

‘Doing it for the kids’? The Discursive Construction of the Teenager and Teenage Sexuality in *Skins*

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Abstract:

The teen series is often regarded by television scholars as an inherently American genre. Indeed, the genre is marked by US constructs, such as the cheerleader, jock, homecoming dance and prom and, in turn, teen television scholarship has focused almost exclusively on US texts. However, more recent years have seen the emergence of British teen drama series, most notably *Skins* (E4, 2007–), which has been so successful that it has spawned an (albeit short-lived) US version which aired on MTV. In an attempt to redress the dearth of academic study of British teen dramas, this article explores *Skins* in more detail. Journalistic discourse on the programme has frequently emphasised the series’ nihilism in contrast to the didacticism that characterises its US generic counterparts, which the series’ creators justify by claims for its authenticity. This article moves beyond the authentic/inauthentic debate to explore instead the discursive construction of the teenager and teenage sexuality in the specific context of broadcasting in the UK. Thus, after situating *Skins* in relation to the history of youth programming in Britain and, specifically, on Channel 4, the article will explore issue-led storylines involving teenage sexuality in more detail. It will argue that despite the programme’s nihilistic ethos, *Skins* is underpinned by more conservative ideologies, particularly regarding the depiction of gender and sexuality. In turn, this ambivalence makes it difficult to discern the programme’s ideological stance on sexual issues.

Keywords: Britain; Channel 4; representation; sexuality; teen drama; teenager; television.

In her essay on the teen series in Glen Creeber’s *The Television Genre Book*, Rachel Moseley concludes that ‘the teenager remains profoundly

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American', thereby implying that the teen drama series is a uniquely American genre (2001: 43). Indeed, the genre is marked by US constructs, including cheerleaders, jocks and homecoming dances, and US teen drama series have featured on British television schedules since the early 1990s. In turn, teen television scholarship has focused almost exclusively on US programming, particularly *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997–2003) and *Dawson's Creek* (WB, 1998–2003). However, more recent years have seen the emergence of British teen series, most notably EA's *Skins* (2007–), which focuses on a group of seventeen-year-olds living in Bristol and has run for six series. The programme's success is further indicated by the (albeit short-lived) US remake which aired on MTV in 2011.

Journalistic discourse surrounding the programme has been at pains to stress its difference from its US generic counterparts. Perhaps the most obvious of these differences is the series' treatment of sex and sexuality. Issues of sexuality become central to the teen genre as its teenage characters mature. Their sexual development is key in marking the transition from childhood to adulthood and series often emphasise significant moments in this process such as first kisses, dates and sexual experiences. *Skins* is no exception. The narrative trajectory of this series mirrors normative sexual development. The pilot episode concerns central male teen Sid (Mike Bailey) trying (and failing) to lose his virginity, while the following two series focus on his romantic relationship with on/off girlfriend Cassie (Hannah Murray). However, while US teen series portray this liminal teenage period as a particularly vulnerable stage, placing strong emphasis on the teenagers' sexual vulnerability, *Skins* instead emphasises teenage independence, rebellion and nihilism. In turn, underage drinking, drug use and casual sex are portrayed not as problems to be solved (as they typically are in US series) but as everyday facts of teenage life. Indeed, the teenagers of *Skins* have multiple sexual partners and the programme features much more frequent and explicit sexual representations than traditional US teen dramas. In part, this heightened teenage sexual activity is related to the shorter narrative length of British series. While one series of a US teen drama typically consists of 22 episodes, a series of *Skins* lasts just nine or ten. Yet these more frequent portrayals of sexual behaviour are related not only to the series' condensed narrative form, but also to the different discursive construction of the figure of the British teenager, as this article will go on to explore.

The justification for this portrayal of teenage behaviour (in a British context) as largely consequence-free is often tied to claims

of authenticity. To my knowledge, there is no academic scholarship on contemporary British teen drama series, but journalistic discourse surrounding these programmes tends to focus on whether their representations of teenagers and teenage life are authentic or not (Bidisha 2008). As British journalist Edward Behrens argues:

Dawson's Creek was the grandfather of teen drama. It allowed teenagers on screen and it allowed them to have their own fantasy lives. It was the first and it was thrilling. But, my God, on reflection, what a fantasy it was. *Skins* may be the coolest show on TV, everyone may want to be in their gang but, thank God it's not in Capeside. Thank God it's true, thank God it's Bristol. Well, thank God it's true at least. (2008: 230)

Behrens' argument hinges upon the notion of authenticity, implying that where *Dawson's Creek* offered a 'fantasy' of teenage life, *Skins* offers a reality. The concept of authenticity pervades both academic and journalistic writing on televisual representations of teenagers, arguably because teenagers are relatively marginal figures on screen and are often conceived of and written by adults. Additionally, sociological research reveals that teenagers view the media as an important source of information and thus arguments about 'authentic' representations are often tied to concerns about the importance of 'positive' depictions. For this reason, televisual representations of teenagers and teenage issues are closely scrutinised by anxious adults. Indeed, there is an underlying belief that teenagers are more susceptible to televisual imagery than are adults and thus in need of adult guidance on how and what to watch.

Not only does this approach rest on an overly simplistic notion of viewer identification, but the notion of authenticity itself is highly contentious; thus I am not interested here in trying to determine whether the programmes' teenage representations are accurately reflecting reality. Instead, the purpose of this article is to explore the discursive construction of the figure of the teenager and of teenage life in *Skins*, focusing specifically on representations of teenage sexuality, and relating these depictions to the series' particular broadcasting and social context. I shall argue that despite its emphasis on teenage nihilism, a closer examination reveals that it is underpinned by a more conservative sexual politics. In turn, this ambivalence has important consequences for its depiction of sexual narratives, particularly those involving sexual violence. *Skins* is unusual in that it changes its teenage cast after every second series and thus, to avoid confusion, in this article I will restrict my analysis to the first two series, which aired on E4 in 2007 and 2008.

Skins in context

The construction of the teenager in *Skins* is inextricably linked to both the history of British youth programming from which this series emerges and to its scheduling in a post-watershed timeslot on E4, Channel 4's digital, youth-oriented channel. Thus it is important to first of all contextualise the series within a broader history of British youth programming, looking specifically at the birth of Channel 4 and E4, as well as wider academic and journalistic debates surrounding youth television in this context.

The national differences in the construction of the teenager can be attributed to the different programming histories from which US and British teen drama series emerge. As Bill Osgerby (2004) explains, US teen drama series emerged from family and, later, teenage sitcoms that centred around white, middle-class characters. In contrast, as Moseley asserts, in Britain 'the teenager was constructed as a problem to be addressed and to be educated, but is rarely the focus of specific provision (apart from pop and rock music programming) other than this remit' (2007: 191–2). This is reflected in television scholarship on British youth and television, which tends to focus on magazine and music formats (Lury 2001; Osgerby 2004). Historically, there has been a dearth of dramatic programming aimed specifically at older British teenagers.

Moseley provides reasons for this lack of British teen dramas, analysing the relationship between British teenagers and television between 1968 and 1982 (2007: 182–97). Attributing this neglect to the liminality of the teenage stage, she argues that:

It is this 'in-between-ness' (between production departments, schedules and audience sectors), in conjunction with rapidly decreasing drama budgets... that has generated the long-standing scarcity of dramatic programming for teenagers in the history of British television. (2007: 187)

Indeed, teenagers and television have traditionally been seen as antithetical constructs, as Lury outlines in her work on British youth television. She argues that while television has typically been associated with the commercial mainstream, youth connotes independence and specialist tastes (2001: 13). As a result of this perceived opposition, there is a prevailing view that teenagers seek their entertainment outside the home. Thus in Britain, the teenage audience has traditionally been addressed by educational programming aimed at schools rather than through entertainment. It is this historical

construction of the teenager as someone in need of 'information, education and regulation' (Moseley 2007: 185) that British teen drama series are often at pains to disprove or reject, in contrast to the didactic model that still characterises many US series.

As Moseley's study ends in 1982—the same year that Channel 4 began transmission—she focuses exclusively on ITV and (more so) the BBC. However, the birth of Channel 4 had crucial implications for the construction of the British teenager on television and for the development of contemporary British teen drama series. Built into its remit from the outset was a public service requirement to ensure that its programming catered to special interests and minority groups, including youth, and represented concerns that were not already being addressed by the existing BBC/ITV duopoly. Further, it was to encourage innovation and experimentation in the form and content of this programming. The channel's mode of production, based on commissioning programmes from a newly emerging independent sector, was viewed as central to fostering this diversity (Harvey 1994: 102–32; Doherty et al. 1988).

Channel 4 began transmission, with a strong emphasis on trying to capture the accelerating social and cultural changes in contemporary Britain. This was reflected particularly in programming that challenged the taken-for-granted centrism of British life, caused offence with its supposedly biased and left-wing political and ideological debates, and extended the range of subjects that had previously been shown on television by representing a broad variety of lifestyles. Specifically in relation to sex and sexuality, the channel ran into trouble with sectors of the popular press for its frank sexual representations (Harvey 1994: 117–19).

As part of its address to the margins, Channel 4 specifically targeted youth audiences. Its soap opera, *Brookside* (1982–2003), (created by Phil Redmond who would later go on to create teen soap *Hollyoaks* (1995 continuing) for the same channel), for example, incorporated a greater number of teenage characters than did existing British soaps. But it was primarily its youth programming that proved instrumental in challenging the historical construction of the teenager as someone in need of adult guidance (Hobson 2008: 115). Magazine and music shows such as *The Tube* (1982–7) and *Network 7* (1987–8) constructed British youth differently. As journalist and broadcaster Miranda Sawyer observes in relation to *The Tube*: 'In its early years Channel 4 seemed to be sneaking an entire new generation in the back door whilst the adults tapped their watches at the front' (2008: 226). There was a sense that during this period Channel 4 was addressing British youth on their

own level and free from adult agendas (although it is notable that it was still largely adults who made and fronted these programmes).

Lury explores this construction of British youth by television in the late 1980s and early 1990s, making complex connections between the emergence of the post baby-boom generation and the rise of British 'yoof' television at this precise moment in history. She argues that 'this coincidence encouraged an aesthetic sensibility that combined "cynicism and enchantment". This meant that although they were "not going to be taken for suckers", young people continued to invest in the pleasures and places produced by television' (2001: 1). Ambivalence, then, is central to British youth programming, as I will discuss in relation to *Skins*.

In mapping this aesthetic across a number of channels, Lury includes a discussion on *Network 7* which, she argues, displayed many 'yoof' aesthetics such as wobbly camerawork, odd angles, bad-taste in-jokes, garish graphics and an amateur presentational style that was punctuated by frequent mistakes (2001: 30). Further, the programme refused to create an illusion of real space and frequently disrupted the traditional studio setting. The cynicism and enchantment of *Network 7* was derived from this aesthetic style and the mistakes simultaneously distanced viewers by calling attention to the programme's artifice and drew them in by establishing an exciting atmosphere of spontaneous, chaotic and unpredictable live-ness. As Lury explains: 'It is exactly a mixture of belief and disbelief that characterizes the yoof TV aesthetic. It is an uneasy *play* between investment and alienation, between an outsider's distaste and detachment and the insider's investment and knowledge' (2001: 42, emphasis original).

While Lury's study ends in 1995 and does not include analysis of any British youth dramas, this sensibility and aesthetic of 'cynicism and enchantment' can be productively transferred onto *Skins*. While the series does not display many of the aesthetic markers identified by Lury, appropriating instead an aesthetic style that is arguably closer to a British social realist soap, it does demonstrate 'yoof' characteristics in its bad-taste humour, which relies upon the juxtaposition of unlikely audiovisual elements. The first episode of series 2 ('Maxxie and Tony'), for example, features two of the central male characters being sexually propositioned by eight-year-old girls. The series also oscillates between cynicism and enchantment in its mode of address, as I shall discuss.

This tonal inconsistency is characteristic of the teen genre more widely. Moseley argues that many US teen drama series offer 'a broad address in which both engagement with the melodramatic/emotional

and knowing distance can be accommodated', using *Dawson's Creek's* blend of self-consciousness and intense emotionality as an example (2001: 43). Yet British teen drama series offer a more pronounced example of this broad address, in which the contrasting sensibilities of cynicism and enchantment transcend editing or witty one-liners to be mapped directly onto the image. For example, the series 1 finale of *Skins* ends with the character of Tony (Nicholas Hoult) being hit by a bus. The scene is shocking, dramatic and upsetting, with Tony lying bleeding and unconscious in his younger sister's arms. However, the emotion is undermined when the action suddenly and surreally cuts to Tony's best friend, Sid, singing Cat Stevens' *Wild World* directly into the camera, with the other core cast members, including Tony, joining in. The interplay here between Tony's dramatic accident and the self-conscious musical number has a profound effect on the tone of the scene, making it difficult to know how to react. It is implied that Tony is seriously injured, yet the singing undermines this and suggests that his accident should not be taken too seriously. Additionally, the use of a folksy song from 1970 stands out in a series that predominantly features a contemporary, indie soundtrack that underlines *Skins'* youthful sensibility. On one hand, this makes the scene more memorable and unusual, heightening its emotional impact. Yet, on the other hand, the choice of song is highly jarring, conspicuously drawing attention to the artifice of the scene and complicating notions of audience address.

As illustrated by this scene's uneasy mixture of self-consciousness and emotion, *Skins* can be viewed as a development or continuation of the 'yoof' aesthetic of British programming of the previous decades which, as Lury demonstrates, transcends channel identities. Yet its scheduling on E4—Channel 4's digital channel—is also relevant to understanding its teenage representations. Indeed, the legacy of the early days of Channel 4 is evident in the ethnic, racial, sexual and class diversity of the teenage characters in *Skins*. For example, the core teenage cast of series 1 and 2 features a black female, a Muslim male and a homosexual male. While US teen dramas also often feature central non-white or homosexual characters, this tends to be an either/or matter. Moreover, the centrality of an openly gay teen can be seen as part of a longer tradition of overt homosexual portrayals on Channel 4 (Arthurs, 2004: 117).

The series' frank treatment of sex, which is apparent in its pilot, can also be linked to a wider history of explicit sexual representations on

Channel 4. *Skins* opens with sexually explicit dialogue as Tony tries to organise Sid losing his virginity, and the episode goes on to feature full male nudity. In contrast, onscreen representations of nudity and masturbation are absent from US teen drama series, which are subject to stricter regulation. In this context it is significant that the DVD box sets for *Skins* bear '18' BBFC certificates while the box sets of *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003–7) and *Smallville* (The WB/CW, 2001–11) are rated '15'. The sexual frankness of *Skins* can also be attributed to its timeslot, airing between 10.00 and 11.00 p.m. Popular journalistic discourse relating to *Skins* echoes early concerns about the contents of Channel 4's programming. For example, the *Herald*, 7 November 2008, ran an article headlined 'Filthy Party-crashing Craze is Blamed on Teen TV Show *Skins*'¹ while the *Telegraph*, 13 April 2007, ran a piece about the same 'craze' entitled 'Police Arrest MySpace Party Girl'.²

Yet it is important to note that *Skins* emerges in a different climate from the early programming on Channel 4. In the 1990s, the channel was subject to much criticism in some quarters over the perception that it was abandoning its public service approach in favour of increasing ratings by importing US programmes, including teen drama series such as *Dawson's Creek*. Debates about the relationship between the channel's public service values and entrepreneurial tendencies (often viewed as mutually exclusive) have plagued Channel 4 since its inception and prevail to this day, with two essays in a recent edition of *Screen* examining this tension (Ellis 2008; Malik 2008). E4 emerged in 2001 as a direct response to such debates. The rationale for the channel was linked to growing evidence from market research that Britain's youth no longer felt a need for public service broadcasting (Born 2003). As a senior strategist for Channel 4 argued: 'There are lots of kids who just would not turn on a BBC channel; they don't think it's got anything for them. So if public service values are going to remain in touch with that generation, E4 is a bridgehead into essentially alien territory' (quoted in Born 2003: 782). One of the ways that E4 targets this youthful demographic is through its teen drama series. At the time of writing, it currently imports US teen series *90210* (2008–continuing) and airs re-runs of *One Tree Hill* (2003–continuing) and *Smallville* (2001–11). However, as Georgina Born argues, there is a tension between E4 directly targeting niche youth audiences and the 'universality principle at the heart of PSB', an argument that Channel 4 counters by claiming that they target youth 'attitudinally rather than demographically' (2003: 791).

'Doing it for the kids'?

Skins' sexual cultures

Skins, from the outset, established itself in direct opposition to the discursive construction of the teenager in need of guidance, as favoured by US teen drama series, by emphasising the intense independence of its nihilistic teenage characters and offering a frequent—and largely consequence-free—portrayal of underage drinking, drug use and promiscuous sex. It claimed to be free from a moralising adult agenda, as the following comment from Jamie Brittain, the twenty-something-year-old son of the father/son duo who created the programme, illustrates. In response to his father, Bryan Elsey, who was running ideas past him for a new teen series, he argued:

You should do something for kids; but not the usual crap. Get rid of all the moralising, the constant pumping rock music that old people seem to think kids like, the fantasy sequences, the flashbacks, the wobbly camera work, the middle aged portrayal of emotions, the stupid issue based stories, the crap voice-overs, the glammed up 20-something actors who play them. Get rid of all that shite and do something FUNNY instead. (Quoted in Elsey 2007)

Elsey elaborates further, pointing out that 'we're obsessed with drugs, with drinking, with sex. Young people accept these things as givens. Lecturing them is hopeless. Understanding them is impossible. You can only watch and wonder at how well the vast majority of them survive' (ibid.).

Elsey's suggestion that *Skins* offers an authentic, unmediated window into teenage life in Britain is reinforced by the production of the programme, which includes teenage voices on its writing team, and by its casting. The series features mainly amateur actors who, despite being highly attractive physically, are much less polished than their US counterparts and often have greasy hair, dirty clothes and spots. The promotional materials for the series also trade upon this notion of authenticity by connecting the series to the real world through *Skins*-sponsored parties at nightclubs throughout Britain and by creating Facebook and Myspace profile pages for its characters. Debates about the authenticity of the series' representations also enter into popular journalistic discourses. Thus in a 2007 episode of *Charlie Brooker's Screenwipe* (BBC4, 2006–), British comedian Stewart Lee complained that the teenagers on *Skins* were overly 'confident, sassy and cool', and thus unrealistic. Conversely, Behrens argues that an 'authentic attitude' is 'everywhere in the *Skins* DNA' (2008: 229).

The programme's claims of authenticity are often used to provide a justification or rationale for its representations of teenage life. In this way, it echoes arguments surrounding the depiction of social issues in British soap operas (see Geraghty 1995: 71–2). Yet where *Skins* differs considerably is in its rejection of didactic issue-led storylines in favour of portrayals of underage drinking, drug use and casual sex as everyday facts of teenage life about which nothing can be done. Indeed, the trailer for the first series capitalised upon the 'shock value' of the programme by depicting the teenage characters at a wild house party, drinking, taking drugs and having sex. Youthful exuberance is connoted and celebrated through fast-paced editing, colourful clothing and a soundtrack which uses the rebellious anthem of Gossip's 'Standing in the Way of Control'. It ends with a long-shot of the teenagers passed out in a mass in the bed. Crucially, it is not teenage vulnerability or fallibility that is emphasised here, but rebellion, excitement and nihilism.

However, despite the creators' assertion that they are representing a version of teenage life that is free from an adult moral agenda, an analysis of depictions of gender and sexuality in the series reveals that in ideological terms it is fairly conservative and arguably very similar to the US series from which it attempts to distance itself. For example, despite the diversity of its ensemble cast, the dominant point of view presented in the series is that of the heterosexual white male, through Sid and Tony. Consequently the latter character has the most episodes devoted to him, while in interviews Brittain and Elsey claim that they based Sid and his father (Peter Capaldi) on themselves. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Sid's father, although certainly not flawless, is the most well-rounded and sympathetic adult in the series.) The narrative also privileges Sid and Tony's relationships—both with each other and their girlfriends. By comparison, non-white and homosexual characters are marginalised, as demonstrated by the series' structure. Each episode is named after and follows a different member of the teenage cast. Notably, the only characters to share episodes are the Muslim Anwar (Dev Patel) and his homosexual friend Maxxie (Mitch Hower).

This ideological conservatism is further illustrated by the programme's treatment of teenage sexuality in general. As noted in the introduction, *Skins* differs from US teen dramas in its heightened portrayal of the sexual activity of its teenagers. Yet, while the creators of *Skins* claim that the series is free from a moralising adult agenda, it is notable that, as in US teen dramas, teenage friendships and romantic relationships are emphasised and sexual encounters that take place

within the context of monogamous rather than casual relationships are prioritised. Furthermore, the series' representations of teenage sexuality are distinctly gendered, as reflected by narratives which involve characters losing their virginity. Several of *Skins*' teens are sexually experienced before the diegetic world of the series begins. However, it is significant that of the virgins that do exist when the programme starts, females have much more to lose from engaging in sexual activity than males. For example, after central female teenager Jal (Larissa Wilson) finally has sex for the first time with her boyfriend Chris (Joe Dempsie), she soon discovers that she is pregnant. Moreover, the narrative frames the pregnancy very much as *her* problem – she withholds the information from Chris and turns to best friend Michelle (April Pearson) for help. This replicates the traditional notion that heterosexual intercourse is a woman's responsibility and perpetuates the stereotype of male sexuality as something that men cannot control. By contrast, the series' male virgins, Sid and Anwar, face no negative consequences after having sex for the first time. Instead they are portrayed as ever-ready and willing, regardless of whom their sexual partner is, thus replicating the dominant stereotype that male sexuality is unstoppable, natural and somehow detached from the male in question.

Such gendered differences surrounding the representation of teenage sexuality extend to other narratives involving one night stands and infidelity. When female characters in *Skins* engage in one night stands, it has little to do with active desire; rather, such encounters occur because they are drunk, unhappy or lonely. For example, when Cassie and Michelle have non-monogamous sexual experiences, these are closely followed by scenes showing them crying. By contrast, one-night stands involving male characters tend to be depicted as positive experiences and occur primarily because of active, male sexual desire, which is presented as uncontrollable and in need of release. This gendered inequality between representations of casual sex, embedded in the narrative organisation and characterisation of *Skins*, indicates a reluctance to depict female sexual desire as active and potentially pleasurable.

Significantly, the sexual culture of the series fits neatly with Michelle Byers' (2007) analysis of representations of teenage sexuality in the US teen drama series, *My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994–5). Byers argues that these representations are gendered, with male characters' sexualities portrayed as fluid and flexible in contrast with the sexual agency of female characters, which almost always results in loss

(2007: 13). Although *Skins* seemingly celebrates teenage sexual activity as consequence-free, it is notable that the usual, conventional gendered sexual norms apply.

This interplay between, on the one hand, the series' construction of the teenager as highly independent and rebellious and teenage life as free from moral lessons to be learned, and, on the other, the conservative ideology at its centre, has key implications for narratives involving sexual violence and teenage sexual vulnerability. For example, the depiction of teenagers as sexually experienced, knowledgeable and confident means that their sexual victimisation is much rarer. This is illustrated by an episodic homophobic abuse narrative involving Maxxie ('Maxxie and Tony').

The episode opens comically with Maxxie's father Walter (well-known comedian Bill Bailey) practising a dance routine to diegetic country music with his dog for an upcoming dog show. Overhead (and shot from below) six unsmiling teenage males lean over the railings of the housing estate where Maxxie lives, watching. Their inscrutable facial expressions, identical stances, similar heights and casual dress make it difficult to distinguish one from another, marking them as an imposing mass. The music fades as the camera cuts to Maxxie sauntering past the gang. Dressed in a pink and maroon striped t-shirt, a pale blue jacket and a gold necklace, he is othured from the outset.

The camera focuses on each boy as they turn to stare, laughing loudly and moving threateningly towards Maxxie while mocking him with homophobic dialogue. The music is no longer audible at this point, highlighting Maxxie's isolation, out of his father's sight. This is further highlighted by the framing: Maxxie is framed alone while the gang are grouped together. Yet throughout the volley of abuse, Maxxie remains silent and relaxed, an amused smile playing across his face, his hands thrust in his pockets. Humour further neutralises the threat as one of the boys' homophobic comments veers into homoeroticism when he describes explicitly Maxxie's sex life. Silence descends—the only audible sound the squawk of nearby seagulls—as the gang stare incredulously and confusedly at the boy's outburst.

Although Maxxie does become more fearful of the gang, his independence and, specifically, his sexual confidence (he has always been open and unapologetic about his sexuality from the outset of the series) have crucial implications for how the narrative unfolds. In homophobic abuse narratives in US series, perpetrators are rarely depicted and the solution to the 'problem' lies with the homosexual character. Once they 'come out', the threat disappears—but often the homosexual character also disappears (see Berridge 2012). By way

of contrast, in this episode of *Skins* homophobic abuse operates as a catalyst for Maxxie and Dale (Matthew Hayfield) – the only one of the gang to be given a name and (partial) back-story – to kiss each other.

Towards the end of the episode, the abuse becomes physical when Maxxie is chased by the gang outside a party in the woods. Threat is established by the shadowy lighting and fast-paced, non-diegetic music, the beats intensifying the sense of urgency as Maxxie tries to escape. Suddenly he is whipped out of the frame as Dale wrestles him to the ground and kisses him; the positioning suggests Dale's power, but again Maxxie looks more confused than fearful. Indeed, he laughs, raising himself up to rest on his elbows, and explains: 'Dale, you can't just treat me like shit and then just . . . just . . . ah, fuck it!' before kissing him back. Maxxie's exclamation of 'fuck it' is significant here, echoing the motto of his friend Chris, who is arguably the most nihilistic of the teenage cast. Indeed, the nihilistic attitude that underpins the series more generally makes it difficult to take sexual violence seriously. Thus despite Maxxie's initial fear while running from the gang, his sexual confidence ultimately renders him more in control and powerful than the still-closeted and self-loathing Dale.

Another episode from the first series ('Effy'), this time involving the threat of rape, further illustrates the ambivalent portrayal of teenage sexual violence. In this storyline, Tony's younger sister Effy (Kaya Scodelario) is taken to a house-party and drugged by a group of male teens led by marginal character Josh (Ben Lloyd Hughes), as revenge for Tony taking (consensual) nude photos of Josh's sister. Josh then issues Tony with an ultimatum: he will call an ambulance for Effy only if Tony has sex with her. Once again, the teenagers' hedonistic lifestyle has crucial implications for the way that the narrative unfolds. Although younger than the other characters in the series, Effy is portrayed as incredibly wild. In the pilot episode, Tony is forced to cover for her with their parents when she sneaks out late at night dressed in highly revealing clothing. (She returns only at breakfast the next morning.) As Effy is a peripheral character, the narrative rarely focuses on where she goes, establishing her as a mysterious figure, and this is heightened by the fact that she refuses to speak. The episode emphasises Effy's nihilistic behaviour: she sexually propositions an elderly man on the bus, goes to a party at a warehouse, and kisses and takes drugs with a random boy. Even when Josh later injects her with more drugs, she does not protest. As with the homophobic abuse narrative, this behaviour ultimately detracts from the violence inflicted upon her. Indeed, what is striking about this episode is that

the narrative dwells for some time on Effy's actions before she is drugged, emphasising what she was wearing, drinking and doing at the time of the drugging.

The narrative scrutiny of Effy is notable when compared to the treatment of Maxxie, whose behaviour leading up to the homophobic attack is not dwelled upon. Again, this perpetuates the stereotype that women are more responsible for their sexual actions than are males. And yet, reflecting the series' ambivalent mix of nihilism and conservatism (unlike the didacticism of US teen drama series), the narrative does not necessarily operate as a warning about Effy's behaviour. She is visually and narratively marginalised after passing out, and so there is no sense that she learns a lesson about the possible consequences of her wild behaviour. Indeed, in the few seconds of screen time Effy is afforded following her being drugged and 'attacked', she appears to feel no anger or any other emotion whatsoever, in keeping with her general state of blank, speechless composure.

The narrative does, however, provide a warning to Effy's brother, Tony. Sexual violence here is framed in relation to Tony's character development and is part of a long chain of events that highlight his (sexually) manipulative behaviour—including verbally bullying and cheating on his girlfriend and taunting Sid. Thus the sexual violence narrative focuses predominantly on Tony and is interwoven with other storylines involving his friends excluding him from their social activities, further highlighting the effects of his domineering behaviour. After rescuing Effy from Josh, Tony mutters to Sid that 'it's all my fault', and in the car on the way to the hospital the camera lingers on a close-up of his sad and shocked facial expression. Effy is largely obscured and the following episodes place little emphasis on the aftermath of the attack on her. Instead, the series finale in the following episode focuses on Tony trying to make amends for his previous behaviour.

Both of these storylines featuring sexual violence are less about the relationship between normative constructions of gendered sexuality and violence than about issues of personal identity; thus they fail to connect sexual violence to the broader gendered social structures that enable and permit this abuse. In this way—and despite the creators' wishes to establish *Skins* as the antithesis to these programmes—the series' sexual representations are ultimately similar to those in US series (see Berridge 2010). However, this emphasis on the personal cannot simply be attributed to the wider teen drama series genre.

Rather, it stems from the particular series' structure of *Skins*, which focuses on a different character each week. In this context, sexual violence narratives are embedded within episodes about individual teenagers and issues concerning their personal identity—so that in 'Effy', for example, the sexual violence narrative operates in order to further Tony's character development.

The overall ethos of *Skins* further complicates straightforward ideological readings of sexual violence in the programme. The nihilistic sensibility that underpins the series' teenage characters—a sensibility that can be traced back to the history of youth programming that the programme emerges from as well as its position on E4—obscures the seriousness of the sexual violence committed upon them. Thus Maxxie quickly excuses Dale's behaviour in favour of kissing him, while Effy is obscured altogether following her drugging. This makes it difficult to take seriously these representations of sexual violence, or to discern any clear, didactic stance on this abuse. The eschewal of didacticism reflects Elsey's assertion that 'lecturing [young people] is hopeless'.

What is striking, however, is that the first two series of *Skins* feature narratives involving sexual violence in the first place. These are storylines that, across the genre more widely, would typically operate in order to highlight the sexual vulnerability of the liminal teenage stage. The discursive construction of the British teenager as independent and sexually confident affects how these narratives unfold, but their very presence hints at a desire by the series' creators and writers to engage with important and serious social issues that have resonance with young viewers. On the other hand, situating these narratives of sexual violence in relation to the wider sexual culture of the series exposes the more conservative ideologies underpinning the series. Recurring storylines around teenage sexuality are heavily gendered, perpetuating the dominant myth of male sexuality as natural and unstoppable, while reinforcing the idea that females are more responsible for their sexual actions than are males. Ultimately, this suggests that *Skins* might not be 'doing it for the kids' after all.

Notes

1. < <http://www.herald.ie/national-news/filthy-partycrashing-craze-isblamed-on-teen-tv-show-skins-1527212.html> > (accessed 6 November 2009).
2. < <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1548483/Police-arrest-MySpace-party-girl.html> > (accessed 6 November 2009).

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'Doing it for the kids'?

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