counter to the assertions of program producers and supporters, however, heavy viewers of these programs were significantly more likely to think that teen mothers had an enviable quality of life, had a decent income, and involved fathers than did lighter viewers of these shows.

The results of this study bolster Potter's (1993) criticism of cultivation theory for assuming that the television landscape is relatively homogeneous. In our study, overall television viewing did not predict any of the variables of interest, whereas exposure to teen mom reality programming did. The results of this study mirror other research that has attempted to examine content-specific effects on adolescents' expectations of motherhood. For example, Ex, Janssens, and Korzilius (2002) explored the relationship between television viewing and young female adolescents' thoughts about motherhood in their sample of 166 Dutch adolescents. The researchers found that exposure to family sitcoms and soap operas, but not total amount of television exposure, significantly predicted female adolescents' images of what motherhood entails. Given that specific-content cultivation

effects have been found in mass media research (e.g., Oliver & Armstrong, 1995), future research should continue considering the nature of the programming that adolescents watch as opposed to sheer exposure alone.

Our data call into question the content of teen mom reality programming. For all three of our outcome variables, heavy viewing of teen mom reality programming *positively* predicted unrealistic perceptions of what it is like to be a teen mother. It could be that the reason such a relationship was found was because these programs do, in fact, portray teen parenthood in a positive light. Unfortunately, we did not content analyze these programs so it is unknown how, exactly, teen parenthood is portrayed therein. Clearly future research needs to examine teen mom programming more carefully in light of the findings presented here.

An outside variable that may be playing a role in cultivating positive beliefs about the teen mom experience involves the celebrity that the teen moms portrayed on these reality shows have garnered from media coverage that is separate from the shows proper. The teen moms on these programs are frequently shown (and thereby positively reaffirmed and celebrated) on morning talk shows, the covers of gossip magazines, and as the subject of celebrity websites, blogs, and social media channels (see Dolgen, 2011; Marcus, 2011). It is possible that teens are drawn to, or desire the celebrity status afforded to, these teen mothers and such celebrity makes a larger impression on viewers' perceptions of the teen mom experience than does the real-life narratives featured on these programs. In support of this idea, Aubrey and colleagues' (in press) experimental study found that affinity for the teen mothers featured in *16 & Pregnant* (i.e., homophily and parasocial interaction) predicted lower risk perceptions, greater acceptance of myths about teen pregnancy, more favorable attitudes about teen pregnancy, and fewer behavioral intentions to avoid teen pregnancy. In other words, the attention and opportunities seemingly thrown at these teen parents may appear so appealing to viewers that no amount of horror stories from the reality shows themselves can override them. An important limitation to this study is that we did not measure identification with or affinity for the teen mothers featured in these programs. Future research on such programming should examine teens' exposure to other media that may showcase these women in positive, enviable ways, as well as individual differences in identification. The portrait of effects may be more nuanced than the one presented here.

Our lone hypothesis asked whether the relationship between exposure to teen mom reality programs and teens' perceptions of teen motherhood would be stronger among those teens who perceive reality television programming as more realistic. This hypothesis was mostly supported. This finding also makes an important contribution to this body of literature, because we found a specific effect for perceptions of *reality* programs.

The impetus for asking this question as opposed to television in general was the reality programs claim to be “real.” Yet not all viewers are aware that these programs are often scripted and heavily edited before they go on air (Hill, 2002). Thus, it seemed worthwhile to gauge teens’ attitudes about reality TV to see if it moderated such effects. At least in this sample, teens who *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that reality television content was realistic were most impacted by exposure to teen mom programs. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that we measured perceived reality of reality programs in general and not perceived reality of teen mom reality programs in particular. The results reported here may be different had we measured whether teens perceived the teen mom reality programming to be realistic. Future research should take such perceptions into account.

It is also important to note that impact of exposure to these programs affected female and male viewers similarly. Across the outcome variables of interest, the relationship between exposure and perceptions was statistically significant even after controlling for gender. In fact, gender failed to be a significant predictor of perceptions and accounted for 3% of the variance in perceptions of quality of life, 5% of the variance for perceptions of income, and only 7% of the variance for father involvement. This finding is surprising given that teen girls watched significantly more of these programs than did teen boys. We suspect that teen mom reality programs may be a genre that captures a male adolescent’s attention in ways that most other television programs do not. Teen mom reality programs feature not only female teens but also teen fathers. The male participants in this sample who watch such shows may be drawn to, and thus engaged with, this form of programming more so than with other forms of programming investigated in previous work. Indeed, Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) found no gender difference in their study of the relationship between reality dating programs and young adults’ sexual attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, the heavy-viewing male participants in the present study may not be representative of all male adolescents. Future research should attempt to duplicate the findings reported here, as well as measure motivations for viewing.

Limitations, Contributions, and Implications and Future Directions

It should be acknowledged that this study does not allow for a discussion of causal influence because the data come from a single point in time. Therefore, we cannot assess whether these programs are influencing teens’ perceptions or if teens who already hold such beliefs are seeking out such content. In addition, we did not content analyze the teen mom programs themselves. Thus, the context of the portrayal of the teen mothers on these shows is only informally accounted for herein.

In addition, these data reflect a small sample of teens in the Midwest. Sample size and selection is particularly important to note. Although our power analysis revealed that we had enough power to detect a medium and large effect, it could be argued that our sample was selected to ensure an effect was found. Grimes and Pierce (2013) recently argued that the use of students from school populations tend to trend toward lower socioeconomic status demographics. This is particularly problematic when one considers that the youth who are most often at risk for negative media effects come from economically disadvantaged households (e.g., media violence on aggression). Yet there are important reasons that this does not seem to be the case with the sample presented here. For one, we selected schools based on demographic averages that were on par with U.S. census figures. That is, we did not select schools where teen pregnancy was a known problem. In fact, the lowest teen pregnancy rates in the state were found in the two counties where the study was conducted, at 14 per 1,000 live births. Thus, our sample may be limited in that it cannot speak to students in communities where pregnancy is a problem but rather only to communities where teen pregnancy is uncommon. For another, and offering further corroboration for the accuracy of our study's findings, is the idea that it is unlikely that television exposure would be related to such unrealistic beliefs if teens were being educated in environments where teen pregnancy is a reality for themselves and/or their peers. Our results should be considered in light of the sample used here.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a valuable contribution because it links exposure to specific content—teen mom reality programming—to teens' perceptions of teen motherhood. Although it would be inappropriate to suggest that viewing these programs is the cause of teen pregnancy, one might consider it as a possible contributing factor. Indeed, as a predictor variable, viewership of the three teen mom programs significantly accounted for about 20% of the variability across all three of the outcome variables. To the degree that these programs are most popular among viewers who are most at risk, we are faced with a problematic situation. If we accept that television shapes perceptions about violence (Bushman & Anderson, 2001), family life (see Wilson, 2003), and sexual activity (Collins et al., 2004), it is certainly reasonable that these shows can shape perceptions about teen motherhood.

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