



Risky movies, risky behaviors, and ethnic identity among Black adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To investigate how exposure to sex, alcohol and violent content in mainstream and Black-oriented movies relates to corresponding adolescent behavior among Black youth from the United States and whether those relationships are moderated by ethnic identity.

Methods: The present study uses survey data from an online sample of 1000 Black adolescents and content analysis ratings on top-grossing 2014 films and 2013/2014 Black-oriented films. Content-specific exposure measures for alcohol, sexual activity, and violence were calculated from self-reported exposure data and content analysis ratings. Regression analyses estimated the associations among exposures to risky health content in mainstream and Black-oriented films and adolescent behaviors as well as moderation by ethnic group identity. **Results:** Black adolescents were mostly unaffected by exposure to risk portrayals in mainstream films, but exposure to risk in Black-oriented films was related to their behavior in all three domains. Strong group identity strengthened the relationship between exposure to sex in Black-oriented and mainstream films depending on the sexual outcome.

Conclusion: The type of movie (i.e., mainstream or Black-oriented) through which Black adolescents are exposed to risky health portrayals is important for understanding its relationship to their behavior, and variations by ethnic identity were limited to sex content. Future research should identify the mechanisms through which risk content in Black-oriented films is associated with Black adolescents' risky behaviors to determine how media influence contributes to behavioral disparities among youth.

1. Introduction

Black adolescents are more likely to be in a physical fight, to engage in sexual intercourse, initiate sex earlier, and have four or more sex partners (Kann, 2016) compared to their white and Hispanic counterparts. Studies have linked exposure to media content portraying alcohol use, sex, and violence with increased risky behavior among adolescents (Bushman and Huesmann, 2006; Hanewinkel et al., 2014; Hennessy et al., 2009; O'Hara et al., 2012; Strasburger et al., 2010). However, media exposure to risk is differentially influential on behavior: the relationship between media exposure and behavior tends to be stronger among white adolescents compared to Black adolescents, as has been found in studies on smoking initiation (Dal Cin, Stoolmiller, & Sargent, 2013), sexual behavior (Hennessy et al., 2009), and alcohol use (Gibbons et al., 2010). These differences persist despite the fact that Black youth spend almost twice as much time watching media than

their white counterparts (Jordan et al., 2010; Rideout, 2015).

Why are Black adolescents apparently less influenced by media depictions of risky behaviors? One explanation is that media effects studies focus almost exclusively on mainstream content and fail to account for Black-oriented media (Dal Cin et al., 2013; Ellithorpe and Bleakley, 2016). Black-oriented media is programming where a majority of the characters are Black, the narratives revolve around racial themes, and/or is targeted toward Black audiences (Dal Cin et al., 2013; Schooler et al., 2004; Sheridan, 2006). Black youth watch mainstream media content, but also seek out programming that features more racial diversity (Ellithorpe and Bleakley, 2016). Previous research on tobacco use suggests that Black adolescents are influenced by exposure to tobacco use in Black-oriented media but not in mainstream media (Dal Cin et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important to examine how different sources of content may be related to risky behavior, and whether differential effects contribute to adolescents' behavioral health disparities.

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We examine the association between exposure to sex, alcohol, and violent content in mainstream and Black-oriented movies with corresponding behaviors among Black adolescents from the United States. Social cognitive theory (SCT) assumes that media exposure is translated into behavior when the role model is similar and attractive to the viewer, the portrayals are realistic, and the behavior is positively reinforced (Bandura, 2001). It suggests that adolescents watching media characters perform risk behaviors have an increased probability of behavioral imitation, especially if they can relate to the characters and are lacking their own life experiences (Bandura et al., 1994). Thus, media which feature predominantly Black characters may be more likely to influence Black adolescents if they identify with characters in Black-oriented films. Research indicates that Black audiences have stronger reactions to Black models (Abrams and Giles, 2007; Appiah, 2001, 2002) and that they watch media with more racial diversity (Ellithorpe and Bleakley, 2016). Incorporating Black-oriented media into such studies may reveal a stronger exposure-behavior relationship for Black youth (Dal Cin et al., 2013) than studies on media effects have typically shown.

A content analysis of the films included in this sample reveals that Black characters were more likely to engage in sex and alcohol, compared to white characters who were more likely to be involved in violence (Ellithorpe et al., 2017). Black characters were also more likely to portray multiple risk behaviors, with sex and alcohol being the most common combination. In the mainstream films, only 5.1% of characters were Black (75.3% were white, and 19.6% other) compared to 75.4% Black characters in Black-oriented films (20.9% white and 3.7% others) (see Ellithorpe et al., 2017). The underrepresentation of Black characters in popular media was also found in a comprehensive report of diversity in popular movies and television series, which concluded “the landscape of media content is still largely whitewashed” (Smith et al., 2016). Black characters in mainstream media have historically been relegated to minor or sidekick roles, with a lack of depth among characters and unflattering stereotypical depictions (Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Ward, 2004), and Black youth often feel that popular media images of Blacks are negative, inaccurate, and offensive (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Ward, 2004; Ward et al., 2005). A nationally representative survey of Black adolescents and young adults reported that respondents indicated “TV shows and movies they watch either portray them as unfaithful, promiscuous, or more likely to fail in life and relationships—or don't portray them at all” (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2011).

In contrast, Black-oriented media offers audiences an opportunity to observe Black characters in a range of roles in narratives that may more closely reflect Black experiences. Additionally, Black audiences are more likely to trust the portrayal of Black characters in such content (Jones, 1990). If youth are more likely model behavior when the models are similar and attractive, we would therefore expect exposure to risk content in Black-oriented movies should be more strongly related to behavior than exposure to risk from mainstream films.

Audience characteristics may be a moderating factor in that the exposure-behavior relationship may vary by the strength of adolescents' ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is one's knowledge and attachment to their racial group (Phinney, 1992) and is particularly relevant for youth. Developmentally, identity formation is a central task of adolescence (Erikson, 1994), but the importance of identity to an individual may be situational. Differences in the saliency of racial identity to the audience may affect how the audience responds to what is seen onscreen (Gandy Jr, 2001). Because evidence that suggests Black audience members report greater identification and liking for Black characters than for White characters (Appiah, 2001, 2002), we might expect that the stronger one's racial identity, the stronger the relationship between Black-oriented content and related behaviors. In contrast, a strong ethnic identity may be protective against mainstream content so that stronger identity would be associated with a weaker relationship between mainstream film content and related behavior. This pattern has

been observed in relation to rap music videos and Black women's body image (Zhang et al., 2009), but has not been explored in the context of risky health content in mainstream and Black-oriented films.

Our study hypotheses are: (H1) Reported exposure to sex, violence, and alcohol content in Black-oriented movies will be more strongly associated with Black adolescents' reported sexual activity, aggression, and alcohol use, respectively, than similar exposure in mainstream movies; and (H2) Ethnic identity will moderate the relationship between exposure to sex, violence, and alcohol content and corresponding behaviors in that stronger identity will strengthen the relationship between Black-oriented exposure and behavior, and stronger identity will weaken the relationship between mainstream exposure and behavior.

2. Method

Participants were 1000 Black adolescents aged 14–17 years recruited from online opt-in panels through the survey company GfK between November 13 and December 14, 2015. Most respondents were recruited through their parents; the remaining were recruited directly. This sample are the Black youth from a sample of 2424 adolescents surveyed as part of a larger study. Respondent ages were: 14 years (20.8%), 15 years (25.8%), 16 years (27.4%), and 17 years (26.0%). Study protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania.

Exposure to media content was calculated for sex, violence, and alcohol using content analysis of movies and participants' exposure to film titles. *Film sample.* The top 30-grossing films of 2014 according to *Variety* magazine were selected as representing popular mainstream films. Black-oriented films were defined as those in which Black actors comprised half or more of the main characters and/or the movie had a Black-oriented narrative (Allen et al., 1989; Schooler, 2008; Schooler et al., 2004; Sheridan, 2006). Of the top 500 films for 2013 and 2014 (1000 total) according to www.boxofficemojo.com, 33 films were selected as Black-oriented. The final sample included 29 mainstream films and 34 Black-oriented films (one film originally coded with mainstream films (*Ride Along*) met the criterion for a predominately Black cast). Exposure to sexual content was calculated only for R-rated films ($n = 7$ mainstream; $n = 16$ Black-oriented) because most explicit sex content is found in R-rated films; the MPAA rating system is less effective in restricting violent and alcohol content, which appear equally in PG-13 and R-rated films (Bleakley et al., 2014; Nalkur et al., 2010).

2.1. Content coding procedures

The films were coded by trained coders in five-minute segments ($n = 1510$) using a directed, quantitative, previously-validated coding scheme (Bleakley et al., 2012; Bleakley et al., 2014; Jamieson and Romer, 2008; Nalkur et al., 2010). After multiple training sessions, the coders achieved inter-coder reliability for identifying the presence of each behavior as calculated by Krippendorff's alpha using a separately validated test sample of 59 segments. Each segment was coded for the portrayal of alcohol, sex, and/or violence. Sexual behavior was defined as any type of sexual contact, from kissing on the lips to explicit intercourse ($\alpha = 0.93$). Violence was defined as initiated or received intentional acts to inflict injury or harm ($\alpha = 0.94$). Alcohol portrayal was defined as a character being directly involved any activity related to alcohol, ranging from handling of alcohol bottles to observed consumption ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Exposure to risk behaviors was operationalized by multiplying the proportion of segments for each film containing the risk behavior by each participant's self-reported exposure to the film (indicated on the survey for whether they had seen each film: never (0), once (1), or more than once (2)). Using a previously tested approach (Bleakley et al., 2008a,b, 2011; Hennessy et al., 2009), these scores were summed across all films to create a measure of exposure to each risk in mainstream films and in Black-oriented films. The measures were then

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