

TV Drama Can be More Persuasive Than News Program, Study Finds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A fictional television drama may be more effective in persuading young women to use birth control than a news-format program on the same issue, according to a new study.

Researchers found that college-age women who viewed a televised drama about a [teen pregnancy](#) felt more vulnerable two weeks after watching the show, and this led to more support for using birth control.

However, those who watched a news program detailing the difficulties caused by teen pregnancies were unmoved, and had no change in their intentions to use birth control.

The results show the power that narratives like TV shows can have in influencing people, said Emily Moyer-Gusé, co-author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

“A message that is hidden inside of a story may overcome some of the resistance people have to being told how to behave,” Moyer-Gusé said.

“The impact that dramatized stories have on people’s beliefs and intentions depends a lot on the individual viewers, and not just the message - but our results suggest the effect can be there.”

Moyer-Gusé conducted the study with Robin Nabi of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Their research appears in the current issue of the journal *Human Communication Research*.

The study involved 353 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25. All of them watched one of two programs that focused on the difficulties associated with unplanned teen pregnancies.

Half of the participants watched a program developed by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy to be broadcast on Channel One - a news program that airs in many U.S. high schools. This program used a news format, and profiled male and female teen parents. The overall message was that teen pregnancy makes life as a young adult more difficult.

The remaining participants watched an episode of the U.S. teen drama, *The OC*. In this episode, high-school students Ryan and Theresa faced the difficult consequences of an unintended pregnancy.

The programs were pre-tested with other students, who agreed that they both had the same main message concerning the difficulties of teen pregnancy.

Before watching the programs, participants completed questionnaires concerning how often they used some form of birth control if they were sexually active, and their intentions to use birth control over the next year.

Immediately after viewing the programs, participants filled out questionnaires concerning how much they were emotionally involved in the program, how much they identified with the characters, and other issues concerning their response to the programs they viewed.

Two weeks later, they were contacted again and asked about their intentions to use birth control.

The researchers found that male and females had different responses to

the programs.

Watching the news-format program had no effect on men's safe-sex intentions two weeks later.

But two weeks after watching *The OC*, men said they were actually less likely to follow birth control practices than they did before they viewed the program. That was probably because men reported they didn't like the program as much as women did, and didn't identify with the characters, Moyer-Gusé said.

Women had a different reaction to the programs. The news-format program had no effect on their intentions to use birth control. But those who watched *The OC* episode were more likely to report in two weeks that they planned on taking steps to prevent pregnancy.

The findings revealed some of the underlying mechanisms that made the TV drama persuasive to many women viewers.

Findings showed that viewers who said they identified with the two main characters in *The OC* episode also felt, when contacted two weeks later, that they were more vulnerable to an unplanned pregnancy. That, in turn, led to greater intentions to use birth control.

"Many of the women participants were able to put themselves in the place of the characters and sense they could end up in a similar situation if they weren't careful," Moyer-Gusé said.

Feeling vulnerable was the key to accepting birth control practices for the women in the study.

"One of the reasons why some people avoid safer sex behaviors is because they feel invulnerable - they have this optimistic bias that

nothing bad will ever happen to them,” she said.

“But if you vicariously experience a bad result happening to you by watching a narrative program, that may change behavior in a way that is difficult to achieve through a direct message.”

Participants, particularly women, were more likely to be persuaded to use birth control if they felt the program they watched didn’t have an overt safe-sex message.

Most people didn’t think The OC episode was preaching the use of birth control, but those who did were much less likely to increase their intentions to use birth control, the findings showed.

In addition, those who reported that they reacted to the characters in The OC as if they were friends were also less likely to see an overt message in the show, and were more likely to accept [birth control](#) practices.

Moyer-Gusé emphasized that the results don’t mean that men aren’t persuaded by narratives such as TV dramas.

“The show we chose happened to connect less with the men. But if we picked another topic or another show, I believe a narrative program could also be persuasive to male viewers.”

While these results suggest persuasive messages might be better received by people if they are wrapped up in a story, Moyer-Gusé cautions that it isn’t always that simple. As the different reactions of men and women in this study showed, a lot depends on the individual viewers and not just the message.

“The problem with using stories to persuade people is that people can interpret them in different ways. You don’t always get the results you

expect,” she said.

More information: www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0360-3989

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