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A randomized controlled trial of soap opera videos streamed to smartphones to reduce risk of sexually transmitted human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in young urban African American women

Rachel Jones, PhD, RN, FAAN^{a,c,*}, Donald R. Hoover, PhD^b,
Lorraine J. Lacroix, MPH^{a,c}

^a Bouvé College of Health Sciences, School of Nursing, Northeastern University, Boston, MA

^b Department of Statistics and Biostatistics, Rutgers University, Rutgers, NJ

^c Institute on Urban Health Research and Practice, School of Nursing, Northeastern University, Boston, MA

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ABSTRACT

Background: Love, Sex, and Choices (LSC) is a soap opera video series created to reduce HIV sex risk in women.

Methods: LSC was compared to text messages in a randomized trial in 238 high-risk mostly Black young urban women. 117 received 12-weekly LSC videos, 121 received 12-weekly HIV prevention messages on smartphones. Changes in unprotected sex with high risk partners were compared by mixed models.

Results: Unprotected sex with high risk men significantly declined over 6 months post-intervention for both arms, from 21-22 acts to 5-6 ($p < 0.001$). This reduction was 18 % greater in the video over the text arm, though this difference was not statistically significant. However, the LSC was highly popular and viewers wanted the series to continue.

Conclusion: This is the first study to report streaming soap opera video episodes to reduce HIV risk on smartphones. LSC holds promise as an Internet intervention that could be scaled-up and combined with HIV testing.

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African American women are disproportionately affected by human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Rates of new HIV infections among Black women are 20 times those of white women and four times that of Latina women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013a). Yet, Black women are no more likely to engage in unprotected sex or have

multiple partners than their white counterparts (Tillerson, 2008); however, they are more likely to have sex partners who are at greater risk (CDC, 2013b; Newsome & Airhihenbuwa, 2013). Greater HIV prevalence in Black communities is attributed to stigma, structural, and racial disparities (CDC, 2013b). Unprotected sex with HIV-infected men accounts for just

* Corresponding author: Dr. Rachel Jones, Northeastern University, Associate Professor, School of Nursing, Faculty Scholar, Institute on Urban Health Research & Practice Bouve College of Health Sciences, 360 Huntington Avenue, 102 RB, Boston, MA 02115.

E-mail address: ra.jones@neu.edu (R. Jones).

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more than 90% of transmission in all 13-to 24-year-old girls and women and 87.4% in all 25- to 34-year-old women (CDC, 2012). Relationships with men and emotional connection are high priorities for many women (Bell, Atkinson, Mosier, Riley, & Brown, 2007; Jones & Oliver, 2007; Jordan, 2010). Because unprotected sex with infected male partners is the leading route of HIV transmission for heterosexual women, it is concerning that unprotected sex is promoted in urban sex scripts as a means to fulfill relationship needs (Bowleg, Lucas, & Tschann, 2004; El-Bassel, Caldeira, Ruglass, & Gilbert, 2009; Emmers-Sommer & Allen, 2005; Jones & Oliver, 2007; Ortiz-Torres, Williams, & Ehrhardt, 2003). Although these scripts rarely succeed in satisfying loneliness and connection in the long term (Jones & Oliver, 2007), high-risk sex scripts remain a challenge to reducing HIV sex risk.

Love, Sex, and Choices (LSC) is a 12-episode weekly soap opera video that was created to reduce HIV sex risk behavior in young urban women. The series portrays four archetypical women who face commonly occurring high-risk relationship dilemmas with men. Sexual health promotion messages for handling these dilemmas are woven into emotion-laden sex scripts and portrayed through the characters' process of changing risk behavior. The effect of LSC video series on women's unprotected sex with high-risk partners was evaluated in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted in 238 high-risk, predominantly African American/Black young adult women in the urban Northeast. Weekly video episodes were streamed to smartphones provided to participants during the study (Jones & Lacroix, 2012). The video intervention was compared with 12-weekly, text-based HIV risk reduction messages.

Background

Sex Scripts and Power as Knowing Participation in Change Theory[®]

Sex scripts are commonly understood expectations for sex behavior (Gagnon & Simon, 2005) that are shaped by one's environment, view of self sexuality, and by how a couple interprets and improvises (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In an environment of gender inequalities, men control condom use (Biello, Sipsma, Ickovics, & Kershaw, 2010; Ehrhardt, Sawires, McGovern, Peacock, & Weston, 2009; Kim et al., 2007; Krishnan et al., 2008). Adherence with such traditional beliefs about gender roles serves to place a man's needs first and dampen a woman's resolve to engage in condom protected sex. These expectations about gender roles are important in forming sex scripts (Eagley & Wood, 2003; Santana, Raj, Decker, Marche, & Silverman, 2006). Consistent with a scripted view that unprotected sex promotes

intimacy, a three-city study of low-income, high-risk women found that being aware that a male partner was high-risk was not associated with condom use, but main partner status was associated with unprotected sex (Ober et al., 2011).

Sex scripts direct how a person interprets an experience because the script associates the event with popular meaning or personal experience (Stacy & Wiers, 2010). With little opportunity for introspective awareness, relevant cues can trigger impulsive emotions that steer a person in the direction of one behavior (Fiske, 2004; Gawronski, Hofmann, & Wilbur, 2006; Stacy & Wiers, 2010).

The Objective is to Reduce Sex Risk Behavior by Changing Sex Scripts

New associations can be created by reframing new sex scripts (Mays et al., 2004) so that risk reducing behaviors could become a more available response (Stacy, Newcomb, & Ames, 2000). The approach of LSC was to reframe these scripts. Women who succeed at promoting lower risk scripts are more likely to characterize themselves as being aware and powerful (Martyn & Hutchinson, 2001). Being powerful means they make stronger choices and follow through to affect change. According to Barrett (2010), power is the capacity to participate knowingly in change. Power is being aware of what one is choosing to do, feeling free to do it, and doing it intentionally. There are four indivisible dimensions of power: awareness, choices, freedom to act intentionally, and involvement in creating change. Barrett's theory proposes that change occurs in a dynamic process of these four dimensions.

Sex Script Theory and Barrett's Power as Knowing Participation in Change Theory were integrated into a framework and themes from a content analysis of focus groups with young urban women were conceptualized as lower- or higher-power sex scripts (Jones, 2006; Jones & Oliver, 2007). In a lower-power sex script, a woman envisions herself as having to satisfy her man. In a higher-power sex script a woman engages in a process of expanding awareness of her value as a woman, of her choices, and engages the will to pursue these choices, such as engaging in condom-protected sex and HIV testing (Jones & Oliver, 2007). The LSC soap opera series associates these more powerful sex scripts with the needs typically served by unprotected sex to increase likelihood of behavior change. For example, if "raw" sex indicates intimacy, condom-protected sex is promoted to indicate caring for each other.

Entertainment-Education and the Soap Opera

Videos that are designed to entertain while communicating prosocial norms and behaviors are known as entertainment-education (EE) (Singhal, Cody, Rogers &

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