

Media notebook: MTV plays 'Skins' game cagily but with little to edify viewers

NEW YORK - Considerable controversy has been generated by the new comedy-drama series "Skins," which premiered on MTV Jan. 17 and is slated to continue running Mondays 10-11 p.m. EST.

Adapted from a British series, the program follows a group of high school students who regard sexual activity, drinking and drug use as normal aspects of their lifestyle. The show's content has led a number of sponsors to withdraw, and the Parents Television Council has condemned it vigorously. Some Catholic groups may also be mobilizing to oppose the show. Yet, for the moment at least, MTV insists that it will not be canceled.

In short, "Skins" plays a cagey game, avoiding outright nudity or fully graphic sexual content. But the debased values underlying the series - taken for granted by its characters and lived out in a thoroughly edgy way on screen - constitute an unmistakable, and alarmingly irresponsible, precedent for television programming aimed at young people. While what might be called the "Porky's mindset" may be well entrenched in R-rated films, its marketing to teen viewers via prime-time TV is a disturbing innovation.

The plotlines of the show's first two episodes speak for themselves. In the first, the smug, supposedly sophisticated main character, Tony, is determined to help his nerdy pal Stanley liberate himself from the intolerable burden of his virginity, announcing that unless Stanley "gets laid before he turns 17," they can no longer be friends. There is also this exchange, quoted on the Parents Television Council website:

Stanley: "It's totally normal for a kid of 16 not to have had sex."

Tony: "It's embarrassing, Stan. So we go to a party and get some girl racopiously

spliffed up, in a confused state, and she comes to believe, however momentarily of course, that you're attractive, and she bangs your brains out."

As this dialogue suggests, the pursuit of casual sex leads to the purchase of a large haul of marijuana, intended to induce Katie – an avowedly narcotics-loving, psychologically disturbed fellow student – to facilitate Stanley's initiation. As for Tony, he and his girlfriend spend so much time passionately necking in the school cafeteria – and, it's clearly implied, doing a great deal more off-screen – that it's a wonder he can fit Stanley's woes into his schedule.

The second episode revolves around Tea, a lesbian cheerleader who not only frequents a gay bar – where the vast majority of the other patrons appear to be minors, like herself – but also brings a bisexual school chum home for a semi-graphic romp in her bedroom. As a close-up of her face makes clear toward the end of this encounter, Tea does not lack for the kind of satisfaction after which Mick Jagger once musically pined.

According to the script, of course, Tea's problem is not same-sex attraction, but that she finds the girls with whom she sleeps "uninteresting" and unworthy of her. Tony, who fancies himself quite interesting, startles Tea by inveigling her into a heterosexual liaison, which we also witness.

In case anyone might be inclined to question Tea's choices, the episode includes a manipulative scene in which her grandmother recounts the persecution of gays at the hands of the Nazis and the effect this had on the grandmother's youthful relationship with a female lover. The takeaway? Even granny liked girls in her time, and anyone with moral concerns about homosexual behavior must be a jackbooted fascist.

In addition to all of that, online viewers are subjected to an outrageously sacrilegious ad for Red Bull, one of the few advertisers still on the show – a puerile cartoon mocking confession – before the episodes unroll.

As for the series itself, its potentially toxic impact on impressionable youngsters is undeniable.