Representations of Teen Pregnancy and Motherhood in the United States

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Abstract

The teen pregnancy rate in the United States has been rapidly and steadily declining across all ethnic groups and races over the past two decades and is now at an all-time low. Most academic studies attribute this decline to increased and consistent use of contraception. Despite this good news, instead of or in addition to focusing on evidence-based advocacy in their prevention efforts, many social institutions, including public health entities and private sector organizations, continue to use representations of teen pregnancy and motherhood that stigmatize young mothers – or construct narratives of failure – as part of their communication interventions. The advent of social media, however, has given young mothers the means to challenge these mainstream representations and create positive social identities – or construct narratives of success.

My research focuses on how images used in prevention campaigns construct or resist representations of teen pregnancy. My methodological framework consists of a combination of textual analysis and qualitative interviews with the image-producers. Theories related to language as an important tool for constructing and resisting representations, communication for social change as a rights-based framework and social media as a site to build identity and interject voice in public discourse are also explored and should be of interest to communication for development practitioners.

*Keywords*  Representation, Identity, Resistance, Teen Pregnancy, Human Rights, Participatory Communication, Social Media, the United States
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1. Introduction

1.1. Aim of the Study

The central concern this study is the examination of visual representations of adolescent pregnancy and young mothers in the United States. I explore how these representations are produced and how they inform current public discourse around the issue.

I attempt to show how social institutions, including public health and private sector organizations, frame teen pregnancy as a problem of public interest, and how young mothers attempt to resist those claims and use social media to reach others with their message and build alliances.

I analyze a selection of visual texts of teen childbearing, including some that cultivate dominant representations and others that resist the same. The methodological framework I use combines textual analysis and qualitative interviews. Theories of representation, identity and resistance, human rights and participatory communication, and social media, are used to inform the research process and the analysis and discussion of the findings.

1.2. Background

My initial intention when beginning to research representations of teen pregnancy as a possible subject of my Degree Project was to compare and contrast communication approaches apparent in the United States and in European countries. During this period, however, my attention was drawn to the public debate around the controversial the ‘Real Cost’ teen pregnancy prevention campaign launched in 2013 by the Human Resources Administration of New York City, where I am currently based. The campaign featured posters with images of toddlers overlaid with text describing the negative consequences of teen pregnancy for both the parents and their children (“I’m twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen”). The posters were displayed in subway cars and bus shelters throughout the city. The administration said that the campaign was meant to encourage responsibility and send the right message (“Teens
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giving birth before they are ready to provide emotional and financial support is not a good way to raise children”

Many public health and teen advocates, however, protested that the campaign only shamed teenaged mothers and fuelled stigma and did not provide young people with information about sexual and reproductive health, including means of preventing pregnancy. A coalition of opposing voices organized the ‘No Stigma, No Shame’ Pushback Campaign, primarily via Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms. The counter-campaign focused on the importance of education, advocacy, policy and direct services to preventing teen pregnancy and underlined that there was no need to stigmatize teen parents in the process.

As I followed the high-profile debate around this campaign, I became increasingly aware of the community of teen mothers, many of whom were members of the #NoTeenShame movement and driving the Pushback Campaign, that was resisting the dominant representations and actively using social media platforms to deconstruct dominant representations and to support one another in creating positive identities. I became interested in this new movement and, as a result, decided to modify the subject of my research, limiting it to representations of teen pregnancy circulating in the United States, including self-representations by young mothers.

1.3. Research Questions

My main research question is: How do visual texts construct or resist representations of teen pregnancy in the United States?

Questions that will be explored in relation to the larger question are:

- Do these representations matter?

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• What role do social media play in expanding opportunities for engagement in the public discourse around teen pregnancy and motherhood?

1.4. Scope and Limitations

In this work, I discuss and analyze:

• Visual representations of adolescent pregnancy produced in the United States by institutions and the self-representations produced by teen mothers themselves.
• Functions and meanings on the part of producers of the analyzed representations.
• Theories of representation, identity and resistance, human rights and participatory communication, and social media, and how these relate to the production and consumption of the representations.

I do not fully discuss:

• The historical, political and cultural context, including complex issues of poverty, race, gender and sexuality, within which the representations analyzed were created and viewed.
• The measurable impact of these different communication approaches on rates of teen pregnancy.
• How teen girls decode the different approaches and what impact, if any, they have on their sexual and reproductive choices.

Although I do not address these questions in-depth here, I believe they are important areas for future research.

1.5. Relevance to the Field of Communication for Development

The subject of this study is linked to a number of concepts of concern to Communication for Development practitioners.

The first is how the most basic elements of communication – text and images – are powerful meaning-makers that can impact people and the societies we live in.
The second is the integration of a human rights perspective into development communication. Putting the stakeholders at the centre of any intervention moves the Communication for Development needle from a traditional approach that seeks mainly to change individual behaviours to a communication for social change approach, which is based on dialogue through which people define the change they want to see in their lives and determine how to realize that change. This approach lies at the heart of participatory communication.

The third area of interest focuses on how social media can provide opportunities to construct or resist representations, build communities, and engage in public discourse with a view to influencing policy and practice.

1.6. My Interest in the Subject

Working in the area of communication for global development organizations for more than 20 years, I have long been interested in how texts – comprising language and images – are used in communication to change behaviour, promote good public health policy and practice and ultimately effect social change.

Specific to the intent of this project, working for the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS from 2001 to 2008 at the headquarters in Geneva and in the Tanzania Country Office, I was witness to the about-face in communication approaches used in the AIDS response during this time. The development community made a deliberate move from the use of ‘shame and blame’ tactics and images of people dying from AIDS towards the use of positive messages and images of people living with the HIV virus. I have always been interested in understanding whether or not this change in course had any influence on the effectiveness of the communication or on the dynamics of the AIDS response. Given my experience working in the area of HIV and communication, this study references the human rights-based approach to communication and its role in addressing the AIDS epidemic as well as issues of stigma and discrimination.

1.7. Context: Teen Pregnancy in the United States
The national teen birth rate in the United States has declined almost continuously over the past 20 years. The figure has been more than halved, from 61.8 births for every 1,000 adolescent females ages 15-19 recorded in 1991 to 26.5 births for the same number of girls in the same age range in 2013.\(^2\)

Declines have been achieved across all 50 states. Between 1991 and 2013, the teen birth rate fell 60 percent or more in 18 states and 50 percent or more in 36 states. The smallest state-level decline over this period was 31 percent.\(^3\)

Not all teen births are first births. In 2013, one in six (17 percent) births to 15- to 19-year-olds were to females who already had one or more babies.\(^4\)

Nor are all teen births are planned. A study conducted in 2006, found that 82 percent of teen pregnancies in the United States were unintended.\(^5\)

Despite the impressive decline, the U.S. teen birth rate remains much higher than that of most other developed countries. It is more than four times higher than the rate in Western Europe, for example.\(^6\)

Research suggests that the decline is entirely attributable to increased contraceptive use among older youth (18 and 19 years old) and primarily attributable to improved contraceptive use among 15- to 17-year olds.\(^7\) A comprehensive review of programme evaluations by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found


that two-thirds of sex education programmes focusing on both abstinence and contraception had a positive effect on teen sexual behaviour.\textsuperscript{8}

In addition, the same study found no strong evidence that abstinence-only programmes delayed the initiation of sex, hastened the return to abstinence, or reduced the number of sexual partners.\textsuperscript{9}

Considerable national funding for sex education in schools has been directed at abstinence-only programmes, however. It is estimated that more than US$1.7 billion in federal money has been spent on abstinence-only programmes since 1982. The highest abstinence-only funding levels were seen during the conservative Republican Administration of President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2009. Some have attributed an anomalous increase of 3 percent in the national teen pregnancy rate reported in 2005 to 2006 to this policy position.

Since the election of Democratic President Barack Obama, the balance of resources allocated to sex education has shifted, with the majority of funding going to comprehensive programmes, which include information on contraception. While national funding for abstinence-only sex education has been decreasing since 2009, the spending level increased in the most recent federal budget allocation unveiled in April 2015.

The separation of church and state is oftentimes difficult to delineate in the United States. Nowhere is the influence of religion on public policy more apparent than when issues relate to female sexual and reproductive health – most contentiously the right to abortion and, it appears even more so, the sexuality of teens.

Americans disapprove of sex between teenagers. A recent survey found that seventy percent of those polled find it morally wrong and “largely unacceptable.”\textsuperscript{10} This is fewer


than those opposed to suicide and polygamy, but more than those disapproving of premarital sex, having a baby outside of marriage, gay or lesbian relations, birth control – and even abortion.

2. Literature Review

Although images of teen pregnancy and motherhood were not the focus of the study “Constructing failure, narrating success: Rethinking the ‘problem’ of teen pregnancy,” I give due credit to the author for bringing to my attention this intriguing concept and turn of phrase, which provided the framework for my research. She conducted the ethnographic research project as a full-time audience/participant in a high school in California for a period of one year in the mid-1990s. Participant observations and interviews were the principle modes of data collection.

Based on this research, the author suggests:

“In contrast to media representations of teen pregnancy as a sign of failure or dysfunction, for some young women, the presence of children in their lives motivates them to stay in school and work toward a career in order to support their children” (Schultz, 2007: 114).

She recommends that the perspectives of young people, including young mothers, should be central to discussions around teaching and learning in high schools, instead of beginning with negative media representations.

I found several studies that did focus on images and other mediated representations of teen pregnancy and motherhood while conducting my research. Most analyzed representations seen in mainstream broadcast media, particularly in feature films and on television. The popular reality television series “16 and Pregnant”, which became “Teen Mom” as it followed a group of young mothers from pregnancy through to motherhood, has been the subject of much analysis, given its longevity – it debuted in 2008 and is still running – and reach – more than 5.5 million viewers tuned into the 12 October 2010

episode. A recent academic study claimed that these programmes contributed to a record decline in the teen childbearing rate in the United States.

Others studies have analyzed still images of adolescent childbearing.

One study looked at photos of young mothers in popular North American newspapers and magazines. This textual analysis was coupled with qualitative interviews with 11 young mothers. This research demonstrates “how young women challenge dominant discourses (constructed in mainstream media) by highlighting their similarities to ‘other mothers’ and rejecting the importance of age as a criterion for successful mothering” (Neiterman, 2012: 41).

Formal baby portraits are the focus of another study, in which some 80 young mothers in California were interviewed. Analyzing the portraits as representations of childhood, motherhood and family, the study concluded that they were used by teen mothers to construct a “public statement about themselves” as good mothers (Freedman Lustig, 2004: 181). The author of the study noted: “…photography is clearly a tool that allows marginalized people to represent themselves to others, instead of only being represented by others” (2004: 181). Again, the photos analyzed in this study were formal portraits of the children of teen mothers and not of the teen mothers themselves.

A group of short videos produced by young mothers about mothering experiences, referred to as ‘mommyvlogs’, were the subject of another research study. A feminist lens was used to frame the analysis, which considered how the content addressed, reinforced or challenged patriarchal ideology and gender norms. The study concluded that, "while not always, or even usually, these blogs are inherently political attempts to rewrite narratives of motherhood” (Tanner, 2013: 37).

In relation to these studies, I believe that my research is original in two ways.

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First, it focuses on visual texts produced as part of public campaigns and how these both construct and resist dominant representations of teen pregnancy and childhood. Second, it considers texts produced by teen mothers, including self-representations, which have been disseminated via social media channels, primarily as a deliberate strategy to interject voice and alternative perspectives in wider public discourse as a means of effecting social change.

3. Theoretical Framework

With the subject of this work being both the construction of and resistance to visual representations of teen childbearing circulating within the public discourse in the United States today, theories of representation, identity and resistance provide the basis of my research. Questions of voice and participation are also critical to representation and perhaps more so to the ability to resist representation. Communication theories rooted in concepts of human rights and participation, particularly of the marginalized, therefore, are also presented and discussed, providing additional insights.

3.1. Representation, Identity and Resistance

Stuart Hall defines culture simply as “shared meanings” (1997: 1). Since what is called the ‘cultural turn’ in the 1970s, culture has been considered the predominant site of meaning-making or knowledge and “meaning is thought to be produced – constructed – rather than simply ‘found’” (1997: 5).

Collaborative media – and social media as its latest incarnation – is described by Löwgren and Reimer “as a new cultural form” (2013: Chapter 1).

Language is the privileged medium through which meaning is produced and exchanged. The term ‘language’ is used broadly to include not only words but also images or any other text that can be used to produce meaning. Representation connects meaning and language to culture.

As Hall clarifies:
“We give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them. It is what distinguishes the ‘human’ element in social life from what is simply biologically driven” (1997: 3).

In addition, according to Hall, meaning is fluid:

“One implication of this argument about cultural codes is that, if meaning is the result, not of something fixed out there, in nature, but of our social, cultural and linguistic conventions, then meaning can never be finally fixed” (1997: 23).

As a result, meaning is a constant battleground. It is a struggle between those with power and influence and those who are marginalized.

Cultural meanings organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects on our lives. For these reasons, meanings matter.

Hall writes:

“We struggle over (meanings) because they matter – and these are contests from which series consequences can flow. They can define what ‘normal’, who belongs – is and therefore who is excluded. They are deeply inscribed in relations of power” (1997: 10).


Some, like Wilson and Huntington, suggest that the dominant representation of teen pregnancy in the United States as a problem is a social construction:

“Paradoxically, the recent constitution of teenage motherhood as an object of concern in the developed countries of the West has coincided with declining teen birth rates. This suggests that the view of teenage childrearing as problematic is largely underpinned by changing social and political imperatives regarding the role and responsibilities of women in Western society. The pattern of higher education, the establishment of a career, and then (perhaps) starting a family, for contemporary middle-class women has gradually become normative, while those young women who do not follow this trajectory – or do so in a different order – have become
the targets of marginalisation and stigmatisation” (Wilson and Huntington, 2006: 59).

The practice of stigmatization referred to here by Wilson and Huntington is a powerful device of classification and marginalization that can lead to the disenfranchisement of individuals and entire segments of a population.

According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights:

“Stigma, as a deeply entrenched socio-cultural phenomenon, lies at the root of many human rights violations and results in entire population groups being disadvantaged. Stigma can broadly be understood as a process of dehumanizing, discrediting and devaluing people in certain groups, often based on a feeling of disgust. Stigma attaches itself to an attribute, quality or identity that is regarded as “inferior” or “abnormal” and is based on a socially constructed “us” and “them” divide. “13

Not only is stigma a determinant of the accessibility of information and services, but it can also affect the extent to which individuals and groups can exercise their right to self-representation and self-determination and their agency and capacity to engage in social and political discourse and processes.

Importantly, add Murthy and Williams, stigma is relationship- and context-specific; it does not reside in the person but in a social context (2012: 2). Again, therefore, it is a social construction.

Hall asks: “Can a dominant regime of representation be challenged, contested or changed?” (1997: 269). He presents three methods of resistance to dominant representations: reversing the stereotypes; substituting negative imagery with positive; and contesting representation from within.

It is the second strategy that is most relevant to my study. According to Hall, it can be executed in two main ways: by challenging or reappropriating dominant representations and by creating alternative narratives (1997: 272).

Hall explains that this strategy attempts to construct a positive identity from that which has been devalued by the dominant regime. He elaborates:

“(Substituting negative imagery with positive) greatly expands the range (wider range of colours than social institutions) of … representations and the complexity … thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes” (1997: 272).

Paulo Freire says that the quest for humanization “is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (1970/93: 44).

The reductionist stereotypes to which Hall refers are often articulated as labels:

“It is these processes of differentiation and decomposition of a person’s story into a series of cases, articulated through labelling, which have enabled de-linked explanations of poverty and deprivation to appear and function as ideology” (Wood, 1985: 357).

The practice of labelling, then, places responsibility on the shoulders of the individual as deviant, and thereby directs attention away from the need for more complex conversations around dimensions of difference, including race, poverty, gender and sexuality, in a society.

According to Shohat and Stam:

“The privileging of character over narrative and social structure places the burden on oppressed people to be ‘good’ rather than on the privileged to remove the knife from the back” (2004: 203).

Wood, for one, however, sees labelling as a contradictory process. Recognizing that its primary purpose is to disorganize the vulnerable and excluded, at the same time, he suggests that it also has “the potential of reorganizing interests around the solidarities which the labelling might itself engender” (1985: 364).

By connecting around the common label, then, marginalized individuals and groups become aware of their own agency and through the process of empowerment are able to mobilize collective action to influence the social and political environment that affect their lives.

Of particular importance to this study is the question of whether teen pregnancy leads to or is a result of a host of social ills. The dominant view is that teen mothers are more likely to drop out of school and the labour market and as a result live together with their children in poverty:

On the other hand, others believe that external circumstances such as social and economic inequalities contribute to the instance of teen birth and to any inferior outcomes. Following extensive research in this area, Kearney and Levine concluded:

“We believe that the high rate of teen childbearing in the United States matters because it is a marker of a social problem, rather than the underlying social problem itself” (Kearney and Levine, 2012: 163).

3.2. Communication from a Human Rights Perspective

During my research, I was struck by similarities between current representations of teen pregnancy in the United States and representations of people infected with HIV early in the global AIDS response. In the latter instance, I witnessed how these representations evolved as the communication paradigm shifted from a focus on behaviour-change communication aimed at the individual to a broader human rights-based social-change approach.

These two different communication models are discussed in the working paper “Communication from a Human Rights Perspective: Responding to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic in Eastern and Southern Africa” (Ford, Odallo and Chorlton, 2003).

The working paper describes the behaviour-change model as a one-way process of persuasion that aims to change risky behaviours and practices of individuals. The social-change model, on the other hand, is described as a process of public and private dialogue through which people define who they are, what they want and how they can get it. In addition:

“[Communication for social change] seeks particularly to improve the lives of the politically and economically marginalized, and is informed by principles of tolerance, self-determination, equity, social justice and active participation for all” (Ford, Odallo and Chorlton, 2003: 607).

So described, the social change approach is rooted in a human rights framework.
The paper also includes a very succinct presentation of six fundamental differences in emphasis between these two communication models, which was originally put forward in a position paper on communication for social change published by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1999 (Ford, Odallo and Chorlton, 2003: 607).

In brief, moving from the behaviour-change model toward the social-change model, the emphasis shifts:

- Away from people as the objects for change . . . and on to people and communities as the agents of their own change;
- Away from designing, testing and delivering messages . . . and on to supporting dialogue and debate on the key issues of concern;
- Away from the conveying of information from technical experts . . . and on to sensitively placing that information into the dialogue and debate;
- Away from a focus on individual behaviours . . . and on to social norms, policies, culture and a supportive environment;
- Away from persuading people to do something . . . and on to negotiating the best way forward in a partnership process;
- Away from technical experts in “outside” agencies dominating and guiding the process . . . and on to the people most affected by the issues of concern playing a central role.

This presentation is useful to explore if and how the two different communication approaches factor into the representations of teen pregnancy examined in this study.

3.3. Voice: Participatory and Social Media

The emphasis on dialogue and the inclusion of affected individuals and communities in the social-change communication model are also fundamental elements of the participatory approach to communication, as described by Tufte and Mefalopulos:

“The free and open dialogue remains the core principle of participatory communication” (2009: 10).
According to Clay Shirky, “When we change the way we communicate, we change society” (2008: 17). In this study I discuss the extent to which new social media channels are affording marginalized groups—teen mothers, in this case—new opportunities to push back against dominant representations of teen childbearing and to insert their voices and participate in the public discourse with a view to effecting social change.

As described in Wikipedia, the ‘social media’ denomination “includes web-based and mobile-based technologies which are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue among organizations, communities, and individuals” (cited in Löwgren and Reimer, 2013: Chapter 1).

While tools to produce content have been increasingly easier to access and use, the reach of dissemination channels has been limited to the dominant players. In the past there was little possibility of penetrating traditional channels largely controlled by mainstream media gatekeepers—the newspaper did not print your manifesto, the radio station did not give you access to the airwaves.

With the advent of social media, however, according to Löwgren and Reimer, “… being a formal producer with access to a privileged production and distribution structure” is no longer required to create and distribute messages” (2013: Chapter 1). Instead, “the emergence of digital technologies and the Internet has offered significantly greater potential to disrupt traditional production-consumption media structures” (2013: Chapter 1) and the ability to challenge the messages and meanings being made by those dominant structures.

Today, not only can users, “formerly known as the audience” (Löwgren and Reimer, 2013: Chapter 1), produce their own content without restriction, but they can easily and freely post or ‘pass along’ their content to other social media platforms, sparking interest and discussion among a variety of communities and building a network of support. As the content spreads across a multitude of social media channels, the probability of being picked up or referenced by mainstream channels or institutions is high. The power of new technologies does not lie solely in the collaborative channel itself, therefore. It is the opportunity to interject alternative viewpoints into public discourse through mainstream
media or through the ‘convergence’ of new and traditional media, as analyzed by Henry Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture*, which is also key to revolutionizing the reach – and the impact – of alternative content.

The reverse is also true. Any content produced by dominant social institutions, whether using new or traditional technologies, will inevitably end up in the new media universe. In his 2009 TED talk “How social media can make history”, Clay Shirky identifies one of the big changes brought about by the transformed media landscape:

“As all media gets digitized, the Internet also becomes the mode of carriage for all other media, meaning that phone calls migrate to the Internet, magazines migrate to the Internet, movies migrate to the Internet.”

Importantly, the availability of this content in digital formats lends itself to modification and re-publication (Löwgren and Reimer, 2013: Chapter 1). Putting digital production in the hands of the users, then, also provides the means of resisting or manipulating the original producer’s intentions.

It is only through this convergence of culture’, where traditional and new media meet and where audiences that do not share the same cultural and social views can interact, that any meaningful social change can occur.

The notion of social media as a driver of participatory dialogue that leads to social change is reflective of the ‘bright side’ perspective of collaborative media, which is described by Löwgren and Reimer as “characterized by somewhat idealistic assumptions concerning the emancipatory powers of collaborative media in terms of enabling direct democracy and grassroots activism, leveling the playing field for creative expression by bypassing the existing media distribution monopolies, and so on” (2013: Chapter 7).

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the ‘dark side’ perspective, “which comprises critical and analytical perspectives emphasizing the dangers, drawbacks, and negative aspects of collaborative media and participatory culture” (Löwgren and Reimer, 2013: Chapter 7).
Löwgren and Reimer make another interesting observation with regard to the DIY – ‘do-it-yourself’ – culture of collaborative media. As we have seen, anyone with access to basic collaborative tools and the Internet can produce and share works of their own. Löwgren and Reimer argue that the amateur DIY quality of much collaborative media produced by non-professionals enhances its authenticity and “can be particularly appealing to viewers suffering from spectacle fatigue after years of being exposed to professional works of increasingly higher production quality” (2013: Chapter 7).

4. Methodology

This study was triggered by a series of images used in New York City’s ‘Real Cost’ campaign, which was launched in 2013. Although disseminated locally as print posters on public transportation, the images quickly ignited national debate that played out across mainstream traditional media and new media digital channels.

The images I chose to analyze for this research were found circulating on social media channels as part of this public debate. The selection comprises representations used in teen pregnancy prevention campaigns produced by social institutions and by private sector actors. Digital self-representations posted by young mothers on the Internet and social media channels are also analyzed. I believe the variety of representational perspectives considered affords the opportunity to conduct a critical analysis.

The images can be viewed in Appendix 1 and are described briefly here:

**Image A:** One of a series of images that was produced by the private-sector Candie’s Foundation as part of its ‘Change it!’ campaign, which was launched in 2013. The images were circulated in print publications and in digital format on the Internet and across social media channels.

**Image B:** One of a series of images that was produced by the New York City Human Resources Administration as part of its ‘Real Cost’ campaign, which was launched in 2013. The images were disseminated as print posters that appeared in subway cars and in bus shelters in the city of New York.
Image C: One of a series of images that was produced by the National Campaign for the Prevention of Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy as part of its ‘Sex has Consequences’ campaign, which was launched in 2000. The images appeared in print publications as public service advertisements.

Image D: Produced by Natasha Vianna, co-founder of the #NoTeenShame movement, and disseminated via social media channels in 2013.

Image E: Produced by Gloria Malone, co-founder of the #NoTeenShame movement, and disseminated via social media channels in 2013.

Image F: Produced by the Planned Parenthood of Columbia Willamette as part of its ‘Sexuality is a Gift’ campaign. It is unknown by the author whether this image was one of a series or when it was produced.

Plucked from the digital media universe, the images circulated with little reference to when they were first produced or for what purpose or to the original site of dissemination, whether in print magazines or on public transportation, for example.

This interplay between the local and the global – referred to as ‘glocal’ – is of particular interest here given the focus on the role of social media in the production and dissemination of representations of teen pregnancy in public discourse. Clay Shirky’s idea that, with the increased accessibility of new technologies, all communication eventually is digitized and finds its way on to social media is important here. Even though some of the images examined were produced more than a decade before the 2013 ‘Real Cost’ debate, they remain contemporary and relevant to ongoing public discourse and may be considered ‘evergreen’ considering that the date-stamp of digital media is ‘now’. Having said that, analyzing images produced over such an extended period of time does raise the question of whether or not the depiction of teen pregnancy has evolved over time given changes in public perception and communication approaches.

Clearly there are a myriad of ways that people access health information and sexual health information, in particular, beyond the mainstream and new media platforms considered in this study. These may include ethnic and grassroots media, for example,
that differ in form and content depending on location and intended audience. How teen pregnancy and motherhood are represented in these alternative channels is an equally important area of research but it is beyond the scope of this study.

Given the focus of this study on visual representations, I use textual analysis as the principal methodology for this examination. Also, I conducted qualitative interviews with key people involved in the production of the texts analyzed to explore their understanding of the functions and meanings of the representations and gain additional knowledge, which may have confirmed or challenged the findings of the textual analysis.

As expected, this combination of textual analysis and qualitative interviews resulted in a rich collection of data for comparative analysis and discussion.

4.1. Textual Analysis

I primarily use Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Methods* (2001) as my guide to analyzing the images of teen pregnancy collected for this project and exploring how they construct or resist representations.

“There is no point in researching any aspect of the visual unless the power of the visual is acknowledged,” according to Rose (2001: 33). To this point, it was the passionate national debate triggered by posters appearing on subways and bus shelters as part of the New York City ‘Real Cost’ teen pregnancy prevention campaign that resulted in the choice my research topic.

Mirzoeff suggests that postmodern society is ocularcentric “because we interact more and more with totally constructed visual experiences” (1998: 4 cited in Rose, 2001: 8). As we have seen, technological progress has increased the ability of those with the most basic digital tools to both construct and share images. As a result, images “are becoming more a part of how we interpret and experience life or make sense of the world around us” (Rose, 2001: 8).
Rose proposes that there are three main sites at which the meanings of an image are made and should be analyzed when carrying out visual research: the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences (2001: 16). In addition, she offers three modalities that can contribute to a critical understanding of images: technological, compositional, and social. With regard to methodology, Rose also describes three main approaches to analyzing images: compositional interpretation, content analysis and semiology.

In my analysis, I focus on the site of the images themselves and consider the three modalities suggested by Rose. Compositional interpretation is used as the principal methodology for my research.

The initial step in compositional interpretation is a detailed scrutiny of the image itself, according to Rose. She breaks down the compositionality of an image into a number of components that may be considered in this exercise, namely: content, colour, spatial organization, light, and something she calls ‘expressive content’ (2001: 38).

Content comprises both the visual and textual elements of an image. The text may be embedded within the image itself or appended as a caption to guide the viewer’s understanding of the image. Hall suggests that the meaning of an image lies in the conjunction of image and text, citing Barthes (1977) who argues that, often, “it is the caption which selects one out of the many meanings from the image, and anchors it with words” (1997: 228).

In addition to content, which is perhaps the richest source of meaning, spatial organization and expressive content are the most important in this analysis.

According to Rose, there are two aspects of spatial organization to consider: the organization of space ‘within’ an image, and the way the spatial organization of an image offers a particular viewing position to its spectator (2001: 40). The angle, distance and height of the spectator in relation to the image can impact the viewer’s perspective, for example. Thus the spatial organization of an image is not innocent. It has effects. It produces a specific relation between image and spectator (Rose, 2001: 45).
‘Expressive content’ is described by Taylor as "the combined effect of subject matter and visual form” (1957: 43±4 cited in Rose, 2001: 39).

4.2. Qualitative Interviews

The exploration of meanings and understandings is critical to the present study. Qualitative rather than quantitative research methods, therefore, are the most appropriate tools to use: “Qualitative research methods are appropriate when concerned with establishing meanings and in-depth and complex understandings” (Pickering, 2008: 73).

While I may be confident in my understanding of the meaning of the representations following textual analysis, learning what the producers and consumers understand the texts to mean could only result in additional knowledge and inform a richer discussion.

Kvale describes the qualitative research interview as “a construction site for knowledge” (2007: 7).

For this reason, I chose to conduct qualitative interviews to support the textual analysis.

When undertaking qualitative interviews, determining who qualifies as a participant is critical. “There are topics where respondents need to fulfill certain criteria in terms of possessing specialist knowledge or engaging in certain activities,” explains Meyer (cited in Pickering, 2008: 78). Therefore, potential interview participants were limited to those who were in some way responsible for or directly involved in producing the representations to be analyzed.

I sent an initial e-mail communication to each of the six intended participants, introducing myself as a graduate student, describing the subject of my thesis and my interest in interviewing them as part of my research. I sent a follow up e-mail when a response was not forthcoming after a period of one week. Following these efforts, I received positive responses from three of the six. The remaining three did not respond. For this study, then, I was able to arrange and conduct interviews with the following:

- Bill Albert, Senior Programme Officer, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy
• Gloria Malone, young mother and co-founder of the #NoTeenShame movement
• Natasha Vianna, young mother and co-founder of the #NoTeenShame movement

Complete transcripts of these interviews are provided in Appendix 2.

I conducted one-on-one interviews with the selected participants. The private setting of individual interviews is more conducive to exploring meanings and readings, particularly when related to a subject considered to be a moral issue and is often discussed in relation to subjects such as race, class and sexuality: “The one-to-one research situation also means that interviews are well-suited to exploring issues that are sensitive, emotive or controversial” (Pickering, 2008: 78).

Of three different interview structures—structured, semi-structured or unstructured—I chose to use the semi-structured approach and used open-ended questions to encourage more thoughtful responses revealing meanings and understanding rather than yes-and-now answers (Pickering, 2008: 80).

4.3. Reflections on Methodology

Compositional interpretation, which is the principal methodology used in the textual analysis, claims to look at images for ‘what they are’, rather than for what they do or how they were or are used (Rose, 2001: 24).

This methodology has been criticized by many as limited in its usefulness as an analytical tool: “Visual images do not exist in a vacuum and looking at them for ‘what they are’ neglects the ways in which they are produced and interpreted through particular social practices” (Rose, 2001: 37).

Clearly investigating meaning made at the site of production and the site of the audience of a particular image facilitates a more comprehensive analysis of how the local historical, political and cultural context, including contemporary narratives of poverty, race, gender and sexuality, within which the image was created and seen may have influenced the genesis of the image and its interpretation. Instead, the deliberate choice to focus on meaning made at the site of the image itself allowed a more detailed scrutiny of
its components and how these are used to construct meaning, which is the main objective of this study. While the broader context is of great interest and importance to the understanding of all representations, and in particular those of teen pregnancy, a thorough and just critical analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Whitely suggests that to mitigate shortcomings of compositional interpretation, the methodology may be “conjoined to other types of analysis so that the visual scrutiny of what can literally be seen can be studied in relation to reception, meaning and content” (1999: 107 cited in Rose, 2001: 37).

While the use of the technological and social modalities, in particular, provide some possibility to consider the ways in which images are produced and interpreted, the qualitative interviews conducted more critically contributed knowledge around all three sites of the images analyzed.

As the interview participants represented both producers and consumers of the images analyzed, in addition to commenting on the images themselves, they also shared their views on the technological and social aspects, which resulted in a deeper level of understanding of the text than was afforded by the compositional interpretation alone.

Turning to the interview methodology, according to Kvale, there is no ‘right’ number of interview subjects: “In qualitative interview studies, the number of subjects tends to be either too small or too large” (2007: 43).

As mentioned, my initial list of six interview candidates was reduced to three. In retrospect, I am pleased with the smaller number as I believe it resulted in a more in-depth understanding and analysis of the resulting knowledge and its meaningful integration in the discussion. I was fortunate that, among the three who agreed to participate in this research, producers of both dominant and resistant representations of teen pregnancy were included.

To guide the interviews, I shared the six images selected for analysis, and around which I intended to base the interviews, with each participant. This was instrumental in eliciting comments from the participants on specific situations and experiences, as both producers
and consumers. By basing the interview on specific texts, “the interviewer will be able to arrive at meanings on a concrete level, instead of general opinions…” (Kvale, 2007: 12). It also aided the systematic comparison and analysis of the interviews as all participants were responding to the same set of images, albeit from different perspectives (Kvale, 2007: 49).

To conduct the interviews, I used Skype to call the telephones of each of the participants. Using Skype allowed me to audio-record the interviews to facilitate transcription. This also allowed me to fully focus on the conversation and not be distracted by note-taking during the interview.

I strictly followed the same protocol at the start of each interview. As I had in the initial e-mail request, I identified myself as a part-time graduate at Malmö University. I explained that the interview was part of the research for my thesis and described the subject. I informed that my interest in the subject was triggered by the public debate surrounding the ‘Real Cost’ teen pregnancy prevention campaign launched in New York City in 2013, with which I was certain they would all be familiar. I explained that I was a part-time student, and that I was a full-time employee of the United Nations and have been for 25 years, working in the area of communication primarily on issues including HIV and AIDS, and currently, sexual and reproductive health. I felt that by sharing this information, they would understand that I was a communication professional and had considerable substantive knowledgeable about the subject of the interview. According to Kvale:

“An interviewer demonstrating that he or she has a sound knowledge of the interview topic will gain respect and be able to achieve an extent of symmetry in the interview relationship” (2007: 70).

I believe this led to a more focused and rich discussion.

Regarding practical considerations, I asked the three participants for their permission to record the interview, the transcription of which would be included in the final paper, and to identify them by their full names and titles. I underlined that, assuming it was accepted, the study would eventually become a public document. They all graciously granted permission.
The interviews went extremely well. All three participants are spokespeople for their respective organizations and all were open, articulate and passionate in their responses. In addition, they were also very familiar with and most often complimentary of the activities of one another.

The length of each interview was approximately 30 minutes. Each of the interviews was transcribed verbatim and I transcribed them myself. “Researchers who transcribe their own interviews … will have the social and emotional aspects of the interview situation present or reawakened during transcription, and will already have started the analysis of the meaning of what was said,” suggests Kvale (2007: 95). Indeed, I found this to be a very valuable exercise, and it contributed immensely to my understanding and analysis of the knowledge produced.

5. Analysis and Discussion

I examined visual representations circulating in the current discourse on teen pregnancy prevention in the United States using textual analysis of the images. This analysis was supported by qualitative interviews conducted with producers of the images. Theories of representation and resistance, participatory communication for social change from a human rights-based perspective, and social media as a means of interjecting voice in public discourse, were used to inform these activities.

In the analysis to follow, I group the six images into two sets of three. The images in the first set were produced by formal social institutions and illustrate the dominant narrative around teen pregnancy in the United States today. The second set of images reflects attempts to resist the ideological and cultural assumptions reflected in the dominant representations. Two of the three images in the second set were produced by the grassroots #NoTeenShame movement led by teen mothers and the third was produced by a formal institution.

As mentioned previously, I conducted qualitative interviews with producers of three of the six images. I asked each of them to describe the intention and experience associated with the image attributed to them. In addition, I asked them to share any comments they
had on the other five images in the set of six. For this reason, comments from the three interview participants as both producers and observers are woven into the analysis of all six images.

From my research, I have understood that all three interview participants agree unintended teen pregnancy is not a good thing:

“‘We [at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy] think it is in the best interest of mothers, fathers, children and society at large that we delay pregnancy and parenthood for a bit.’ (BA 15) 

“I think preventing an unintended pregnancy for anybody is great.” (GM 3) 

“I think the problem for some people is that they think because we are talking about being proud teen parents that we think everyone should become teen parents, which is completely false. (NV 8) 

Also, they all agree that increasing access and use of contraception among sexually active adolescents is the key to preventing teen pregnancy.

What they do not agree on is whether or not images of teen mothers have a role in teen pregnancy prevention communication.

Producers of dominant representations believe that by communicating the negative experiences of teen mothers – narratives of failure or ‘problem-based’ representations – these images are effective in persuading young people to delay sex or pregnancy until they are better equipped and prepared. Producers of resistant representations believe that the negative representations have no effect on teen pregnancy rates and only serve to shame and stigmatize teen mothers, and therefore should not be used. Instead, as a resistance strategy, they create ‘strength-based’ representations to push back against

14 Formulation here and in all instances refers to interview participant Bill Albert, Senior Programme Officer, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, and corresponds to numbered response found in Appendix 2, Transcript 1, pp. 68-73.
15 Formulation here and in all instances refers to interview participant Gloria Malone, young mother and co-founder of the #NoTeenShame movement, and corresponds to numbered response found in Appendix 2, Transcript 2: pp. 74-79.
16 Formulation here and in all instances refers to interview participant Natasha Vianna, young mother and co-founder of the #NoTeenShame movement, and corresponds to numbered response found in Appendix 2, Transcript 3, pp. 80-86.
stigmatizing representations and advocate for the involvement of teen mothers in prevention interventions.

How do visual images construct and resist representations of adolescent pregnancy – and do they matter?

5.1. How Do Visual Texts Construct Dominant Representations of Teen Pregnancy in the United States?

Using textual analysis, here I examine the first set of three images that were produced by social institutions and support the dominant view in the current public discourse that teen pregnancy is the result of individual failure and a ‘problem’ of public concern.

IMAGE A  
Candie’s Foundation – ‘Change it!’ campaign

IMAGE B  
New York City Human Resources Administration - ‘The Real Cost’ campaign

IMAGE C  
National Campaign for the Prevention of Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy – ‘Sex has consequences’ campaign

How is the dominant representation of teen pregnancy constructed, then, as a narrative of failure? There are two main methods that are most evident in the images analyzed in this
research. One is the depiction of teen pregnancy as the result of a failure of individual behaviour or judgement.

In all three images, teen mothers are presented as having ‘failed’ as individuals with consequences for themselves, their children and families and even the broader society, and they are being chastised by all three.

This is indicated primarily through the text that accompanies the photos. As discussed earlier, Barthes noted that text can anchor the many possible meanings of an image and make a difference to how viewers will see or understand it. In Image A, for example, the message in the main caption is directed at ‘You’, focusing on the individual receiving the message as the object of change: “You’re [emphasis added] supposed to be changing the world… not changing diapers. Change it!” In Image B, a crying child looks up and speaking directly to his teen mother, in words appearing in the image caption in a font suggesting a child’s script, he blames her for his limited chances to complete a high school education: “I’m twice as likely not to graduate high school because you [emphasis added] had me as a teen.” In Image C, the word ‘Nobody’ appears in large, bold and red upper-case font across the chest of the teen mother figure in the image, thereby eradicating any sense of self-worth and negating her value to society.

All three images, then, reflect the negative result of failed behaviour and poor choices on the part of the individual and, in this way, call for behaviour change as critical to preventing teen pregnancy. This is reflective of the behaviour-change model presented earlier (Ford, Odallo and Charlton, 2003: 607), which emphasizes people as objects for change and focuses on individual behaviour and persuading people to do something.

In Image A, the ‘something’ is articulated clearly as the campaign’s tagline ‘Change it!’ According to the poster, “75,000 teenage girls will become pregnant this year.” The viewer or ‘You’ is asked to change that number by changing their behaviour.

In all of the images, the teen mother or her experience is isolated, which further emphasizes the individual as an object for change. The teen mother is separated from the rest of her ‘story’ or personal narrative and is identified only as a teen mother and presented as a ‘case’ or problem to be solved. This process of de-linking and associated
labelling allows the ‘problem’ of teen pregnancy to be isolated as an individual
behavioural issue and frees any response from having to address broader political and
social relationships or change deeper structures in the dominant society, which the
#NoTeenShame movement of young mothers rejects:

“We also have to look at the larger societal and systemic mixing of things
like poverty and lack of comprehensive sexual education, lack of access to
birth control methods, cultural barriers that people might have, language
barriers. So for me, #NoTeenShame talks to those larger systemic things
that can contribute to unintended pregnancies.” (GM 3)

Image C is one of a series of five posters that was produced by the National Campaign to
Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in 2000 as part of the ‘Sex has consequences’
campaign. The National Campaign’s Bill Albert refers to this series as the ‘Label’ ads. In
each image in the series, a single word is extracted from a complete quote, which appears
in much smaller font and runs vertically alongside the image, and is prominently affixed
as a label across the chest of the young mother. In Image C, the complete quote reads
“Now that I’m home with a baby, NOBODY calls me anymore,” while the label reads
‘Nobody’. Other labels in the series include ‘Cheap’, ‘Dirty’, ‘Prick’ and ‘Reject’. All
depict teen mothers except the ‘Prick’ poster, which presents a teen father.

As we saw, by focusing on a particular, most often negative, attribute, labels are a means
of articulating reductionist stereotypes, which serve to dehumanize and disengage
individuals and groups.

Often, the label can become a self-fulfilling prophecy:

“As teen moms, we would see really negative images of teen mothers
being used in campaigns, we would see a lot of negative statistics being
used in the media and on social media and it would be really difficult for
us. For some of us, we didn’t push back or respond, because we began to
internalize and believe that some of these things were true.” (NV 3)

In the interview, Bill Albert acknowledged that the campaign was controversial as
expected, but merits the controversy with its success:

“If your goal, as was our goal, with this particular campaign was to focus
teens’ attention on early pregnancy and parenthood and to, at the same
time, break through the considerable clutter of their media-saturated lives,
I would suggest that you need to develop something a bit more memorable. And that’s what we did here.” (BA 5)

“If you show me an intervention that doesn’t offend a single solitary soul, I will show you an intervention that doesn’t work.” (BA 9)

While suggesting that the images used in the campaign may have been offensive, then, the trade-off was that they continue to appear in the media spotlight and by extension the subject of teen pregnancy, which was the goal of the campaign.

Describing the research and development process behind this series of posters, Bill Albert shared that a focus group of 30 teens – the target group for these public service advertisements – was involved from beginning to end. While the campaign itself is aligned with the behaviour-change model, which emphasizes designing, testing and delivering messages (Ford, Odallo and Charlton, 2003: 607), the involvement of representatives of the target audience in the development process moves it towards the social-change model of communication, which advocates “the people most affected by the issues of concern playing a central role” (Ford, Odallo and Charlton, 2003: 607).

In addition, according to Bill Albert, all of the phrases used in the campaign posters “came directly, directly from quotes from real teenagers” (BA 5). At some point, however, an editorial decision was taken as to which word to extract from each complete quote and, removed from its context, affix it as a label or value judgement to the figure in attention-getting large, bold and red capital letters. When asked to comment on accusations, particularly by teenaged mothers, that the ‘Label’ series stigmatizes teen mothers, Bill Albert spoke to the critical nature of social media and suggested that many more were in support of the campaign:

“…just like we all live in a world of social media, you tend to hear from critics. The fact of the matter is there was extraordinary amount of support that we heard from teens themselves for this campaign. And, again, in as much as it was pro bono, the media outlets that ran it were obviously showing their own support for it.” (BA 9)

Teen mother Natasha Vianna, on the other hand, underscores the need to privilege the voice and concerns of those most affected, and identifies the ability to challenge messaging as a positive or ‘bright side’ aspect of social media:
“But what also happens is that social media becomes a two-way conversation whereas others are just broadcasting. So now you’re getting feedback or push back or, if you frame something wrong, you find out right away. (NV 15)

As Rose (2007: 39) noted, compositional interpretation pays most attention to the compositionality of the image itself, which she breaks down into five main components: content, colour, spatial organization, light, and ‘expressive content’, described as the combined effect of subject matter and visual form.

In Image C, the content and colour, specifically the label ‘Nobody’ in large, bold, red upper-case lettering, are most impactful. In Images A and B, spatial organization is most instrumental in meaning-making.

Rose suggests spatial organization produces a specific relation between image and spectator (2007: 45). In Image A, the principal figure has her back turned to the intended recipient – the teen mother – although directly addressing her. The tone of the message is already condescending, suggesting that the teen mother cannot do anything other than change diapers, and that changing diapers, and by association raising a child, is not a valuable contribution to society. The turned back is a physical manifestation of the marginalization of the teen mother from society, further stigmatizing her and negating her value.

In Image B, the perspective of the viewer intrudes upon or ‘breaks’, if you will, the intimate relationship between the child and the teen mother as her visibly distressed child accuses her of reducing his chances of achieving even a minimal education.

In all three images, the expressive content, described as “the combined effect of subject matter and visual form”, is undeniably powerful. The physical rejection in Image A, the vulnerability in Image B and the shame in Image C are potent. When asked about the message communicated by these images, teen mom Gloria Malone remarked: “(They present) a young person who has had a pregnancy as a cautionary tale, as the worst thing that can happen and something that you really don’t want to be.” (GM 4)

Considering the considerable gap in time between Image A, which was produced in 2013 by the Candie’s Foundation, and Image C, which was produced by the National
Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy more than a decade earlier, in 2000, in relation to the earlier question of whether or not representations of teen pregnancy have evolved given progress on cultural, social and political fronts, Gloria Malone suggests that nothing has changed:

“The National Campaign ads, now they are ‘dated’. But if you look at the Candie’s ads, they’re very similar in a sense. They’re separated by years but they just use really old, tired tropes.” (GM 4)

The second main method of constructing meaning is by presenting quantitative data such as statistics as the ‘truth’ about teen pregnancy. Dominant discourse in the United States, as generally in the Western world, is seen to privilege quantitative science, which is considered to be more sound, more expert. According to Wilson and Huntington:

“In the West dominant claims to knowledge and truth are made by science, and consequently scientific discourses determine (and constrain) how we experience the world” (, 2006: 63).

Image B is part of the ‘Real Cost’ campaign, which, as the name suggests, focused on communicating some of the perceived economic and other costs associated with teen pregnancy.

Each of the posters in the series presents a different ‘cost’, which is highlighted in a bright yellow band that crosses most of the width of the poster with black font in capital letters. The words ‘Teen parent’ or ‘Teen mom’ are further highlighted in the banner text in bold, bright pink font, clearly attributing blame. In Image B, the ‘cost’ is: “Kids of teen moms are twice as likely not to graduate than kids whose moms were over age 22.” Other banners in the series read:

- Are you ready to raise a child by yourself? 90 percent of teen parents don't marry each other.
- Think being a teen parent won't cost you? Expect to spend more than $10,000 a year to raise a child.
- Think being a teen parent won't cost you? NY state law requires a parent to pay child support until a child is 21.
Focusing on numbers to frame the teen mother and child relationship again here illustrates how reductionist stereotypes serve to dehumanize the marginalized. Wilson and Huntington caution:

“Reliance on quantitative data, however, tends to overlook the contextual nature of human behaviour and can give a distorted and limited understanding of a person’s life” (2006: 69).

In three of the four posters in the ‘Real Cost’ campaign series, including Image B, the children depicted are of colour or mixed-race.

The founding members of #NoTeenShame interviewed for this study raised the critical issue of race a number of times when describing their experiences with representations of teen pregnancy and childbearing as both producers and consumers. Generally, Natasha Vianna observed:

“You will see that especially in a lot of teen pregnancy prevention campaigns that use children of colour or use teen fathers and mothers of colour and will usually throw in one white teen just to not not have one, but predominately they use young people of colour.” (NV 12)

Here, by linking quantitative costs, particularly economic costs, directly to communities of colour, which are stereotypically of lower-economic status, the message inferred by the ‘Real Cost’ images is that the costs associated with teen childbearing will be paid through public tax dollars. As described by Natasha Vianna:

“Oftentimes, teen pregnancy is framed as a burden that impacts all Americans because of, you know, the National Campaign does this every year, they attach teen parents and our children to this large lump of tax money that people are ‘wasting’ their tax money on teen parents and their children, who if they had just taken birth control or not had sex, they wouldn’t be wasting all this money.” (NV 12)

She continues, addressing more directly the issue of race, which can further compound the stigma of teen mothers of colour:

“I also think that there also is the reality that because Latinas and young black women are more likely to become teen parents than white and Asian young women, I think there is a racial piece to that. It’s seen as a women of colour issue, but yet we’re all paying for it.” (NV 12)
Lastly, it is worth noting that, despite the fact that research has proven that increased access to contraception and the ability to use it effectively is the single most effective method of preventing teen pregnancies, none of these three images analyze contain information in this regard. Image B does provide a means of accessing information on further costs of teen pregnancy but none on how to prevent it.

5.2. How Do Visual Texts Resist Dominant Representations of Teen Pregnancy in the United States?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMAGE D</th>
<th>IMAGE E</th>
<th>IMAGE F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#NoTeenShame movement – Natasha Vianna, co-founder</td>
<td>#NoTeenShame movement – Gloria Malone, co-founder</td>
<td>Planned Parenthood of Columbia Willamette – ‘Sexuality is a gift’ campaign</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, again using textual analysis, I examine the second set of three images, which have been produced as a means of resisting the construction of teen pregnancy as a ‘problem’ of public concern reflected in current public discourse.

In this discussion, I refer primarily to one of three methods of resistance proposed by Hall, namely, substituting negative imagery with positive (1997: 269). Hall describes this
strategy as an attempt “to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected,” and suggests it may be executed in two ways: by challenging or reappropriating dominant representations and by creating alternative narratives. (Hall, 1997: 272)

Image D is an example of reappropriation, namely of Image A in the first set of images analyzed and its inference that teen mothers are too busy changing diapers to be able to change the world. It was produced by the #NoTeenShame movement, which aims to push back against negative representations of teen mothers used in teen pregnancy campaigns.

Image D is what Löwgren and Reimer would call a ‘remake’, that is, a “work made from scratch but based on what others have done” (2013: Chapter 7).

It is made from scratch but includes many of the same elements of content and colour – two of the five components of compositional interpretation proposed by Rose – as Image A in order to make the link between the two.

Like Image A, Image D includes a photograph of a single female figure. In Image A, the female is pop singer Carly Rae Jepsen, who at the time of the campaign launch had a hit on the pop music charts. She is one of a number of glamorous and popular young female celebrities mostly from the worlds of music, film and television depicted as spokespeople in the ‘Change It!’ campaign. In Image D, the female is Wendy Davis, a teen mother herself, who at the time the image was created was a United States senator from Texas and had gained national media attention by conducting an 11-hour-long filibuster to block a bill that included more restrictive abortion regulations for the state of Texas. According to Natasha Vianna, the image of Wendy Davis was a deliberate device used to resist the claim in Image A that teen mothers are incapable of changing the world:

“We specifically used Wendy Davis’s photo in this one because here she was as a prime example as a woman, a mother and a teenage mother, who was doing something amazing, who was making serious impact, and who was being watched by people around the world for doing something that was brave, courageous and strong. And so we wanted people to know that there are teen mothers out there who have been and are continuing to do things that are changing the world.” (NV 4)
Here again the importance of using the image of a white woman to challenge racial stereotypes is underscored:

“And also because she is a white woman in politics and often we don’t assume that teen parents become politicians or are white women and so we were very strategic in choosing that photo at a time when everybody was talking about Wendy Davis.” (NV 4)

Similar to Image A, which says in its tagline that “Nearly 750,000 teenage girls will become pregnant this year”, Image D also prominently includes a series of numbers that serve as evidence of Wendy Davis’s accomplishments – “1 degree from Harvard Law, 5 years as a State Senator and 11 hours spent filibustering to protect women’s health.” Numbers are also used to underscore her credibility as a symbol of what teen mothers can achieve – “19 years old when she became a Single Teen Mom”. The use of numbers here, then, can be seen as a deliberate response to the use of quantitative data to construct the dominant narrative of failure of teen childbearing used in Image A and, more prominently, in Image B and similar images used in the ‘Real Cost’ campaign.

According to Wilson and Huntington, “In contrast to the bleakness which typifies the findings of the quantitative science, young mothers … see themselves as making a success of their lives in a variety of ways” (2006: 65).

As described, the use of statistics in Image D mimics their use in the dominant narrative images. In this instance, they also serve to construct a comprehensive narrative of Wendy Davis and her achievements in other areas of her life, challenging the de-linking process and associated labelling that negate other aspects of the life of a teen mother:

“For a lot of teen parents, teen pregnancy is only one piece of their lives.” (NV 13)

As noted earlier, more than 80 percent of teen pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, whether accidental or, too often, the result of coercion. Yet, it is the single fact that they became pregnant as teenagers which defines their identity in the view of society and differentiates them from other adolescent females and from other mothers.
As Hall explained, the resistance strategy seen here, of substituting negative imagery with positive, “greatly expands the range of … representations and the complexity … thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes” (1997: 272).

While the photo of the protagonist in Image A appears to be professionally staged and photographed, the photo of Wendy Davis in Image D appears to be a candid shot taken of her while addressing the Senate. This unscripted in-situ photo of Wendy Davis in action, as described by Löwgren and Reimer, enhances the communicative quality and authenticity of the image and presents her as a more authoritative and credible figure.

Wendy Davis is represented here as a teen mother who is a change agent and in a position of power, pushing back against the reductionist stereotype articulated in Image A. Emphasizing individuals and communities as agents of their own change is one of the basic tenets of the social-change communication model as articulated by Ford, Odallo and Chorlton.

With regard to the use of colour to inform meaning, like Image A, Image D uses a bright pink accent colour to the black and white palette. In Image A, the pink colour of the protagonist’s dress and the heart cut-out in the back can be seen as an expression of the promise of youth and romance and a reflection of self-love, which are negated by teen motherhood. In Image D, on the other hand, the colour is used more boldly to highlight the title and achievements of teen mom Wendy Davis and bring attention to the #NoTeenShame Twitter hashtag.

Finally, Image D poses a direct challenge to Image A, by inserting a call to action for viewers to send a message that “Teen parents ARE changing the world” to the Candie’s Foundation @Candiesorg, the producer of Image A, via social media.

Image E is more reflective of the second of two ways the resistance strategy of substituting negative imagery with positive, as described by Hall, can be executed: by creating alternative narratives (1997: 272). While Image E may be seen as a response to Image B in spirit, in reality there was no direct challenge, according to #NoTeenShame co-founder and teen mother Gloria Malone, who is depicted in the image with her daughter and who posted the image to social media channels:
“There are few images on social media that are positive around teen mothers and graduation. I wanted to add to that for other teen mothers to see, I didn’t see many positive images when I was a teen mother out there. So being able to add something to the world of the Internet that was a positive image of a young person graduating with a child was one of the reasons I wanted to put it out there.” (GM 1)

Clearly, the image constructs a narrative of success, as it is taken at a graduation ceremony, with the teen mother dressed in cap and gown, bright colourful flowers in her hand, while the daughter is looking happy and healthy, dressed in a pretty outfit on this special occasion.

The emphasis on individuals as agents of change as discussed in relation to Image D is perhaps even more powerful here, in Image E, as it is a first-person narrative of accomplishment, as presented in the caption: “I wanted to be someone my daughter could be proud of. More than anything I was determined. Gloria Malone”.

Although there is no direct link between Images B and E, it is useful to compare them, however, to explore how the teen mother and child relationship is depicted differently – one constructing failure and the other success. In Image B, only the child is shown in a clearly distressed state, crying and blaming his mother for his anticipated future hardship. He looks up at the mother, however, and, as described earlier, the perspective afforded by the spatial organization of the image allows the viewer to interrupt the intimate bond between mother and child. In Image E, both the mother and child are depicted, both smiling and very happy and looking directly at one another with an uninterrupted gaze. Here, the spatial organization reinforces the strong and direct bond between mother and daughter and only allows the viewer to witness this scene from afar. The content of the accompanying caption, described earlier, which is presented in bright white and bold lettering, also emphasizes the importance of her mother-daughter relationship in any achievement.

Another interesting difference between the two images is the context surrounding the protagonists. In Image B, the child is alone against an artificial and plain dull grey-blue backdrop, giving the feeling of isolation. In Image E, on the other hand, the mother and daughter appear to be in the centre of post-graduation ceremony festivities with many
other people visible in the background, both graduates and supporting family and friends. This gives the sense that, in addition to the mother and daughter appearing to be a strong unit, they are also part of the ‘real’ world and have a supportive community around them. They are not alone and isolated, as the child and mother in Image B appear to be.

The sense of community is extended by the fact that the image analyzed here is taken from the Twitter account of a fellow teen mom, Tara Jefferson, who is ‘passing along’ the image of Gloria Malone via social media to a wider community along with a personal message of congratulations and support to Gloria and other teen parents like her.

This example of solidarity among teen mothers speaks to Wood’s suggestion that labelling can be useful in its potential to organize the marginalized and mobilize collective action to resist oppression. As discussed earlier, the participatory nature of social media is a critical factor in facilitating such collective empowerment and engagement.

Also, with regard to social media, Gloria Malone moves a personal communication into the realm of public discourse with the decision to add the #NoTeenShame hashtag to the image:

“It’s about presenting a different lens of how people look at pregnant and parenting young people and how people look at young people and sexual health information,” she said. “So that’s why the #NoTeenShame hashtag was added.” (GM 1)

Turning to Image F, Löwgren and Reimer would no doubt consider it to be a ‘remake’ of Image C. It is a direct replication in as much as possible without having the original artwork to manipulate. It duplicates most of the compositional elements of the image. Like Image C, it depicts a single female figure. The spatial organization is the same, with the figures in the same proportions and in a similar position, both gazing directly at the camera. In both images, a single word is pulled from a caption printed in small black lettering along the left side of the image and is displayed across the upper body of the figures. In both images, the single word extracted appears in upper-case letters and in the same bright red and bold font.
While the single word can also be considered a label in Image F, the choice of the word ‘Proud’, extracted from the tagline “I am a teen mom and I am proud of my child” connotes a positive narrative, rather than the negative ‘Nobody’ seen in Image C.

Differences in form as well as content add up to a difference in the ‘expressive content’. In Image F, the principal figure smiles and looks natural and relaxed in her dress, makeup and body language. In Image C, the principal figure appears defensive, with her arms folded across her chest, and tense, as her right hand fidgets; while her dress and makeup make her appear both more harsh and vulnerable at the same time. While there is no doubt that the bold ‘label’ is the single element that contributes to the meaning of these images, even if the words were neutral the viewer’s experience with each of these images would be very different: one dark and closed, the other light and open.

This expressive content provides a similar experience more broadly across the two sets of images: the first set appearing artificial and negative, communicating failure; the second set appearing natural and positive, communicating success.

Another significant contributing factor here is the professional versus non-professional production values. As noted earlier, Löwgren and Reimer point out that the amateur quality of collaborative media can be more authentic and genuine and therefore more appealing to viewers suffering from “spectacle fatigue” (2013: Chapter 7).

Interestingly, Image F was produced by Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette, a local affiliate of the global organization Planned Parenthood, which also has a strong national presence in the United States. It is one of an increasing number of formal organizations that are resisting dominant representations of teen pregnancy.

The taglines for these campaigns – Image F is part of the ‘Sexuality is a Gift’ campaign; Image C is part of the ‘Sex has Consequences’ campaign – are clear indicators of the different perspectives of the organizations, which inform their communications.

I am very curious about the origin of this image, but unfortunately I was not able to speak to anyone at Planned Parenthood to ask about its genesis, intention, distribution and
impact, despite numerous attempts to make contact with the local affiliate and also the national headquarters.

I did ask Bill Albert for his reaction to Image F, as it clearly was created in response to the National Campaign’s ‘Label’ posters:

“I think it’s terrific. Lord knows I respect everything that Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette does; they do terrific work out there. They apparently at the time didn’t like these ads. That’s fine. That’s absolutely fine. And I’m glad they produced something in response to it.” (BA 9)

Again, not able to verify its genesis, it is likely that Image F was produced soon after the National Campaign released the ‘Label’ posters, which was in 2000, and most probably in print format for circulation in print media or perhaps in an early Internet environment. We see that the image continues to circulate and remain relevant on social media channels, as it was posted here on ‘Shaming Teen Pregnancy’ tumblr blog in April 2014\(^{17}\). The ability to ‘pass along’ this text on social media provides the opportunity for others to comment and engage with it directly.

5.3. Do Visual Texts Matter?

Again, as Hall said, “We struggle over (meanings) because they matter” (1997: 10).

From a quantitative perspective, whether or not teen pregnancy representations and the meanings they make matter, however, is not certain.

As mentioned, the national teen pregnancy rate in the United States has been declining steadily over the past 20 years, with all 50 states registering substantial decreases from 30 to 60 percent over the same time period. The use of images in the communication efforts at state level varies widely, however, even more so when discussing representations of teen pregnancy and motherhood. At the extreme ends, as examples, are the non-profit organizations the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy and the United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County in Wisconsin.

As stated on the website of the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, ‘reframing’
teen pregnancy” is one of the organization’s three inter-related strategies:

“We know teen pregnancy and young parenthood are complex issues and
driven by many social inequities and environmental factors. Our work is
designed to focus on preventing unintended teen pregnancy while
increasing resources and respect for young parents and their families.”18

One of the main activities of the Alliance is the ‘Pushback Blog’19, which they describe
as “a space for young mothers and young fathers to push back against judgment and show
what young parenthood really looks like”. The blog is managed by teen mother and
participant in this research Natasha Vianna. A second activity is called the ‘Partners in
Prevention Project’, which “facilitates opportunities for collaboration among stakeholders
to find community solutions to the challenge of teen pregnancy.” The Alliance appears,
then, to have chosen to adopt the social-change model of communication, which
emphasizes dialogue and partnership, changing social norms, policies and culture,
building a supportive environment and, critically, supporting those most affected playing
a central role (Ford, Odallo and Charlton, 2003: 606).

The United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County, on the other hand, appears
to have chosen to use the behaviour-change model of communication as one of the key
elements of their teen pregnancy prevention ‘Baby Can Wait’ campaign. The campaign
uses images of teen pregnancy and childbearing to emphasize the negative outcomes of
individual behaviour in an attempt to persuade teens to delay pregnancy. Images
produced and displayed in public places such as bus shelters as part of the campaign have
been called out by many, including the #NoTeenShame movement, as unnecessarily
stigmatizing of young parents. The organization, however, sees the controversial images
used in the ‘Baby Can Wait’ campaign as key to the success of its teen pregnancy
prevention efforts:

“The initiative’s success is attributed to an all-hands-on-deck approach
adopted by the community, which has been honored nationally as a model
for other cities. The effort included the use of several controversial public

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19 Accessible at: http://thepushback.org/.
awareness campaigns designed to show teens how getting pregnant negatively affects both young men and young women.”

In an opinion piece, the Vice President of Community Impact for United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County addressed the use of the controversial posters and presented data and evidence as ‘truth’:

“As is often the case with public health issues — whether this or obesity or smoking — it's imperative that we tell the truth, that we acknowledge data and evidence — even if that means that some audience members are offended. Pretending that teen pregnancy isn't an issue — pretending that early parenthood isn't associated with a host of adverse outcomes — isn't fair to the young people that we serve every day.”

While using very different communication approaches in their teen pregnancy prevention efforts, both the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy and the United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County reported success: in Milwaukee, the teen birth rate dropped 50 percent since 2006; in Massachusetts, it declined 50 percent since 1989, and is currently 50 percent below the national teen birth rate.

How much of this success can be attributed to the communication approaches taken by these organizations and, of most interest here, the images used in the ‘Baby Can Wait’ campaign? According to Bill Albert, the research is not available to answer this question with any certainty:

“So we cannot, I think where you’re going, is say that in some states the progress is because of different communications campaigns. And I would very much caution you to go there because I don’t think the data supports that.” (BA 17)

Bill Albert considers the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s ‘Label’ campaign a success, however, because, 15 years after its launch, it continues to be talked out, keeping the issue of teen pregnancy in the public discourse:

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“The fact that we are even discussing this PSA campaign – again, a pro-bono campaign that at best lasted a year – 15 years on, and that others are discussing it 15 years on, I think the New York Times mentioned it in an article last year, if I remember correctly, suggests to me that it was a quite effective campaign.” (BA 4)

Natasha Vianna disagrees and argues that just talking about the issue does not translate into impact: “…just having a conversation about teen pregnancy, also, does not prevent teen pregnancy.” (NV 9)

This discussion points to the need for more stringent evaluation of the measurable impact of communication used in public health campaigns.

From a qualitative perspective, on the other hand, we understand from teen mothers, that the images do matter on a number of different levels.

On a personal level, the negative images can be self-fulfilling, taking a psychological and emotional toll on teen mothers:

“…as teen parents we experienced shame and stigma throughout our pregnancies and after giving birth. We often felt like we were outcasts, we didn’t deserve support. We internalized a lot of the negative things that we heard about teen parents.” (NV 3)

They can also negatively impact the day-to-day life experience of the teen mothers by adding challenges to already existing hardships as they try to navigate around the stigma and shame. Commenting on the ‘Real Cost’ campaign posters displayed on public transport throughout New York City, Gloria Malone said:

“I have done a lot of workshops here in the city at high schools with teen moms and they have told me, literally, that they would be late for school because they didn’t want to get on the subway cars where those ads were.” (GM 8)

The dominant images also have the power to impact all aspects of a young mother’s life and its trajectory by influencing the behaviour and decisions of gatekeepers in society:

“I also think that these ads are so detrimental to teenage parents because they inform policy and they come from policy. They also inform the ways
in which the gatekeepers in our lives treat us. When I became pregnant, my guidance counsellor completely stopped talking to me. And that’s a problem. That’s a huge problem. Some of my teachers just wouldn’t give me assignments. They said, ‘We didn’t think you would be here. We didn’t think you would stay. We didn’t think you would graduate.’ Because that’s what the ads say, that’s what the movies say, that’s what images and the media say.” (GM 7)

Natasha Vianna also commented on how the images can negatively influence the policy environment and social support framework, which can have real consequences for young parents:

“These people who have been hearing and exposed to these negative images, go on to become our legislators, they go on to become our educators, they go on to become the people who work in the transition office who gets to determine whether a homeless teen parent gets into a shelter or not. All of these biases sit in the back of our minds. Again, they’re unconscious and we don’t know that it’s happening, but we’ve been making all of these assumptions about teen parents because we’ve been exposed for years to these images of teen parents and them being nobodies and them ruining their lives because they made poor decisions.” (NV 13)

The ability to challenge these dominant representations by inserting narratives of success in public discourse, in no small part due to opportunities provided by social media, is critical. It affords the possibility of pushing back against these assumptions and directly influencing opinion leaders and decision-makers at all levels:

“[Social media] has also got the attention of people to begin to open up how they think about teen pregnancy. And that’s really, really powerful. So to be able to get people to start thinking about possibly wanting to think in another way is a big deal. Because it’s hard to shift peoples’ ideas. The ideas they have about issues or individuals. And I think social media has been very instrumental in doing that.” (GM 8)

Findings of a recent study22 suggest that there was a direct correlation between images running alongside articles on poverty published in mainstream print periodicals in the United States over a period of 18 years between 1992 and 2010 and stereotypes reported

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at the same time. The analysis showed that African-Americans appeared in more than 50 percent of the images, even though, at that time, they made up only a quarter or so of people living below the poverty line. This discrepancy was mirrored in a survey undertaken during the same period, which found that Americans’ median guess at how many of the country’s poor people were African-American was 50 percent, though at the time the actual figure was 29 percent.

Similarly, today, while the teen birth rate in the United States is at an all-time low, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reports that, of Americans polled, 50 percent incorrectly believe that the teen pregnancy rate has increased over the past two decades, and just 18 percent understand that it has actually declined.23

Given this, the question of whether or not there is a correlation between public perception and the negative dominant images circulating currently in the United States around the issue of teen pregnancy and childbearing warrants further research.

5.4. What Role Do Social Media Play in Expanding Opportunities to Engage in Public Discourse around Teen Pregnancy?

Taking the ‘bright side’ perspective, as described by Löwgren and Reimer, social media has significantly expanded opportunities for all to control their own representations and to tell their own stories, to reach out to the like-minded to build communities, and to insert their voice and engage in public discourse to build support and effect change.

With the increasing accessibility and affordability of digital tools, at its most fundamental, social media allows more people to communicate with more people, more effectively and more economically:

“For us, social media is an extraordinarily effective way to reach our target audiences in a way that a modest non-profit like ours can afford to do.” (BA 20)

Importantly, the accessibility of tools and platforms and low production costs allow even the most marginalized to repossess their representations and directly tell their own stories:

“When we [teen mothers] all started using social media we realized that it was the first place that we could talk about our lives in the ways that we wanted to talk about them and not necessarily through an organization or through an agenda or through a different lens. It was coming directly from us.” (NV 3)

“I also like that young people who have experienced a teenage pregnancy are putting their own images out there (on social media), because it’s very unfiltered and just very honest.” (GM 2)

The concept of honesty resonates with the discussion put forward by Löwgren and Reimer of how the authenticity of DIY images and texts shared on collaborative media enhance their communicative value and impact.

Social media not only makes one-way dissemination easier and more affordable, but it also enables two-way dialogue and affords the ability and opportunity to interject one’s voice and engage in public discourse – both core principles of participatory communication and the social-change model presented earlier:

“Prior to social media, teen parents were being heard when it was convenient to organizations or when they had a specific agenda or something that they needed feedback on or involvement. But now social media allows teen parents to actually create and shape that conversation and to allow others to provide feedback versus us being the reactive.” (NV 14)

For marginalized groups, like teen mothers, not only is it the newest, easiest and cheapest way, but perhaps also the only way:

“In reality teen parents or teen mothers don’t have any platform where we have equal power to anyone, anywhere. So social media was the only place where we had an equal platform to level the playing field and share power with people who are getting powerful messages out there. So for us it was very strategic in using social media, but also, for us, kind of our only option.” (NV 5)

This comment echoes that of Löwgren and Reimer who describe social media as an instrument of “levelling the playing field” as one of its ‘bright side’ attributes.
As we saw in the textual analysis of some of the images, social media critically breaks down the barriers that can isolate the marginalized and opens up opportunities to build networks of support. These may be among members of the marginalized group who recognize common challenges and reach out in solidarity, as teen mother Tara Jefferson did by posting a message of congratulations and by ‘passing along’ Gloria Malone’s image of success as a source of inspiration for other young mothers.

Increased visibility can also lead to alliances with other networks of power and influence that are active on social media, thereby broadening the support base through association:

“(Posting the #NoTeenShame image of Wendy Davis on social media) allowed us to jump into a different conversation within feminist spaces because so often we didn’t hear much about teen parents’ rights or the positive image of teen parents within feminism. And so feminists all around the world were cheering Wendy Davis and so when we attached the message of teen pregnancy to what she was doing it really expanded our audience and who would become our supporters.” (NV 6)

The potential afforded by social media to reach and influence those who have the power to effect change in the social and policy environment that can impact the lives of teen mothers in a very concrete way cannot be underestimated:

“Policymakers and their aides are using Twitter. And when these things become viral and show up on their timelines, all it takes is seeing this quick image and associating a strong woman with teen pregnancy for them to start, possibly, thinking about what biases they had before.” (NV 7)

Ideally, interaction facilitated by social media should also lead to constructive dialogue and learning:

“(Social media) allows people to push-back and put their voices out there. And for groups like ours, it allows us to hear it better and that can be positive and negative of course. Some people will say I love X and I hate Y and both of those are important learning experiences.” (BA 20)

Considering the ‘dark side’ perspective, social media as a conduit to social change through participatory dialogue does have its limitations. Though social media may be gaining in credibility, it appears that traditional media remains the dominant platform of power and influence.
Bill Albert considers the ‘Label’ campaign to be a success, not only because the posters continue to circulate on social media 15 years after they were produced, but because “the New York Times mentioned [the campaign] in an article last year.”

Natasha Vianna underscored the vital need to move beyond social media and to enter the discussion carried out in traditional media, which, though increasingly challenged by new media, continues to be inherently part of the dominant power structure and forum of public opinion: “… a lot of how teen parents are portrayed in the media are led by larger and more traditional platforms. So it’s been a priority for both me and the #NoTeenShame moms to make allies in different media outlets and to get our message across in these more traditional settings because not everybody is on social media and because we want to broaden our audience…We can do all the work we want on social media but if traditional media is still framing it that way, then it’s going to be hard to keep moving forward.” (NV 16)

More troubling is the darker side of what might be called the ‘glocal’ nature of social media. While the convergence of new and traditional media has been discussed, the local and global also meet on social media. This can be considered a ‘bright side’ or ‘dark side’ attribute, depending on the intention.

Referring to the ‘Real Cost’ posters, Gloria Malone said:

“…It’s basically just taking shame and stigma outside of the high-school hallways where I had to hear it and putting it up on billboards where everyone could hear it.” (GM 4)

Taking this one step further, as all media get digitized (Shirky, 2009) social media becomes the mode of carriage for all communication, including billboard images, and – by extension – corridor gossip.

Another important aspect here is the concept of surveillance and data gathering that is facilitated by digital media. Publicly self-identifying as a teen mother can be risky, particularly in an environment, as we have seen in the United States, where teen pregnancy is considered to be not only the result of deviant and morally reprehensible behaviour but also the cause of a host of complex social problems:

“(Teen pregnancy) is at the nexus of all the things that American people don’t want to talk about. We don’t want to talk about welfare. We don’t
want to talk about young people. We don’t want to talk about sex. We
don’t want to talk about the fact that poverty causes a lot of issues.” (GM 5)

Sharing information, including images, of themselves and their families on social media
can significantly increase the vulnerability of young mothers and their children
to public condemnation or worse as this information moves from the local to the global
arena.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study looked at representations of teen pregnancy and motherhood circulating in
current public discourse in the United States, focusing on those that construct dominant
ideological views and those that resist those constructions.

Based on the knowledge gathered from the textual analysis and the qualitative interviews
conducted in this study and specifically considering the research questions explored, the
analysis has:

- Demonstrated how dominant representations construct a narrative of failure,
based on a moral flaw or poor judgement or behaviour on the part of the
individual and supported by data quantifying the personal, social or economic
costs.
- Demonstrated how representations resist these dominant texts by substituting the
negative with the positive, presenting the complexity of the lives of teen mothers
and their achievements as mothers and members of society and by privileging
qualitative values.
- Identified, to some extent, the effect that the negative images have on teen
mothers on a number of levels and also the influence that resistant images have on
public discourse. On the other hand, it has not been able to uncover more than
anecdotal evidence that supports the effectiveness of negative representations.
This points to a more general concern that more stringent methods of monitoring
and evaluating the impact of communication are needed.
Representations of Teen Pregnancy and Motherhood in the United States

- Identified ways in which opportunities to produce and exchange knowledge, create communities and networks and interject voice in public discourse have been expanded by increased access to digital tools and social media channels.

Overall, the most fundamental observation is that, while perspectives differ over whether dominant representations are effective in teen pregnancy prevention efforts, all engaged in this issue are committed to ending unintended pregnancy, at whatever age, and are firmly on the side of the evidence that proves that comprehensive sexuality education and services – including access to and correct use of contraception – is the most effective means of preventing unintended pregnancy. In addition, and encouragingly, they are all mutually impressed by the intelligence, creativity and passion each brings to this cause.

The most persuasive piece of data that was revealed in my research was the fact that over 80 percent of teen pregnancies are unintended. In sum, these observations and findings suggest that impressive progress in preventing unintended pregnancies, at whatever age, could be realized if the efforts and resources currently expended on propping up – and resisting – the artificial construct of teen pregnancy, as well as the determination and experiences of all actors involved in the issue, were fully committed to the same goal.

It is the view of this study that adolescent girls deserve the same sexual and reproductive rights as women of any age and respect for the choices they make in exercising those rights. The broad recommendation for all actors engaged in preventing teen pregnancy, then, would be to shift the discussion and focus away from the divisive issue of teen pregnancy and, instead, join forces in supporting girls and women of all ages to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive well-being, through increased availability and access to evidence-based information and services, including contraception, in order to reduce the incidence of unplanned pregnancy.

With regard to specific recommendations for programme and communication specialists working in this area on how the power of communication, including new social media channels, can be harnessed to take this forward, I can only echo what was outlined earlier in the discussion of bringing a human rights lens to communication and suggest that the more participatory social-change communication model replace the individual behaviour-
change model of communication that currently underpins the dominant representations of
teen pregnancy, such as those analyzed in this study.

It is the view of this study that progress in teen pregnancy prevention can be accelerated
and, importantly, stigma and discrimination of teen mothers can be reduced, by
empowering people and communities to be agents of their own change, by supporting
constructive dialogue based on evidence, by creating an enabling environment of
supportive policies and social norms, and by involving partners and, most importantly,
people most affected – teen mothers, in this case – in intervention design and
development.

As we have seen, as images become more and more a part of how we experience and
understand the world, they will continue to be a very powerful tool in any communication
approach. It is critical, then, when created for any public health or social change purpose,
in particular, that they reinforce a strength-based message that is free of shame and
stigma and that they empower the intended audience by providing information that allows
them to be agents of their own change.

A shift to communication firmly rooted in human rights principles of self-determination,
equality and dignity, and informed by both quantitative and qualitative evidence was
critical to turning the AIDS epidemic around and transforming the lives of those infected
and affected by HIV. There is no reason the same approach cannot be applied with equal
success to the issue of teen pregnancy and to the experience of teen mothers. Young girls
and mothers everywhere deserve no less.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Representations Analyzed

Image A

Candie’s Foundation – “Change it!” campaign

Accessible at: http://www.candiesfoundation.org/psa_print
Representations of Teen Pregnancy and Motherhood in the United States

Image B

New York City Human Resources Administration – ‘Real Cost’ campaign

Image C

National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy –
‘Sex has Consequences’ campaign

Accessible at: http://fontsinuse.com/uses/8335/teen-pregnancy-awareness-campaign
Image D

#NoTeenShame movement – Natasha Vianna, co-founder

Accessible at: https://twitter.com/RBraceySherman/status/350027955013054465
Representations of Teen Pregnancy and Motherhood in the United States

Image E

#NoTeenShame movement – Gloria Malone, co-founder

Accessible at: https://twitter.com/TheYoungMommy/status/473520158682923008

I wanted to be someone my daughter could be proud of. More than anything I was determined.
—Gloria Malone

Tara Jefferson @TheYoungMommy · Jun 2
#NoTeenShame This is What Happens When We Support Teen Parents: theyoungmommylife.com/2014/06/02/not...
Image F
Planned Parenthood – Columbia Willamette –
‘Sexuality is a Gift’ campaign
Appendix 2: Qualitative Interview Transcripts

Transcript 1: Interview with Bill Albert, Senior Programme Officer, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, via Skype/telephone, on 17 April 2015

Jacqueline Daldin 1: Do you have any questions, before I begin with my questions?

Bill Albert 1: Nothing yet.

JD 2: You received the few images I sent, correct?

BA 2: Yes, I did indeed.

We are the only national organization devoted exclusively to teen and unplanned pregnancy. Many groups that work on teen pregnancy – including Planned Parenthood, etc. - but, yes, only national organization.

JD 3: What can you tell me about that the ‘Nobody’ poster?

BA 3: A series of ‘Label’ ads that we developed with Ogilvy and was released in, hold on to your hat, October 2000. The one on the right is obviously a counter to the one on the left. It was and we fully expected it would be a controversial campaign; there is no doubt about it. It is interesting to me that this very modest, pro-bono one-year PSA campaign launched 15 years was so offensive and so ineffective that people still remember it 15 years on. That’s my sarcastic way of saying that I think this campaign worked.

JD 4: You’re saying the poster was offensive and ineffective?

BA 4: I think that the fact that we are even discussing this PSA campaign – again, a pro-bono campaign that at best lasted a year – 15 years on, and that others are discussing it 15 years on, I think the New York Times mentioned it in an article last year, if I remember correctly, suggests to me that it was a quite effective campaign.

JD 5: Because people are talking about it?

BA 5: Right. In part. I’m not trying to be glib in any way; it’s just that it depends on what your goal is. If your goal is to offend precisely no one, then by all means develop a PSA campaign filled with puppies and unicorns, and rainbows. It will offend nobody and it will precisely get nobody’s attention. If your goal, as was our goal, with this particular campaign was to focus teens’ attention on early pregnancy and parenthood and to, at the same time, break through the considerable clutter of their media-saturated lives, I would suggest that you need to develop something a bit more memorable. And that’s what we did here.
Now what’s interesting and what few will tell you, is that every single one of those phrases – the small print and the large print – came directly, directly from quotes from real teenagers.

People don’t have to like it, and many did not like it, but it did come from teenagers.

JD 6: So in terms of research and development, then, (the campaign) was based on work with teenagers themselves.

BA 6: Yes, they were certainly part of the development, absolutely, from beginning to end.

JD 7: Where did these posters appear? Were they seen in public, in the streets, bus shelters, etc.?

BA 7: No, and that’s the remarkable thing about this. We spent precisely zero dollars to market this in any way. So unlike the New York City campaign you referenced earlier, they were not on bus shelters. What we did is, we worked with our media partners and begged, borrowed and pleaded for, at the time, was mostly magazine space. Again, this was in 2000, so the notion of Twitter and Facebook weren’t quite there yet. So this was mostly in print magazines, as diverse as Seventeen, which you might expect, to places that have never, at that time, touched this issue of teen pregnancy and I remember one in particular, Electronic Gaming Monthly. Again this was a modest effort. We’re a small group based in Washington, DC, modest budget. We had exactly zero dollars, as I said, to publicize this and market it. It was a very modest effort and it got a lot of attention. Because, again, of the nature of the ads. Some people found them controversial. It became newsworthy, the news outlets picked it up, talked about it, discussed it.

JD 8: What are the thoughts about the ‘Proud’ response poster?

BA 8: I actually remember it. I can’t remember what I had for lunch yesterday but I do remember that, and I thought it was terrific. My feeling is today what it has always been: If you don’t like something, you can create something of your own.

JD 9: Which they did.

BA 9: Yes, which they did. And I think it’s terrific. Lord knows I respect everything that Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette does; they do terrific work out there. They apparently at the time didn’t like these ads. That’s fine. That’s absolutely fine. And I’m glad they produced something in response to it.

And, part of me, again, and I don’t mean this in a glib way. I mean this in a deadly serious way. If you show me an intervention that doesn’t offend a single solitary soul, I will show you an intervention that doesn’t work. Almost anything you produce is going to, perhaps, offend some people. Now either that’s a deal breaker or it’s not. It is not a deal breaker for us.

And again, just like we all live in a world of social media, you tend to hear from critics. The fact of the matter is there was extraordinary amount of support that we heard from
teens themselves for this campaign. And, again, in as much as it was pro bono, the media outlets that ran it were obviously showing their own support for it.

This ad campaign came out and the whole world was horrified. That simply was not the case and has no basis in reality. We’re just not that effective.

JD 10: Fifteen years on, is there a newer (National Campaign) campaign that you would like to talk about?

[Opportunity to talk about change in approach, progress]

BA 10: Sure, we’ve done PSAs since then. We have developed different web properties. All of them have different messages. I think you have a communications background. I’m not breaking news to you or anyone to suggest that for different audiences at different times with different goals in mind, you develop different messages, different images. At the time, in 2000, that’s what we chose for teens. Now we have different things. Like I said, that campaign lasted perhaps a year, perhaps. Since then we have developed other things. We developed a property called ‘Bedsider.org’, which is an online birth control network for those 18 to 29. A completely different look and feel. The videos that we produced, the ads we developed to support, a completely different look and feel.

JD 11: I’m wondering about the “18 and over” qualification on the ‘About’ page on the Bedsider.org site. Obviously this could be useful information for a 15, 16 or 17 year-old who is sexually active.

BA 11: Obviously there is no age-gating about it. If they want to use it, they can use it. The simple answer is not a very nefarious one or a very secret one.

As an organization, we look at teen pregnancy and we look at unplanned pregnancy more generally, particularly women in their 20s.

We didn’t have a good intervention so we went to develop one and that’s where Bedsider came in. But importantly, this was researched and carefully developed specifically for a group that is 18 to 29. We wanted to be very clear about who this was developed for, it was developed for women. This is not a site that I would suggest is particularly effective for a 21-year-old man. Now, do men use it? You bet it. Do we develop ads for men? Of course.

Where so many efforts fail in the do-gooder community, it seems to me, is when they try to be all things to all people. As a general matter, they tend to fall flat. Because 15-year-olds tend to be in a very different age and stage of life than a 22-year-old who is now graduating from college, perhaps.

If you try to develop something that will appeal to both 15 years old and 22 year olds, I think you are in great danger of developing a product that is so vanilla that no one want to use it.

JD 12: I see that Candie’s Foundation is one of your founders.
BA 12: Actually, no that is not quite true. They have given us some money in years past. Have we got a modest amount from them in the past? You bet. In the past six, seven years? No.

Is also getting a lot of push-back. What are your thoughts on what they are trying to do?

I think the Candie’s Foundation should speak for themselves. I don’t know enough about what they did to develop these ads, the research they did. I’m just not as familiar with it. I do know that it’s gotten some push-back and I also know it’s gotten some support. I can talk about our stuff because that I know about. I know what went into it. I just don’t feel qualified to talk about what Candie’s did and didn’t do.

JD 15: The proud response, the #NoTeenShame response, what they are saying is that there is no need to stigmatize teen moms in prevention campaigns and that there are other effective ways to communicate.

BA 15: You bet. And I encourage them. And I’m an admirer of their work. And I encourage them to develop whatever they think is best. They see shame and stigma here and I don’t. Others don’t. Others do. I understand that.

You know it is hard to talk about public health interventions, if we consider this a public health intervention, to talk about preventing something when, of course, there are many people, working heroically, young mothers, and doing right by their children. And we should applaud and support and love them all dearly, but we can also say that, on balance, we think it is in the best interest of mothers, fathers, children and society at large that we delay pregnancy and parenthood for a bit. Again, those two ideas are not mutually exclusive.

I think you can support teen mothers at the same time that you say, on balance, we think it’s a better idea to use your teen years for growing up, getting an education and having fun, rather than pregnancy and parenthood. Others don’t see it that way. You know, if that’s the way they feel, that’s terrific. Not the way we feel.

JD 16: Teen moms are disagreeing with the highly visible use of stigma in prevention communication.

BA 16: Let me push back there. If we were to say the US spends X billions dollars on Medicaid, is that somehow stigmatizing to those who receive Medicaid? If you have a campaign about the dangers of smoking, is that stigmatizing and offensive to those who have cancer? Perhaps, perhaps. And believe me I’m not equating cancer with motherhood, here. Don’t get me wrong. The thing is we’re talking about prevention here. Obviously despite the progress the nation has made, we have very high rates of teen pregnancy. Now I think there’s a fundamental question to ask that most people do not ask. And that is, yes or no, do you think it’s a good idea to start your family when you’re 16 and 17 years old? We believe, on balance, it’s probably best to wait a bit. And that’s what we believe. I think for many people, the truthful answer is that they don’t much care. And that’s fine, too. That’s a fine point of view.
JD 17: I see parallels with the HIV response. There was big turnaround related to stigma and discrimination in the communication and it was largely due to the availability of ARVs and prevention methods. And we have prevention methods of pregnancy. Today you would not see the use of stigma in messaging because it’s just not allowed anymore. And communication had a huge role in this. I’m just not sure how stigma plays a role here in teen pregnancy prevention. And that’s what I’m trying to figure out. There have been huge decreases in rates of teen pregnancy in many states recently and what role has communication played?

BA 17: This is important. There have been historic declines nationally in all 50 states, in among all ethnic groups, in first and second births to teens, and in the poorest communities in this country. There have been significant declines across the board. So we cannot, I think where you’re going, is in some states the progress is because of different communications campaigns. And I would very much caution you to go there because I don’t think the data supports that.

JD 18: You don’t think the data supports what? [Clarification]

BA 18: I think different communication efforts can play a real role. But if you play the string out then what you’re suggesting is that the communication campaigns in all 50 states have been quite successful. Because the declines have been better than 60 in a handful of states and 50 percent in many states. So I guess it’s good. If you play the string out even more, if the hypothesis here is that the nation is stuck on advertising about teen pregnancy is based in stigma and shame, one could say then we should probably continue doing that because there has been enormous success. Now that is a glib answer. But the fact of the matter is the rates have gone down.

Is it due to any particular communications campaign? No, I don’t think so. And I don’t mean to suggest that we have any data whatsoever to say that any of the particular advertising campaigns we have done have been effective. We do a lot of self-assessment. We do evaluations. There’s a new journal article out about the effects of Bedsider.org. So we know it and get it, but we don’t know. But we don’t know about any of the particular ad campaigns.

JD 19: Yes, it’s always tough to evaluate communication campaigns. I will look out for the article.

BA 19: It’s in Social Media Marketing Quarterly.

JD 20: That’s interesting. Because my final question to you is about social media. Do you think social media has influenced public discourse on teen pregnancy?

BA 20: There are tons of people who are much smarter than me on this topic. I mean, for me, as an old man here in Washington DC in a small organization trying to reach a very large country, the clear advantage of social media is that you can quite quickly reach whole bunches of people in a relatively cheap way.

Let’s just focus on Facebook for a moment. Our mission is to prevent teen and unplanned pregnancy. The most important denominator there are teens and young adults. We can
reach huge numbers of them in a very targeted way through Facebook. And I hasten to add, we can reach them in a relatively inexpensive. So for us, social media is an extraordinarily effective way to reach our target audiences in a way that a modest non-profit like ours can afford to do.

[Silence]

We could never afford a national PSA campaign. Never. And I would go on to say that even if we could we probably would not spend the dollars that way. Not effective. Too blunt an instrument. In this day and age, as you know, you can target, social media helps you to target your audiences to a fare-thee-well. And that’s a good thing.

[Silence]

And I will also say for terrific, terrific people like Natasha in Massachusetts who does extraordinary things, extraordinarily positive things on social media, social media is great because it’s two-way. It allows people to push-back and put their voices out there. And for groups like ours, it allows us to hear it better and that can be positive and negative of course.

Some people will say I love X and I hate Y and both of those are important learning experiences.

JD 21: That’s great. Thank you very much for doing this.

BA 21: You’re welcome

JD 22: As I mentioned in my e-mail to you, I intend to transcribe this interview and it will be attached to my thesis. I will also make reference to some of your comments.

BA 22: Go right ahead.

JD 23: And I can use your full name?

BA 23: By all means.

Good luck with the degree and everything!
Transcript 2: Interview with Gloria Malone, teen mother, co-founder of #NoTeenShame movement, blogger, speaker and activist, via Skype/telephone, on 22 April 2015

Jacqueline Daldin 1: I shared with you a selection of images that I will be looking at more closely in my research.

Let’s start with the image of you. What is the origin of the image? Why and how you produced it? Was it part of a broader campaign? Where did you place it?

Gloria Malone 1: That is an image of myself and my daughter at my graduation. A friend of mine made the image for me. I had been blogging for a while about my experiences as a teenage mother and it all came to this huge achievement level when I finally graduated from college. My friend asked if she could take a photo of me and Leilani, my daughter, and if it was ok if she put a quote that I had said before on it as well. I told her yes, it’s totally fine.

It served two purposes. One, showing people who have read my blog and followed me on social media, look, I graduated. I did it. I finally did it.

Also, there are few images on social media that are positive around teen mothers and graduation. I guess I wanted to add to that for other teen mothers to see. I didn’t see many positive images when I was a teen mother out there. So being able to add something to the world of the Internet that was a positive image of a young person graduating with a child was one of the reasons I wanted to put it out there.

It also has the #NoTeenShame hashtag on it. #NoTeenShame is a movement of seven young mothers. I think it’s so much more than just talking back to prevention campaigns. It’s about presenting a different lens of how people look at pregnant and parenting young people and how people look at young people and sexual health information. So that’s why the #NoTeenShame hashtag was added.

JD 2: You mentioned that there were other images out there of teen moms graduating and you wanted to add to that. Were these self-representations or part of an institutional campaign?

GM 2: Just themselves. It was young people, on their own accord, putting their own images out there. Organizations aren’t doing that so often and blatantly saying ‘teen parent’.

JD 3: I’m having a tough time finding a positive image of a young mother that is not stigmatizing used by an institution. But maybe there’s no role for that. What would that look like and for what purpose?

GM 3: My theory is that a lot of people get funding from the federal government for non-profit organizations and the federal government gives tons of money to these very narrow prevention-framed campaigns. Whether it’s a visual campaign or a media campaign. A
lot of federal funds go into that. My theory is non-profits that get funding from the CDCs and the federal government agencies, you can’t really go against what the federal government is saying because they can just take your funding. I think that’s one of the reasons why it’s not out there.

I also like that young people who have experienced a teenage pregnancy are putting their own images out there, because it’s very unfiltered and just very honest.

Even the best well-meaning organization oftentimes has a mission. They have deliverables when it comes to their funding. They have to give quantitative data. What exactly did this image actually do? And I think that’s really hard to measure. So I like that young people who have experienced an unintended pregnancy are putting their own images out there because it is just what we feel, what we’ve experienced and what we’ve seen.

JD 3: You said that #NoTeenShame is more than just talking back but it’s about presenting something new. What is the new thing?

GM 3: Individuals who have experienced pregnancy in their teenage years are tired of being stigmatized and shamed. People have been talking back for years. We are not the first individuals or teen parents who have been talking back. But now with social media we have been able to elevate the discussion and reach larger audiences.

We can talk about prevention without talking about teen parents and teen families in a stigmatizing way. I think preventing an unintended pregnancy for anybody is great.

We also have to look at the larger societal and systemic mixing of things like poverty and lack of comprehensive sexual education, lack of access to birth control methods, cultural barriers that people might have, language barriers. So for me, #NoTeenShame talks to those larger systemic things that can contribute to unintended pregnancies.

And we also talk about support, which I think is very different for people to hear. The narrative has been for so long that if we just shame these people…

People love to say that shame is an educational tool. And, I guess, to some degree, if you’re training a dog, that’s right. But you can’t shame people for their decisions just because you disagree with them.

If we had been supporting teenage parents to stay in school, not kicking them out of school when they have unintended pregnancies, or actually hiring parents, especially teen parents, for jobs, I don’t think we would be in the same position as we are today. To sum up, I feel that supporting teen parents is the best form of long-term unintended pregnancy prevention.

JD 4: Looking at the other images, what are your reactions to any one of them?

GM 4: My reaction is that there is nothing new. When the New York City campaign came out, people said, ‘Oh this is so new, it’s innovative, and it’s edgy, and it’s not.’ It’s basically just taking shame and stigma outside of the high-school hallways where I had to
hear it and putting it up on billboards where everyone could hear it. Shame is not new. Just because you do it in 2013 and it’s in New York City doesn’t make it new.

The National Campaign ads, now they are ‘dated’. But if you look at the Candie’s ads, they’re very similar in a sense. They’re separated by years but they just use really old, tired tropes, of presenting a young person who has had a pregnancy as a cautionary tale, as the worst thing that can happen and something that you really don’t want to be.

Also, I’ve been told and I know from seeing these ads before I became pregnant, that they really didn’t change my way of thinking about unprotected sex or unintended pregnancies, because everyone thinks that it’s not going to happen to them. Even people who are older and experience an unintended pregnancies, they think it won’t happen to them.

So these ads don’t do anything in terms of education. And if they do present some form of education or information, it’s in very stigmatizing ways. The HRA, their whole thing was, ‘Well, we have a text campaign where you can text and get information.’ Unfortunately, even when you texted there wasn’t any real information about where you can go get information about birth control or how to get tested for STDs or STIs. It was, again, a repetition of shame and stigma. So I think, again, they relied on outdated tired tropes of shame and stigma and presented myself, my family, as something you just really don’t ever, ever want to be, as if experiencing a pregnancy is the worst thing that could ever happen to anybody.

Looking specifically at the Candie’s ad, ‘You’re supposed to be changing the world… not changing diapers,’ I feel that’s just an attack on parenthood, overall. Parents of all ages change diapers. So you can’t sit there and tell me that changing diapers doesn’t change the world, because you, elected official, or you, Mr. Neil Cole, who puts these ads out through the Candie’s Foundation, someone changed your diapers before and they were instrumental in you becoming who you are today.

JD 5: Stigma was a big issue in the HIV response. It was seen as instrumental in preventing people from accessing services and support. There were huge communication campaigns to address discrimination and it has become largely unacceptable. We still see stigmatization being used in teen pregnancy prevention communication campaigns, however. Why is that?

GM 5: Well, I’m pretty young. I don’t remember the HIV communication campaigns, to be honest.

But if we look at the history of the trope of the teen mother, it was very, very recent. It was instrumental during Clinton’s first administration and in disassembling the welfare system. This was in the really late 80s or early 90s. That’s one reason why I think that organizations still use these tropes, because they’re still pretty new.

I also think that people are scared as hell of youth sexuality and youth having sex for sexual pleasure. So I feel that if we just scare them into thinking that they will get pregnant if they have sex. Then they probably won’t be having sex. If you are trying to stop young people from sex, which I think is almost impossible, crying babies is not the
solution. It adds an aspect of trying to scare young people away from having sex and experiencing sexual pleasure.

Going back again to history of it, welfare is still very stigmatized in this country. So if you have youth sexuality attached to welfare; it’s at the nexus of all the things that American people don’t want to talk about. We don’t want to talk about welfare. We don’t want to talk about young people. We don’t want to talk about sex. We don’t want to talk about the fact that poverty causes a lot of issues. And teenage pregnancy is at the nexus of all that.

**JD 6: What is the power of images in the public discourse around this issue?**

**GM 6:** Images get a message across very quickly. People feel emotion about an image. People can see other individuals experiencing something. Whether it’s a positive or negative emotion depends on whatever path you have in life to make you have that interpretation. So in a world where there is a shortened amount of time where we can have people’s attention, images can capture people’s attention.

**JD 7: What might an effective teen pregnancy prevent campaign image look like?**

**GM 7:** New York City’s health department has really, really great ads that aren’t teenage pregnancy prevention. They’re just great ads. And even if you don’t go to the website you get information from it. It’s a picture of a young woman with her boyfriend and they look like they’re just about to kiss. And there’s text across the image that says, ‘With my birth control and his condoms, we’re 100 percent covered.’

That is a prevention campaign. And to me that’s a prevention campaign of, not only unintended pregnancy but also STD and STI transmission for young people – and that’s the real epidemic in this country. Yes, our teen pregnancy rates are still very high but young people are contracting STIs and STDs at extremely high rates. So they might be using the pull-out method for birth control so that they don’t get pregnant but if they’re not using condoms they’re not having safer sex so you can still transmit STDs and STIs. And that’s something we need to be preventing.

So to me, that’s what a good ad looks like. So it has nothing to do with the likeness of myself or my child or any of that. It’s informational and it gets the point across.

I also think that these ads are so detrimental to teenage parents because they inform policy and they come from policy. They also inform the ways in which the gatekeepers in our lives treat us. So if your health teacher is teaching that teens who have kids are dumb and stupid and their life is over, then it reinforces this thinking that once someone is pregnant their life is over.

When I became pregnant, my guidance counsellor completely stopped talking to me. And that’s a problem. That’s a huge problem. Some of my teachers just wouldn’t give me assignments. They said, ‘We didn’t think you would be here. We didn’t think you would stay. We didn’t think you would graduate.’ Because that’s what the ads say, that’s what the movies say, that’s what images and the media say.
So it definitely informs the way in which gatekeepers in our lives deal with us or choose not to deal with us.

**JD 8:** My last question is about social media and how it has impacted public discourse. You have touched on it quite a bit already. Any further thoughts?

**GM 8:** I think that social media has gotten the attention of organizations and non-profits and things like that. But it has also got the attention of people to begin to open up how they think about teen pregnancy. And that’s really, really powerful. So to be able to get people to start thinking about possibly wanting to think in another way is a big deal. Because it’s hard to shift peoples’ ideas. The ideas they have about issues or individuals. And I think social media has been very instrumental in doing that.

I also think it’s been so, so helpful for young teens who have children. Sometimes we get so caught up in what organizations think and what policy-makers think, we also need to be wondering about how young people feel. How does that teen mom feel about the ad that she saw? How does she feel when she finds a positive image on line? That’s very powerful. And for me, that’s the beauty of it. Seeing young people use the hashtag #NoTeenShame and post a picture of themselves and their child, or a photo of them graduation or I just got my GED – and #NoTeenShame. I just think that’s so powerful.

Teen moms have the highest rate of post-partum depression, because of all those ads and things. I have done a lot of workshops here in the city at high schools with teen moms and they have told me, literally, that they would be late for school because they didn’t want to get on the subway cars where those ads were.

I really, really dislike those ads.

I think that social media has helped young people begin to realize that they don’t need to be ashamed about having experienced unintended pregnancies. They don’t have to be ashamed about wanting information about sexual health and sexuality. And I think that’s one of the greatest things.

**JD 9:** How do social media open up ways of people thinking in a different way?

**GM 9:** I think because they’re exposed and if they see the images over and over again. Or if they see other people talk about it.

Or I think another thing is when people might be thinking, hey, maybe this ad isn’t that great. So with the HRA ad, for example, I had a lot of people whose political ideologies I may not agree with, say to me, yeah, these ads are really terrible.

So I think it helps people come together in a place and agree on something, which is so unheard of here in the United States. We can’t agree on anything in this country! Especially when it comes to politics. And teenage pregnancy has become so political. It is very political.

Social media brings people to a place where they can agree on things.
And being able to say, yes, prevention is a great cause but it doesn’t have to be so terrible and stigmatizing. And having someone say, what do you mean stigmatizing? And explaining to them, this is stigmatizing because it uses racial tropes, it uses class assumptions, etc. And explaining to people why it is stigmatizing and they might not get it at that moment, but I’ve had people email me later on to say, well, I get it now.

It really creates a space for dialogue and for education.

**JD 10:** Thank you very much. That’s it for me. Do you have any further questions or comments to add before we go?

**GM 10:** Another thing about the New York ads, I feel, is that they plant seeds for division in the families. My daughter read the ads – despite popular belief, teen parents can raised educated children – and asked, why am I not going to graduate high school? So I think that it creates a space to make it ok to be a child of a teen parent and to blame failures on the teen parents but not always giving the success and accolades to the teen parent who is able to raise a child who is able to accomplish great things.

Thank you!
Transcript 3: Interview with Natasha Vianna, teen mother, co-founder of #NoTeenShame movement and Digital Communications Manager, Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, via Skype/telephone, on 22 April 2015

Jacqueline Daldin 1: Before I start with my questions, do you have any questions for me?

Natasha Vianna 1: No, not at the moment.

JD 2: I sent you a selection of images, some by institutions using mainly mainstream channels and some produced by teen moms and distributed mainly via social media channels.

Let’s first look at the image which was produced by the #NoTeenShame initiative, which was started by you and other young mothers. Can you tell me how this image, how this came to be, how did you decide on this, what message you were intending to convey, and if it was successful, in your opinion.

NV 2: Would you like to hear about the #NoTeenShame initiative first?

JD 3: Sure, you can talk about that.

NV 3: Is a national movement that is being led through social media by seven former teen moms from different parts of the country, with different ages, different racial and ethnic backgrounds. We were delighted that that happened because so often when teen parents push back against stigma or against the idea that all teen parents are failures, we can often be exceptionalized. We can be told, oh, because you’re from this race or from this location it’s much easier for you, etc., But when there are seven different teen moms from different areas, with different experiences, and we are all in agreement that this is a problem, I think it’s very powerful.

The reason that we came together is because as teen parents we experienced shame and stigma throughout our pregnancies and after giving birth. We often felt like we were outcasts, we didn’t deserve support. We internalized a lot of the negative things that we heard about teen parents.

But something interesting that happened was when we all started using social media we realized that it was the first place that we could talk about our lives in the ways that we wanted to talk about them and not necessarily through an organization or through an agenda or through a different lens. It was coming directly from us.

Every year May is the month to prevent teen pregnancy in the United States and so there’s usually there is a month-long campaign by different organizations, usually led by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and also by the Candie’s Foundation. And as teen moms, what would happen is, every year during this time, we would see really negative images of teen mothers being used in campaigns, we would see a lot of negative statistics being used in the media and on social media and it
would be really difficult for us. For some of us, we didn’t push back or respond, because we began to internalize and believe that some of these things were true. Well, if the children of teen parents are more likely to end up in prison, is there even anything I can do about that?

But, at the same time, what happened in 2013 was that the Candie’s Foundation launched an image, which you’ve included in your selection, an image of Carly Rae Jepson, who’s just a celebrity and a singer, who was popular at the time, with the quote ‘You’re supposed to be changing the world… not changing diapers.’

And at that point, the group of us, along with many other young parents and many other organizations, felt this kind of messaging was not helpful. There was nothing about preventing teen pregnancy, there was no accurate information for teens on how they could practice safe sex. It just basically said, if you reframed it, that teen parents cannot change the world because they’re too busy changing diapers. And that struck a chord with even non-teen parents because it was like a hit towards mothers in general. And there are so many mothers and parents around the world who are making change and to think that you can’t do both is actually kind of strange.

So the group of seven young moms came together and started talking about we can push back against these kinds of messages. But at the same time, we all had connections to different really amazing organizations that have been supportive to us as young parents throughout our lives and so we partnered with a group of about 15 different organizations across the United States who are working to prevent teen pregnancy and are working on positive youth development on the ground. And the agreement that we had, including with Advocates for Youth, who is a national leader in doing work with young people, and so the one thing that thing that we all came together and agreed was that these messages very stigmatizing towards teen parents and were not helpful at all in preventing teen pregnancy.

I started looking into what the Candie’s Foundation goals were. Even on their website and you can see that – and I wrote it down – “The Candie's Foundation … works to shape the way the youth in America think about the devastating consequences of teen pregnancy and parenthood.” And they do that specifically through communication. So millions of young people are being exposed to their celebrity-led messages and their only goal really is to influence teen culture.

But, at the same time, their frame is that their campaigns are making a different because their research shows that young people who have been exposed to their campaigns are more likely to view teen pregnancy and parenthood as stressful, but there’s nothing about actually preventing teen pregnancy. So there is actually no information that these campaigns effectively prevent teen pregnancy or that they’re providing people with resources.

The only thing their research shows is that young people see teen pregnancy as bad. For many teen parents, 80 percent is unplanned, and so yeah, 80 percent of us knew that teen pregnancy was bad but knowing it was bad did not prevent us from getting pregnancy, clearly.
JD 4: Let’s go back to the image itself…

NV 4: And so what we wanted to do with this image is to elevate the reality that teen parents are doing amazing things. We specifically used Wendy Davis’s photo in this one because here she was as a prime example as a woman, a mother and a teenage mother, who was doing something amazing, who was making serious impact, and who was being watched by people around the world for doing something that was brave, courageous and strong. And so we wanted people to know that there are teen mothers out there who have been and are continuing to do things that are changing the world. And that’s specifically why we chose Wendy Davis.

And also because she is a white woman in politics and often we don’t assume that teen parents become politicians or are white women and so we were very strategic in choosing that photo at a time when everybody was talking about Wendy Davis.

JD 5: You used social media to circulate this image. Was this a strategic decision?

NV 5: We used social media for a few reasons. One is, we knew that with Wendy Davis being completely viral on social media, by attaching our message to her name, it would go viral pretty quickly, which it did.

The second is because, in reality teen parents or teen mothers, don’t have any platform where we have equal power to anyone, anywhere. So social media was the only place where we had an equal platform to level the playing field and share power with people who are getting powerful messages out there. So for us it was very strategic in using social media, but also, for us, kind of our only option.

JD 6: Were you successful in getting your message out using this image?

NV 6: Absolutely! We already had amazing support from different organizations across the country that were already working with young people and around teen pregnancy. But what this image did was, it allowed us to jump into a different conversation within feminist spaces because so often we didn’t hear much about teen parents’ rights or the positive image of teen parents within feminism. Feminists all around the world were cheering Wendy Davis and when we attached the message of teen pregnancy to what she was doing it really expanded our audience and who would become our supporters.

JD 7: Who did you want to reach with the campaign?

NV 7: Honestly, we wanted to reach just about everyone. Again, because social media is a place where everybody is online. So we have, our peers are online, our relatives are online, people within our communities are on line, providers are on Twitter. And now, policymakers and their aides are using Twitter. And when these things become viral and show up on their timelines, all it takes is seeing this quick image and associating a strong woman with teen pregnancy for them to start, possibly, thinking about what biases they had before.
We had a lot of responses from feminists who never looked at teen parents rights as a feminist issue before because they were so focused on preventing teen pregnancy. And so we had really quite a big net and we got a lot of different people.

**JD 8:** What is the goal of #NoTeenShame vis-à-vis teen pregnancy prevention?

**NV 8:** The goal of #NoTeenShame really is to improve the way we work to prevent teen pregnancy by focusing simply on positive youth development and accurate, comprehensive, shame-free, LGBTQ-inclusive, comprehensive sexual education. I think I said ‘comprehensive’ twice.

I think the problem for some people is that they think because we are talking about being proud teen parents that we think everyone should become teen parents, which is completely false.

What we’re saying is all young people deserve accurate information on how to make the best informed choices for themselves and the agency and autonomy to make those choices, and then respect and support for those choices.

**JD 9:** If we look at some of the other images, do you have any reactions or comments? Some people say that some that you might think are shaming are effective because they get people talking about teen pregnancy and that’s a good thing so that’s there’s action taken. What would you say to that?

**NV 9:** My response to that is, firstly, that there is actually no evidence to suggest that using the images of teen parents or stigmatizing teen parents will reduce teen pregnancy. That is just an assumption that is made. And secondly just having a conversation about teen pregnancy, also, does not prevent teen pregnancy. It is accurate sexual education. It is access to birth control and condoms. It is agency and autonomy over your own body. So these images, actually, are not effective.

However, and I don’t have the article in front of me, but it’s something that I know is available; there is evidence to suggest that stigmatizing teen parents will actually negatively impact their lives. And so we know that stigmatizing teen parents through campaigns like these are harmful, not just to themselves but to their children, and there is no evidence at all to support that it actually prevents teen pregnancy. So that for me is an issue. And even at the organization that I work in, and we have this conversation all the time, even if there was evidence to suggest that these campaigns are working and it’s preventing teen pregnancy, there is something really unethical and immoral about doing it and there are other ways to prevent teen pregnancy without doing that.

**JD 10:** What would you consider to be an effective positive image that could be effective in a teen pregnancy prevention campaign?

**NV 10:** That’s a good question. I’m not sure if you’ve heard of Bedsider? But they actually have some of the greatest campaigns around preventing pregnancy. But I realize one of the reasons why I think they’re amazing is because they’re not directed to teens they’re just directed at young people who, I think, are over 20-something. Which is interesting, because Bedsider is actually led by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen
and Unplanned Pregnancy. But if you compare it to some of their framing on sexuality and teen pregnancy, the message between the National Campaign and Bedsider are very different.

Bedsider resonates with a lot of young people and resonates with a lot of teen parents who still need resources on preventing another unintended pregnancy. So I actually really like their campaigns. I’m looking at their website right now and their first banner is “Welcome to the free support network for birth control.” You know, “Find a method that fits your body and your life.” And it’s just very simple things that, first of all, don’t use negative images to scare people into making a decision, and are completely focused on giving that person all of the information so that they can make their own informed choices. Whereas [inaudible] prevention campaigns, are not telling teens that they have options, they are telling what kind of decision they have to make.

JD 12: Stigma was a big issue in the HIV response. It was seen as instrumental in preventing people from accessing services and support. There were huge communication campaigns to address discrimination and it has become no longer acceptable. You still see stigmatization being used in teen pregnancy prevention communication campaigns. Why is that?

NV 12: There are a few things attached to that. Oftentimes, teen pregnancy is framed as a burden that impacts all Americans because of, you know, the National Campaign does this every year, they attach teen parents and our children to this large lump of tax money that people are ‘wasting’ their tax money on teen parents and their children, who if they had just taken birth control or not had sex, they wouldn’t be wasting all this money. I think that’s part of it. And I also think that there also is the reality that because Latinas and young black women are more likely to become teen parents than white and Asian young women, I think there is a racial piece to that. It’s seen as a women of colour issue, but yet we’re all paying for it.

You will see that especially in a lot of teen pregnancy prevention campaigns that use children of colour or use teen fathers and mothers of colour and will usually throw in one white teen just to not not have one, but predominately they use young people of colour.

JD 13: Do you think images are able to impact public discourse around teen pregnancy prevention?

NV 13: I think images matter to the extent that they impact on the conversations that we’re having. Teen pregnancy is at a really low rate right now compared to previous years. Yet we’re seeing many more campaigns coming out that use images that shame teen parents. We are seeing a lot of organizations taking credit for the decline across the country. I have this issue when I was pushing back against the United Way of Greater Milwaukee images, I said these images are stigmatizing and as a teen parent here is how it impacts my life. And organizations or individuals within organizations will take it personally and, actually, say, no, I’m not stigmatizing you, which is a form of erasure and plays into the power dynamics of, you know, who is allowed to talk about how these things impact their lives. And if a young parent is saying, hey, we believe in preventing
teen pregnancy but not at the expense of our dignity, and then the people who hear that are not hearing that, that is harmful.

Again, this plays into the idea that teen parents are nobodies and they’re not valuable and that their opinions don’t matter because they made this decision or mistake.

I think most importantly is that these campaigns and these images reinforce what people have been learning throughout their lives. We start learning about the negative impacts of teen pregnancy quite early in our lives, depending on what type of education we’ve had. It’s never framed as a good thing growing up. These images reinforce what we are learning in school or through our peers.

These people who have been hearing and exposed to these negative images, go on to become our legislators, they go on to become our educators, they go on to become the people who work in the transition office who gets to determine whether a homeless teen parent gets into a shelter or not. All of these biases sit in the back of our minds. Again, they’re unconscious and we don’t know that it’s happening, but we’ve been making all of these assumptions about teen parents because we’ve been exposed for years to these images of teen parents and them being nobodies and them ruining their lives because they made poor decisions.

So it’s has a real impact on teen parents, first of all, because at the end it’s teen parents and their children who are getting the short end of the stick. For a lot of teen parents, teen pregnancy is only one piece of their lives. There’s data to show that for a lot of teen parents, many of them were victims of rape and sexual abuse, reproductive coercion or birth control sabotage. So for a lot of teen parents, they were not even consenting to the experiences that they had at their pregnancy and then to face this sort of stigma from peers, and from decision-makers and gatekeepers, it really has a negative impact on our self-esteem and how we navigate the world and what resources we get to be able to provide our children with better lives.

**JD 14:** You have touched on this already quite a bit, but can you talk a bit here about how social media has impacted public discourse?

**NV 14:** Prior to social media, teen parents were being heard when it was convenient to organizations or when they had a specific agenda or something that they needed feedback on or involvement. But now social media allows teen parents to actually create and shape that conversation and to allow others to provide feedback versus us being the reactive.

**JD 15:** Do you see a relationship between social and traditional media?

**NV 15:** I am much more likely to get my messages and information on social media than anywhere else. I’m more likely to trust peers or people I know than a newspaper. It’s much easier for me to use social media to quickly find out if something is true or not. You will get information faster on social media than you would in other traditional settings. But I do know that billboards and newspapers and commercials all still impact young people so I think they’re equally important to discuss. But there is this new aspect of social media that organizations are tapping into because they know young people are on there. But what also happens is that social media becomes a two-way conversation
whereas others are just broadcasting. So now you’re getting feedback or push back or, if you frame something wrong, you find out right away.

Or you have to hope that if you wrote a letter to the editor that it would be posted and, if it did, it would be posted within the next few days or a week – and not on a Sunday night. So we have a little more power, which can both good and bad.

JD 16: You are quite high-profile and I have seen you quoted in the newspaper and on the radio.

NV 16: That is important because a lot of how teen parents are portrayed in the media are led by larger and more traditional platforms. So it’s been a priority for both me and the #NoTeenShame moms to make allies in different media outlets and to get our message across in these more traditional settings because not everybody is on social media and because we want to broaden our audience.

We don’t want to just reach young people or social media-savvy people but we want to reach people who are listening to (public radio) and who are reading the newspaper or who are reading feminist magazines, because there are just so many people that need to get this kind of messaging or even get that little thought implanted in their minds to think a little differently, so we are definitely reaching out to traditional media as well.

We can do all the work we want on social media but if traditional media is still framing it that way, then it’s going to be hard to keep moving forward.