The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of Communications

THE “NEW TEEN MOMISM”: 16 AND PREGNANT

AND THE NEW “TEEN MOM” IDENTITY

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

Jacqueline N. Dunfee

© 2012 Jacqueline N. Dunfee

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

August 2012
The thesis of Jacqueline N. Dunfee was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Michelle Rodino-Colocino  
Assistant Professor of Communications  
Thesis Advisor

Matthew McAllister  
Professor of Communications

Marie Hardin  
Associate Dean of Graduate Education  
College of Communications

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

Teenage pregnancy in the U.S. has been represented in popular culture in quite contradictory ways: as a serious social problem and an enviable, even glamorous youth identity. One important case in point is the television franchise 16 and Pregnant, a show that, together with its spin-off series, demonize and glamorize teen pregnancy. Above all else, 16 and Pregnant produces the spectacle of the pregnant teen as a new identity for reality television.

The purpose of this thesis is to show how the content of the series 16 and Pregnant reflects an array of historical, cultural, and political-economic factors. I adopt a feminist perspective in my political-economic and textual analysis of the show and related media. The following analysis draws on Douglas and Michaels’ (2004) conception of “new momism” and Murphy’s (2012) conception of “teen momism” and applies these terms to 16 and Pregnant to explain how teen moms are constructed as both morally reprehensible yet also desirable figures that echo neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. I discuss, specifically, how the series relies heavily on integrating neoliberal and postfeminist messages of personal responsibility, individualization, and self-management. I further argue that the construction of the “teen mom” identity within the 16 and Pregnant franchise represents a shift in previous images from “teen moms” as African-American, teenaged “welfare moms” to “teen moms” as white, middle class teens. Additionally, I demonstrate how the show also makes a media spectacle out of teen pregnancy while promoting itself as “educational entertainment.” Finally, I argue that despite its partnership with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, the series focuses on producing an entertaining show by shining a voyeuristic
spotlight on the cast’s personal lives all while promoting the tenets of neoliberalism and postfeminism.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................................................................................... vi

Chapter 1  The Reality of Teen Pregnancy in the U.S. ................................................................. 1
  Procedures ........................................................................................................................................... 7
  Chapter Outline ............................................................................................................................... 9

Chapter 2  Literature Review ........................................................................................................... 11
  Reality TV in the U.S. .................................................................................................................... 12
  Representations of Youth ............................................................................................................. 13
  Representations of Motherhood .................................................................................................... 14
  Political Economic Approach ........................................................................................................ 17
  Feminist Approach ......................................................................................................................... 19

Chapter 3  The Politics of Teen Pregnancy ..................................................................................... 23
  Women, Mothers, and Backlash .................................................................................................... 24
  Framing Teen Pregnancy in the U.S. ............................................................................................ 27
    A Presidential Address to Teen Pregnancy ............................................................................. 28
  The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy ................................................................. 32
  The New Reality of Teen Pregnancy ............................................................................................ 36
  The National Campaign's Media Interventions .......................................................................... 38
  MTV and The National Campaign: Birth of a Reality Series ...................................................... 39

Chapter 4  Introducing "New Teen Momism": 16 and Pregnant ...................................................... 42
  Confronting Social Problems on MTV ....................................................................................... 43
  Commercializing Teen Pregnancy on 16 and Pregnant ............................................................ 45
    Casting ........................................................................................................................................... 47
    Format .......................................................................................................................................... 53
  Promotional Potential of the Series ............................................................................................. 55
  Transitioning from "Teen" to Teen Mom" ..................................................................................... 59
  16 and Pregnant and the "New Teen Momism" ......................................................................... 63

Chapter 5  Conclusions .................................................................................................................... 69
  Discussion ....................................................................................................................................... 71
  Implications for Further Research ............................................................................................... 74

References ........................................................................................................................................ 76
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, Alan and Susan, for providing me with support and love throughout my life, especially throughout my college career. You have stood by my side through each of my endeavors and I couldn’t ask for anything more.

I would also like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Michelle Rodino-Colocino. As one of my mentors, I admire your hard work and dedication to helping myself and other students reach their potential. With your insights and vast knowledge, I have grown as a scholar and as an individual.

Dr. Matt McAllister and Dr. Marie Hardin, it was an absolute pleasure to have each of you on my committee this year. Both of you have helped me develop as a scholar and have pushed me to always conduct myself with integrity. This thesis was guided by your experience and knowledge, and would not be as comprehensive without all of your help, thank you.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to Dr. Jeanne Hall. You were not only a professor and mentor to me, but also a dear friend. Thank you for opening my eyes to see the world in ways I could have never imagined. I will always hold a place for you in my heart.
Chapter 1

The Reality of Teen Pregnancy in the U.S.

In 2009 MTV teamed up with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (National Campaign) to create 16 and Pregnant, ostensibly, to reduce the incidence of teen pregnancy. The series 16 and Pregnant is an hour-long reality TV show that focuses on the trials and tribulations of real teen girls as they deal with unexpected teen pregnancies. Thus far there have been four seasons of the series with 47 regular episodes total, with an additional four “Life After Labor Specials”, three “Unseen Moments” episodes, two “Where Are They Now?” episodes, and one abortion special called “No Easy Decision.” Each week anywhere between 2.7-3.5 million viewers watch the show (Tvbythenumbers.com, 2011). According to the National Campaign’s (2011) website, the show intends to shed light onto prevailing public concerns about teen sexuality and teen parenthood in American society:

“These stories offer a unique look into the wide variety of challenges pregnant teens face: marriage, adoption, religion, gossip, finances, rumors among the community, graduating from high school, and getting (or losing) a job. Challenged by incredibly adult decisions, these girls are forced to sacrifice their teenage years and their high school experiences.”

As one 16 and Pregnant cast member put it, “I'm trying to stop [teen pregnancy] or at least try to make [teens] make better decisions like using protection or birth control.” To discourage others from making the mistakes she made, this cast member claims the show
spotlights the “struggles that you go through when you become a young mom” (Thompson, 2010). Arguments that 16 and Pregnant means to discourage teen pregnancy seem valid, to some extent. After all, the series was originally conceptualized after media coverage and incidents of teen pregnancy started to increase, from 2005-2007. MTV executives claim that the topic would, therefore, be provocative to MTV’s audience of 12-34 year-olds. “As a development exec, I thought it was something that would be worthy of sharing with America—particularly when it was in crises with teen pregnancy”, said Liz Gateley, senior vice president of development for MTV (Kaufman, 2010). The first episode aired on June 11, 2009.

But the series is far from a PSA (public service announcement) that discourages teens from engaging in unprotected sex. As a reality TV show, 16 and Pregnant constituted “educational entertainment” or “edutainment” for the network’s audience. Although MTV’s website describes the show in much the same terms as the National Campaign’s site, one should not lose sight of the fact that “worthy” televisual content for MTV is not merely a matter of public service. Thus, it is not surprising that 16 and Pregnant and its spin-off series Teen Mom became controversial because they appear to promote, even “glamorize” teen pregnancy (Thompson, 2010). One gossip columnist posted an essay suggesting that teens hoped to get pregnant to land an audition on one of the shows (Shuter, 2010). These shows, then, raise questions for critical-cultural scholars of media, including: What are the implications of using the reality TV format to recruit pregnant teens to star in teen in the series 16 and Pregnant? What do the representations within the series say about female gender roles and expectations in our society? What societal norms and expectations are denied, repressed, or expressed within the series?
MTV’s *16 and Pregnant*, produced in partnership with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, offers a rich case for analyzing the convergent, and at times contradictory, interests of the television industry and national anti-teen pregnancy campaigns in commodifying teen pregnancy and pregnant teenage girls. *16 and Pregnant* proves a fruitful political economic and cultural study.

This thesis argues that although the television franchise of *16 and Pregnant* increases the visibility of the social issue of teen pregnancy, the reality TV format presents this issue as entertainment through the spectacle of watching real teens as they deal with unplanned teen pregnancy. The production of this series is manipulative in the creation, treatment, and portrayal of its “teen mom” identities. There are also ideological assumptions inherent in the casting, format and premise of the series in the creation of the “teen mom” identity, e.g. the use of a primarily white, middle-class cast in the first season. “Teen mom” identities are appropriated by MTV Networks and evident in the main narratives of the *16 and Pregnant*. The “ordinary” teens featured in these series are transformed into celebrities. These portrayals then work to commodify unplanned teen pregnancy for consumption by the audience in exchange for popularity, advertising support, and higher ratings.

In addition to offering insights into how social problems become profitable content for television companies, the case of *16 and Pregnant* touches on a topic on which I have a unique perspective. My personal experiences give me another lens through which to view the political economic and cultural aspects of the show. My fascination with teen pregnancy and teen motherhood began when I was in middle school. Similar to the experience of other teens my age, during middle school I found
myself experiencing the awkward transition between adolescence and adulthood. It was
difficult to confront the expectations of my peers, parents, and teachers at this age and I
often struggled to act age-appropriate. This was also the time when I had my first
boyfriend and had to confront what was sexually appropriate for a girl my age. After
having “the sex talk” with my parents, they made it explicitly clear what they considered
was not appropriate for a girl my age. However, my peers also influenced my
perspective and thoughts on sex, which was often the topic of conversation in the locker
room or at the lunch table.

Later that year a close friend of mine revealed that she was pregnant and planned
on having the child. This marked my first experience and initial understanding of the
consequences of unprotected sexual activity. I grew up watching this friend deal with the
difficulties of trying to raise a child and graduate high school. Needless to say the rest of
my friends and I were worried about less serious issues like learning how to drive or
finding summer jobs. I couldn’t have imagined parenting and changing diapers during
that time. Luckily my friend had a strong support network from her parents and the
community, which helped her transition into motherhood and later graduate from both
high school and college.

Unfortunately, many instances of teen pregnancy at my high school did not end
like the story of my friend, and as I grew older I continued to watch my peers deal with
the difficulties of juggling life as a teen mother and high school student. From my
perspective, I felt that my high school and local community had developed a culture
where teen pregnancy was “normal.” (This is to say that it was neither shocking nor
unexpected to discover that one of my classmates was pregnant.) These early
experiences shaped my perspective on teen pregnancy as a social problem in the U.S., and especially the impact teen pregnancy had in my local community.

My personal connections to *16 and Pregnant*, however, ran even deeper. Several years after I graduated high school and attended college, MTV debuted its reality TV series *16 and Pregnant* (2009), a docu-series that exposed the troubles of teen pregnancy across the U.S. through the perspectives of a real teens dealing with an unplanned pregnancy. In the second season of the series, a girl from my high school, Valerie Fairman, became the focus of one of that season’s episodes.

However, the introduction of the *16 and Pregnant* series was just one of many portrayals of teen pregnancy the media offered to the public during that same period. Several reality television series including TLC’s *I’m Pregnant And…* and NBC’s *The Baby Borrowers* debuted the first seasons of these series in early 2008. That same year ABC Family also debuted the hit series *The Secret Life of the American Teen*, a drama focused on the life of an American teen Amy who finds herself pregnant at age 16. These are only a few of the examples of the increased visibility of media representations addressing the issue of unplanned teen pregnancy in the U.S. As a “super-peer” (Brown, Haplnern & L’Engle, 2005; Strasburger & Wilson 2002), it is important that the media offer portrayals of teen pregnancy that accurately provide information to audiences that creates and promotes realistic expectations of teen pregnancy.

This thesis discusses *16 and Pregnant* and its links to the National Campaign, the creation and portrayal of “teen mom” identities, the commercialization of teen pregnancy, and the transformation of ordinary teenagers into “celetoids” (Rojek, 2001). In his book *Celebrity*, Chris Rojek defines “celetoids” as people who enjoy the privileges of
celebrity for a short period of time. Temporary celebrity status may not only encourage
teens to pursue reality television as a career path, but may also pressure teens on the show
into competing to become stars on the next spin-off series.

What I have found is that *16 and Pregnant* is the result of a synergistic
relationship between non-profit organizations and media organizations that on the one
hand, claim to want to eradicate teen pregnancy, but on the other hand, normalize it and
may even glamorize it. In some ways, the show reflects real contradictions in society and
culture. On the one hand, polling data suggest that the vast majority of adults and teens
think teen pregnancy is a “very serious” problem (Albert, 2010). On the other hand, teen
pregnancy in the US has been decreasing since the 1940s. After a slight increase in teen
pregnancies in the US during the mid-2000s, the teen pregnancy rate declined again, and
reached a historic low by the time the first episode of *16 and Pregnant* aired in 2009. The
“problem” of teen pregnancy when highlighted on reality TV shows like *16 and Pregnant*
then, may offer voyeuristic pleasure in viewing the “untainted train wreck personalities”
(Shuter, 2010) rather than useful advice about how to avoid pregnancy in one’s teen
years.

I argue in this thesis that teen pregnancy has become an advertiser-friendly social
spectacle; teen pregnancy has become a problem that generates profitable television
content. My study is informed by current academic literature on reality TV, specifically
on reality TV celebrity and fame, ordinary people in the media, commercialization of
social problems and the creation of cultural commodities. This project aims to contribute
to the expansive field of media studies and as well as the emerging field of girlhood
studies. Media studies include a wide array of disciplines from political economy to
critical cultural studies to feminist studies and this project is an intersection between these paradigms. In regards to the field of girlhood studies, research in this area involves investigating a largely underrepresented and undervalued group in terms of cultural production and participation, namely adolescent girls (Durham, 2003).

Throughout history, media coverage has portrayed the pregnant adolescent/teen as a deviant identity from the point of view of the news anchor, public official, concerned parent, or activist. Pregnant adolescents are often spoken for or about in the discourses of teen pregnancy and the reality TV documentary style of 16 and Pregnant provides an opportunity for this group to represent themselves using real-life pregnant teens.

**Procedures**

This thesis investigates several aspects of the series’ 16 and Pregnant including the nature of the production of the “teen mom” identity through the series. This study is informed by both political economy and feminist paradigms to develop the argument. Within the political economic framework, the analysis of 16 and Pregnant includes an examination of issues of production and labor processes of the series and their connection to the broader socio-political context. This analysis specifically focuses on the interconnected relationship between MTV Networks and the National Campaign in the production of 16 and Pregnant. News articles and press releases were retrieved from MTV’s website and the National Campaign’s website. Articles were also retrieved from the Lexis Nexis database and included nearly 20 sources from Time, The New York Times, and The Huffington Post.
A textual analysis of *16 and Pregnant’s* cast, format and ideological assumptions was conducted for the second part of the analysis. This method included examining several of the series’ episodes (with a focus on the first and second seasons), journal publications, news articles and press releases. The first season of *16 and Pregnant* includes six regular season episodes, one “Life After Labor” special, and one “Where Are They Now?” special. The second season of *16 and Pregnant* includes nineteen regular season episodes, one “Life After Labor” special, one “Where Are They Now?” special and a special dedicated to the issue of abortion titled “No Easy Decision.” The first three seasons include thirty-five episodes total. A sample of five episodes were closely analyzed and are representative of the entire series. The text was analyzed for conversations and situations that displayed the core concepts of neoliberalism and postfeminism. The episodes were analyzed for situations and discussions that displayed themes of personal responsibility, empowerment, individualization, and methods of self-management. The situations analyzed for each of these themes included those in which the term “responsibility” was specifically mentioned in regards to who was at “blame” for the unplanned pregnancy, who would take care of the child and parenting, and who would take care of the financial aspects of raising a child. Each episode was retrieved directly from MTV’s websites and was accessed during the period from January 13, 2012 –March 13, 2012.
Chapter Outline

This project discusses the ways in which the reality TV format used in *16 and Pregnant* creates an outlet for the social issue of teen pregnancy and the “teen mom” identity to be displayed. Chapter 2 reviews current academic literature on reality TV and its representations of youth and motherhood, the political economic media paradigm, neo-liberalism, the feminist media paradigm, and post-feminism. Each of these areas are essential in framing the perspective from which the political economic and textual analysis of *16 and Pregnant* derived. Chapter 3 explores the social and political trends that began in the 1980s that framed teen pregnancy as a social problem. Discussed are the events, specifically the movement of concern over teen pregnancy and teen moms surrounding each period when the teen pregnancy rate increases, that led to the creation of *16 and Pregnant*. This chapter also discusses the creation of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and its relationship with MTV. The National Campaign’s role in different media that portray the issue of teen pregnancy is . Chapter 4 discusses the role of the reality TV format in creating the “teen mom” identity in *16 and Pregnant*, emphasizing the importance of casting and format. This chapter also locates the “teen mom” identity as constructed through both neoliberal and postfeminist ideals in *16 and Pregnant*. Additionally, through a textual analysis of the series, this chapter discusses the ideological messages that originated in anti-welfare discourse that intensified in the US once black women won access to welfare benefits (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Roberts, 1996). Here I also examine the process of commercializing teen pregnancy as a social problem through the creation of
the new “teen mom” identity as examined through *16 and Pregnant*. Lastly, I introduce the concept of the “new teen momism” to explain the portrayals of teen pregnancy and the “teen mom” identity created by and portrayed within the series. The concluding Chapter 5 will summarize the key points of this research, discuss the implications of the analysis to making sense of how social problems come into existence and may also become fodder for commodified entertainment. This chapter also includes implications and suggestions to further research on teen pregnancy.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter discusses the role of reality TV in portraying both youth and motherhood, as pertains to the portrayals in *16 and Pregnant*, and also introduces the political economic and feminist perspectives that frame this study. This chapter also describes how the concepts of neoliberalism and postfeminism can be applied to the series *16 and Pregnant*. *16 and Pregnant* is, above all else, a highly rated reality TV show. Thus, understanding why the series came along when it did requires first that we understand reality TV.

Reality TV has become a major genre of American television over the past two decades. MTV in particular has been influential in developing the genre since the channel’s introduction of *The Real World* in 1992. Tom Freston, former Viacom co-president and chairman of MTV Networks credits his channel for playing a pivotal role in reality TV’s inception. Freston stated, “We had basically invented reality TV—although at the beginning it was a purely financial consideration” (Temporal, 2008, p. 71). However, the reality TV genre has significantly changed since *The Real World* first premiered. Other scholars contribute its recent surge in popularity to the series *Survivor* (Mittell, 2010). As a format, reality television relies heavily on unpaid labor, which increases the bottom line profits for networks, producers and investors. Thus, it is important to consider the economic motivations behind reality shows like *16 and Pregnant*. 
Reality TV in the U.S.

Due to its low production costs, ability to appropriate and hybridize across television genres, and popularity amongst audiences’ reality TV programming became a prominent television format in the 1990s and 2000s (Ouellette, 2004). As a genre it pervades daytime and primetime television slots, replacing scripted series. Reality TV moves private and personal aspects of everyday life into the public sphere. The emergence of reality TV has changed the dynamics of identity construction and representation by allowing previously marginalized identities into the public discourse. “Access to the sphere of public discourse has been seen as an empowering force… offering ‘ordinary people’ access to the airwaves and extending the notion that personal experience… is innately political” (Stephens, 2004, p 193). Furthermore, reality TV invites viewers into the lifestyles of others while acting as a frame of reference through which viewers can evaluate their own lives and experiences, with each new series acting as a form of social commentary on the different lifestyle choices of Americans across the country. *16 and Pregnant* shares intimate details from the lives of young mothers by expanding on ways that youth and mothers are represented.

Representations of Youth

Media play a role in socializing males and females into specific gender roles. For teens and young adults, cultural expectations regarding gender roles in society are often
articulated in terms of social problems. However, there are discrepancies in how male
and female youth are articulated through social problems; males are normally constructed
as involved in theft, violence and vandalism, and females are aligned with sexual
misbehaviors. According to Ouellette and Hay (2008), reality television is a new format
that represents different forms of deviance through real people in real life situations. The
conventions of reality TV uses control, surveillance, and confinement to situate youth in
positions of what is socially acceptable and socially unacceptable behavior.

Razzano, Skalli, & Quail (2009) found that over the past several years reality TV
has re-created the spectacle of youth in trouble, with a focus on drug addiction, runaways,
teen sex, disrespect for authority, theft, vandalism, etc. Through examining MTV’s
Juvies and A&E’s Intervention, they argue that by representing individuals with defiant
lifestyles, these series redefine and reinforce contemporary ideas of deviance and
abnormality. Furthermore, through an emphasis on conflict and confessions, reality
series construct youth in trouble by creating a media spectacle that is then commoditized
and fragmented. Razzano, et al. (2009) argue that this fragmentation not only isolates
youth in trouble from a broader historical, social, political, and economic context but also
attempts to remove tensions resulting from class, race, and gender differences (in

Gamson (1998) recognized a similar pattern of deviant identity construction in his
study of daytime talk shows. According to Gamson (1998) each individual is a
representation of the deviant population, which often ignores the social, political and
economic contexts and instead favors stereotypes (p. 9). Youth in trouble are expected to
take responsibility for their actions and ignore any lack of education, unemployment,
housing conditions, crime or poverty that may be the root cause of these troubles. Hay (2000) describes this as an infiltration of the governmental processes into reality TV in order to create “self-disciplining subjects.” In this “governmentality” model, reality TV allows for a form of governance that detaches individuals from direct forms of state control. The underlying message, however, is that an individual must take responsibility for oneself and self-sufficiently govern oneself regardless of age, race, or class position.

A similar logic is at work in the case of teen pregnancy on *16 and Pregnant*. Although socio-economic and political factors play a significant role in the likelihood of becoming a teen mother, participants and viewers of the series are expected to ignore how these factors may have contributed to teen pregnancy in the first place. Fully understanding the cultural significance of *16 and Pregnant*, however, also requires examination of how mothers and motherhood have been represented in televisual content over the years.

**Representations of Motherhood**

Television sets rapidly entered the homes in post-war America as the social circumstances regarding family structures began to rapidly change. According to Spigel (1992), domesticity was a preoccupation of the middle class in post-war America as suburban neighborhoods outside of large cities became the ideal family home. The post-war “family ideal” was a response to the pre-war housing crisis and can thank government-funded financial incentives for white, middle-class homebuyers. During this time television was filled with images of white middle class domesticity as the ideal of
American life. “Even while married women increasingly took jobs outside the home,” Spigel argues, “popular media typically glorified the American housewife/mother who tended her family on a full-time basis” (Spigel, 1992, p. 33). This created a contradiction between the working lives that women were pursuing and the idealized traditional roles the media put forth.

Since the beginning of the genre, reality TV has glorified stereotypical representations of women for the sake of cheap entertainment. These hegemonic ideologies are specifically portrayed and reinforced in dating (Millionaire Matchmaker, The Bachelor), makeover (What Not to Wear, Extreme Makeover), lifestyle (Wife Swap, The Hills), and competition shows (Project Runway, Top Chef). In her book Reality Bites Back, Pozner (2010) critiques how this form of entertainment “defines ‘women’, and how it constructs gender roles within various contexts, including body, romance, marriage, home and work…while also looking at the genre’s treatment of race and class” (p. 20). According to Stephens (2004), “despite the idea that marriage and motherhood are essentially private concerns, the history of twentieth century interventions into these seemingly private realms is long and invasive” (p. 193).

Time and again representations of motherhood on television reproduce motherhood as one of the few appropriate identities for women in society, however reality TV series often criticize an individual’s ability to perform the role of mother. Several scholars argue that reality TV has been used to challenge the role of the mother as a central identity for women, emphasizing images of the “bad mom” and replacing these “bad moms” with professionals from the “mommy industries” (Brancato, 2010; Maher, 2004; Stephens, 2004). The media representations of motherhood examined by
Brancato (2010, Maher (2004) and Stephens (2004) emphasize an ideal image of traditional motherhood through offering counter-examples of the “bad mom” that help to reinforce the ideal “good mom” image. Women on reality TV are “bad moms” if they fail to uphold the standards of the traditional mother (Brancato, 2010). According to Douglas (2004),

Images of motherhood in TV shows, movies, advertising, women’s magazines and the news have evolved since 1970, raising the bar, year by year, of the standards of good motherhood while singling out and condemning those we were supposed to see as dreadful mothers (p. 14).

Similar portrayals of motherhood and maternity exist in the film industry in the U.S. In *Motherhood Misconceived*, Addison, Goodwin-Kelly, and Roth (2009) suggest that Hollywood has a long history of portraying images of motherhood and maternity that support and maintain hegemony (p. 4). This analysis of motherhood and maternity in film in the 21st century argues that the medium consistently upholds the dominant ideology of the “good mom” as a youthful, white, middle-class, heterosexual. “For almost a century, it has mobilized particular constructions of maternity in service of the status quo” (Addison, 2009, p. 4). Images of motherhood and maternity on screen have remained relatively stable over the past century and often create a spectacle of pregnancy. This spectacle also promises advertiser-friendly television content. Thus, a political-economic perspective helps account for *16 and Pregnant’s* debut.

**Political Economy Approach**
Political economy is the relationship between communication and broader social structures, especially industrialization. Political economists examine how media and communication systems and content, reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class and social relations (McChesney, 2000, p. 110). Political economic analysis examines how organizations ownership, advertising, and government policies affect media behavior and content. McChesney (2000) argues that political economy specifically emphasizes how structural factors and labor practices work together in the production, distribution, and consumption of media.

Political economists also contextualize the objects and practices under study within the larger systems that originate them. This enables the tracing of market and corporate structures and legal and regulatory structures that set patterns and rules of media expression. The economic model of cable television changed in the 1980s as the funding and support for cable networks became strained. Because programs are funded by advertising dollars and must supply audiences while demonstrating advertising revenue, series’ cannot challenge the individualistic values supported by the neoliberal economic environment (Magder, 2004). Neoliberalism is a recent political movement that advocates the deregulation of government, the privatization of nationalized industries and permeation of personal responsibility. The neoliberal ideology supports free market capitalism through the ideals of personal responsibility, individuation, and self-management. The very neoliberal economic logic supporting the production of reality TV programming is also supported ideologically throughout the discourses within television programming.
According to Ouellette and Hay (2008) the current neoliberal ideology grew out of 19th century’s liberalism presumptions that “rulers should only intervene in the affairs of the free market” (p. 9). This is to say that the object of the state (governors/government) should only govern at a distance and not interfere with the personal lives of individuals. Neoliberalism is supposed to provide individuals with a sense of freedom and promote a vision of self-management.

The neoliberal ideology has been broadly applied and acknowledged in reality television as “Good Samaritan” television (McMurria, 2008) and “Charity TV” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Reality TV promotes neoliberal perspectives by teaching audiences how to govern themselves through the strategies like self-management. The goal of neoliberal thought is to eliminate the importance of and reliance on government programs in a society, while supporting the idea of individual responsibility. Neoliberal ideologies often ignore the socio-economic, political and historical considerations that feminist theory employ to understand gender and class tensions. The themes of individual choice, empowerment, and self-management that are essential to neoliberal ideology also surface in postfeminist discourses.

**Feminist Approach**

An important function of the feminist approach to studying cultural texts is the examination of power in shaping the discourses that either reinforce or reject existing socio-economic and political relations, especially patriarchy. Riordan (2002) argues that feminist political economists should focus on the meaning of consuming cultural artifacts
by certain groups, especially when “pleasure” is derived in this consumption by many politically, economically, and socially disenfranchised groups (p. 6). Durham (2003) takes this a step further arguing that the use of girls’ bodies as the focus of the series represents the trans-coding of the late 20th century popular discourse of empowerment and agency (p. 26), both which are discussed by current as postfeminist themes.

Scholars argue that we have moved into an era of postfeminism, however the definitions of postfeminism are widely contested. According to Gill (2007) there are three dominant discourses currently surrounding postfeminist theories, which regard it as an epistemological or political position, a historical shift, or a backlash against feminism (p. 148). Postfeminism is also a “sensibility” that includes the following concepts:

“the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual differences; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill, 2007, p. 149).”

For Gill (2007) the sensibility of postfeminism is primarily characterized through television series, advertisements, films, and media products (p. 148). The series 16 and Pregnant is a contemporary example of the postfeminist sensibility, as the series represents many of the contradictory issues that Gill (2007) describes and does so through the discourse of teen pregnancy. Similar to Gill (2007), McRobbie (1994) locates the expansion of postfeminist texts as not only a reflection of the pervasiveness of third-wave feminism in American society, but also as indicative of larger cultural shifts
and ideological trends in our society. In her earlier work, McRobbie (2004) defines contemporary postfeminist texts as those which portray the lead female as empowered by her sexuality while living independently and pursuing a career, but inevitably the focus of the narrative still revolves around the lead character finding fulfillment and love in a romantic relationship with another lead male. For the purpose of this analysis, postfeminism is applied as a sensibility with an emphasis on themes of self-surveillance, monitoring, discipline, individualism, choice and empowerment. This definition summarizes the main themes portrayed in *16 and Pregnant* as discussed through this contradictory concept of the postfeminist sensibility. Also key to postfeminism is the notion that feminism has succeeded, so political movements for women’s rights can now be abandoned.

Although the majority of teen girls within *16 and Pregnant* live at home, arguments between each girl and her parents arise over her choice to come to term with a child during high school. Some girls in the series eventually find independence through moving out of their parents’ homes and into the homes of their boyfriends or other relatives. Through each of these conflicts, I argue that the teen girls in the series are portrayed as being empowered by their choice to continue with their respective pregnancies and because of this choice are often forced to seek independence from their families and boyfriends.

The narratives in *16 and Pregnant* also consistently focus on the romantic relationship between the pregnant teen and her boyfriend. The romantic relationships in the series are used to portray the difficulties of maintaining a relationship when an unplanned pregnancy occurs and are often central to the narratives. However, a common
outcome of many of these relationships is that these romantic relationships do not work out between the pregnant teen and her boyfriend and she is inevitably forced to deal with parenting her newborn child without the help of her boyfriend. *16 and Pregnant* is a postfeminist text in that the narratives center on the lives of teen mothers as they deal with the complexities of raising children, graduating high school, and balancing familial and friend relationships, but inevitably the brunt of these struggles emphasizes the leading female-male romantic relationship and corresponding issues and problems. For example, at the end of the first episode of season one, Maci Bookhout speaks into the camera about her experience transforming into a teen mom. Rather than focusing on the difficulties of motherhood, Maci’s summary focuses on her romantic relationship with Ryan and ends the episode stating, “it’s been a lot harder than I thought it would be staying with him, and I’m sure he thinks the same thing. And maybe this summer we’ll have the beach wedding like we planned.” Similar to many other postfeminist texts, *16 and Pregnant* inevitably focuses on the romantic relationship between the lead male-female despite all efforts not to. There are also several other themes as discussed through the postfeminist sensibility that locate *16 and Pregnant* as a postfeminist text.

*16 and Pregnant* can also be interpreted as postfeminist and neoliberal in that the emphasis is on personal responsibility for the initial sexual behavior and for every consequence occurred thereafter. Participation in *16 and Pregnant* via the reality TV format frames each girl’s involvement in this cultural production as empowering yet the temporality of their ability to use reality TV for empowerment is short-lived. These shows are designed to appeal to female audiences by spectacularizing presentations of the deviant mother. However, the narratives in *16 and Pregnant* contain contradictory
messages that both challenge and reassert dominant constructions of motherhood while attempting to ignore race and class (Durham, 2003, p. 26).
Chapter 3

The Politics of Teen Pregnancy

Social problems like teen pregnancy need to be understood as having histories. The history of teen pregnancy as an issue in the U.S. dates back as early as the 1800s (Luker, 1996). The last two increases in the teen pregnancy rate (the early 1990s and 2005-2007) have caused the issue to be placed at the forefront of political debates and legislation. This chapter explores relevant moments in the construction of teen pregnancy as a social problem, and eventually, as a problem that made for good reality television programming.

Incorporated into the objectives of the National Campaign is the neoliberal ideology that advances a message of individualization, personal responsibility and self-management in preventing teen pregnancy. *16 and Pregnant* shows the difficulties a teen mom experiences when attempting to conform to the policy provisions in the 1996 PRWORA (although the policy and welfare programs are rarely mentioned). These images of the “teen mom”, especially those portrayed in *16 and Pregnant*, also further the notion that any public financial assistance is unnecessary. This is reinforced again through the reality TV format of *16 and Pregnant*, as audience members are shown that you can “(barely) make it on your own, or even by auditioning to get a spot on MTV. Through the real life narratives of each teen mother the reality TV format then converts these narratives into entertainment fare that commodifies teen mothers.
Women, Mothers, and Backlash

Following World War II, the U.S. reached its peak of teen pregnancies as the soldiers returned from war and hundreds of thousands of middle-class white working women were demoted and laid off to make room for what Lynn Spigel calls the postwar “family ideal” that demanded such women embrace familial work in the confines of domestic space (Spigel, 1992). Consequently, a “baby boom” ensued and became a moniker for the period in U.S. history that lasted from 1945-1964. After this period ended, the teen pregnancy rates dropped to earlier levels and have remained relatively stable since (Luker, 1996).

Although teen pregnancies had declined shortly after this period, concerns about mothers and motherhood were on the rise. In the wake of the civil rights and feminist movements, white male authority seemed even more unstable than it always had been. African Americans challenged the Jim Crow laws of the South, with violent consequence, and white middle class women organized for issues like equal pay and child leave. In the years after Friedan (1963) wrote about “the problem with no name” (referencing the depression, loneliness, anxiety, and lack of fulfillment white middle-class, college-educated women felt in their roles as suburban housewives) and as the “second wave” feminist movement became a force in the US, a backlash was forming.

As the civil rights and feminist movement played out, in ways that clearly challenged the postwar “family ideal”, the ground on which white middle-class male authority could rest appeared unstable. Media seemed to respond by portraying teen pregnancy as deviant. Although in decline from “Baby Boom” levels, teen pregnancy
was a problem in the U.S. that, according to media coverage, had reached “epidemic” proportions (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). When Ronald Reagan took office in the early 1980s, the government and media began to place teen pregnancy on the national agenda along with crack-addicted mothers, drive-by shootings and the failing education system (Luker, 1996, p. 81). Teen moms, especially poor ones, began to bear the brunt of the backlash against feminism and against the work of poor black women, who successfully mobilized to open access to welfare to women of color organizations like the National Welfare Rights Organization (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Roberts, 1996).

In their book *The Mommy Myth*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) argue that this backlash surfaced in what they call a “new momism.” According to Douglas and Michaels, this

“new momism’ is the intense social expectations of mothering that have emerged that includes an emphasis that redefines women in terms of their children. The ‘new momism’ aligns women specifically within the mothering role and requires a complete and selfless devotion to children and parenting. The mommy myth was the result of the combustible intermixing of right-wing attacks on feminism and women, the media’s increasingly finely tuned and incessant target marketing of mothers and children, the collapse of government institutions—public schools, child welfare programs—that served families in the past” (p. 24).

The “new momism” also meant that being a “good mom” meant being a good consumer. Working moms, stay-at-home moms, and celebrity moms, in other words, were expected to fulfill their motherly duties through consumption practices. However, the “new momism” places mothers who cannot become good consumers at the “bad
“bad mom” end of the spectrum. Therefore, mothers on welfare and teen mothers are placed into the spectrum of “bad mom” because these types of mothers do not have the means to buy into the services supplied by the “Mommy Industries.” According to Hoschchild (2003), the “Mommy Industries” signify the entry of previously domestic and private activities within the home into the commercial practices. The “Mommy Industries” are in turn the commercialization of domestic and motherly duties. Under the “new momism”, mothers are expected to consume and buy into these practices in order to be defined as “good mothers.” The backlash against the “second wave” feminist movement promoted neoliberal policy changes that targeted “bad mom” (welfare moms and teen moms) who could not consume and buy into the practices of the “mommy industries.” Both welfare moms and teen moms targeted by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) now received less funding for childcare services and were quickly forced into the workplace. After the eradication of welfare through the 1996 PRWORA, politicians no longer needed to focus specifically on welfare moms. The elimination of long-term assistance through the 1996 PRWORA was replaced with TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) and administered through block grants to states. One of the many interesting things about teen motherhood shows like 16 and Pregnant is that it shows how the problem of teen pregnancy can also be supported by quite different ends, namely the sum paid to each teen mom by MTV. However, the media discourse surrounding teen pregnancy and teen parenthood began long before the reality series 16 and Pregnant ever hit airwaves and the current discourse traces at least as far back to the 1980s and Ronald Reagan.
Framing Teen Pregnancy in the U.S.

The Reagan Administration promised the country economic renewal by pushing policies that aimed to cut government programs and decrease the public’s dependency on welfare. Children were framed as no longer the responsibility of the state and were the responsibility of the family. Under Reagan’s administration funding for daycare centers was cut and so was the WIC program (Women, Infants, and Children). To Reagan and his administration the poor were abusing the social safety net of welfare and upper- and middle-class Americans were supporting the lazy habits of thousands of poor Americans (Douglas, 2004).

Cultural and political historians argue that this attack on poor mothers who received welfare was largely an attack on opening the welfare rolls to women of color. As late at the 1990s, three decades after black welfare activists won access to benefits, there were still significant numbers of white women on the rolls. According to Douglas, at the time images of the black, teen welfare mother were portrayed in news media (roughly around 1994), 39% of welfare recipients were white women. Additionally, 37% of welfare recipients at that time were African American; however, African Americans only consisted of about 12% of the population at that time.

Images of unworthy black teen mothers who were welfare recipients ran counter to the ideals of the “new momism” because these mothers were considered lazy, careless and neglectful as mothers. They were also bad consumers. The image of poor teen mothers dependent on welfare also ran counter to ideals of hard-working Americans who were willing to be self-sufficient. Therefore, media’s message was that the welfare
programs supporting the habits of these “bad mothers” needed to be eliminated to end the media constructed dependency of “twelve-year-olds who have six babies by the age of twenty instead of finishing high school” (Douglas, 2004, p. 179).

During the 1992 presidential race, candidate Bill Clinton promised to “end welfare as we know it.” Clinton declared his “War on Welfare” later that year. Previously defined by the economic costs teen childbearing caused the country, Clinton’s take on welfare reform pointed to a failure in values and behaviors as the cause of teen pregnancy in the U.S. (Geronimus, 1997). As part of his larger political battle on the welfare nation, Clinton argued for teens to take responsibility for their actions, indicating that it is a failure of both the values and behaviors in the American family that lead to irresponsible actions by teens across the country. The emphasis that Clinton began to place on the personal responsibility of teen parents, specifically teen mothers, indicates a move towards neoliberal policies to manage teen pregnancies. Clinton’s campaign against teen pregnancy replaced previous government aid for many teen mothers while raising the bar to receive aid for those teen mothers who did qualify. Therefore, the 1996 PRWORA is a cornerstone piece of neoliberal legislation in the U.S. that continued to have implications on teen mothers.

A Presidential Address to Teen Pregnancy

“We’ve got to ask our community leaders and all kinds of organizations to help us stop our most serious social problem: the epidemic of teen pregnancies and births where there is no marriage… Tonight, I call on parents and leaders
across the country to join together in a national campaign against teen pregnancy to make a difference. We can do this, and we must” (Clinton, 1995).

Clinton campaigned to “end welfare as we know it”, and made good on that pledge once in office. In his 1995 State of the Union address, President Clinton summoned the public to take action against teen pregnancy in a national campaign. At the time, the Clinton Administration was making larger changes towards addressing America’s “failed welfare system.” A government-funded program to combat “America’s worst social problem” was not included as part of the reform. Instead President Clinton requested a grassroots effort to form, calling on individuals and private organizations to take the reigns on America’s fight against teen pregnancy.

Contradictorily the same year that President Clinton called for a national campaign, teen pregnancy rates in the U.S. dropped to the lowest on record in over 27 years.

Despite this decrease, media attention continued to focus on the problem of teen pregnancy in the U.S. Prior to President Clinton’s 1995 Presidential address, the 1995 Guttmacher Report on the current state of teen pregnancy in the U.S. introduced the term “epidemic” for the first time into the discourse surrounding teen pregnancy (Luker, 1996, p.4). The following year President Clinton again addressed the social problem of teen pregnancy in his State of the Union Address. President Clinton announced that within a year of coming to the forefront of America’s social issues, private citizens had quickly moved to solve “America’s most serious social problem” and on January 23, 1996, the

---

1 The Guttmacher Institute is a non-profit organization created in 1968 that works to advance reproductive health worldwide. The Guttmacher Institute publishes annual reports on the current state of reproductive health in the U.S., including a report that specifically focuses on teenage pregnancy, births, and abortions.
National Campaign to Reduce Teenage Pregnancy was established. This was mere months before President Clinton signed the biggest welfare reform bill to date, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA).

The PRWORA aimed to reduce “dependency” on welfare and to promote personal responsibility amongst U.S. citizens. The PRWORA also specifically addressed concerns over the increasing population of unwed teen mothers. Unwed teen mothers were more likely than other teens to end up on welfare and their children were more likely to experience poor health, have a hard time in school, become teen parents themselves, and spend time in prison. In response to these concerns, two provisions were added to the welfare bill, one mandating that unmarried minor parents attend school, and a second requiring that they live with a parent or with a responsible adult, as a condition for receiving cash assistance. The two provisions regarding teen parents included the following:

- **Live at home and stay in school requirements.** Under the new law, unmarried minor parents will be required to live with a responsible adult or in an adult-supervised setting and participate in educational and training activities in order to receive assistance. States will be responsible for locating or assisting in locating adult-supervised settings for teens.

- **Teen Pregnancy Prevention.** Starting in FY 1998, $50 million a year in mandatory funds would be added to the appropriations of the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Block Grant for abstinence education. In addition, the Secretary of HHS will establish and implement a strategy to (1) prevent non-marital teen births, and (2) assure that at least 25 percent of
communities have teen pregnancy prevention programs. No later than January 1, 1997, the Attorney General will establish a program that studies the linkage between statutory rape and teen pregnancy, and that educates law enforcement officials on the prevention and prosecution of statutory rape (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

The bill also significantly reduced both private and public resources for childcare, creating a burden on teen mothers who were now forced to attend school and care for their children simultaneously. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) prohibited a state from using any part of its federal TANF grant to fund assistance to teen parents without a high-school or equivalent degree unless they are in school working toward a high-school degree or in an alternative education or training program approved by the state (U.S. House of Representatives, 2008). *16 and Pregnant* displays the difficulties that teen parents experience when attempting to conform to the policies of TANF without ever addressing any sort of policies (local, state, or national) in the series.

In some ways, *16 and Pregnant* also places teen motherhood back into the suburban, white middle class context of the postwar family ideal and reclaims it as a white middle class problem. The first season included five white teen mothers and one African American teen mother. After the first season, the series began to slowly diversify the ethnic and racial backgrounds of the teen mothers after viewers wrote in to complain (Sun, 2011). Similar to McRobbie’s (2004) argument that often time scenarios in makeover reality programs are not only classed and gendered, but are racialized through exclusion. She argues that the judgments passed on white working class women in many
makeover TV series would be deemed racist if the judgments were white experts commenting on black bodies, lives and practice. A similar argument can be applied to *16 and Pregnant*, whereas presenting only the lives of African-American or Hispanic teen mothers would be deemed racist, which creates an emphasis instead on the lives of white working-class teens. And, because “welfare queens” had been coded as black during different times in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (after black women had access to welfare beginning around 1967), there was probably also an implication that these troublesome teen mothers referenced in the PRWORA were black, even if the majority of recipients were white. Images of the “welfare queens” in media reinforce and legitimate the need for neoliberal policies like the PRWORA. The National Campaign, with its neoliberal messages of personal responsibility, was created with the mission to prevent teen pregnancy through media campaigns and national awareness.

**The National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy**

“To strengthen family we must do everything we can to keep the teen pregnancy rate going down… Tonight I am pleased to announced that a group of prominent Americans is responding to that challenge by forming an organization that will support grass-roots community efforts all across our country in a national campaign against teen pregnancy. And I challenge all of us and every American to join their efforts” (Clinton, State of the Union, 1996).

President Clinton again addressed the issue of teen pregnancy and parenthood in his 1996 State of the Union address. As stated in the quote above, he called for a national
campaign against teen pregnancy while challenging Americans to contribute their individual efforts to this campaign. A board of seventeen private individuals lead by former New Jersey governor Thomas Kean launched the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (National Campaign) on January 29, 1996. The National Campaign was created less than six months before the 1996 PRWORA was signed. Rather than including provisions in the 1996 PRWORA to address the issue of teen pregnancy, President Clinton called for a private effort to address America’s “worst social problem.” This is another indication of the transition to neoliberal politics that has occurred since the early 1980s. The creation of the National Campaign imagines no need for government assistance for teen pregnancy because it calls for privatizing the resources available to aid pregnant teens and teen mothers.

Since its beginnings the non-profit has increased its address to include “unplanned” pregnancies and is now known as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Less than a week after his State of the Union address, President Clinton announced that Dr. Henry W. Foster Jr., former candidate for surgeon general, would be the government’s adviser and liaison between the organization and the White House (Wetzstein, 2006).

Although President Clinton directly addressed the need for an effort to combat teen pregnancy, the formation of the group was not included in any piece of legislation. Instead, private organizations were asked to front the fight against teen pregnancy. The National Campaign is not a government agency nor is it a part of any federal mandate or legislative action. It is a private non-profit organization. The neoliberal logic that led to the creation of the private organization, rather than a government program, is also
expressed through the goals of the National Campaign and permeates into all educational and informational programs the campaign offers. But clearly, the organization reflects the policy priority of its founding moment, and continues to do so today.

*16 and Pregnant* promises to support one of the main goals of the organizations: to educate teens and parents on the importance of taking personal responsibility for one’s actions, especially in the case of unprotected sexual activity and unplanned pregnancies. This neoliberal belief can be found in the slogan of the National Campaign, which is “Responsible Behavior, Responsible Policies.” The first part of the slogan indicates the responsible behavior that is promoted throughout the National Campaign’s website and materials. Responsible behavior is expected at the individual level, specifically at the teens who are engaging in the irresponsible activity of unprotected sexual activity. Responsible behavior is also promoted at another level whereas teens are educated to act responsibly once the choice to carry out and pursue teen pregnancy and parenthood is made.

The National Campaign promotes a similar message of personal responsibility through supporting responsible policies at the local, state, and national level. It is expected that these responsible policies also hold the individual accountable and responsible for her own actions. The show also supports the organization’s other two goals to create a “culture of personal responsibility” and to support policy that encourages contraceptive use and responsible behaviors. According to the National Campaign’s (2011) website, the three main objectives of the non-profit are:
1) Strengthen a culture of personal responsibility regarding sex, getting pregnant, and bringing children into the world, as well as strengthening the practice of always using contraception when you aren’t having a child;

2) Support responsible policies that will increase the use of contraception, particularly by those who cannot afford it and by those at greatest risk for having an unplanned pregnancy; and

3) Provide more education to teens, parents, and young adults in their 20s that encourages them to take sex and pregnancy seriously, stresses personal responsibility and respectful relationships, and includes extensive information about contraception.²

Incorporated into the objectives of the National Campaign is the neoliberal ideology that advances a message of individualization, personal responsibility and self-management in preventing teen pregnancy. The first objective of the National Campaign indicates an aim to influence and maintain a culture in which those who fail to utilize the self-management strategies that prevent teen pregnancy must take personal responsibility and are now cast as individuals who caused their own misfortune. The second objective resonates a similar message in which the National Campaign agrees to support responsible policies that will further allow the individual take personal responsibility in utilizing the self-management techniques prescribed within these policies. Thus the National Campaign promises to support public policy that both reiterates and reinforces the neoliberal ideology present within the first objective. Lastly the third objective of the

² Emphasis is original.
National Campaign promises to supply educational information on how to implement the self-management techniques, further emphasizing that this education information will undoubtedly stress the neoliberal logic of personal responsibility.

Each of the objectives of the National Campaign is engrained with the three central tenets of neoliberal ideology: individualization, personal responsibility and self-management. These messages continue to diffuse the individual’s dependence on any form of welfare and slowly act to eliminate the government’s responsibility to provide aid to citizens in need. As clearly stated in the third objective, the National Campaign disseminates this neoliberal message throughout all of its educational resources for the public.

In its first year the National Campaign set the goal to cut the U.S. teen pregnancy rate by one-third by 2005. That goal was successfully reached in 2005. The CEO of the National Campaign, Sarah Brown, announced that despite reaching its original campaign goal the fight against teen pregnancy was not over because the teen pregnancy rate in the U.S. was still higher than any other industrialized country. However, the success was short lived when in 2006 the CDC reported that the teen pregnancy rate increased for the first time in fourteen years and national attention to teen pregnancy went to the forefront of the media and public’s attention again (Reinberg, 2007).

The New Reality of Teen Pregnancy in the U.S.

Despite the policy changes initiated during the 1980s and 1990s, teen pregnancy re-emerged into the political national discourse again in 2006 when the Guttmacher
Institute reported that teen pregnancy rates were again on the rise. It was reported that after over a decade of steadily declining teen pregnancy rates in the United States, teen pregnancy rates began to increase in 2005 (Reinberg, 2007). For three consecutive years from 2006-2008, the teen pregnancy rates in the U.S. began to increase (Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010). The increase in the teen pregnancy rate began to land national headlines, raising concerns amongst the public.

In December 2007, 16-year-old Nickelodeon star Jamie Lynn Spears announced she was 12 weeks pregnant with her longtime boyfriend Casey Aldridge. Celebrity pregnancy is always a popular topic in many tabloid magazines, but this coverage extended into popular news media outlets in 2008 due to events associated with the presidential election. On September 1, 2008 Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin announced her unwed teen daughter Bristol Palin (age 17) was pregnant and keeping the baby. Over the next several weeks Bristol Palin’s pregnancy became a focus of news media coverage and she quickly became the newest spokesperson for the Candies’ Foundation’s campaign against teen pregnancy. In addition to the coverage of celebrity teen mothers, the media increasingly focused on unplanned teen pregnancy as a main topic in the national news media.

In June 2008, Gloucester High School made national headlines across the U.S. for the sudden “pregnancy boom” at the high school. According to Time magazine (which originally published the article), the high school’s administrators became concerned when seventeen girls at the high school were expecting mothers by the end of the 2007-2008 school year. After conducting interviews with several of the students, school officials discovered that the girls had made a “pregnancy pact” to get pregnant and raise their
children together (“Pregnancy Boom at Gloucester High”). At the same time popular television networks also began featuring teen pregnancy as the focus of its programming and many worked in conjunction with the National Campaign,

The National Campaign’s Media Interventions

The National Campaign is media savvy. Its webpage is data-oriented and provides the most up-to-date statistics and studies regarding teen pregnancy, unplanned pregnancy, abortion, etc. The National Campaign website does not disseminate educational information on responsible actions like contraceptive use, healthy relationships, and how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and infections, nor does it directly offer any form of financial assistance to individual teens. The campaign’s website does provide information on how individual organizations can request grants from the federal government for funding and a few grants are offered by the National Campaign.

MTV is not the first nor only media network to partner with the National Campaign. The National Campaign has relied heavily on media to distribute its neoliberal message of “Responsible Behavior, Responsible Policies.” The National Campaign boasts partnerships with over 100 media companies, including The CW Network, NBC, CBS, and FOX Broadcasting (The National Campaign, 2011). The National Campaign recognizes the reach and influence that television has in its target audience of American teens and collaborated with several networks to create series that might help combat the problem. The campaign’s messages appear in much of the content that portrays teen pregnancy on all of these networks. The campaign’s website also states
that the campaign’s messages have reached over 300 million people through select television series and magazines (The National Campaign, 2011).

The National Campaign recently worked with ABC Family and NBC to address teen pregnancy and teen parenthood. In 2008, ABC Family debuted the hit series *The Secret Life of the American Teen*, a drama focused on the life of an American teen, Amy, who finds herself pregnant at age 16. The National Campaign played a role in the creation of this program and at the end of each episode public service announcements directed audiences to one of the National Campaign’s offshoot websites StayTeen.org. During that same year another reality television series was introduced that focused on providing teen couples with a temporary real life experience of raising a child in NBC’s *The Baby Borrowers* (2008). The premise of the show featured five couples aged 18-20 moving in together while going on the fast track through parenthood, taking care of infants, toddlers, adolescents, teens, and eventually the elderly. In 2008, the National Campaign received another request to work with MTV in the creation of a new reality series that hoped to address teen pregnancy like never before (Rothman, 2011).

**MTV and the National Campaign: Birth of a Reality Series**

In a CNN special editorial online the creator of *16 and Pregnant* Lauren Dolgen revealed that the idea for the series *16 and Pregnant* came to her as media attention began to focus on both Jamie Lynn Spears and Bristol Palin, who were both amid controversies over out-of-wed-lock teen pregnancies in 2008. Dolgen also stated that the media coverage of both Spears and Palin presented information on the actual statistics of teen
pregnancy in the U.S. and that she realized this was an issue directly impacting the core audience of MTV, viewers aged 12 to 25. Therefore, in order to best attract this segment, the series *16 and Pregnant* was conceptualized to educate and entertain audiences on the struggles of teen pregnancy in America through the real stories of American teens.

The first four seasons of *16 and Pregnant* are offered as a media resource for schools and parents through the National Campaign’s website. The National Campaign offers each DVD, which consists of 3 episodes, at no charge (besides a shipping and handling surcharge) and are accompanied with discussion guides that include suggestions for classroom discussion topics and questions. However, MTV sells each of these seasons on Amazon for a retail price of $24.95-$29.95 per season. Digital downloads of each season are available on iTunes for a retail price of $8.99-$16.99 per season. Single episodes are also available through iTunes as digital downloads for $1.99 per episode. There are also two novels published by MTV Press that are authored by teen moms from the series: *My Teenage Dream Ended* by Farrah Abraham (Season 1) and *Bittersweet Blessing: 16 and Pregnant* by Ashley Salazar (Season 2). Each of these novels provide examples of how cross-platform media is created and continues to reinforce the *16 and Pregnant* brand’s conception and representation of teen motherhood.

*16 and Pregnant* and all cross-platform media associated with the series (including both spin-off series *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*) are the newest media synergy through which the National Campaign disseminates its ideological messages of individualism, personal responsibility and self-management. The neoliberal messages are incorporated into every aspect of the series. The “teen mom” identity is constructed
through both a neoliberal and postfeminist sensibility created through the casting, format and premise made available by the reality TV format.
Chapter 4

Introducing “New Teen Momism” on *16 and Pregnant*

Because of government defunding of social services like public health education, television is an important means for disseminating health-related information (Ouellette and Hay, 2008). This should not be a surprise, because privately owned media companies have attempted to fill other gaps in public information’s dissemination in ways that makes such information entertaining fare for popular consumption. The terms “infotainment,” “edutainment,” and “democratainment” point to this process. Each of these terms assumes that television can provide a hybrid form of entertainment and information, education, or democracy to the public. Besides providing a form of education to the public, it has also been argued that television acts as a “super peer” to younger audience members, especially teens and young adults (Brown, Haplern & L’Engle, 2005; Strasburger & Wilson 2002). Even more than this, Davis and Dickinson (2004) argue that “television plays a pivotal role in the way teenagers are managed: what they are allowed to do, what is forbidden, and what they are encouraged to become” (p. 10). Television viewing is one of the only leisure activities that teens engage in within the home, often times with parents, siblings or friends. But while teens watch, they learn. MTV has capitalized on these dynamics of TV’s role as a manager, super-peer, and disseminator of public information. In fact, it has become part of MTV’s brand image to create program with messages that contain messages about social responsibility. Thus, 16
and Pregnant ultimately serves MTV’s brand image as a network that targets teens and young adults and is good for them too.

**Confronting Social Problems on MTV**

MTV has a history of involvement in social issues thought to concern its main audiences of young adults and teens. Bob Pittman, one of the original creators of MTV, stated that he designed MTV to “mirror the issues of people moving from adolescence to adulthood” (Levy, 1983, in Lewis, 1990). Throughout the years, MTV has created hundreds of programs that discuss contemporary teen issues including sex, drugs, alcohol, high school, college, etc.

In 1992 MTV introduced its *Choose or Lose* campaign to encourage youth to vote in the presidential election. The *Choose or Lose* campaign has continued each year of a presidential election in the U.S. and has garnered much success in generating new voters in the 18-29 demographic. According to Stephen Friedman, president of MTV, the name of the campaign was changed in 2012 to *The Power of 12* by the channel to support the notion that 18-29 year-olds have the power to make a change if they choose (Stelter, 2011).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s MTV also introduced its *Fight For Your Rights* campaign to raise awareness against drugs, violence and crime in the U.S. This campaign included a made-for-TV movie that exposed the real life story of a gay college student who was brutally murdered by his fellow college students in 1998 because of his
sexual orientation. After the film aired, a discussion was held and MTV was blacked out in order to display the names of young hate crime victims across the U.S.

Most recently, MTV launched its think MTV campaign that aims to raise awareness on a variety of political and social issues affecting teens and young adults across the U.S. The think MTV campaign includes a website with provides information and discusses topics like discrimination, environment, politics, health & self, crime & violence, poverty & disease, human rights, war & peace, relationships & sex, faith, substance abuse, and education. The campaign aims to allow viewers to chose which topics are most important to them and to take action in order to make a positive change. Each of these social activism campaigns encourages young adult and teens involvement in political and social issues. These campaigns also make use of real life examples to persuade the audience on the seriousness of the issue. 16 and Pregnant also utilizes real life examples to educate teens on the potential consequences of unprotected sex and unplanned teen pregnancy, but the difference lies in the use of the reality TV format as an edutainment tool. A similar logic can be seen in MTV’s 16 and Pregnant. The reality TV format that allows each pregnant teen the opportunity to tell her story to the public places MTV as a socially responsible company aiming to reflect the issues that impact its audiences.

In their book Better Living Through Reality TV, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008) categorize this genre of reality television as “do good” and trace its roots on television to the late 1990s and early 2000s. They argue that “do good” programs appear to the public as a solution to the plight of society’s problems and were replacing governmental aid and programs. Individuals in the American public view “do good”
programs as a viable option to solve problems in every aspect of their lives. This was indicative of larger “liberal capitalist policies” in society, which beginning in the Reagan presidency headed the replacement of publicly funded welfare programs with privately organized solutions to society’s problems. Ouellette and Hay (2008) describe this process as an extension of the larger move in the U.S. towards the permeating neo-liberal ideology.

McMurria (2008) expands this idea by tracing the corporate interest (like that of MTV) in creating “do good” television programs back to the earliest days of television. Corporations have a long history of underwriting television programs as part of larger philanthropic campaigns. McMurria argues that more recently corporations are no longer interested in these programs to enhance corporate reputations, but now “more strategically incorporate giving with product marketing and to sustain a neoliberal political platform for deregulating industries and shrinking state welfare provision” (2008, p. 309). Product placement and corporate branding now motivate corporate sponsorships of “do good” programs. These programs simultaneously reinforce the neoliberal policies that encourage the public to seek solutions to their problems through private means.

**Commercializing Teen Pregnancy through 16 and Pregnant**

In *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, Hochschild (2003) argues that family life, especially in the past three decades has struggled in the face of an increasingly commercialized culture. The audiences’ desires for new programming and producers’
needs to create cheap programming to fill schedules enhances this culture of commercialization of aspects of everyday life. Reality TV creates the opportunity for all aspects of domestic life and American culture to be easily and cheaply transformed into a series.

Ordinary people are now more involved in the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of media than at any other point in history. Participation in reality programs provided the ordinary person the opportunity to gain visibility across media in unprecedented amounts. With an emphasis on “ordinariness”, “authenticity” and “realness”, reality television presents the opportunity for the ordinary person to transform into the media person while maintaining his or her own identity throughout this transformation. This changing dynamic allowed for the participants in these programs to exercise more editorial control over their representations. In a society where self-branding is encouraged to differentiate one’s self from the crowd, media in the era of convergence provides increased opportunities to control the representation of one’s identity across different media.

Production of these identities is no longer contained to the sets constructed in the studios of Hollywood. With its emphasis on the “real” and “authentic”, the format of reality television allowed for production of these identities to move into the private homes and hometowns across America. Whereas documentary-style reality television used to focus on presenting the private lives of ordinary individuals in constructed sets like those seen on The Real World and Big Brother, now reality television presents the private lives of individuals in their private residences. Reality television provides individuals of every age, sex, race, religion, and class to participate in mainstream
cultural production like never before while acting as the means by which the public is provided entrance into the lives of these individuals. As argued in the previous chapter, *16 and Pregnant* is targeted at the youth and teen population to educate audiences on the difficulties that teen pregnancy causes in family life, romantic relationships, friendships and the derailment of high school or college education plans. *16 and Pregnant* is no different than previous reality series in that the casting and format are used to enhance the authenticity and ordinariness of the series to illuminate the social problem of teen pregnancy.

**Casting**

The producers of *16 and Pregnant* claim that although they avoid promoting teen pregnancy, the premise of the series forces producers to seek teenage girls to participate in the series. Instead of contracting teens to become pregnant, they rely heavily on filming teen girls who are already pregnant.\(^3\) One of the most alluring aspects of reality TV for producers is not only the availability of ordinary people willing to participate in different series, but also the willingness of these people to participate. As a format, reality television relies heavily on unpaid or very low-budget labor, which inevitably increases the bottom line profits for networks, producers and investors.

Casting calls are a regular occurrence for reality series as producers attempt to weed through the “ordinary” individuals to find those who are best fit for the series. Maci

\(^3\) Although MTV makes claims to not promoting teen pregnancy, nothing certain can be said of any possible effects the success of the original series may have on the incentives of the show’s applicants. See “Teens Getting Pregnant to Get On ‘Teen Mom’” Shuter, 2010.
Bookhout (Season 1) revealed that she was recruited for the series through an advertisement that she found on Craigslist (Armstrong, 2010). MTV also hosts casting calls for the series on the MTV website. Rather than hosting casting calls on location, MTV uses the neoliberal logic to invite interested pregnant teens to apply to be on the series. The most recent casting call for *16 and Pregnant* was posted on April 7, 2011 and stated:

> From morning sickness to dealing with parents and boyfriends, as well as making challenging decisions and ultimately to the day of the baby's arrival and beyond, we would like you to let us document this exciting, life changing and complicated journey. This show seeks to allow young women to share their personal story in their own voice and how others could potentially learn from their mistakes and decisions.

> As time is of the essence, please email us as soon as possible. Include the city and state you live in, your contact details, a picture and why you would want to take part in *16 and Pregnant* (MTV Networks, 2011).

Producers then exchange the individual’s “real life story” as a pregnant teen and use the “real” and “ordinary” factor of these stories to attract audiences to watch the series. In turn the commodity in this scenario is the “real life narrative” of the pregnant teen.

Cultural commodities include television programs, films, music recordings, newspaper articles, novels, paintings, etc. “The cultural industries --including the
recording industry, the arts, television and radio-- commodify, package, and market experiences as opposed to physical products or services. Their stock and trade is selling short-term access to simulated worlds and altered states of consciousness” (Rifkin 2000, as qtd. in Banks, 2007). In the case of reality TV series, these “simulated worlds” are the “real” lives and experiences of the reality stars as portrayed by the networks that produce, distribute and display these television programs. The series 16 and Pregnant utilizes the reality TV format to invite audiences into the experiences of teens as they deal with an unplanned pregnancy.

In response to criticism over the use of white, middle-class girls in the series, producers argued that they wanted to “make it seem like it could happen to them” (Sun, 2011). The former MTV executive producer for 16 and Pregnant, Morgan J. Freeman, also defended the casting decision arguing that producers thought the audience would find the use of middle-class white teens in 16 and Pregnant more relatable to the audience (Sun, 2011). The MTV targets 12-34 year-olds and was cited in 2010 as being the “#1 cable network for 12-34 year-olds” by the popular TV ratings website, TVbythenumbers.com (Seidman, 2010). This exposes an interesting dynamic in the production decisions of both series.

The producers of the series claim that the social placement of these teen mothers as white, middle-class or white, working-class are accessible by a broad range of teens (Sun, 2011). An alternative viewpoint to this claim is that the use of primary white, middle-class girls in the series also frames teen pregnancy as a crisis that is affecting middle-class America, removing teen pregnancy from the frame as a lower-class African-American issue. This indicates an aim to exert social control over this specific group and
is about protecting white middle class girls against the dangers of their own femininity and sexuality. Regardless of personal history and circumstance, it is implied that teens are unfit as mothers through the cast-typing of each pregnant teen into homogenized images that normal and function as models which the self is continually expected to “discipline” and “judge” itself (Bordo, 1993, p. 24-5). Previous images of the welfare teen mom from the 1970s and 1980s were predominately African-American.

As Douglas and Michaels (2004) discuss in depth throughout their book The Mommy Myth, when news representations of “bad mothers” on welfare (widely known as “welfare queens”) were at their most negative during the 1980s, the women featured tended to be black. Critics of the series pointed this out in arguing that the series fails to deliver an accurate representation of the racial breakdown of teen pregnancy in the U.S. (Sun, 2011). Although the teen pregnancy rates for African-Americans are three-times of that for white Americans, producers portrayed teen pregnancy as a serious problem amongst white, middle-class American girls. Perhaps the focus on white pregnant teens suggests an attempt to target white audiences. This is indicative of two possible underlying aims of the series: to exert social control over white, middle-class girls and to protect white, middle-class girls. Through the representations of the teen girls on 16 and Pregnant, a message specifically targets white middle-class teens and forewarns them of the negative social and cultural consequences of becoming pregnant. Similar to McRobbie’s (2004) analysis of makeover reality TV series, 16 and Pregnant is classed, gendered and racialized through exclusion and failure to address each of these issues. This also creates a reference group for teen girls of all races by removing teen pregnancy
from solely being represented as a problem affecting only African-American and Hispanic girls.

The *New York Times* published an interview with MTV’s president of programming Tony DiSanto and *16 and Pregnant*’s producer Morgan J. Freeman that suggests the show was driven by concept and not by casting (Caramanica, 2010). Later, however, the spin-off series *Teen Mom* became cast-driven like other MTV hit reality series including *The Hills* spin-off of *Laguna Beach*. This allows the *16 and Pregnant* franchise to flow with the rest of MTV’s programming schedule. Morgan J. Freeman produced both series, but similarities do not extend far beyond the production of each series in the reality television format.

Unlike *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*, the stars of *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* do not live in million-dollar mansions and drive Mercedes-Benz, rather many live in trailer homes and apartments complexes and many do not have driver’s licenses. Despite both series’ focus on exposing the “real” lives of American teens to the public, there are vast differences between the series’ from an ideological standpoint. *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* focus on glamorizing the luxurious lifestyles of upper-class teens from Orange County, CA. Meanwhile, both *16 and Pregnant* and its’ spin-off *Teen Mom* focus on illustrating the difficult struggles of lower- to middle- class teen mothers as a socially undesirable position.

The different economic status of the stars in each series is also reflected in the salary each teen is paid. Lauren Conrad and Heidi Montag from *The Hills* were paid $75,000 and $65,000 *per episode*, with Lauren Conrad paid higher than any other star in the series because it was in her “original contract” (‘MTV ‘The Hills’ Salary Dispute:"
MTV ‘The Hills’ Salaries Revealed”, 2008). The stars from Teen Mom were paid $60,000-$65,000 per season for their third season, which according to the article was, “certainly more than their classmates flipping burgers” (“Teen Mom’ Stars’ Salaries Revealed’, 2010). Freeman, who produced both series, states that each show appeals to audiences for different reasons, yet both are popular hits amongst MTV’s audiences. The series 16 and Pregnant is even lower budget than other popular reality TV series and thus the political economic context of the series helps to explain the fact that the series features low- to middle- class teen mothers. The girls who participate in the series are constrained financially by their socio-economic status and the wages paid by MTV (compared to the wages paid for other reality series) help to maintain that status.

According to Dyer (1986) celebrities are also developed to make money. MTV’s interest in creating celebrities out of pregnant teens would be to generate high ratings, which equate to advertising dollars. This also reinforces a sense of social responsibility that enhances the MTV brand. The National Campaign’s interest in creating celebrities out of pregnant teens can be assumed to gain funding for its cause in preventing teen and unplanned pregnancy. The incentives for the pregnant teens to become celebrities include money for labor, as well as the symbolic meaning of celebrity and fame. Essential to the element of success of the program is that these girls can be easily replaced to reproduce the format.
Format

On *16 and Pregnant* each episode is filmed on location in and around each teen’s home, putting set and wardrobe costs at a minimum. The use of each teen’s home and hometown as the “natural” set of the show also enhances the visual “authenticity” of each episode. Rather than using a combination of constant surveillance and direct interviews, the format of *16 and Pregnant* closely follows the narrative structure of the documentary. The narrative structure is set up in a mock diary format, enhanced by the televisual elements. Each teen acts as the narrator of her own episode, which enhances the “authenticity” through portraying her story through her point of view.

The episodic format of the series also invites the viewer to understand teen pregnancy from the view of an individual experience. Each episode introduces the pregnant teen and the end of episode resolves the individual experience of teen pregnancy. The only other encounters audiences have with the teen mother are in the “Life After Labor” specials that occur at the end of each series and the “Where Are They Now?” specials that occur at the beginning of each next new season. Each episode creates a new opportunity for a pregnant teen to enjoy her fifteen minutes of fame; however, there is a planned obsolescence in that after that episode is aired there is a minimal chance for the teen to appear on television. As long as teen pregnancy remains a hot issue in the public discourse, the teen moms from the series will remain in their temporary celebrity status. The celebrity status of teen mothers inevitably acts as an organized form of social control and a frame of reference for the general population of the consequences of pursing deviant identities in American society. Producers use the
real life narratives to direct the narrative of the show through production and editing processes that ultimately produce the finished content.

The series heavily relies on the common understanding and experiences of the American teenage audience with controversial topics regarding unprotected sexual intercourse and unplanned teen pregnancy. The general premise of the series is to expose the hardships of a real life of a pregnant teen who failed to adhere to the socially constructed norms regarding acceptable life choices for teen girls. The use of the documentary format presents teen pregnancy as entertainment through the spectacle of watching as the teen girl copes with the everyday difficulties of an unplanned pregnancy.

In *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, Hochschild (2003) dissects the heightened symbolism of the mother in U.S. culture as caused by an increase in the “Mommy Industries” which have commercialized every function within the family. She argues that this has specifically caused a heightened symbolism of the “mother” figure. The processes of commercialization and commodification have eroded the emotional role of the wife and mother. The role of the mother functions as the “symbolic weight of the family” and the more shaky the outside family appears, the more we seem to need to believe in an unshakable family, and failing that an unshakable figure of the mother-wife. Although the series heavily draws on the difficulties and failures of each pregnant teen’s attempt at transitioning from childhood to motherhood, both the audience and producers can be said to have a stake in the successful transition of these teen girls to either reinforce or reject cultural ideas about teen pregnancy in American society.

The series *16 and Pregnant* implies that teen mothers are bad in some ways, but they are also celebrities, and in this way, also occupy a culturally desirable position. The
“teen mom” identity is not only commercialized and commodified by MTV but is simultaneously demonized within the series. Teen moms in the series occupy an ambivalent and contradictory position—they are both “good” and “bad” depending on the outcome of each episode. The “good” moms in the series include those girls who have made the responsible decision to put their babies up for adoption. These “good” moms include Catelynn (Season 1) and Ashley and Lori (Season 2).

**Promotional Potential of 16 and Pregnant**

Critics have argued that the series *16 and Pregnant* glorifies and normalizes teen pregnancy. Similar to arguments raised by critics of *A Baby Story* and *A Wedding Story* in Stephen’s (2004) study, concerns are directed at normalizing teen pregnancy amongst the shows’ audience and are due to the nature of the programs’ production which uses the narratives of real teens’ lives. Arguments that the series makes teen mothers look “cool” and “normal” imply a level of notoriety and fame are achieved through the series (Thompson, 2010).

*16 and Pregnant* and its spin-off series exploit the “ordinary” teen by creating a short-term celebrity-commodity for audiences, creating what Rojek (2001) termed as “celetoids” in his book *Celebrity*. According to Rojek, “celetoids” enjoy the privileges of celebrity for a short period of time, but this is only a short-lived celebrity-status that is quickly digested by the public audience. Temporary celebrity status may not only encourage teens to pursue reality television as an early career path, but may also pressure teens on the show into competing to become stars on the next spin-off series. The
commercial exchange of the 5-7 month period of during and after pregnancy is minimal for a shot at celebrity, fame, and possibly money. Incentives to participate increase as contracts begin to develop for spin-off series.

According to the article “Teen Mom’: Inside the Phenomenon” in *Entertainment Weekly*,

Not only is it a buzzy ratings hit, with an average of 3.4 million viewers and a barrage of recent celebrity-magazine covers focused on the teen stars, but it also serves to showcase the network's socially conscious side by leading a national discussion about birth control, abstinence, and adoption (September 24, 2010).

As Turner (2004) notes, the publicity and promotions potential of reality television as a format is extraordinary; each show can be promoted as news, a cultural phenomenon, or in the case of *16 and Pregnant*, a pressing social issue (59). Each week an episode airs during a season allows for cross-promotional coverage by the network, tabloids, magazines, newspapers, social media sites, and online forums and blogs. The popularity of *16 and Pregnant* led to the increased visibility of its stars into other forms of media.

The success of the original series *16 and Pregnant* led to two spin-off series *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. Each of these series features the lives of four of the original series stars as they transition into motherhood. The cast of *Teen Mom* includes Farrah Abraham, Maci Bookout, Amber Portwood, and Catelynn Lowell from the first season of *16 and Pregnant*. *Teen Mom* began shortly after the first season of *16 and Pregnant* ended in 2009 and completed its third season on October 20, 2011. The cast of *Teen Mom 2* includes Jenelle Evans, Kailyn Lowry, Leah Messer, and Chelsea Houska from
the second season of *16 and Pregnant*. *Teen Mom 2* completed its second season on February 28, 2012.

Celebrity value is constructed in two places: the original text in which the celebrity derived and the inter-texts that circulate images and stories about celebrities (Holmes, 2004). Collins (2008) refers to these inter-texts as the “celebrity place”, which includes the entire realm of the media industries that is devoted to stars and star coverage. These residual forms of media provide access into the lives of teen mothers from a different angle. Media formats function for different purposes and provides different levels of control of the representation of the “teen mom” identity. Dyer (1986) argues that the identities of these “stars” are embedded with cultural meanings that can be applied to the meanings given to ordinary individuals with similar identities. Therefore, the cultural meanings ascribed to the images of the “teen mom” identity created in *16 and Pregnant* and then placed into tabloid magazines can be applied to the identities of the non-celebrity and otherwise “ordinary” teen moms.

Murray and Ouellette (2004) also argue “the fame that is the principal reward for participating on the programs limits the selection of ‘real people’ to those who make good copy for newspaper and magazine articles as well as desirable guests on synergistic talk shows and news specials” (p. 8). Because teen pregnancy was already a controversial topic in the U.S., due to the increased teen pregnancy rate from 2005-2007, the production of *16 and Pregnant* almost guaranteed continued exposure in newspapers, tabloids, and talk shows.

What this means in terms of the spin-off series *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* is that in order to continue the exposure of the reality TV stars onto multiple media channels, the
most interesting, dramatic or controversial teen mothers are selected to ensure continued media exposure for the franchise. Although it can be argued that all of the teen mothers from *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* fit this criteria, Amber Portwood (*Teen Mom*) and Jenelle Evans (*Teen Mom 2*) are prime examples of this. Each of these girls has received significant media attention due to domestic abuse charges and drug abuse in national media outlets like the *Huffington Post*, *USA Today*, *ABC News*, *Ok! Magazine* and *People* (Messer, 2009; Oldenberg, 2010). Andrevejic (2003) calls this the “work of being watched”, a reflexive practice where reality television celebrities invite the public into the ever-more intimate details of their lives through as many media channels as are available.

According to Marshall (1997) “within society, the celebrity is a voice above others” that often serve as stand-ins and spokespersons for political, social and economic issues. In the case of *16 and Pregnant* these “teen mom” celebrities have derived from the social and political issues that originally brought them celebrity in the first place. “Celebrity is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity and media industries that producer these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function” (Turner, 2004: 9). The celebrity of the *16 and Pregnant* girls is traded throughout the publicity industries to act as a “real” representation of the problem of teen pregnancy in the U.S. Images and stories about every aspect of these girls’ lives is attributed to their celebrity face and as representations of the “real” problem of teen pregnancy concordantly their actions are attributed as representative of all “real” teen mothers. The social function of this celebrity is to act as an exemplar of the severity of teen pregnancy in the U.S. The “real” teen girls have transformed into the real spokespersons for the National Campaign.
**Transitioning from “Teen” to “Teen Mom”**

Audiences are introduced to each subject of *16 and Pregnant* at the beginning of each episode with a short narration on the girl’s life before she was pregnant. The narrative statement introduces the girl, describes several of her school activities and interests, plans for the future, and her relationship with her friends and boyfriend.

Each narration at the beginning of the series ends with the statement, “…But things are about to change because… I’m pregnant.” This formulaic statement emphasizes that it is now up to the teen to determine which course her life will take in lieu of her pregnancy. She is expected to use free will and choice to make the most responsible decision in terms of her life and her baby. On the series, teen mothers are expected to deal with the consequences of her actions through self-management techniques. Issues related to self-management include finding financial support and caretaking options for her child, as well as the educational and workplace opportunities for the mother. Anxieties concerning financial support of the newborn babies are played out in the relationships between the pregnant teens and their boyfriends and the pregnant teens and their parents/guardians. Sharing these anxieties emphasize the financial realities and hardships each of the teen moms lives with, but fails to address that these hardships may have existed prior to their pregnancies. More often than not pregnant teens derive from families with a lower-economic status, and their pregnancy causes them to remain at that status (Luker, 1996).

Consequently, for every decision the pregnant teen makes she is held personally accountable for the consequences that occur because of that decision. This logic is
originally implied in the fact that participation in the series indicates that the pregnant teen will carry her pregnancy to term. This choice drives the premise and creation of the series, as well as creates the expectation that each teen girl must take personal responsibility for her actions. It is emphasized consistently throughout the series that the teen girl had a choice before becoming pregnant and must now make responsible choices after the birth of her child. This message of choice and personal responsibility is repeated in the narration that each new teen mother delivers at the end of the series. It is best expressed through Valerie’s statements in season two when she stated that…

“I wish I was in high school a lot, but I guess this is something I had to give up by having a baby. So I can’t be a full out teenager but this was my like choice. So this is what I have to do now” (Valerie Fairman, Episode #203).

Becoming pregnant as a teen reflects a transition into the adult world in that is undesirable within the neoliberal discourse. Although the initial decision to carry the pregnancy to term is undesirable, this decision reflects the postfeminist ideal of empowerment because despite inequalities of power each young woman has made an independent choice to pursue that lifestyle. Within neoliberalism, “the individual must bear full responsibility for their life biography, no matter how severe the constraints under their action” (Gill, 2009, p. 163). Therefore, it is within the neoliberal discourse that the teen must take responsibility and use self-management to deal with her choice to pursue life as a teen parent. Because it was the pregnant teen’s individual choice to pursue teen motherhood, each decision she makes thereafter is her sole responsibility and she must self-manage her life based on the decisions she has made.

Each pregnant teenager transitions from “ordinary” teen to “teen mom” throughout
the course of each episode. Depictions of the life of each teen as a girl (prior to pregnancy) are portrayed through her narration at the beginning of each episode. These depictions of life as teen girls are often “rosy” showing the girl as happy, successful in her hobbies and schooling, and excited about the future. The conclusion of each episode includes a final narration by each pregnant teen that provides an overview of her experience throughout the transition from teen to “teen mom.” As each girl transitions from teen to “teen mom” these depictions of a successful and happy life become more vague. Within these narrations several concerns are raised articulating the past and future opportunities each teen has missed out on and failed to experiences due to her choice of motherhood.

One of the most prominent concerns expressed through the narrations: the loss of adolescence and the social experiences that most teen girls experience in high school. Many of these experiences include proms, dating, parties, extra-curricular activities like cheerleading and band. Other concerns expressed by each teen in these narrations are the missed educational and career opportunities becoming a young mother can cause. Missed educational opportunities are often expressed in terms of past experiences in high school and future opportunities to attend colleges and universities. The young women in the series often express a sense of loss associated with being home-schooled rather than attending the public or private high schools that they attended before the pregnancy. The young women in the series also express a sense of loss in terms of their ability to obtain a degree higher than a high school diploma or GED. Many of the girls express concerns over the affordability of both a college education and a child. Kailyn Lowry expresses the extreme difficulty she has in affording her child and education at a local community
college. This understanding implies that these young women desire alternative opportunities in education and employment and do not accept the role of mother as their primary position in the economy.

It also constructs adolescent motherhood itself as a limiting condition on these young women appropriately participating in an economic society. An example of this is seen in the episode from season two that features Jenelle Evans. Within the episode Jenelle complains about the lack of jobs available due to the “poor economy” and that she cannot support her child. To Jenelle, the role of bearing and raising children is implicitly not in itself desirable as a primary role.

Dominant western discourses expect women to handle both the role of mother and worker at the same time (Douglas, 2004). In these dominant social constructions of a normative course of a young women’s life disallows the position of teen mother the ability to pursue both of these options concurrently. Although the socio-economic backgrounds of the teen mothers are often ignored within the series it is portrayed as extremely challenging, if not impossible, for teen mother’s to manage domestic, educational and economic “success.”

The roles of mother, student, and worker are portrayed as unmanageable for a teen girl on the series. Parents on the series repeatedly resonate the idea that their daughters/sons cannot handle the responsibility of a child, cannot afford childcare, and that this creates a dependence on the family and the parents for support. The discourse within the series presents the difficulties and hardships experienced by each teen as a series of individual choices made independently by each of the girls. The experiences of teen pregnancy become individualized, as each teen mother is held accountable for her
success or failure as a daughter, student, and parent. This individual assessment of success or failure is reinforced at the end of each episode of *16 and Pregnant* with a reflection narrated by each teen mother on her own experience of unplanned pregnancy.

As a reality TV series, *16 and Pregnant* aims to expose the “true reality” of teen pregnancy in the U.S. Images of teen pregnancy have existed in the media for decades, but the series *16 and Pregnant* provides audiences with newer and more “authentic” teen mom identities derived directly from the U.S. population. Although the teen moms on the series may be portrayed as more “ordinary” and “authentic” as understood through the reality TV format, the “teen mom” identities offered by *16 and Pregnant* continue to reinforce previous social and cultural ideas about teen pregnancy.

*16 and Pregnant* and the “New Teen Momism”

*16 and Pregnant* was also developed with an educational mission at a time when teen pregnancy rates were again on the rise in the U.S. As discussed throughout the previous chapter, the origins of *16 and Pregnant* involved collaboration between MTV and the National Campaign. The National Campaign offers select episodes from the series as free educational content, including an educational handout and guide for both parents and teachers. The only service and aid that the National Campaign provides to young adults and teens is access to information.

The difference between the shows discussed by Ouellette and Hays (2008) and *16 and Pregnant* is that little assistance is offered to these girls through the television show. What differentiates *16 and Pregnant* from each of these series that Razzano, Skalli, and
Quail (2009) discuss is that no form of reformation or reconciliation is provided through the series, it is purely a documentary of the youth in trouble. Therefore, the media spectacle of teen pregnancy heavily promotes the “problematic” and “ugly” aspects of teen pregnancy and teen parenthood throughout the series.

Rather than providing help to the girls involved on the show, or to the bigger cause, the series just “documents” the current state of affairs. The only time any form of assistance is offered to these girls is in the series finales of “Life After Labor.” Each of these specials is hosted by Dr. Drew and recaps moments from the entire season and speaks with each girl about what happened. The only way to have a dialogue about teen pregnancy is to expose the “worst-case scenarios” envisioned through the real lives of real teens on 16 and Pregnant. Critical attention needs to be paid to the particular political and ideological underpinnings regarding teen pregnancy. The text relies on the discourses of empowerment, personal responsibility, and self-management to position each teen mother through a neoliberal postfeminist frame. This also positions the “teen mom” identity into what I define as the “new teen momism” in the U.S. The “new teen momism” emerges from and is an extension of Douglas (2004) conception of the “new momism.”

According to Douglas, the “new momism” is the intense social expectations of mothering that have emerged that includes an emphasis that redefines women in terms of their children. Douglas (2004) argues that a “new momism’ emerged as the backlash against feminism in the 1980s. The “new momism” aligns women specifically within the mothering role and requires a complete and selfless devotion to children and parenting. The “new momism” distinctly defined what it meant to be a “good mom” versus “bad
What being a “good” mom especially means under the “new momism” is being a good consumer. I argue that a similar conception has emerged from the “new momism” over the past several years and I term this as the “new teen momism.”

Murphy (2012) first extended the conception of “momism” to “teen momism”, but focused more in detail on the postfeminist neoliberal subjectivities presented in 16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom. Murphy places her emphasis on how the series works to integrate the role of mother into the identity of the adolescence, which relocates 16 and Pregnant as a makeover series and focuses on how each “teen girl” either successfully or unsuccessfully transforms into a “teen mom.” She also emphasizes how the series uses surveillance to discipline images of the young, female body into traditional conceptions of beauty and health (p. 95). However, my conception of the “new teen momism” focuses on how the series distinguishes between the “good mom”/”bad mom” dichotomy and reinforces previous cultural and social conceptions that leave no room and provide no assistance for pregnant teens and teen mothers in society.

The “new teen momism” defines what it means to be a “good mom” and a “bad mom” in the context of teen parenting. The series 16 and Pregnant delivers examples of both types of teen moms, however it is a complicated definition because the overarching message of the series is that there is no type of teen mom that is a “good mom.” A similar dichotomy between “good mom”/”bad mom” is discussed by Solinger (1992, 2001) who argues that “the logic of adoption is to sort women into good mothers, who deserve children, and bad mothers, who are enjoined, expected, or forced to surrender their children to good mothers” (Kawash, 2011, p. 982). However, pregnant teen (who
are normally considered bad moms) that pursue the choice of adoption are placed as the preferable type of “good mom” in the series.

In season one, Catelynn Lowell and her boyfriend Tyler Baltierra pursue the choice of adoption for multiple reasons. Both Catelynn and Tyler talk about coming from broken homes, with parents who were non-supportive. Catelynn’s mom is an abusive alcoholic who constantly berates Catelynn throughout the episodes. Interestingly enough, this is one of the only episodes that emphasize the background of pregnant teen as an explanation of her choices as a teen parent. However, Catelynn’s choice is adoption, not teen parenthood like most of the other girls within the series. In the reunion special of the series, another teen mom says to Catelynn “When you get older and you do have a baby, you’re going to be an awesome mom.” This indicates that Catelynn is not only a “good mom” now for making the choice of adoption, but her ability to make this responsible decision poses her as having the ability to be a “good mom” in the future. Other examples of “good teen mom” who chose adoption in the series are Lori and Ashley from season two. The images of the “good teen mom” are often juxtaposed against other images of the “bad teen mom” within the series.

A variety of behaviors and actions are used to portray the image of the “bad teen mom”, including personal behaviors like partying, drug use, abuse, and smoking, as well as mothering behaviors of neglect, inability to support the child financially, and poor parenting skills expressed as the lack of education on how to be a mom. Amber Portwood from the first season and Jenelle Evans from the second season encompass many of these behaviors in their episodes of 16 and Pregnant. Amber and her boyfriend Gary consistently argue throughout the series and make poor financial decisions. In her
episode of *16 and Pregnant*, Amber and Gary fight about their finances after Gary buys a $500 video gaming system only weeks before their daughter Leah is born. She complains in the episode that it is Gary who “is always bitching about money”, but is the one spending it recklessly at the same time. Images of their house throughout the episode shows unpacked boxes and piles of clothes. Amber is constantly arguing with other members of her family as well, especially her own mom. Amber was also continually portrayed as having the inability to hold healthy relationships with her boyfriend and her parents. After the series aired, Amber’s image blew up in the media as allegations of her domestic abuse were published throughout tabloid magazines like *People, OK! Magazine*, and several online tabloid websites. Amber also faced charges of losing custody of her daughter, as well as spending time in prison. After three seasons of *Teen Mom*, a court ordered that Amber could no longer participate in the series and had to find employment elsewhere as she was required spend up to three years in a half-way house (Finn, 2012). Amber was often portrayed by the media as out of control and fulfilled many of the previous conceptions of the “welfare queen” as lazy, abusive, and out of control.

Similarly, Jenelle Evans faced similar difficulties with drug abuse and partying throughout her episode of *16 and Pregnant* (and later into her portrayal on *Teen Mom 2*). Jenelle constantly argued with her mom, who consistently complained that Jenelle was “partying too much” and needed to take more responsibility for her son. Similar to Amber, Jenelle is consistently displayed as having the inability to obtain healthy relationships as well as hold down a steady job. Jenelle argued that it was the bad economy that caused a lack of jobs for her to pursue. However, Jenelle’s mom did not
accept the bad economy as an excuse and constantly blamed Jenelle’s marijuana use and partying for her laziness and inability to obtain a job. Jenelle’s mom eventually gained partial custody over Jenelle’s son. Her drug-abuse and partying serve to place Jenelle in the position as the “bad teen mom” who is lazy and a drug-addict, aligning her identity with previous conceptions of teen mothers.

The “new teen momism” is clearly expressed through the different identities of “teen mom” created in the series 16 and Pregnant. These identities serve to portray the idea that no form of teen motherhood is an acceptable, unless that position is relegated to a “teen mom” who chooses the responsible option of adoption for her child. Teen mothers who choose adoption are also submitting to the idea that teen girls are unfit and incapable as mother figures. Positioning the “good teen moms” also works to emphasize the severity of the “bad teen mom” image that is created throughout the series. The images of the “bad teen mom” reinforce previous images of the “welfare queen” that was created in the media during the Reagan era in the 1980s. This is indicative of the larger fight against welfare dependency and welfare programs in the U.S. that has existed since the Reagan era.
Chapter 5

Conclusions

This research aimed to examine the dynamics that influence representations of the “teen mom” identity in the series *16 and Pregnant*. Although the television franchise of *16 and Pregnant* increases the visibility of the social issue of teen pregnancy, the reality TV format presents this issue as entertainment through the spectacle of watching real teens as they deal with unplanned teen pregnancy.

Often times the media that represents alternative types of motherhood in our society, acts to reveal contemporary socio-economic anxieties while simplifying complex political issues and simultaneously reify the historically conservative and hegemonic ideals about motherhood and family life. Mass identification asks and encourages audiences to measure themselves against the participants and the idealized social norms inherent in the series. The “teen mom” identity created in *16 and Pregnant* supports the new concept of the “new teen momism.” This concept is an extension of Douglas (2004) idea of “new momism” that has created unrealistic and idealized expectations for mothers for the past several decades. The “new momism” derived as a backlash against feminism and as an attack on the system of welfare in the 1980s and the “new teen momism” derives from a similar sentiment in the current era where attacks on the welfare system in the U.S. continue to occur.

Although the system of welfare has been diminished in the U.S. it still exists but discourses of welfare are often absent from the episodes of *16 and Pregnant*. This is another indicator of the neoliberal logic fabricated within every detail of the series. The
pregnant teens within the series are expected to receive financial support for their child by their own means of working salaries, child support from their boyfriends, or additional support from their parents/guardians. The lack of inclusion of welfare in the series support the notion that teen mothers need to self-manage their finances in order to support the choice they made in becoming a teen mother. This again diffuses the role of government responsibility in supporting the welfare of its’ citizens.

Each episode of *16 and Pregnant* depicts the pregnant teen as capable of making personal choices and decisions, regardless of whether or not these choices are considered socially acceptable. The original decision to participate in the series is marked as empowering within the postfeminist discourse by inviting teen girls as autonomous individuals to make the free choice to engage in the series. The production logic of reality TV is that participants have the ability to co-construct and control the representation of their identities on television. This type of participation in the construction of the “teen mom” identity is viewed as empowering within the postfeminist discourse. It is also understood that the producers and editors of the series inevitably have the final say in the portrayals of the “teen mom” identity within the series and can construct these identities in specific ways for their own purposes.

Although the production processes of reality television allow for a certain level of women’s involvement and control in producing their representations, the overall editorial control possessed by producers and editors in the construction of these representations cannot be ignored. Audiences are expected to view participation in these programs as empowering (Turner, 2004). The view that media involvement and representation can be
a form of empowerment for women is indicative of a larger cultural transition into a postfeminist environment.

By ignoring the socio-political and economic factors and replacing the a narrative of a freely-chosen individual lifestyle choices the liberation promised by these shows to remove the stigma associated with teen pregnancy is a sham-destroyed by the immature, childish actions of the girls in each episode and in their “real” lives off-camera. These actions refocus media attention back to the “out of control”, immoral, irresponsible, troubled youth narrative that has framed young adults throughout history. These themes are of empowerment, personal responsibility, and self-management. Each of these themes is located within the merging of neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies that often work to ignore aspects of social-economic status and personal backgrounds. Instead, teen pregnancy is portrayed from the viewpoint of the autonomous individual, whose decisions are reflective of her ability to take personal responsibility for her actions.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this project was to examine the construction of the “teen mom” identity within the *16 and Pregnant* franchise. The representations of teen pregnancy portrayed within the series produces a media spectacle of this social problem. Despite a partnership with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, the series focuses more on producing an entertaining show through the narratives of the cast’s personal lives. The previously private space of teen pregnancy is exploited through the production techniques of the reality TV format. These production techniques may
cut costs, but at the cost of creating a false representation of “authenticity” and “reality.” Meanwhile, this type of production exploits the availability of the free labor provided through televising girls’ lives that already have what I will call a “pre-existing condition” of teen pregnancy with false promises of celebrity status. It seems that increasing the visibility of teen pregnancy, as a social issue does not decrease the stigmatization that has accompanied the label “teen mom.”

In creating spin-off series like Teen Mom and Teen Mom 2, we can better understand how this cycle of reproduction may manipulate the reality TV stars to act in such a manner that encourages producers to invite them onto the next series. Meanwhile, this also invites audiences to continually consume these commodities into future seasons and series. (Arguably, this is not unique to the 16 and Pregnant series and can be applied to the production of several of MTV’s additional reality programs.)

It seems, then, that the political-economic goals of shows like 16 and Pregnant and attendant media products like tabloid magazines, by producing “celetoids” specifically and commodifying spectacles of teen pregnancy generally, work against the stated goals of the National Campaign. This raises several additional questions in finding a solution to educating teens about safe sex and contraceptives. Is it possible to create programming that can satisfy the educational goals of the National Campaign without using reality TV to exploit teens who have hopes of celebrity status and a better life? Is there a more effective way to reach teens and teach them about safe sex and contraceptives? Or will the entertainment value always overshadow the educational aspects? And what about the goals of the National Campaign? Are they part of a larger neoliberal and postfeminist discourse, and with MTV, part of a larger neoliberal
economic and symbolic system that trades in postfeminist representations of young teen mothers?

Despite the National Campaign and Kaiser Family Foundation’s emphasis on the educational purpose of the series, an interview with Bill Albert, chief program officer for MTV underlines the entertainment purposes of MTV as a television network. “While MTV is not in the pregnancy prevention business, we firmly believe they have developed two shows that are probably among the most powerful interventions you are likely to see,” said Albert (Rothman, 2010). The idea that teen pregnancy can be effectively addressed and prevented using the reality TV format to create a dialogue about teen pregnancy without exploiting and exposing those who are directly involved is difficult given the economic model of reality TV. The series *16 and Pregnant* transforms the tantalizing prospect of having a meaningful dialect and discourse about teen pregnancy into a voyeuristic spectacle of “teen drama.”

Rather than promoting advocacy programs or creating an independent fund to prevent teen pregnancy, MTV created a television show with a high entertainment value. Advertisements promote the series with tears, drama, and fighting. Even during the months when the shows are off-air, the social media pages constantly distribute updates on the series, additional clips and interviews from the shows, and generate hype for upcoming episodes and seasons. These updates are also available on the MTV website. These messages have also been created in collaboration with the National Campaign to promote self-education and self-reflection on personal values and norms regarding sexual behaviors and relationships (National Campaign, 2011). The neoliberal messages created
by the National Campaign are reflected throughout all media related to the *16 and Pregnant* franchise.

Despite the claims made by MTV and the National Campaign to that the *16 and Pregnant* franchise provides has an effect on viewer’s attitudes towards teen pregnancy (Rothman, 2010; Sullentrop, 2010), the sample size used in their evaluation was small and only included individuals from a small geographic area in North Carolina. There are several additional studies that should be conducted to investigate any media effects the series may have.

**Implications for Further Research**

This purpose of this research was to outline the historic events that led to the creation of the series *16 and Pregnant* and to investigate several aspects of the portrayal of teen moms within the series. As comprehensive as this study attempted to be, there are a few shortcomings within the research. In a future study, a larger sample size of episodes should be analyzed to include examples from across all four seasons of the series. A larger sample size could provide information on whether the “teen mom” identity found within the sample of this study is portrayed throughout each additional season of *16 and Pregnant*, or if this identity changes as the series matures.

Another possible study in the future should research more in depth the complexities surrounding issues of class and race within the series. As stated in the above research, the first two seasons of *16 and Pregnant* heavily relied on the use of middle-class white teen girls. However, this may not be the case in newer seasons and
any implications of issues in portraying race and class within the series should be investigated.

Conducting additional research on portrayals of teen pregnancy in the media is important in better understanding why this group is continually stigmatized by society and has remained on the outskirts of society throughout history. Interdisciplinary research should be conducted in understanding teen pregnancy because it is a complex issue historically, culturally, and socially.
References


5021


