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Sex, 'soaps' and HIV: multiple and concurrent partnerships in South African soap operas

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of multiple and concurrent partnerships (MCPs) is a key driver of the South African HIV epidemic. Given that the epidemic is stabilising though not yet declining, reducing the frequency of MCPs should constitute part of South Africa's prevention strategy. Soap operas, with their strong emphasis on sexual intrigue and infidelity, offer an ideal platform for addressing the risk of MCP.

This article presents quantitative research that explores the extent to which seven locally broadcast soap operas include sex and HIV in their storylines. It also explores whether a connection is currently being made between MCPs and the risk of HIV infection. The findings show that sex is a key component of these soap operas, but is only linked to HIV in two per cent of cases. In comparison with their real-world occurrence, MCPs, transactional sex and intergenerational relationships are overrepresented in soap operas. Only eight per cent of soap operas mention HIV, whether linked to sex or not. This is mostly through storylines featuring 'stock' HIV-positive characters.

These findings feed into a wider discussion around the role and responsibilities of soap operas in a society grappling with a widespread HIV epidemic.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent findings from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) National Household Survey show that although the HIV epidemic in South Africa has stabilised at a level of around 11%, it has however not yet declined (Shisana et al., 2009). Of graver concern is that prevalence was twice as high among females aged 25–29 and 20–24 as among their male counterparts. The survey further shows that there was a substantial increase in the number of young females who reported having a partner five or more years older than themselves (from 18.5% in 2005 to 27.6% in 2008) and a slight increase in those who reported two or more partners (10.6%) in the past year. The phenomenon of having two or more partners - who often overlap - is termed *multiple and concurrent partnerships* (MCP). Previous research has shown MCP to be one of the key drivers of the southern African HIV epidemic (Halperin & Epstein, 2004; 2007; Morris & Kretzschmar, 1997). These findings suggest that HIV-prevention campaigns in South Africa need to be scaled up, especially among young women, and that they need to focus on MCP and intergenerational sex.

One such campaign is Soul City's Regional MCP Campaign 2008–2011, which strives to "reduce new infections in the region by focusing on reducing MCP", through a harmonised mass media and social mobilisation programme implemented simultaneously throughout the region (Soul City, 2008:6). The recent *Soul City* 9 weekly series on SABC1 was an expression of this campaign, using entertainment-education ('edutainment') to produce a powerful storyline involving MCP, intergenerational and transactional sex, and HIV. The writers used generic features of soap operas, such as a unique use of time, narrative, characters and gossip (Geraghtty, 1989), to move the story forward. *Soul City*, then, is an example of how to use elements of the soap-opera genre for pro-social purposes (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

But what about the daily soap operas on South Africa's four public broadcast channels? A quick flick through the channels on any given evening seems to suggest that sex - particularly in MCPs - is a key ingredient of the soap-opera recipe. It seems, though, that the very real risk of HIV infection, which accompanies this sexual behaviour, is not reflected in these storylines. This is the broad premise on which the research presented in this paper is based. If MCPs and related sexual behaviour are contributing to the high HIV prevalence in South Africa, then surely this connection should be made by our popular media? In the context of a South African reality, prevention among those - principally *young* women - who engage in these kinds of relationships, is an issue of critical importance and also a national priority.

The aim of this research is thus to conduct a quantitative content analysis of seven locally broadcast soap operas to assess the following:

1. To what extent do storylines include sex and HIV and how are these issues portrayed?
2. Is a connection made, in these storylines, between multiple and concurrent partnerships and the risk of HIV infection?
3. What does this say about the role of soap operas in contributing to the wider discussion and debate on MCP and HIV in the media?

However, before proceeding we shall provide a background to the issue of MCP in South Africa.

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1 Defining multiple and concurrent partnerships

Parker, Makhubele, Ntlabati, and Connolly (2007:5) define *MCP* as "a situation where partnerships overlap in time, either where two or more partnerships continue over the same time period, or where one partnership begins before the other terminates". It is important to note that concurrency is different to having multiple partners, as the latter may be concurrent but could "also be sequential and monogamous" (ibid).

The definition of an 'overlap' is interpreted slightly differently in a number of studies. Doherty, Padian, Marlow and Aral (2005), for example, consider 'concurrency' to mean having more than one partner in a two-week period. Soul City (2007:6) considers a sexual partnership to be concurrent "if a person reports having two or more sexual partners in a month". Nevertheless, the principle of the 'overlap' remains the same. Soul City (2007:6-7) also identifies four distinct forms in which MCPs occur, and that are helpful for the purposes of this research. These are:

1. Intergenerational sexual relationships – defined by an age gap of five years or more between partners and usually involving a 'sugar daddy' and a young woman and sometimes an older woman and a young man
2. Having a 'steady' partner and a 'side' partner – normally kept secret from one or more partners in the sexual network
3. Transactional sexual relationships – where material gain, usually through the acquisition of goods or money, benefits one partner
4. Polygamy – when a person, usually a man, has more than one spouse.

Only *Muvhango* (a soap opera broadcast on SABC2, which explores the tensions between rural Venda and urban Johannesburg life) has a storyline featuring polygamy. All of the other soap operas analysed for this research – *The Bold and the Beautiful, Generations, 7de laan, Isidingo, Rhythm City*, and *Scandal!* - feature a combination of the other three forms in which MCPs usually manifest themselves. When reference is made to 'MCP' in this research, all four scenarios are implied.

1.2 The prevalence of MCP

Research by the Reproductive Health and HIV Research Unit (RHRU) (Pettifor et al., 2003:43) found that among young people (aged 15–24) who had had sex in the month preceding the survey, 27% reported that they had had more than one sexual partner. This figure was supported by further research by the Soul City Institute (2007:6–7), which added a further nuance to the statistics by dividing them into age groups, thereby revealing that "45 per cent of males and 28 of females aged 15–19 years ... [and] 36 per cent of males and 21 per cent females aged 20–24 years reported concurrency".

In a survey of sexual activity in men aged 18–62 conducted in 2008 by Chopra et al., it was found that 98% of respondents reported having had concurrent sexual partnerships in the three months prior to the survey. The numbers of partners reported ranged between two and 39, while the average number was six , and the median was five (2008:2). These research studies suggest that concurrent partnerships are indeed extremely common.

It is true that the extent to which MCPs are a driver of the HIV epidemic has not been widely established in scientific studies. However, it cannot be denied that MCPs increase the likelihood of a sexual network that places everyone in it at risk, especially during the period of acute infection and high viral load just after the transmission of HIV (Halperin & Epstein, 2004; 2007). In this situation concurrent partnerships "may be as important as multiple partners or cofactor infections in amplifying the spread of HIV" (Morris & Kretzschmar, 1997:641).

As a result, the HIV & AIDS and STI Strategic Plan for South Africa, 2007–2011 (NSP) and the Declaration of the 3rd South African AIDS Conference (2007) both identified MCP as an important factor needing to be addressed by a broader strategy to promote the prevention of HIV. The conference, for example, committed itself to addressing "the risks of having concurrent and multiple sexual partners… in behaviour change communication programmes; and increasing investment in improved monitoring and evaluation of existing and future programmes aimed at behaviour change" (NSP, 2007:5).

1.3 MCP: the challenge for prevention

MCPs need to be tackled in relation to the broad range of contexts and factors that cause their prevalence - what Parker terms the "intersection between socio-economic and cultural contexts" (2007:6). These contexts, when combined with individual psychological phenomena such as low self-esteem and fatalism, or with external factors such as substance abuse, peer pressure, notions of masculinity, economic need, family breakdown, and lack of parental support and violence, make a person more susceptible to engaging in MCPs. Thus, MCPs present a number of challenges to HIV prevention campaigns in South Africa. These challenges are mostly of a long-term nature and they result from broader problems facing South Africa as a whole, and not merely from its policy for HIV prevention. Breaking the cycle of MCPs and their role in the epidemic will therefore require dealing with far broader social and economic issues than simply people's sexual behaviour.

The established 'Abstain, Be faithful, Condomise' ('ABC') campaign offers a strategy to people for preventing the spread of HIV. Not only is the success of such a campaign cast into doubt by the issues identified above, but there are also questions about what people understand by these terms, and particularly about what precisely constitutes *faithfulness*. Parker et al. (2007:26) found that "faithfulness is not necessarily understood as being monogamous. Rather, this concept is related to the notion of protecting a 'main' sexual partner from the knowledge that one is being unfaithful".

However, evidence from a number of studies shows that there *are* ways of using campaigns to address behaviour surrounding MCP. Simbayi, Kalichman and Jooste (2005:60), for example, suggest that "HIV prevention messages delivered through media campaigns can be effective at correcting misinformation and priming changes in condom attitudes". Others argue that more intensive behavioural interventions that focus on delaying sexual debut, returning to abstinence, or practising consistent safer sex are most effective when they educate, motivate, and build risk-reduction behavioural skills (Fisher & Fisher, 1992). These kinds of campaigns should go beyond top-down communication directed at horizontal and participatory approaches. Such approaches incorporate the concept of addressing enabling environments and contextual factors and are framed by the concept of 'communication for social change' (Parker, 2004). The precise extent to which this kind of approach might be incorporated into the storylines of soap operas underpins this research.

2. SOAP OPERAS

It can be argued that soap operas are above all a business, and are therefore primarily guided by the imperative to generate a profit. A number of studies have looked at the importance of soap operas to the financial success of broadcasters. Particular elements that make soap operas successful are: the choice of actors, costume and location, a catchy theme song, attention-grabbing opening titles, and cliff-hanger endings (Buckingham, 1989; Hobson, 2003). Wittebols (2004) has suggested that the revenues generated by popular soap operas has led to the emergence of a 'soap-opera paradigm' – the tendency for media conglomerates to incorporate soap-opera story elements into their overall programming, including news, reality television and sports shows. Writers and producers of soap operas would argue that the need to generate a profit means that a high value is placed on entertainment, and that, within this realm, sex reigns supreme. The intrigue generated by infidelity, *femmes fatales* and their unwitting victims is what keeps viewers tuning in night after night.

Escobar-Chaves et al. (2005) note that the highly accessible nature of media, in a variety of forms, means that exposure to sexual content is almost inevitable. The effects of exposure to sexual content in the media are, however, difficult to quantify and depend on a range of factors. Sexual content is not restricted to visual depictions of sexual behaviour. It includes talk about sex, song lyrics that discuss sex, and written descriptions of sexual behaviour (Taylor, 2005). Usually, the types of sexual attitudes and behaviours portrayed in the media are not consistent with healthy and responsible sexual practices (Brown, 2002). The popular media especially tend to portray sexual behaviour in a primarily risk-free light and they generally do not include discussion of sexual risks and responsibilities (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005).

High levels of exposure to sexual content in the media are thought to influence attitudes and behaviours in various ways. Brown (2002) notes at least three: firstly, sexual behaviour may be kept on public and personal agendas by the media; secondly, the media may reinforce a fairly consistent set of relationship and sexual norms; and, thirdly, the rare portrayal of sexually responsible models of behaviour may negatively affect safe sex practices.

The issue of the precise extent to which explicit or implicit sexual content on soap operas actually influences the behaviour of viewers is highly contested. On the one hand, ongoing research by the Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE), in which it has conducted a series of focus-group discussions with the viewers of soap operas, found that viewers can 'model' the behaviour of their favourite soap character. Parker (2009) argues that soap operas involve daily exposure and thus have particular power because they become part of daily life and of 'lived experience'. Thus, expressions of sexuality found in soap operas, including MCPs, intergenerational and transactional sex, are embedded in the popular consciousness as 'legitimate' sexual practices (ibid.).

On the other hand, Hobson (1989) conducted unstructured interviews with viewers of the British soap opera *Crossroads* to see how viewers relate their own reality to that of the characters. The study found that while viewers draw parallels between their own experiences and those of the characters, they can also be very critical of the way in which characters respond to certain situations. This can, at times, include pointing to inconsistencies in character development and even costume, which suggests that viewers are conscious of the fictional nature of the programme.

The issue is complex – sex does form the backbone of many of the soap operas to which millions of South Africans tune in every day. Yet, in a recent panel discussion on the issue of sex and HIV in South African soap operas (HIV/AIDS and the Media Project, 2009), it was clear that scriptwriters and producers of soap operas are willing to engage with social issues:

> "…As an industry, we don't just sit back and say: 'Let's just create something, we don't give a damn what's going on.' That is not my experience at all…" (Steven Raymond, former Coordinating Producer, *Isidingo*).

> "…[T]here can be great, really gripping drama that still gives an important message, and I think that the future holds more exploration of the relationship between the two in addressing pressing social problems" (Neil McCarthy, Head Writer, *Rhythm City*).

> "We recently did an episode that carried a strong theme of going to get yourself tested for HIV, and speaking to someone from [HIV counselling and testing service] New Start, they said that following the airing of that storyline, they had a significant increase of people going for testing, and I was told that the story was the reason for this" (Bongi Ndaba, Writer, *Generations*).

Soap-opera storylines can either be led by issues or they can develop organically. Issue-led soap operas are used to introduce the audience to any number of contentious topics that may lead to the viewers' enlightenment, which does often happen in our local soapies (Henderson, 1999). In Tanzania, radio soap operas have been shown to have strong behavioural effects on family planning and have motivated listeners to talk to their peers and spouses about contraception (Rogers et al., 1999). A similar radio soap-opera project in St. Lucia positively influenced listeners

on issues of family planning and HIV prevention (Vaughan, Regis & St. Catherine, 2000). Myers (2002) has shown the success of television and radio dramas in educating people in sub-Saharan Africa on issues of HIV. The measurable impact of these educational dramas is largely attributable to their ability to contextualise issues over time, modelling situations and portraying possible solutions that the listeners or viewers can apply to their own realities. Perhaps there is a way for producers of local soap operas to adapt a model such as this to create a balance between issue-led and organic storylines, and so to maintain intrigue while pointing to the risks inherent in engaging in MCP.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in partnership with Media Monitoring Africa (previously the Media Monitoring Project), a local NGO that has for over a decade been monitoring the media for issues related to human rights, such as gender, race, HIV, and children. Seven soap operas shown on SABC1, 2, 3 and etv (mentioned above) were monitored for a month, from 19 April to 16 May 2008. Six soaps were local and one international (*The Bold and the Beautiful*). This soap opera was included because of its immense popularity among South African audiences.[1] Each monitored soap-opera episode was considered 'an item' and in total, 132 items were monitored. Each item was monitored using a specially developed 'Monitor User Guide' that provided monitors with a list of possible 'issues' related to sex , HIV and MCP to identify in each separate item.

The monitor guide was developed specifically for this research, in consultation with researchers and those who commissioned the research. The guide provides an overview of MCP to enable the monitor to understand the issues and then a step-by-step guide, with examples, for monitors to follow.[2] Monitors were supervised by senior staff at MMA to ensure both the validity and the reliability of the raw data.

3.1 Limitations

Without any survey of the audience of these soap operas, it is impossible to gauge the actual effect that they have on behaviour. The primary data can only speak to the content found in soap operas. The secondary data - in the form of prior research on similar media - are used to contextualise the findings of this research and suggest how these findings may impact on viewers' perceptions and behaviour.

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[1] For example, in a random selection, the CADRE research (Parker, 2009) showed that on the evening of 19 May 2006 the all-audience share of The Bold and the Beautiful was 47.7%, making it more popular than the most watched local soap opera, Generations, which managed to attract 46.1% of the all-audience share on the same night.

[2] A copy of this user guide can be accessed at http://www.journaids.org/index.php/key_documents/hivaids_and_the_media/

A longer period of monitoring would have allowed a greater number of important issues to be identified. However, owing to limited resources, this was not possible. Yet the timeframe of this research nevertheless yielded some interesting results.

Soap operas, or at least some of them, aim to represent the realities of life in a society. As such they only represent what is going on in particular society. *The Bold and the Beautiful* is produced in the United States (and also some considerable time elapses before its broadcast in South Africa), thereby making it less meaningful to a current social issue in South Africa. Conversely, a series that has great bearing on the issue of HIV, *Soul City*, was excluded from this research. This was firstly done for practical reasons in that it was not on air during the research period. Secondly, and more importantly, including *Soul City* in the survey would have distorted the statistics considerably, if we take into account its deliberate 'edutainment' focus. However, cognisance must be taken of its existence and, perhaps, of the possibility that having a programme of this nature in the broadcast schedule might lead other writers and producers to reduce the *edutainment* content of their own shows.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Items

The following categories and subcategories were developed for the analysis of the 132 items:
1. Items referring to sex:
   1.1. Items that referred to concurrent sexual activity
   1.2. Items that referred to non-concurrent sexual activity
2. Items referring to HIV:
   2.1. Sexual activity that made reference to HIV
   2.2. Sexual activity that did not make reference to HIV
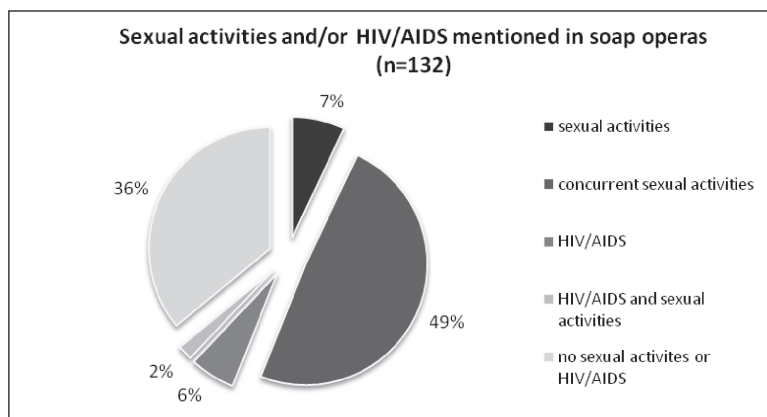3. Items that did not refer to sex or HIV

Sexual activities and/or HIV/AIDS mentioned in soap operas (n=132)

- sexual activities
- concurrent sexual activities
- HIV/AIDS
- HIV/AIDS and sexual activities
- no sexual activites or HIV/AIDS

7%, 36%, 2%, 6%, 49%

Figure 1: Sexual activities and/or HIV/AIDS mentioned in soap operas (n=132).

Figure 1 indicates that almost half (49%) of all episodes that either showed or referred to sexual activity and/or HIV were about concurrent sexual partnerships. Only eight per cent of episodes referred to HIV, whether related to sexual activity or not, and only two per cent of episodes linked HIV and sexual activity.

This two per cent consisted of two storylines in *Isidingo* and *Rhythm City*. In *Isidingo*, a character with an HIV-positive wife engaged in an extramarital affair, while in *Rhythm City*, two characters discussed protection against HIV. Thula, a male sex worker, discussed condoms with another man, called Stone. A few episodes later, Stone had sex with a sex worker.

4.2 Themes

Each individual item included a number of themes. Monitors chose the three main themes of each item, which are reflected in Figure 2 below.
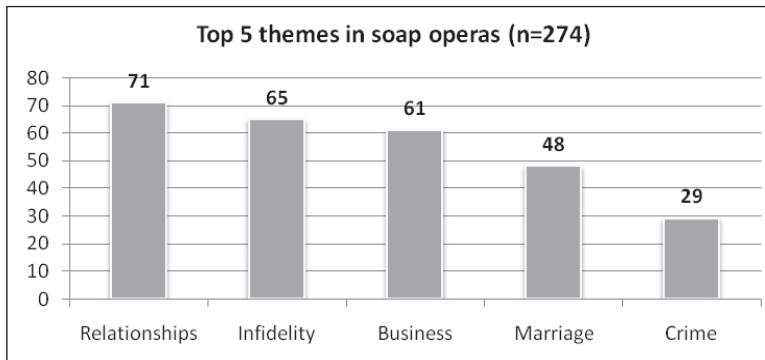

Figure 2: Top 5 themes in soap operas (n=274).

The 'relationships' theme was the most common. This theme was selected when characters discussed potential relationships, gossiped about who was seen with whom or when episodes featured arguments between unmarried couples.

Considering that almost half of the episodes either referred to or showed MCPs, it is not surprising that the 'infidelity' theme featured prominently. This theme was selected when infidelity was either taking place or when it was a key discussion point.

The HIV theme was much less prominent. It featured as a main theme in only ten of the 132 monitored items. This was mostly as a result of a storyline in *Scandal!* During the monitoring period, the soap opera featured a storyline on whether Palesa, a character living with HIV, should have taken certain tablets to treat the virus. As is turned out, the tablets were placebos sold by charlatans and, after much discussion among family and friends, Palesa did not take them.

4.3 Nature of sexual act

When sexual activity was either clearly implied or explicitly shown in the monitored items, the type of sexuality was monitored. Furthermore, both the reason for the sexual act and whether the sexual activity occurred in a monogamous, serial monogamous or concurrent sexual relationship were noted.

Figure 3 reveals type of sexuality. In 95% of all cases, heterosexual sex was either shown or implied. The small percentage of homosexual sex was mainly due specifically toThula's job as a male sex worker in *Scandal!*
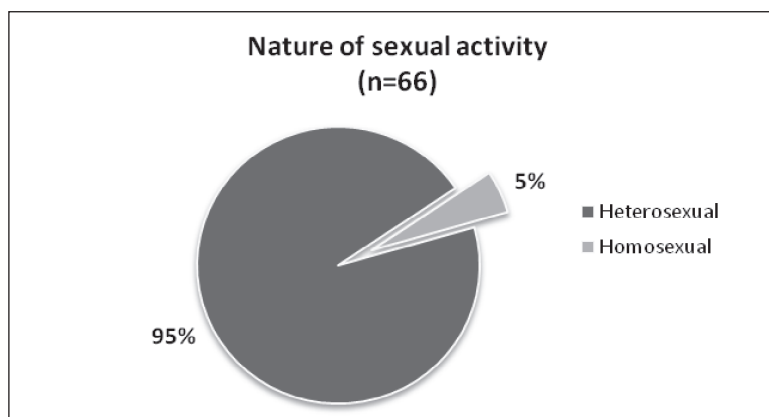
Figure 3: Nature of sexual activity (n=66).

The reason for the sexual act was also explored. The categories were:
- Sex in a loving relationship
- Sex as a result of lust (for example, a one-night stand)
- Forced sex or rape
- Sex in exchange for either money (commercial sex work) or goods (transactional sex)

As shown in Figure 4 below, none of the items either showed or implied forced sex. Sex as a result of lust was most common, and it often matched with the number of times the theme of infidelity was observed. Twenty-nine per cent of the monitored sexual acts took place in exchange for money or goods.
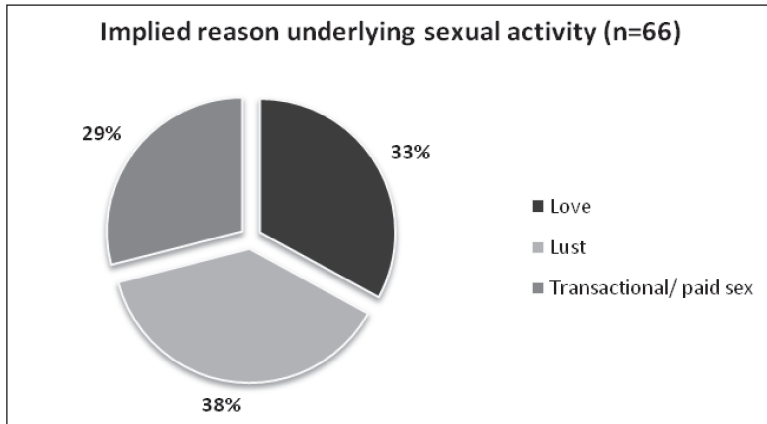
Figure 4: Implied reason underlying sexual activity (n=66).

Rhythm City was responsible for 19 out of 28 of all occurrences of transactional sex. During the monitoring period, a concurrent sexual partnership, which also involved transactional and intergenerational sex, occurred between a young woman, Sunay, an older man, Miles, and a young man, S'bu, who was also Miles's son. In this storyline, Sunay and S'bu had a loving relationship, but she referred to Miles as her 'sugar daddy'. In exchange for sex, Miles provided Sunay with a recording contract, money and a luxury apartment. Miles was still 'happily' married to his wife, Lucillia and both she and S'bu were unaware of the sexual relationship between Sunay and Miles.
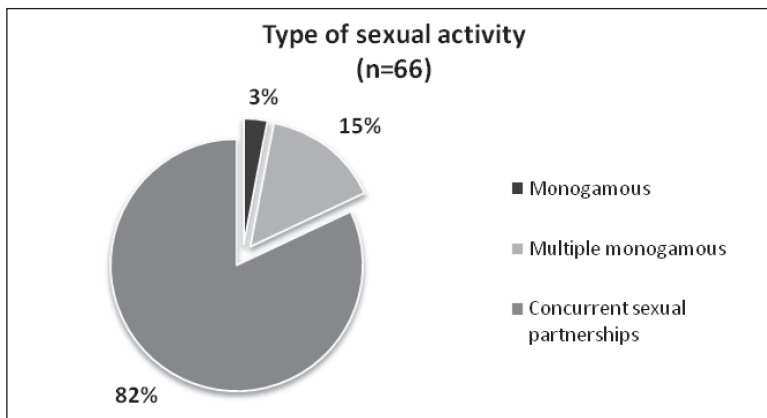

Figure 5: Type of sexual activity (n=66).

Figure 5 indicates that MCPs constituted the vast majority of all sexual activity portrayed in the monitored soap operas (82%). A mere three per cent of sexual activity occurred within the context of monogamous relationships and mainly between married couples.

4.4 Issues in monitored items

Each monitored item was analysed in respect of whether it addressed certain issues related to sex and/or HIV. An example of an issue did not necessarily have to be acted out; it merely had to be referred to by a character. For example, if the issue 'married people engaging in sexual activities outside of marriage' was addressed by a character who was worried that a spouse was 'cheating', and although this did not necessarily mean that the spouse was actually being unfaithful, it was nevertheless noted.

Issues were divided into four categories:
1. *Sexual issues* - including affairs, sexual relationships, condom use and sex education
2. *HIV issues* - including HIV-positive characters, HIV treatment, risk of infection and positive living
3. *Cultural issues* - including pre-marital sex, polygamy and arranged marriages
4. *Consequences of sexual behaviour* - including unintended pregnancy, HIV infection, and risky sexual behaviour, such as MCPs

According to Table 1 below, that all of the top ten issues featured in the monitored items were related to sex. HIV featured more prominently than expected, and so too did some of the consequences of risky sexual behaviour.

The most prominent issue was 'married people engaging in sexual activities outside marriage'. The second most prominent issue was that of 'unmarried people engaging in concurrent sexual relations'. It is interesting to note that the issue of the 'episode has a person infected with HIV' is more prominent than expected and was placed sixth on the list of ten. The soap operas with HIV-positive characters were *Isidingo* (Nandipha), *Scandal!* (Palesa), and *Rhythm City* (Thula's mother – rarely mentioned and not shown).

Table 1: Top 10 issues in soap operas.

Top 10 issues in soap operas	Number of times monitored
Married people engaging in sexual activities outside marriage	65
Unmarried people engaging in concurrent sexual relations	30
Sexual activities only insinuated, but not actually there	23
Talking about sexual activities	23
People engaging in homosexual sexual activities	21
Episode has a person infected with HIV or AIDS	16
Married people engaging in sexual activities	15
Unmarried people engaging in sexual relations	15
Episode has a person becoming unintentionally pregnant	11
Condom usage: inexplicitly not used	10

The fourth category, 'issues related to culture', did not feature in the top ten issues. The only occurrence in this category was when *Muvhango* featured a character, Ndalamo, using his 'unwanted' arranged marriage to his wife, Thandaza, as an excuse for 'cheating'. One of the characters, the elder, Albert, remarked: "It's hard for young wives these days to understand that a man can have extramarital affairs." (6 May 2008).

4.5 Visuals in monitored items

In soap operas viewers are sometimes made aware of sex having taken place through conversations between characters. Soap operas usually *imply* sexual activity rather than *show* sex explicitly because they are broadcast in the afternoon or early evening when younger viewers are able to watch them. In terms of this research, this meant that it was at times difficult to establish whether people actually engaged in sexual activities or not. For instance, if a couple kissed and then moved to the bedroom or they were waking up together, it was categorised as a 'visual implying sexual activity'. Only in a few instances were people shown explicitly to engage in sex - for example, in a scene in *Rhythm City* (23 May 2008) where Stone was caught by his girlfriend while engaging in oral sex with a sex worker.

Table 2: Visuals seen in soap operas (n=40).

Visuals seen in soap operas (n=40)	Number of times monitored
Imagery of sexual activity implied	21
(Possible) HIV-infected people shown in a positive way	11
Prevention measures against STDs, HIV/AIDS and pregnancy (e.g. condoms)	4
Imagery of sexual activity displayed	3
Nudity displayed	1
Nudity implied	0
(Possible) HIV-infected people portrayed in a negative way	0
Prevention measures only against pregnancy (e.g. contraceptive pill)	0

Table 2 above lists visuals shown in the monitored items. While sex was either clearly shown or implied 24 times in 132 episodes, condom use was only displayed four times. For example, in *Isidingo*, Parsons engaged in an extramarital affair with his mistress, Thandi. His wife, Nandipha, is HIV-positive. In one instance when Parsons and Thandi were having sex, the camera zoomed in on an open condom package (14 May 2008).

4.6 Television advertisements

Only those advertisements displayed directly before or during soap operas, and which moreover referred to either sexual activity or an HIV-related issue, were monitored. Fifteen out of a total of approximately 1,240 advertisements fell within this category.

Of said 15 advertisements, six referred to sexual activities (40%). These were all advertisements for viewers to text the message 'love' to a certain phone number in order to receive "sexy tips, hot poems and more" to improve their love life. The other nine advertisements were either from loveLife, a local health-communication campaign, or from Nedbank, in which reference was made to donating money to different causes, including HIV.

5.   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this research reveal that sex is indeed a key component of the seven monitored soap operas, thus, as Escobar-Chaves et al. (2005) argue, making viewers' exposure to sexual content almost inevitable. These findings further concur with Taylor (2005) in that this exposure is not limited solely to explicit scenes of sexual activity, but also includes implicit references to sex, in conversations or through characters kissing or waking up together. As discussed earlier, most of the sexual activity in these soap operas manifests in the form of MCPs, and then also significantly more often than in the 'real world' (Pettifor et al., 2003; Shisana et al., 2009). The same is true of transactional relationships, which, conversely, occur less often in the 'real world' than they do in the daily soaps.

Thus, these kinds of partnerships are overrepresented in soap operas, more than likely because they create sexual intrigue and drama. This, in turn, generates advertising revenue for their home channels (Buckingham, 1989; Hobson, 2003). To what extent then does such overrepresentation legitimate certain sexual practices and make these practices part of viewers' lived experience (Parker, 2009)? Although the degree to which viewers model their favourite soap characters' behaviour is uncertain, there is a case to be made for writers to develop issue-led storylines that include both sex occurring in many different kinds of partnerships and also discussion of the accompanying risks (Myers, 2002).

When HIV is mentioned in soap operas, the occurrence is comparatively low – only eight per cent of monitored episodes referred to HIV - whether linked to sex or not. The HSRC Survey (Shisana et al., 2008) found that general HIV prevalence in South Africa is 10.6%; however, in certain pockets this figure is much higher. Thus, although the occurrence of HIV in soap operas and that in South African society is quite similar, the weight of HIV as a social issue should be taken into account.

Soul City has demonstrated how 'education' on issues such as gender-based violence, substance abuse and HIV is possible without diluting the 'entertainment' aspect of storylines. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from soap-opera writers (discussed above) suggests that, when HIV storylines

are developed, they can have a dramatic effect on the audience – as in the case of the partnership between *Generations* and New Start. This further suggests that this innovative approach could be replicated both to build new and to strengthen already existing partnerships between civil society and the producers of soap operas. In this way, each party is able to contribute a set of skills and expertise to develop storylines that meet the criteria of 'entertainment' and 'education'.

Although three out of seven of the soap operas analysed for this research do attempt to mainstream HIV into their storylines by having an HIV-positive character, all of these characters are black women. To a certain extent, this reflects a reality in a society in which the burden of HIV is carried mostly by economically impoverished black women. Yet the media are also guilty of creating a stereotype in that the 'face of AIDS' has become black women. Soap-opera writers and producers should consider this representation seriously and diversify the characters they portray as being HIV-positive. Research and common sense tell us that HIV 'does not discriminate' and that it is sexual behaviour - and definitely not belonging to a particular 'group' - that increases one's risk of HIV infection.

Perhaps the most worrying result of this research is that a link between sex and HIV is made in only two per cent of cases. This supports the argument advanced in the literature review: sexual behaviour in soap operas is mostly portrayed in a primarily risk-free light and does not include much discussion of sexual risks and responsibilities (Esobar-Chaves et al., 2005). When this did occur in the monitored episodes, it was not in the context of normative sexual behaviour – in other words, heterosexual sex within a monogamous relationship. References were made to using a condom, but only in relation to homosexual sex and sex with a sex worker. This is ironic, considering that the HIV epidemic in South Africa is patently prevalent among the heterosexual population and moreover that a key driver of the epidemic may be those very relationships that feature prominently in soap operas, namely concurrent and transactional sexual relationships.

This indicates that soap operas inadvertently reinforce a fairly consistent set of relationship and sexual norms. Furthermore, even if soap operas are, in the main, businesses that need to generate profits, there still is room to improve on how often HIV within the context of sex is mentioned. This does not necessarily mean flooding every storyline with messages around HIV, but rather attempting to incorporate the risks associated with high risk sexual behaviour in storylines.

6.   CONCLUSION

The statistics quoted, earlier on in the literature review, reveal that a large proportion of the population, and particularly the young population, are engaging in MCPs, transactional and/or intergenerational sex. The above findings imply that there is a failure on the part of the popular media - specifically soap operas - to link these risky sexual behaviours with the spread of HIV.

It is possible that the lack of reference to the potential outcome of engaging in MCPs reflects the failure of both the government and civil society to convey their message successfully to South African society – the very society portrayed in soap operas. This silence in the popular media is,

therefore, accurate and representative: if the people to whom soap operas are trying to sell their product are not discussing MCP and linking such behaviour to the risk of HIV, then perhaps it makes sense that the issue is not reflected in storylines.

The challenge that emerges from these findings is one of establishing links between government and civil society prevention campaigns and soap-opera storylines. Researchers and experts have much to contribute in terms of understanding the issues around MCP and prevention, just as producers and writers do in terms of understanding their audience. Efforts should be combined in order to create informed and entertaining storylines that address the issue of MCP and HIV. This research shows the need for government, civil society, HIV researchers and the popular media to work together to do so. To this end, the following recommendations should be considered:

- Holding a public roundtable discussion forum on HIV/AIDS and MCP coverage in the popular media[3];
- Encouraging ongoing engagement between civil society, scientists and popular media on MCP and HIV[4];
- Understanding the challenges that soap-opera writers and producers face when writing storylines on HIV; and
- Developing media-friendly resources to assist soap-opera writers and producers in writing these stories.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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[3] On March 4, 2009, the HIV/AIDS & the Media Project hosted a roundtable discussion forum entitled "Sex, soaps and sensationalism: multiple and concurrent partnerships in the popular media" to discuss and debate the portrayal of MCP and HIV in soap operas. For more information see:
http://journaids.org/index.php/research_and_events/events/sex_soaps_and_sensationalism_multiple_and_concurrent_partnerships/

[4] Following on from the public discussion, the HIV/AIDS & the Media Project on 15 October 2009 hosted an intimate, closed door roundtable discussion between a select group of soap-opera writers and producers and researchers, entitled "Writing the 'stuff of our lives': sex and HIV in South African soap operas". The discussion was rich and vibrant, and showed the need for ongoing engagement between these different groups of stakeholders. The next forum will be held in 2010. For more information, see: http://journaids.org/index.php/research_and_events/events/writing_the_stuff_of_our_lives/

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