

# **Watching young people watching MTV Shuga: Lessons from the use of 'reaction videos' as a form of qualitative observational research**

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# Watching young people watching MTV Shuga: Lessons from the use of 'reaction videos' as a form of qualitative observational research

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## Abstract

**Background:** Mass media campaigns, particularly edutainment, are critical in disseminating sexual health information to young people. Yet there is limited understanding of the authentic viewing experience or how viewing contexts influence engagement with media campaigns. Reaction videos, a popular format in online culture where users film themselves reacting to music or TV shows, can be adapted as a research method for immediate and unfiltered insights into young people's engagement with media edutainment.

**Objective:** We explored how physical and social context influences young people's engagement with "MTV Shuga", a dramatic television series based on sexual health and relationships among 15-25-year-olds. We trialled reaction videos as a novel research method to investigate how young people in South Africa experience the show, including sexual health themes and messages, in their chosen viewing environments.

**Methods:** In Eastern Cape, late 2020, purposively selected 18-24 year-old participants of an evaluation study were invited to participate in further qualitative research, specifically to video-record themselves watching MTV Shuga episodes with their "COVID social bubble". Participants transferred their video recordings to the research team for analysis. To guide the analysis of the visual and audio data, we created a framework to examine the physical setting, group composition, social dynamics, coinciding activities, and viewers' spoken and unspoken reactions to the show. We identified patterns within and across groups to generate themes about the nature and role of viewing contexts. We also reflected on the utility of the method and analytical framework.

**Results:** Eight participants recorded themselves watching MTV Shuga episodes in family or friendship groups, mostly with siblings or cousins. Viewings occurred around a laptop in the home (living room, bedroom) and outside (garden, vehicle). In same-age groups, viewers appeared relaxed, engaging with the content through discussion, comments, empathy, and laughter. Inter-generational groups experienced discomfort, with older relatives' presence causing embarrassment and younger siblings' distractions interrupting the engagement. Scenes featuring physical intimacy prompted some viewers to hide their eyes or leave the room. While some would prefer watching DS2 alone to avoid the self-consciousness experienced in group settings, others valued the social experience and the lively discussions it spurred. This illustrates varied preferences for consuming edutainment and the factors influencing these preferences.

**Conclusions:** The use of reaction videos for research captured real-time verbal and non-verbal reactions, physical environments and social dynamics that other methods cannot easily measure. They revealed how group composition, dynamics, settings, and storylines can maximise engagement with MTV Shuga DS2 to enhance HIV prevention education. Presence of parents and the camera may alter young people's behaviour, limiting the authenticity of their viewing experience. Still, reaction videos offer a unique opportunity to understand audience engagement with media interventions and to promote participatory digital research

with young people.

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## Original Manuscript

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## Abstract

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## Conclusions:

The use of reaction videos for research captured real-time verbal and non-verbal reactions, physical environments and social dynamics that other methods cannot easily measure. They revealed how group composition, dynamics, settings, and storylines can maximise engagement with *MTV Shuga DS2* to enhance HIV prevention education. Presence of parents and the camera may alter young people's behaviour, limiting the authenticity of their viewing experience. Still, reaction videos offer a unique opportunity to understand audience engagement with media interventions and to promote participatory digital research with young people.

**Keywords:** Mass media; edutainment; adolescents; young people; sexual health, HIV prevention; participatory research.

## Introduction

Mass media has become an important tool for disseminating sexual health information, particularly to young people [1-4]. Edutainment is an approach in mass media interventions that delivers educational messaging in entertaining formats. Edutainment can ignite conversations, prompting discussions on topics typically not openly discussed [5, 6]. Yet, the influence of the context in which individuals engage with edutainment—whom they're with and where they watch—on their understanding, actions, and beliefs remains less explored. Furthermore, others' reactions during these media experiences can shape one's perception and the educational impact of the content.

Our knowledge of the context and conversations arising from edutainment consumption often relies on viewers' self-reported reflections gathered through interviews or focus groups. These retrospective reports can be influenced by social desirability bias, recall, and social or power dynamics between participants and researchers. Moreover, they rarely capture viewers' natural, real-time interactions and reactions, including how mass media edutainment is experienced in its actual viewing environment. To gain a more comprehensive perspective, there is a need to capture the unfiltered viewing experience and how the viewing context, including both social and physical elements, influences the effectiveness and impact of mass media edutainment. This holistic understanding can further enhance the effectiveness of sexual health messaging through mass media.

Reaction videos have become a common feature in online and media culture. Reaction videos are recordings of people watching footage (for example, scenes from movies, TV shows, music videos, or comedy sketches) to capture the emotional reaction of the viewers. Audience reactions have become a popular form of entertainment, epitomised by the success of the British reality television series “Gogglebox” which, for 22 series, has documented families and groups of friends around the United Kingdom who are filmed for their observations and reactions to the previous week's television from their own homes.[5]

The rising popularity of reaction videos on YouTube, TikTok and other social media platforms, reflects a fascination with observing other people's natural, unscripted social interactions. By turning the camera around, to show the viewer, the audience becomes the story. As with other media formats, there is potential for reaction videos to be both entertaining and educational. They offer a literal lens with which we can observe the influence of media, in real-time and real-life situations. With viewers' consent to be recorded, reaction videos can become a form of observation research.[6] While viewers will be aware of the recording and potentially alter their behaviour, consciously or unconsciously, reaction videos offer an inside perspective that cannot easily be captured otherwise, and which can complement other data sources for research and evaluation.

In this paper we describe the use of reaction videos, self-filmed by viewers, as part of a mixed-methods evaluation of *MTV Shuga* in South Africa. *MTV Shuga* is a mass media campaign created by the Staying Alive Foundation to engage young people with positive sexual health messages using compelling and relatable storylines. At the centre of this ‘360-degree’ media campaign is a dramatic television series which, since 2009, has reached an estimated 719 million households through 179 terrestrial channels and another 42 million viewers through rights-free streaming on the Internet. Results of our own research have shown a positive association, consistent with a causal impact, of *MTV Shuga* ‘Down South’ (based in South Africa) on young people's awareness and use of HIV prevention tools like HIV self-screening and condoms and greater motivation among adolescents to use pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV (PrEP)[7].

Evaluations of other *MTV Shuga* series, produced in other contexts, such as Nigeria, also show

positive associations of engaging with *MTV Shuga*, for example, on young people's adoption of chlamydia and HIV testing, condoms and contraception [7-9]. Such findings have largely relied on self-reported data captured through interviews with individuals and groups, or in community-based screenings organized by researchers [8, 10]. Young people's real-life engagement with the *MTV Shuga* series have not been documented at the time or in the place of private viewing, for example at home with family and friends.

We hoped that self-filmed reaction videos would complement self-reported data by revealing the physical and social context in which young people view sexual health media content, and how that experience may influence the show's effect. Specifically, our objectives for using reaction videos as a research method were: 1) to create a remote approach to observation, without the presence of a researcher, where young people could record their experiences of watching the *MTV Shuga* show in viewing groups; and 2) to understand how physical context and social dynamics influence young people's experiences of watching *MTV Shuga* within their household or other social spaces, with family, relatives and friends. We also sought to critique the successes and challenges of employing self-filmed observation for research purposes to reflect on the utility of this technique more widely in qualitative investigations with young people.

## Methods

### Recruitment

We recruited participants from a web-based survey which was live online in South Africa from September-December 2020. The survey was part of an evaluation to understand the impact of the mass media campaign *MTV Shuga 'Down South' season 2 (DS2)*, and detailed methods and results to date have been published elsewhere [4, 11, 12]. In short, 3,431 young people aged 15-24 years completed the online survey. Of those who reported ever watching *MTV Shuga* DS2 (n=238), 68 within the study area of Mthatha in Eastern Cape opted-in to further research, to be conducted remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions at the time. Participants were first invited to individual interviews or focus groups, findings from which are reported elsewhere [4, 11], and participants of those activities were subsequently invited to create video recordings of themselves watching *MTV Shuga* DS2 episodes. Initially, the eligibility criterion was that viewing groups should include a parent and their adolescent children (aged 15-19), in order to understand parent-child viewing dynamics. However, when it proved difficult to recruit adolescents willing to watch with their parents, eligibility was expanded to all 68 participants from Mthatha (aged 15-24) who opted in to further research, to watch *MTV Shuga* DS2 with any family members or housemates of their choice (within their COVID19 "social bubble"). Of those, participants were called at random until eight consented to and participated in the reaction videos. Eight was considered to be a useful number to trial the method and analytical framework with a range of viewing groups.

### Data collection

Researchers conducted informed consent procedures via a Whatsapp phone call with the whole viewing group; specifically, to confirm that they were aware of the reaction videos and its purpose and consented to being filmed. The survey participant signed a consent form by email on behalf of their viewing group. For individuals under 18 years the written permission of parents and guardians was also confirmed by email. We asked participants to use a smartphone to video-record their group watching DS2 episodes 5 and 6 both 22 minutes long. It was not required for participants to have seen episodes 1-4 before participating in the reaction videos. These episodes include storylines about PrEP, HIV self-screening, and gender-based violence. They also feature two scenes with physical



intimacy that include kissing, removing clothes, and opening condoms. All participants were able to choose where, when and with whom they would watch the episodes. The transferred their video recordings via WhatsApp to the research team who deleted them from the research phone once downloaded to a password-protected private server.

Four researchers familiar with the study setting and local language reviewed each reaction video and took notes, describing the setting, interactions and significant verbal and non-verbal communication in ways agreed during researcher training, to aid consistency. Following their review, researchers called the main participant of each viewing group via a WhatsApp 'debrief' call to ask about the experience of watching DS2 with this group of people and if they had any advice to improve the show. Participants' responses were summarised and included in the notes. Research notes and debrief notes were recorded in English, and translated from Xhosa into English as needed.

## Analysis

To analyse reaction videos, we created a framework to capture the range of information available from such recordings, including **group composition, physical setting, coinciding activities, social dynamics, and reactions to the DS2 show and this research activity.**

1. **Group Composition:** The characteristics of those involved in the viewing, including their age, gender, relationships with each other, and other relevant information provided by the participants.
2. **Physical Setting:** this describes the physical space in which the participants are viewing the DS2 episodes. It encompasses factors such as the location, the time of day, surrounding physical objects, lighting, and overall environment, as well as the mode or device by which they view DS2.
3. **Coinciding Activities:** Any concurrent activities happening during the viewing that might either enhance or distract from engagement with the show.
4. **Social Dynamics:** The interactions between participants during the viewings. It includes spoken dialogue or unspoken gestures and responses between members of the viewing group.
5. **Reactions to the DS2 show:** Any verbal or nonverbal reaction expressed by participants in response to the DS2 episodes and scenes they are watching. This includes body language, facial and bodily expressions (such as laughing or gasping), and their overall attitudes while watching (e.g., bored, relaxed, awkward, happy) as perceived by the researchers and the debrief call with the main participant.
6. **Reactions to the research activity:** Participants' awareness of the camera, including speaking directly to the camera, their chosen positioning for the filming, and any statements they make in the debrief call about their experience of the filming.

Using this framework, we analysed observation notes and video recordings and transcripts of the audio. We wrote up short summaries organised by each subheading of the framework, for each video. We combined the summaries to look for themes within and across the videos. The lead analyst (VB) discussed emerging findings with the data collection researchers and a translator to ensure they

accurately reflected the video recordings. The researchers involved in data collection and analysis reflected on how their knowledge, attitudes, assumptions and positions (Zulu and Xhosa, male and female, under the age of 30) and analyst (White, British female aged 32) might affect the interpretation of the data.

## Privacy

As part of the consent process, participants were assured of anonymity, and that no footage of the reaction videos would be shared beyond the research team. Instead, moments recorded in the videos were illustrated through artwork with participants' facial features changed to avoid identification. This allowed the context and composition of the viewing group to be captured anonymously, in dissemination of the research methods and findings. A young South African artist (Lunga Jonas) whose age, ethnicity and residence resembled those of the study participants was commissioned to depict the videos through graphic art.

## Results

### Group Composition

A total of eight self-filmed reaction videos were received from eight distinct viewing groups (see Figure 1). Only one group (Group 1) included a parent who filmed her three sons (aged 15-26) while watching the show together. Other groups included viewers ranging in age from 7 to 32 years. These groups, confined to 'COVID social bubbles,' primarily consisted of siblings and cousins. All groups included males: 3 with males only and 5 mixed gender groups. There were no exclusively female groups; all female viewers were accompanied by older male cousins or younger brothers who were not within the target age range for *MTV Shuga* (15-25).

### Physical Setting

As illustrated in Figure 1, the environments in which groups convened to watch *Shuga DS2* were diverse, with a blend of communal and secluded spaces. Use of laptops by all groups may have allowed flexibility in where they chose to watch the show. Groups 5, 6, and 7 viewed the episodes in spacious living rooms with plush sofas and chairs, suggesting an evening setting or at least an ambiance with the curtains closed. Group 1, on the other hand, opted for a more structured viewing setup, congregating around a dining table during daylight hours. Groups 4 and 8 chose the privacy of bedrooms, where they huddled around laptops with siblings or cousins. These indoor gatherings were marked by a laid-back vibe, with participants donning loungewear and pajamas, and sporting bonnets, all contributing to the gatherings' casual and comfortable essence.

Two of the all-male groups, Groups 2 and 3, opted for outdoor settings for their daytime viewings. Group 2 created a makeshift viewing area by arranging chairs around a crate, situated beside an exterior wall. The 4 brothers in Group 3 sought an enclosed environment, choosing to watch the episodes from the confines of a vehicle though they mostly had the windows and doors shut, they occasionally rolled them down to talk to passersby who approached the vehicle to greet the boys inside.

## Coinciding Activities

Communal activities often accompanied the viewing of the show, particularly in groups watching at home. For instance, Group 6 and 7 participants combined viewing with eating a meal, while Group 5 engaged in doing their hair. These activities illustrated the intimacy or familiarity of these groups, however, they also introduced potential distractions. Engaging in activities unrelated to the show led to conversations and actions that diverted attention away from the content being watched. As a result, participants might have missed crucial dialogue or scenes, highlighting a trade-off between enhancing the communal viewing experience and maintaining focus on the show's narrative and messages.

Other distractions included people from who were not involved coming to chat with the participants, which only happened in the group 3 who met in the vehicle.

Phone usage emerged as a significant distraction during the viewings. Although recording the viewings required smartphones, other phones were frequently present and easily accessible to participants. While the majority focused on the show, smartphones proved to be potential distractions. For instance, in Group 2, a participant began scrolling through his phone for several minutes, diverting his attention away from the show. Similarly, in Group 5 the 13 year-old in Group 5 was less engaged with the show than her 24 year-old sister, more absorbed in her phone, and visibly distracted by an ongoing text conversation, as indicated by her active notifications. Both the older sister and younger brother nudged her and told her to concentrate on the episodes. Additionally, smartphones were sometimes deliberately used to 'escape' the viewing. In Group 7, during a scene that made them noticeably uncomfortable, one man turned to their phone to avoid watching the laptop screen.

Despite most groups experiencing some distractions, no group paused or rewound to avoid missing the show.

## Social Dynamics

### *Awkwardness*

While most of the time viewers appeared relaxed around each other, intimate scenes showing couples kissing, opening condoms or discussing PrEP created awkwardness across many groups. Viewers 15 years and younger often responded to the intimate scenes by closing their eyes, covering their faces, or laughing nervously. In Group 1, the mother often teased and joked with her sons about their visible discomfort during some scenes, playfully remarking that "it's not that painful" when her children appeared awkward during an intimate scene about Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis that ends with characters kissing and taking of clothing. Though the atmosphere appeared light-hearted the boys, smiling shyly, laughing with flushed faces, shaking their head and covering their eyes were embarrassed watching these scenes with their mother. In group 6, the teenage girl looks up and smiles awkwardly, showing discomfort as she pushes her face on the pillow to hide from the intimate scene. Her uncle in the debrief remarked, "It was awkward a little bit because my niece and I are not used to each other that much, so I was uncomfortable with some scenes." Groups 5, 7 and 1 in the debrief calls agreed that watching with family was awkward, but overall, they say they enjoyed the experience.

### *Dialogue*

The reaction videos highlighted the social aspect of watching a show as a group especially how it

elicits reactions and facilitates discussion among viewers. In groups of young men, the show's content related to HIV prevention, often intimate in nature, created reactions or dialogue, for example, one participant in Group 3 encouraged the characters on-screen to engage in sexual activity, using the phrase "Shaya shaya [Hit Hit]." Participants explained how watching the show created an environment where they could discuss topics that came up in the show once the viewing was complete. Group 2 shared, "I love watching shows like these with my brothers because we discuss and agree and disagree on some issues afterwards, but it helps because we grow each other." For Group 3, the discussions were also a major component of enjoyment for the show; they stated that they "Loved every moment of it because we discussed it afterwards and shed light, so it was very informative." However, it was not universal that groups enjoyed watching the show in groups—mainly due to discomfort around intimate scenes and relationship dynamics with family members, as referenced in the theme above. As the Group 6 uncle states, he found it uncomfortable watching with his niece, but "I wouldn't have a problem watching alone."

### ***Age dynamics***

The study revealed varying dynamics in viewing experiences across different age groups. Groups in which viewers were a similar age, such as Group 7, found the viewing experience agreeable and comfortable, noting, "It was okay [watching with family]. We are all adults." Similarly, Group 4 said, "We enjoyed it. It was fine because we are almost the same age group."

The presence of younger siblings aged 7-8 in Groups 5, 6, and 8 introduced unique dynamics. These younger viewers were notably active, often moving in and out of the room, yet engaged with the show by asking questions about the storyline, such as "What's happening?" (Group 8) or "Who is Lemo?" (Group 5). These inquiries sometimes elicited impatience from their older siblings. For instance, during a scene in which a character discovers his girlfriend has tested positive for HIV, the 8-year-old in Group 5 begins narrating the event, only to be cut off by an older sister with a dismissive, "You don't need to explain." The video recording later captures the end of a discussion happening off camera, then shows a visibly upset younger brother remarking, "This is such a joke, this is supposed to be a family thing," before exiting the room.

In Group 8's recording, the younger brother playfully interacted with the camera, making faces and sticking out his tongue, prompting a reprimand from his older sister filled with a mix of discipline and humour: "If you do that one more time, I am going to make you rewatch this [laughs and pauses], but I'm serious." These interactions show that although younger viewers were included, their older siblings frequently guided or managed their behaviour. It led to distractions for the older viewers and irritation of the younger ones.

### **Reactions to the videos**

#### ***Entertainment value***

Overall participants seemed to enjoy watching the show finding it engaging and fun. Many participants stated in the debrief that they enjoyed the music, and this was evident during the recordings with some singing along and dancing in moments (Group 6 and 8) and recognizing famous actors in the show. Others enjoyed the other creative components integrated into the show, for instance, the older sister in Group 5 hummed and snapped her fingers during a scene with a poetry slam.

## *Reactions to storylines*

### **Que and Dineo (transactional sex)**

The storyline between Q and Dineo, which portrays a budding romantic relationship, elicited varied reactions from participants, particularly regarding the theme of transactional relationships. Dineo's involvement in a transactional sexual relationship, where her school fees are paid by an older man (a 'Blesser'), sparked comments on the motivations behind such relationships. In Group 4, a viewer empathised, "Things we do for money," when Dineo explained to Q why she was sleeping with an older man.

Que's initial response to Dineo's situation was seen as understanding and supportive. Group 1 mother remarked "That's one understanding guy," as Q came to terms with Dineo's arrangement with her Blesser.

However, Q attempts to win Dineo's affection by spending money on her, generated different reactions. In Group 2, a 19-year-old male viewer noted Q's financial expenditure, remarking, "u fit kanje," which translates to "so much money." This observation was echoed by other groups with expressions of surprise and dismay, watching Q withdraw his savings to spend on Dineo.

In Group 3, participants expected physical intimacy in Q and Dineo's relationship as a return for Q's financial spending, encapsulated in the comment, "Akamunike futhi (She must give it to him now)," showcasing the perceived sexual obligation created by the financial exchange.

### **Reggie and Odirile (same sex relationship)**

The responses of boys and men to scenes showing same-sex intimacy were characterized by notable discomfort. This was manifested by in-jokes and physically shielding their eyes during the scenes where two male characters show intimacy while discussing the use of PrEP. In Groups 2 and 7, male viewers' reactions to these scenes were marked by avoidance; a male from each group walked away when two male characters started kissing. This strong aversion contrasted with a female viewer in Group 7 who laughed at the boys' uneasy reactions. In Group 4, during a scene where male characters Reggie and Odirile kissed, the group expressed their unease (shaking their head and covering their eyes, groaning), with one stating, "They should move on to the next scene" suggesting a collective discomfort or disinterest in engaging with same-sex romantic content. Young men's reactions potentially led them to miss the scene and the educational content about PrEP and HIV prevention options.

### **Daniel and Ipeleng (HIV Self Testing)**

The HIV self-testing scenes in DS2 were designed to be educational and showed the characters Daniel and Ipeleng using a mouth swab for self-testing at home. This scene received a subdued reaction compared to scenes involving PrEP and intimacy. Only Groups 7 and 5 visibly reacted to these moments. In Group 5, someone off-camera expressed disbelief saying "i-swab?[a swab?]" showing she was surprised HIV could be screened with an oral swab. Group 7 participants showed skepticism; one doubted the method's reliability, preferring a blood test and saying, "Don't trust this one; I want the blood one." Another participant misconstrued the testing method's implications, mistakenly suggesting, "If they swab, that means we can get HIV through kissing."

## Reaction to the research method

The reaction videos were on average 44 minutes long, the duration of the 2 episodes together. Some of the videos were sent in one long recording while other groups sent multiple shorter videos.

The awareness or presence of the camera played different roles in each observation. In Group 1, the mother, holding her phone to film the observation, stood over her sons, using the camera to zoom in and capture their expressions. Although her voice was audible, she remained invisible on screen. Her sons were very aware of the camera and often hid their faces, smiling shyly as she brought the camera close. In contrast, the young female participants who watched with their younger siblings (Groups 5 and 8) positioned themselves as the central characters in the viewing, ensuring the camera captured their reactions. They appeared to be aware of the camera, sometimes glancing at it. For instance, the 24-year-old in Group 5 set up the camera and positioned herself within the frame. She took charge of the viewing, reprimanding her sister for checking her phone and not paying attention to the show. Her glances at the camera showed an awareness that the video had captured the distraction.

## Discussion

Reaction videos revealed insightful dynamics within diverse viewing groups comprised of siblings, cousins, parents and friends. The findings underscore the significant influence of physical context and social interactions on participants' engagement with *MTV Shuga*. Observations highlighted varying levels of comfort and discussion, particularly in response to themes of intimacy, including same-sex intimacy, HIV prevention, and transactional sex, which were influenced by familial and peer relationships and dynamics. The varied settings of communal living rooms, private bedrooms outside, and activities concurrent to viewing, such as eating, styling hair, and using smartphones, modulated the viewing experience. The study revealed the potential of self-filmed observations to capture genuine reactions and discussions, offering a rich, unmediated insight into the viewers' experiences. However, the technique also posed challenges, including varying levels of camera awareness and engagement with the content, which could influence the authenticity of young people's viewing experience.

The reaction videos reveal the spontaneity and authenticity of viewers' reactions in real-time, providing unfiltered access to their immediate emotional responses to the show's content. Follow-up questions with a researcher further enrich this data, allowing participants to reflect on and articulate their experiences, offering a dual layer of insight—immediate reactions and post-viewing reflections.

Reaction videos can potentially minimize researcher influence and maximise participant control. Drawing from the principles of visual methodologies and participatory research rooted in the traditions of ethnography within anthropology and sociology[13, 14], these videos enabled participants to document their reactions to *MTV Shuga* within the familiarity of their social and physical environments. This approach leverages smartphone cameras to allow participants to show their own perspectives while enabling remote observation by researchers. This eliminates the need for a researcher's physical presence, potentially reducing response bias as the presence of the in-person researcher will not influence social dynamics. While the absence of a researcher can diminish direct influence, the visible awareness of being filmed and the anticipation of sharing these recordings for research will shape participants' behaviour.

Granting participants the autonomy to decide their positioning in front of the camera and select the moments they wish to record transforms the research process into a participatory one. The dynamic of power and control shifts as participants handle the camera by self-focusing or navigating family interactions, like younger siblings guided by older ones or parents capturing playful dominance over their children's reactions. Participatory research is vital in adolescent research as it can examine power and voice while simultaneously being an empowering activity, building agency and giving voice to underrepresented or marginalised groups[15].

Filming reactions in the comfort of their own homes or chosen environments, participants provide authentic insights closely reflecting how they naturally might consume and engage with *MTV Shuga*. Open living rooms with communal activities created potential distractions, while bedrooms offered a more intimate and focused viewing experience, allowing participants to huddle together and engage deeply with the content. Outdoor settings allowed participants to view away homes in peer groups.

The group's composition, determined by the main participant, could reveal with whom young people would most naturally watch *MTV Shuga*, provided the main participant has the freedom to select the group they would most authentically watch with. The participants' choice was hindered in our study due to COVID-19 social restrictions. While the group composition may not reflect participants' preferred or natural choice, it did reveal important social dynamics, e.g., the discomfort when viewing with older relatives (a parent or uncle), the distractions when viewing with young siblings, the disruptions of coinciding activities like smartphone use or passers-by, can impede the educational and entertainment value of watching *MTV Shuga*. These are important insights but enabling participant choice about their preferred and more natural viewing experience, for the video recordings, could reveal more ways in which viewers can be comfortable (physically and socially) and most receptive to the educational value of the show. Reaction videos can also be adapted to solo reactions, which could yield insights into more personalized viewpoints again akin to those shared on social media platforms. As noted by some participants, some would be more comfortable viewing *MTV Shuga* alone. Indeed, engaging in the reaction videos may have inspired some to view more *MTV Shuga* episodes, under other conditions, but we did not follow up the participants.

Social dynamics played a crucial role in shaping the viewing experience, especially regarding age dynamics. Even during the recruitment phase, participants resisted joining the qualitative reaction videos as we initially requested that adolescents (aged 15-19) watch the show with parents. While we initially hypothesized that *MTV Shuga* could have a 'family influence' by encouraging communication between parents and adolescents, we have since observed resistance to this in other research activities, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in which adolescents cite discomfort in viewing sexually explicit content with parents, for fears of awkwardness and judgment[11, 12]. Some parents shared an interest in viewing and learning from the show, but encouraging 'family' or inter-generational viewings can depend on the cultural context, for example, whether social norms about adolescent or pre-marital sex can be challenged safely.

Participants noted that watching with peers of similar ages made the viewing experience more engaging, often sparking discussions and learning opportunities among them. The groups who reported engaging in discussions after watching the show were those young men who viewed it outside their homes. As we observed in other research, this calls for creating spaces and opportunities for youth to consume sexual health media together in youth-friendly spaces[11, 12].

Real-time reaction, particularly among viewing groups who felt they were not "the same age", showed how visual intimacy scenes in *MTV Shuga* scenes, such as characters kissing, undressing, or reaching for condoms, created discomfort among many groups. This led to distractions and

awkwardness as participants covered their faces, walked out of the room or picked up their phones often during critical and short HIV prevention scenes. It's not clear if these reactions were due to the presence of others in the viewing group or the presence of the camera (spurred by social expectations), and may not have happened in the absence of either. Nevertheless, while visual intimacy can elicit embarrassment, discussions on sexual topics were approached with comfort when not accompanied by intimate scenes. For instance, participants in several groups engaged in animated discussions about Q and Dineo's relationship around transactional sex. Groups of young men were content watching scenes of Reggie and Odirile discussing sexual health and only reacted negatively when the couple kissed onscreen. This shows that *MTV Shuga* may be more effective at facilitating conversations around sexual health and relationships if it reduces the intimate scenes that can make viewing uncomfortable. However, the show must balance its aim of creating destigmatised representative content (for instance, to help normalize kissing among a same-sex couple) with creating content that is comfortable to its audience[16]. And, in some cases, generating a strong or discomfiting reaction can challenge viewers to think and learn, and leave a more lasting impression, as long as it is not harmful or gratuitous.

The HIV screening scene, particularly the depiction of a swab for self-screening, generated limited dialogue and, concerningly, misconceptions about HIV transmission through saliva. Similar findings were documented in our earlier research [7]. To prevent misunderstandings and concerns among viewers, future series can embed clearer explanations of how oral swabs check for HIV antibodies in saliva, and do not detect the HIV virus itself, given the absence of real-time clarification from health professionals in media interventions.

## Limitations

Findings from this study, involving a small sample of eight reaction videos from a specific region of South Africa, may not be generalizable to other social and cultural contexts. The demographics of participants do not represent *MTV Shuga* viewers in South Africa, as it excluded female-only groups. Females constitute the largest viewing group of the MTV series. Recruitment challenges, especially in engaging parents, impacted the study's original design, constraining insights into parent-child dynamics during *MTV Shuga* viewing. The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced the availability of peer spaces and viewing habits. The viewing groups may not have been the group young people would usually choose to watch with. Not all participants adhered to instructions to ignore the camera, but their interactions provided valuable insights into social dynamics. The success of this method hinges on participants' ease with technology and access to the necessary resources, such as the Internet and smartphones and a laptop further restricting who would be able to participate in this study. Challenges arising from the reaction videos included participants utilizing personal devices for filming, impacting the quality of audio and visuals in the recordings. The videos narrow view makes it challenging to understand dynamics occurring outside the camera's frame within the room or other spaces.

Participants' reactions were likely influenced by the collective atmosphere and the perceived expectations of their peers or family members. The reaction videos aimed to capture group viewing dynamics; however, we must recognise that not all who participated in the research would naturally watch *MTV Shuga* in groups or with this group. Their reactions to the activities may have been different if viewing alone. COVID also limited their social contact, narrowing the potential choice for participants to choose who to include in their viewing groups perhaps, influencing the authenticity of the composition of the viewing group.



## Conclusions

The study's exploration of viewer engagement with *MTV Shuga* through reaction videos has illuminated the nuanced impact of physical and social environments on the consumption and influence of edutainment. By capturing real-time reactions and discussions among various viewer groups in their chosen settings, this research method offers valuable insights into the immediate emotional responses and subsequent reflections on themes of intimacy, HIV prevention, and transactional sex. Additionally, the innovative use of these reaction videos represents a significant opportunity for adolescent health research. This participatory approach not only respects the autonomy and perspectives of young people but also provides deeper insights into their interactions with health-related content, and dimensions of context (physical and social), which are not easily captured with other methods.

The study acknowledges the inherent limitations in capturing the authentic viewer dynamics due to the self-selective nature of the viewing groups, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 context, and the observer effect of the camera. The findings suggest that while reaction videos can significantly enrich our understanding of audience reception, careful consideration must be given to the potential influences on participant behavior and the representativeness of the data collected.

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## Conflicts of Interest

Georgia Arnold was the Executive Director of the MTV Staying Alive Foundation at the time this study was designed and conducted, and has since left the Foundation.

## Abbreviations

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease

DS2: MTV Shuga, Down South series 2 in South Africa

HIV: Human immunodeficiency virus

JMIR: Journal of Medical Internet Research

PrEP: Pre-exposure HIV prophylaxis

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## Supplementary Files

## Figures

Illustrations and descriptions of the viewing groups partaking in the self-filmed reaction videos.

	
Group 1: Three brothers aged 15, 18, 25 years and their mother (age not disclosed).	Group 2: Four brothers aged 28, 23, 21 and 19.
	
Group 3: Four brothers aged 32, 25, 23 and 19.	Group 4: Three young men aged 17, 17 and 19; two cousins and a friend.
	
Group 5: Two sisters aged 24 and 13 and a brother, aged 8.	Group 6: An girl aged 15 and her uncle 28. A boy aged 7 is also present but not for the whole screening.
	
Group 7: a family, with three men aged 30, 29, 27 and one young woman aged 24.	Group 8: a woman aged 24- and her 8-year-old brother.