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Devon Greyson

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Cathy Chabot

University of British Columbia

Jean A. Shoveller

University of British Columbia

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Young parents' experiences and perceptions of 'Teen Mom' reality shows

Devon Greyson^{1,2}, Cathy Chabot¹, Jean A. Shoveller¹

¹School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

²New affiliation: Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Massachusetts, USA

Corresponding author:

Devon Greyson

N308 Integrative Learning Center

650 N. Pleasant St.

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Amherst, MA 01003-1100

dgreyson@umass.edu

@DevonGreyson

ORCID: 0000-0003-4860-384X

Jean Shoveller / Cathy Chabot

UBC School of Population & Public Health

2206 East Mall

Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z3

jean.shoveller@ubc.ca; cathy.chabot@ubc.ca

Jean Shoveller ORCID: 0000-0002-4616-3556

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MTV's hit reality shows *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* were produced with an agenda of preventing teen pregnancy. Researchers have examined their effectiveness as behavioural interventions, yet little attention has been paid to experiences of young parents themselves with these shows, nor to their ethical consequences, including the potential for compounding of stigma against young parents. This analysis qualitatively examines the experiences of young parents in British Columbia, Canada, with the media phenomenon referred to as 'Teen Mom shows.' Interview and observation data from a large, longitudinal, mixed-methods ethnographic study of young parents was analyzed using hybrid deductive-inductive qualitative content analysis. The dominant understanding was that *Teen Mom* depictions of young parenting were inaccurate and overly dramatic. Young mothers and fathers experienced stigma and judgement that directly or indirectly referred to *Teen Mom* portrayals of young mothers as immature, dramatic, and promiscuous, and young fathers as absentee parents.

Keywords: young parents; teenage mothers; reality television; media; television; ethnography

Introduction

MTV's hit reality shows *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* were produced with an agenda of preventing teen pregnancy by displaying a carefully constructed image of early-age parenting. Series creator Lauren Dolgen was explicit regarding her intention to provide 'cautionary tales about the consequences of unprotected sex, and the reality of becoming a parent too early,' (Dolgen, 2011). In support of this objective, MTV partnered with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy to educate viewers about the challenges involved in young parenting and promote contraceptive awareness. Public health organizations (e.g., Kaiser Family Foundation, Planned Parenthood) also partnered with MTV on *It's Your Sex Life*, an

award-winning website featuring sexual health information interspersed with excerpts about the shows' stars and storylines.

Researchers have examined the effectiveness of *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* as interventions to prevent early-age pregnancy. However, little attention has been paid to the experiences of young parents themselves with these shows. Moreover, there has been little examination of the ethical consequences of these series, including their potential for compounding of stigma against young parents. The current analysis qualitatively examines the experiences of young parents in British Columbia, Canada, with the media phenomenon many participants referred to as 'Teen Mom shows.'

Background

Teen Mom shows are deeply tied to broader education-entertainment efforts and with societal perspectives on young mothers. Reality entertainment's roots lie in documentary filmmaking and radio. Concern over the exploitative potential of documentary media, and the impacts on the real people who effectively become characters in an entertainment product, have long plagued producers and critics. Reality television, a newer take on the documentary format, is premised on the use of non-actors speaking unscripted lines in situations that are constructed so as to convey the 'essence of real life' (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2012, 309). Reality shows have often invited audience participation (e.g., voting for winners of competition shows), used soap opera-style emotional drama storylines, and revealed an element of the filmmaking (e.g., through interviews, visibility of filming equipment) in efforts to 'produce authenticity' (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2012, 317). They invite viewers to compare their own lives with those portrayed (Rose and Wood 2005), and have proven a highly successful medium for embedded advertisements (Eagle and Dahl 2015; Kowalczyk and Royne 2012).

Analyses of *Teen Mom* reality shows have found that the structure and content of the series minimize social inequities, emphasizing a 'postfeminist' subjectivity that appropriates language such as the rhetoric of 'choice' while entrenching heteronormativity, gender roles, and the myth of equal opportunity in society (Guglielmo 2013). Teenage parents on these programs are typically portrayed as 'younger, more often White, and had more healthy babies as compared to national averages' in the United States (Martins et al. 2016, 1548), and the storylines rely on narratives of 'individual responsibility' and a need for redemption (Murphy 2012). The shows position young women's bodies (and sexuality) as in need of discipline and surveillance, and put forth an aspirational motherly femininity as the goal of a 'good' teen mom (Murphy 2012).

An emerging body of research reveals mixed results in terms of the effectiveness of *Teen Mom* shows as an educational intervention, exploring the potential for exposure to such media to impact young people's sexual and reproductive attitudes and behavior. In experimental research, Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2011) found that the ability for 'education-entertainment' media to influence sexual risk-taking behaviours in young adults varied depending on gender and past experiences, with the greatest effect in persuading viewers toward safer sex occurring among girls with limited sexual experience. However, both Aubrey and colleagues (2014) and Martins and Jensen (2014) found that high school aged viewers of such reality shows were more positive in their views about teenage pregnancy and parenting, feeding ongoing public accusations that such media glamorized young parenthood (see, for example, (Dockterman 2014; Hanson 2011). Challenging these findings of ineffectiveness, Kearney and Levine (2015) conducted a high-level observational study combining various data sources to document an association between higher regional levels of viewership of *16 and Pregnant* and a decrease in teen birth rate in corresponding areas; however, causality can not be determined by such research.

In today's digital era, effects of reality shows cannot be fully measured by simple metrics such as television viewership or surveys assessing attitudes pre- and post- viewing of television episodes. Sophisticated marketing strategies include the use of social media for audience participation and cross-branding, extending the characters and narratives beyond the confines of television shows (Conlan 2014), making *Teen Mom* stars social media celebrities. Gossip magazines regularly publish articles about *Teen Mom* stars, typically featuring struggles with addiction or substance abuse, criminal charges, disputes with partners, or hypersexualized behavior (see, for example, Favicchio 2015; Strohm 2015).

The *Teen Mom* media phenomenon also is inextricably linked to societal perspectives on young mothers, particularly negative stereotypes of early-age parenting as an outcome that is damaging for young parents, their children, and society. Such views place pressure on young mothers in particular to demonstrate 'respectability', often through participating in consumer culture (Ponsford 2011; Banister et al. 2016). However, evidence of poor social or medical sequelae of early-age parenting is a matter of ongoing debate. While researchers have documented associations between teenage childbearing and outcomes such as lower educational attainment or income (Hoffman and Maynard 2008), evidence is mounting that the negative outcomes widely perceived to stem from young motherhood appear to be more an artefact of underlying factors such as poverty and social disadvantage (factors edited out of *Teen Mom* media) than of teenage pregnancy and parenting itself (Gold et al. 2001; Penman-Aguilar et al. 2013; Shrim et al. 2011; Arai 2009). Additionally, recent research has documented the experiences of young mothers for whom becoming a parent has significantly *improved* their health, education, and social welfare status (Anwar and Stanistreet 2015; Seamark and Lings 2004; Duncan, Edwards, and Alexander 2010).

Attempts to use media to 'restigmatize' teen motherhood in North America by showing the 'ugly' side of young parenting surfaced in the late 20th century (Kelly 1997). Research indicates that young mothers are acutely aware of being socially stigmatized by individuals, social services, and the media (Yardley 2008). Stigma, a concept brought to sociological prominence in the 20th century by Erving Goffman, is assigned based on an (actual or perceived) attribute of a person or group¹, and serves to "discredit" them in some way relative to the mainstream population (or in Goffman's language, "normals" (Goffman 1963; Goffman 2016)). Falk expands on Goffman's work to theorize that stigma-based exclusion may result from both conditions over which one does and does not have control, and describe how stigma functions to discipline deviance from societal norms (Falk 2001).

In the public health arena, stigma combines recognition of difference with application of power, resulting in a variety of public health disparities, including stress-induced poor health (Link and Phelan 2006). Stigma intersects with other forms of social marginalization, such as homophobic harassment and discrimination (Saewyc et al. 2008), to influence health and social outcomes. It is important to note that stigma may be enacted by others (e.g., via exclusionary words, actions, or measures), perceived by the stigmatized (e.g., as an attitude without accompanying concrete exclusionary actions), and even internalized and applied to oneself (often referred to as self-stigma). These types of stigma are intimately linked (e.g., experiencing exacted and perceived stigma may lead to self-stigmatization) (Luoma et al. 2007; Chi et al.

¹ n.b. Goffman defines the term stigma to apply both to the attribute itself and to the resulting social relationships (Goffman 1963, 3–5); however in public health literature the latter is the primary application of the term, and thus the one which the current analysis will use.

2014), and serve to set an individual or population apart, diminishing them in the view of self and/or others.

MTV producers frame these shows as an intervention to prevent early-age pregnancy, a perspective that is legitimized by the collaboration of public health organizations. However, by dramatizing the difficulties faced by teen parents in a reality television format, and creating social media-integrated tabloid celebrities out of the stars of these series, *Teen Mom* media invites judgement that might extend to further disadvantage young parents. While young mother activists such as Gloria Malone (2014) have denounced such media as unhelpful and unjust, no research published thus far has empirically examined the experiences and perceptions of young parents regarding *Teen Mom* media.

Methods

This analysis uses data gathered during a large, longitudinal, mixed-methods ethnographic study investigating the effects of social context on the experiences of young parents in two communities in the Canadian province of British Columbia. During fieldwork the significance of *Teen Mom* media in the lives of participants—and particularly young mothers—emerged as an important point of discussion during interactions with young parents enrolled in the study. As a result, we undertook the current analysis to examine the research question: *How is 'Teen Mom' reality television perceived and experienced by early-age parents?*

Data Collection

Data were collected in the Greater Vancouver (GV) and Prince George (PG) regions of British Columbia (BC), Canada. Five white, female researchers in their 30-40's, three of whom were parents themselves and two of whom were pregnant during portions of fieldwork, completed in-

depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork from Autumn 2013 through Spring 2017. The population of interest was pregnant and parenting youth. In British Columbia, "youth" is commonly defined as <25 years of age, and youth services are frequently offered for young people through age 24. While teenagers who are pregnant and parenting are frequently referred to young parent support services, young people at the top end of this age range who were involved with young parent supports often had their first children prior to age 20.

The research team completed 381 in-depth interviews: 281 with young mothers ($N = 89$) and 64 with young fathers ($N = 23$); nine with co-parenting grandmothers ($N = 2$), and 26 with young parent service providers ($N = 25$) who were recruited from observation sites (e.g., young parents programs in schools and community settings) and the surrounding communities. Young mothers, fathers, and co-parent participants were invited to complete follow-up interviews (approximately every 4-6 months). Sampling was a combination of purposive (seeking young parents ages 15-24 and their co-parents/partners, and young parent service providers) and theoretical (seeking participants who might provide diversity of perspectives in subsequent recruitment rounds). Interviews were audio recorded (although on three occasions study participants indicated that they preferred detailed notes be taken, rather than audio-recordings). Observational field notes were written by researchers. All interview participants provided written informed consent, and the study was approved by the behavioural ethics review board of the University of British Columbia (certificate # H13-00415) as well as by participating school districts and community organizations.

Data Analysis

Handwritten observational field notes were typed up, and interview recordings were transcribed, scrubbed of potentially-identifying personal information, and member-checked by participants

who wished to do so, before being imported into NVivo10 for analysis. The approach was a hybrid deductive-inductive approach to qualitative content analysis, which Miles and Huberman describe as a two-stage etic-emic coding process (Miles et al. 1994, 61). Thematic coding was conducted by three research team members (the lead author and two research assistants), and analytic interpretation was developed by the authors. The research assistants applied a standard codebook to all transcripts and field notes, including coding all media-related segments with a "media" tag. Following this, the lead author inductively coded the data (also using NVivo) using constant comparison (Glaser 1965) within and around the "media" coded content in order to identify emergent themes related to the research question. As findings began to take shape, all three authors discussed and provided feedback on the interpretations, contributing to the development of the final analytic categories.

Results

Study Participants

Interview participants included 89 young mothers (YMs) and 23 young fathers (YFs) who were parents or expecting their first child. Young parent participants (aged 15-29 years; see Table 1) from the Greater Vancouver (GV) and Prince George (PG) regions were eligible. In GV, the average age for YM participants was 18.86 ($SD=2.4$) and in PG this was 19.65 ($SD=2.5$), while YFs were, on average, 20.83 ($SD=3.3$) years of age in GV and 22.52 ($SD=3.2$) in PG. Young parents in PG also had, on average, more children than those in GV, although overall the majority of young parent participants ($N = 75$) had one child or were expecting their first ($N = 13$) at time of first interview. To protect their privacy, participants are referred to here by region, participant type, and participant-selected pseudonym.

Table 1. Young parent participant ages at first interview

| Age | Young Mothers | Young Fathers | Total |
|-------|---------------|---------------|-------|
| 15-16 | 6 | 0 | 6 |
| 17-18 | 30 | 4 | 34 |
| 19-20 | 24 | 2 | 26 |
| 21-22 | 10 | 7 | 17 |
| 23-24 | 17 | 5 | 22 |
| >24 | 2* | 5** | 7 |

*Two 25-year-old mothers were enrolled at age 24 but not interviewed until after their 25th birthdays

**Five fathers in the 25-29 age range were included, as they were either partnered with young mothers in the study or otherwise engaged in young parent services and milieu

A minority of the young parent participants had completed secondary school ($N = 18$), a few ($N = 9$) had not only a high school diploma but were enrolled in postsecondary education, and two young mothers had completed a trade, college, or university diploma at the time of their first interviews. Most were either currently working to complete secondary schooling ($N = 47$) or had stopped schooling (at least temporarily) with incomplete high school education ($N = 36$). Most participants self-identified as white (European ancestry) or Indigenous/Aboriginal (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participant ethnicities, by fieldwork region

| Ethnicity Category* | GV Region | PG Region | Total |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| White | 33 | 33 | 66 |
| Indigenous | 14 | 46 | 60 |
| Other** | 6 | 4 | 10 |
| Latin American | 7 | 0 | 7 |
| Filipino/a | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Black | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Chinese | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| South Asian | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Arab | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| South East Asian | 1 | 0 | 1 |

*Categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore totals do not add up to 140

**Other here includes a variety of specific country origins, which were primarily European

Prominence of 'Teen Mom' Media for Young Parents

Our interview guide contained the question, 'What messages do you see in the media about young parents?' It was commonplace for participants to respond with statements like, 'When you said "the media" I thought *Teen Mom*,' (Brown, young mother), or explanations such as, 'there are shows these days about, like, young moms...and well, there's even this TV show and it's called *Teen Moms* and it's a reality TV show of teen moms,' (Violet, young mother). As we explored the idea that *Teen Mom* media was a dominant force in messaging about young parents, we found that virtually every participant was familiar with *Teen Mom* television shows, regardless of whether or not they had personally watched them, indicating that the series had indeed become a cultural phenomenon.

Young mothers in particular described ways social media picked up on and furthered the reach of *Teen Mom* media. Young mother Alex illustrated the interconnections among reality television, social media, and experiences of real-life bullying from her peer group:

My boyfriend posted on his Facebook first about the pregnancy. Then my Ask[.com app] blew up with nastiness. [People were saying things like,] 'You are too young, not in school, a single parent,'" and other really discouraging things. [...P]eople talk about me. They say things like, '16, homeless and pregnant—have you called MTV yet?'

Similarly, young mother Maya reported feeling judged by other youth online, and attributed this to the greater visibility of young mums, 'ever since the show *16 and Pregnant*.' This intertwining of *Teen Mom* media and young mothers' social media landscapes was primarily reported among mothers in the Greater Vancouver region, who described higher levels of social media connectivity compared with their Prince George counterparts.

Perceived Realism of Portrayed 'Reality'

Although there were exceptions, the general consensus among interviewees was that *Teen Mom* shows are unrealistic: that the situations are hyperbolic, the entertainment companies emphasize 'drama' in order to make money, and that even if parts might be accurate portrayals of the stars' lives, this was not applicable to participants' local or cultural contexts. As young father Jonah explained, '[T]hey exaggerate sometimes. I don't know how to explain it but... I dunno, sometimes they put more into the story than what it already is.' Jonah felt that this was done 'both to make it look bad and [to] make it look good,' but that, 'the TV, they only shows the drama part. That's about it.' Young mother Sofia agreed, noting, '[T]hey just want the drama. [...] And I don't think people realize it.' Young mother Maria felt that the messages in *16 and Pregnant* were largely irrelevant to her experience as an Indigenous woman living in an Indigenous community in Northern BC, where she perceived that children were welcomed and celebrated regardless of the mother's age.

They Make it Seem Like All We Do is Suffer

Interviewees frequently told us that *Teen Mom* shows make life as a young parent look unrealistically terrible. Young mother Sarah described the hyperbolic nature of this media:

Life is not like that! It is *not* that much drama. I was watching this, I'm like, this has got to be [chuckles]—this is crazy. I don't even watch that show because it's just completely overrated. Too much drama for one life...and pain. Life is not as hard as *Teen Mom*, that's for sure.

Brown similarly thought *Teen Mom* media exaggerated the misery of young parenthood, and resented that she felt these shows made teenage mothers look 'so stupid sometimes.'

[H]ave you watched the show *Teen Mom*? It's like they're showing all the really bad things about being a teen mom. [...] When you see that show, it's like they make it seem like us teen moms—that's all we do: all we do is suffer. You know what I mean? But no, they don't really show the really good times that you can have with your children.

They Kind of Glamourize it

Although many participants strongly felt that *Teen Mom* media made the lives of young parents appear needlessly bad, young mother JBiebs was among those who thought *Teen Mom* media was unrealistic in a way that might lead to increased teen childbearing, explaining:

They kind of glamourize it. Like, MTV has these TV shows [...] *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom 1*, *2*, *3*, *4*, like when are they going to stop? It might make people – I mean teenagers – want to get pregnant and have a baby 'cause they see all these good things with the baby, like, 'Oh you can go out and dress them, you can do this, you have to do this,' but then they don't think about the downsides when they do get pregnant.

JBiebs felt that the television shows didn't show 'how you would struggle' as a teen mom, and that some young people might not realise that 'these parents on TV, they're getting paid. That's why they have money to dress their kids all like that. That's why they have money to go places like Disneyland.' Young mother Kiwi had similar concerns, noting, '[On] that TV show *Teen Moms*, I kind of see that they have it easy because they're getting paid to be on TV, so they get [...] financial access to, like, cars, new phones, stuff like that.' Young mother Sabrina felt that she herself had been influenced by the glamorization of young parenthood in this media, stating,

[W]ith the show *16 and Pregnant* and stuff, I kind of think [...] it makes kids want to have a kid. 'Cause if they're seeing that and—you know, babies are adorable, right? So why wouldn't they? 'Cause when I was young at that age and I was watching that show, it made me want to have a baby, yeah.

Referential, if not Realistic

A few participants challenged the notion that *Teen Mom* is unrealistic. Some made reference to 'facts' as learned from the show, for instance young mother Courtney, who noted that on *Teen Mom* one girl got pregnant the first time she had sex, therefore it was inaccurate to call all teen mothers 'sluts'. Young mother Ella felt she had a realistic view of relationships because, 'I watch *Teen Mom*. I've seen girls get married, divorced, married, divorced. I'm not going to get married until I know for sure that I want to get married and that I won't just fail.' One participant, young mother Melissa, acknowledged the differences in a televised life versus a private one, but felt that the situations *Teen Mom* stars dealt with were similar to those faced by other young mothers, even if the show was not particularly useful for real life problem-solving.

[I]t's interesting 'cause you can relate to them in some ways with the stuff they deal with and...they definitely have a lot more attention on them because they are on TV. [...] They're useful, but, like, not at the same time. [Chuckles]

Natalie, who used to watch *Teen Mom* before she herself got pregnant, felt that what happened on the show was fairly accurate to her experience as a young mother, including 'how they struggle and the difficulties with their baby daddy and...like...yeah. And babies could have—be born with some difficulties. I think yeah, it's pretty much all true.' However, when asked how watching the show affected her parenting, or whether she felt it made her more prepared to handle these issues, Natalie was unsure.

Perpetuation of Stigma

Although most did not use the word 'stigma,' many participants described ways they felt that *Teen Mom*'s portrayal of young mothers and young fathers perpetuate negative views toward young parenthood, sometimes affecting others' perceptions of and behaviour toward them.

Additionally, participants noted that the overwhelmingly negative representation of young mothers in the media acts in an intersectional manner to compound stigma for those who are marginalized in other ways as well.

Makes Young Mums Look Bad

Participants generally expressed opinions that *Teen Mom* media not only made young parenthood look dramatically difficult, it also portrayed young mothers as lonely, irresponsible, and childish. Young mother Brooklynn stated that these shows make young mums look 'childish 'cause a lot of them you do see leaning on their parents the whole time, when a lot of the young moms that I know aren't like that. [...I]t kind of just makes them look lazy, that they're not doing as much as an older person would.' Another participant described *Teen Mom* as a show that,

scares people into not wanting relationships, because there are mothers that they'll show on there that can't handle having a kid and they'd much rather go out and party and, like....There's that one girl and she came out with a porn video and she was, like, a major party animal and stuff and didn't want any part to do with her kid. And then there's that other one that we watched and it was, like, this drug addict and the [grandmother] practically watched the kid all day while the [young mother] went out and did drugs all day. (Lila, young mother)

Young fathers were particularly vocal about the unfair way that young mothers are portrayed in reality media, with Victor objecting to the portrayal that 'they're really on their own and just having a really hard time' and Ryan describing the *Teen Mom* depiction of young mothers as, 'Party girls or whatever.' George stated that the only time he ever saw young mothers in the media is on '*Teen Moms*, and they set an extremely low standard for teen mothers. So I don't think the media helps young mothers at all.' When asked to clarify what he meant by a low standard, George explained that,

[When you see] a 30-year-old in an interview or on a commercial, the standard is set high. There's a big nice kitchen, there's a big house, there's – everybody's got their stuff together. But in *Teen Mom*, they're all living with moms or they're living in trailer parks or everything's dirty and cluttered.

Young Dads are Not There

Teen Mom media's image of young fathers was perhaps the topic about which there was the most unanimous response within this study. While participants were split regarding whether or not portrayal was realistic, there was widespread consensus that young fathers were depicted as absentee parents. As young mother Riley put it, 'the only thing I ever see on TV about young dads is that they're not there.' Another young mother, Jade, expanded on the invisibility of fathers in *Teen Mom* media, stating, 'There's nothing. Nothing. It's, like, you were frickin'...Mother Mary or whatever, just got pregnant on your own. 'Cause there's nothing about young dads.' When fathers were mentioned, their irresponsibility and immaturity were most often the focus of attention, as noted by young mothers Caroline who saw 'mostly that they aren't ready and they just leave the mother,' and Brooklynn, who felt the messaging was 'That they're all pieces of crap, basically.'

Young father participants were particularly likely to mention scenes showing young dads in the act of leaving. George noted, 'I've not watched a lot of *Teen Mom* but when, like, my sisters were, that's all I'd seen, is them, you know, throwing fits and walking out and then that's the end of it and they're never on that show again, right?' Young father Saul echoed this sentiment, commenting, 'I just see lots of them leave.' Dave felt that young fathers were portrayed on these shows as 'naïve,' explaining that 'They plan on taking part, right? You see it and then when it actually comes down to it, they're just, like, "Oh well I'm gonna walk away from this 'cause I can.'"

While some participants described this as an accurate portrayal, many young mothers and fathers alike protested that this was inaccurate and unfair. Young mother Kristey felt that 'it just makes it seem like all young guys are bad dads and everything when they're not.' Victor acknowledged that young fathers leaving is 'very real and it happens,' but that also 'there's a lot of fathers that are around and [the media] should be more positive [about] the ones that definitely are around taking care of the children, you know.' Lila agreed, noting that '[T]he perspective on the fathers is they're all deadbeats and they all don't want any part of the kid,' but that 'there are good dads out there, like the father of my baby that we're expecting, he's – he does really good.'

Some young mothers noted that a side effect of the assumption that young fathers would leave was that those who did stay involved with their children's lives were met with amazement and sometimes undeserved accolades. Young mother Meredith said, 'I think people are more surprised when the dad is involved ... 'cause on the show there's very few who are,' while Maria Theresa had encountered the idea that 'if they stay around they're—they're the best dads ever and they're willing to give their life away for a kid and—to be there and to support a family from such a young age and they're the best.' One young mother rankled at the double standard she perceived in her community, explaining,

I think that if a young dad stays around, people think he's a hero. People think he's this amazing person. Super great; lots of women will find that very attractive. It's, like, 'Oh, you have a kid, wow! You're awesome.' Whereas a young mom, if she doesn't stick around, they're, like, 'Oh, my God. You gave your kid away? Really? Like, how could you?' (Mary)

They Think We're All Like Them

Participants expressed frustration that others in their communities appeared to have been influenced by the depictions of young parenthood popularized by *Teen Mom* media. As Meredith put it, 'I think people have a completely twisted view now that there are shows like *Teen Mom*.'

Young mother Kim stated, 'I think from shows like *Teen Mom*, it's now becoming like, "Oh my God, you're just like one of those on *Teen Mom*,"' and Riley echoed this feeling that, 'a lot of people think that we're all like them.' While it might be argued that stereotypes and stigma toward young mothers are prevalent and predate *Teen Mom* programming, several participants were very clear that they perceived others' attitudes to be influenced at least in part by the messaging and popularity of *Teen Mom*.

The *Teen Mom*-related perceived and enacted stigma experienced by participants came from a variety of sources, including other young people, older parents, and even professionals in the community. Saul, for example, felt that child protection authorities' attitudes toward him and his partner were affected by this media.

Well I think that show that [my partner] watches—*Teen Mom*—like, lots of them on there, young parents, all of them are like, drug addicts and stuff like that. And we're not. But the Ministry [of Child and Family Development] acts like we are like, doing drugs and stuff.

Young mother Holly experienced attitudes she felt were influenced by *Teen Mom* media at her child's school. At first she felt stigmatized by other parents in her child's class, noting, 'They wouldn't even chat with me, or they wouldn't even, like, invite me to anything because I'm young.' As her child got older, Holly felt the other parents got used to her, but had recently started to feel 'a lot of stares' and comments from the older children at her son's school, 'Because they know *Teen Mom*.'

I'm Becoming One of Them

Some participants, particularly those young mothers who themselves had been fans of *Teen Mom*-style reality shows prior to becoming pregnant, reflected on the ways the stigma perpetuated by *Teen Mom* affected their own attitudes and feelings about themselves. This self-

stigmatization was most common among younger women in the Greater Vancouver region, which is the group within this study with the highest viewership of these shows. Kim explained the way her previous stereotypes of young mothers were based in *Teen Mom* media and the impact this had on her self-image when she herself became pregnant as a teenager:

I used to watch [*Teen Mom*] 'cause it was gossipy and it was like, 'Oh my god, *that's* who gets pregnant?' [...] And I was just sort of like, 'Oh, I *never* want to be one of them.' So then finding out I was pregnant, I was like, 'Wow, I'm becoming one of them and that just sucks. Like, I failed, I'm...terrible.' And it was because, on that show—and I realize it now—if you watch it, like, there's a tone to it. A negative tone.

This experience was echoed by other participants. Some of these stories came from avid watchers, including young mother Laura, who told us, 'I used to watch *16 and Pregnant* all the time. I loved that show. [...] I watched it before I got pregnant, like, "I'll never do that. I'll never be 16 and pregnant. Those girls are crazy." And then I got pregnant at 17.' Other self-stigmatization stories came from young people who were not fans of the shows, but were nonetheless aware of the phenomenon, such as Naomi, who described feeling like she had gone from laughing to being the butt of the joke:

I have never watched *Teen Mom*. Um, but I remember me and my boyfriend, we would laugh at those shows. [...] *16 and Pregnant*? Yeah, like, we would laugh at that. And now it's—now it's different of course. We think about it and it's, like, okay, society thinks of it as a joke, you know. Or on *Family Guy* and stuff, it's like, the stupid...the *stupid* girl that got pregnant.

Ethical Considerations

Most participants expressed disapproval or mixed feelings, and some shared ethical concerns regarding this media. One young mother who felt that *Teen Mom* 'mocks' young parents in a way that was 'depressing' objected to the show because 'they're spotlighting these

girls that have a hard life as it is' (Violet). While the objectification of the show's stars (and their children) arose multiple times in the data, two additional and complex ethical issues also surfaced: that of representation of young parents in the media, and of the impact of such shows on young people's behaviour.

Representation in the Media

Not only were *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* the first media representations of young parents to come to most participants' minds; they were the only examples most could think of. Young mother Elena knew about 'the *Teen Mom* show, but that's about it that's on TV. [laughs] But uh, just if I think of commercials and everything, about babies and stuff, they always have, like, the adult as a mum, not younger kids.' Despite the generally negative depictions of young parenthood, some participants felt it was nonetheless nice to see at least some acknowledgement that young parents existed. Ciara, for example, said she became 'obsessed' with *Teen Mom* due to craving stories of other young mothers, although she didn't necessarily agree with the messaging. She also 'related to a lot of the stories,' despite the fact that she perceived *Teen Mom* as emphasizing pregnancy prevention and she was pregnant with her second child.

Effects on Behaviour

Given the emphasis the shows' creators and promoters placed on the goal of preventing teenage pregnancy, we explored with participants whether they felt *Teen Mom* media had an impact on their reproductive decision-making or that of other young people in their communities. While a few participants were willing to entertain the idea that reality television could serve as a deterrent, none felt it had been for them, and some—both aficionados and those who eschewed the shows—found the idea laughable. Maya, never a fan of *Teen Mom* television, was

incredulous at the idea that a reality show could influence young people's reproductive decisions, commenting, 'I just think that things happen and then people just make their own decisions about that. And then that people should respect the decisions.' When asked if she felt that *Teen Mom* affected her reproductive decisions, Alex, a former avid viewer, responded,

Not at all! [laughs] Didn't do anything. It didn't make me think, "Oh, I'm gonna use protection." It didn't make me think, "Oh, I'm not gonna use protection." It's not—you don't really think about it. So no influence whatsoever. It's just a TV show to me.

However, Alex continued to clarify that, 'It definitely influences people's attitudes towards teen moms. But um, in the sense of influencing me, not at all. It didn't do anything.'

Discussion

Teen Mom shows were prominent in the social worlds of many young parents, and often the only representation of young parents to be found. The dominant understanding of *Teen Mom* depictions of young parenting was that they were inaccurate and overly dramatic, exaggerating the negatives of teenage childbearing while also obscuring the financial incentives provided to the show's stars. Whether or not they were viewers of such shows themselves, young mothers and fathers in the current study experienced stigma and judgement from other youth, other parents, online bullies, and sometimes even 'helping' professionals that directly or indirectly referred to *Teen Mom* portrayals of young mothers as immature, dramatic, and promiscuous, and young fathers as absentee parents. Some young women in the current study reported experiencing self-stigma as well, feeling like they had failed by becoming 'one of them'—the teenage mothers they used to think were 'crazy' or 'terrible' based on their representation on *Teen Mom* shows.

Ethical concerns with *Teen Mom* media were raised by participants, including the morality of shining a public spotlight on young people's most difficult times, and of filming children too young to consent. Based on these findings, we suggest that the stigmatization of young mothers and fathers that *Teen Mom* media disseminates, perpetuates, and compounds for young parents is in and of itself a matter of ethical concern. The issue of stigma perpetuation has long been an ethical dilemma in public health communications (Guttman and Salmon 2004). For example, following tobacco control initiatives designed to 'de-normalize' smoking, tobacco use decreased overall but has increasingly become concentrated among socially disadvantaged young people (Frohlich et al. 2010). Social punishments meted out to smokers intersect with social class, and have been cited as exacerbating the entrenchment of smoking within marginalized groups (Farrimond and Joffe 2006; Frohlich et al. 2012). Rather than addressing the social contextual factors that encourage tobacco use, 'hard-hitting' (i.e., those with "with strong fear-arousing messages and personal stories" (Riley et al. 2017, 476)) tobacco 'de-normalisation' campaigns have successfully associated smoking with stigma, concentrating harms amongst already-marginalized populations, increasing inequities. Evidence such as this raises concern regarding use of stigmatizing education-entertainment as an alleged intervention related to health behaviour overall, and in particular the potential for such efforts to compound marginalisation for socially-disadvantaged youth.

In the absence of compelling evidence that *Teen Mom* media improves health or social outcomes for youth in society, and in the presence of strong indications that young parents experience their stigma as compounded by such shows, we assert that it is disingenuous to frame *Teen Mom* style shows as a positive force for the well-being of youth. Further, we argue that it would be patently unethical to perpetuate stigma against the already-marginalized youth

population of young parents, even if doing so were discovered to reduce overall teenage pregnancy rates. Young parents are not acceptable collateral damage in a moral crusade against teenage parenting that masquerades as evidence-based public health practice. We would strongly caution public health organizations against endorsing such partnerships between health promotion and mass media outlets to use stigmatizing education-entertainment interventions as strategies to influence behavioural health.

Conclusion

Young parents in the current study perceived, experienced, and sometimes participated in gendered stigma toward young mothers and fathers that built on the dramatized depictions of teenage parenting popularized in *Teen Mom* reality media. While representation of young parenting in popular media may be important, and education-entertainment may be a viable vehicle for educating the public about reproductive health topics such as contraception, those wishing to promote the well-being of today's youth should seriously consider the ethics of stigmatizing an already-marginalized social group. Given the lack of evidence that interventions such as *Teen Mom* reality entertainment improve health or social outcomes, and indications from our participants that it may be harmful to young parents themselves, we suggest caution regarding the use of such media as a prevention strategy.

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