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**Naughty in the Aughties**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Century British Adolescent Culture and Alienation**  
**in *Skins* Seasons 1-2**

**A Thesis Presented**

**by**

**Megan Griffith**

**to**

**The Faculty of the Graduate College**

**of**

**The University of Vermont**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**  
**for the Degree of Master of Arts**  
**Specializing in English**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores representations of British youth culture and adolescent identity formation in the 'first generation' (seasons 1-2) of the British television teen drama *Skins* (2007-8). Like its peers in the Teen TV genre, *Skins* focuses on normative teenage angst and rebellion that results in 'naughty behavior': sex, drug and alcohol use, and conflict with and alienation from parents. *Skins* sets itself apart from genre standards by heightening and glamorizing the way these behaviors are visually depicted. Furthermore, the characters experience very few substantial consequences or repercussions from parents or other authority figures, but rather repercussions come from within their own close-knit group. The primary source of tension in the series occurs during the moments when the group of friends challenge the cultural, biological and ideological constraints under which they find themselves when their preoccupied, self-involved, neglectful, and otherwise overbearing parents directly contribute to the conditions that fuel their excessive 'naughtiness.' The series creators, writers, producers and actors promote *Skins* as an authentic representation of teenage experience and this thesis ultimately seeks to explore the implications of this representation in order to gain a better understanding of British youth culture in the new millennium.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Pretty boy Tony, geeky virginal Sid, dotty anorexic Cassie and some of the lesser characters too, seemed like real Noughties teenagers and that’s an achievement” (Patricia Wynn Davies qtd. in Brook, par. 5).

It is not easy being a British teenager in the new millennium, or so the writing/producing father and son duo Bryan Elsley (the father) and Jamie Brittain (the son), co-creators of the E4 teen drama, *Skins* will have you believe. Yet however difficult and challenging the post 7/7, post 9/11 world may be, Elsley and Brittain will also have you believe there are some good times to be had and some epic parties to crash. Brittain explained how he co-created *Skins* with his television writer father: “My idea was to start fresh, to involve young people from the start, and to present teenagers as fully-rounded characters with complex emotional lives. Plenty of shows have done that before—*Buffy*, *My So-Called Life*—but not really on U.K. telly. So once we had that, Bryan filled in the gaps with his experience and we put the show together” (Brittain qtd. in Hogan, *afterellen.com*). Ironically, their cooperation embodies the antithesis of one of the primary thematic elements of the series they created—dysfunctional parent and adolescent relationships. *Skins* does not deviate far from this standard convention in the Teen TV genre and utilizes it very effectively to help create conditions that temper the simultaneously comedic, heartfelt, and stereotypically conflict-filled teenage strife that makes for appealing dramatic television.

Utilizing a theoretical framework from *Cultural Studies* (2007) by Chris Rojek, that analyzes representations of culture in terms of four reference points: location, embodiment, emplacement, and context, coupled with adolescent development theory

that maps out individual and collective identity formation during an influential period in human development, this paper will examine how the amplified displays of normative adolescent behavior represents *habitus*. “Peter Bourdieu’s term *habitus* (1984) refers to generative principles that produce and reproduce the practices of a cultural formation” (Rojek 74). The first chapter of this work seeks to locate *Skins* within its cultural context and provide a brief history of the development of British youth culture in the twentieth century that will elucidate how key moments in cultural history inform the way teen culture is represented in the series. We will also examine how Rojek’s four cultural reference points relate to standard tropes utilized in the Teen TV genre, such as how evidence of individual identity formation can be seen in interior shots of a teen character’s bedroom.

The second chapter seeks to gain a better understanding of how the parents (and other adults) are depicted and how their neglect influences and affects their teenage children. We will look at specific examples of bad parenting and compare those to instances of more complex, nuanced parenting that provides good examples to their children. What is imperative to understand, and will be explored in further detail in this chapter, is that the parents’ neglect *does not directly cause* the ‘naughty behavior,’ but rather, it directly impacts the level of isolation that leaves the members of the cohort to act with a level of free agency that often times exceeds their ability to fully deal with the emotional consequences of their actions.

In chapter three we will take an in depth look at how the group’s ‘naughty behavior’ (or otherwise normative adolescent behavior) can be described as ‘calculated hedonism.’ This behavior is then glamorized by the show because they are not shown to



suffer any negative consequences for this behavior from any one in a position of authority. As a result of the parents' failure to hold them accountable for their 'naughty behavior,' the characters must take responsibility for holding each other accountable for their actions, decisions and mistakes that have both positive and negative consequences on the group dynamic.

Therefore, we can see that *Skins*' frequent depictions of 'naughty behavior' which includes: extensive substance abuse, psychosocial issues, arguably promiscuous sexual encounters, raging parties, rebellion against parental authority and/or parental absenteeism, and strained interpersonal friendships and romantic relationships are not good or bad. Instead, *Skins* seeks to present them as complex and authentic representations of liminal adolescent cultural experiences in the new millennium.

*Skins* first aired in the U.K. in January of 2007 and it depicts "a gang of friends in Bristol – an Asian one, a gay one, a black one, a geeky one, a cheeky one, a cheerleader-type and an anorexic – and its mission is to be as unsqueamish as possible, to give kids a realistic slice of sixth-form life, complete with hip slang and exhausting looking parties" (Shoard, par. 5). In order to situate the group within its cultural context, the term *cohort* will be used to refer to the main group of friends and characters on whom the first two seasons of the series focuses. According to sociologist, Norman B. Ryder, "cohorts are used to achieve structural transformation and since they manifest its consequences in characteristic ways, it is proposed that research be designed to capitalize on the congruence of social change and cohort identification" (843). In other words, the term cohort, when used to describe the group of teens in *Skins*, is a term that helps unify the

group so that the effects of cultural patterns can be traced as a collective representation of their generation that is rooted in a specific time and place.

When characterized utilizing Shoard's one word descriptors, the cohort in the first two seasons of *Skins* includes: Tony Stonem (the cheeky one), Sid Jenkins (the geeky one), Michelle Richardson (the cheerleader-type), Cassie Ainsworth (the anorexic), Chris Miles (the partier), Jal Fazer (the black one), Maxxie Oliver (the gay one) and Anwar Kharral (the Asian one). These reductive social identity markers on scratch the surface of the complex representations of adolescent identity exploration that occurs in experiences with concomitant friendships, romantic and sexual partnerships, separation from and conflict with parents, rebellion against authority, identity experimentation, and feelings of isolation. The sum total of these experiences leave indelible impressions on vulnerable individuals as they come of age in the new millennium.

In many ways the characters from *Skins* are not all that original as representatives of the Teen TV genre, nor is the material covered in the series especially groundbreaking, but it is a show that has 'come of age' at a time when mature thematic material featuring teenage characters pervades the television landscape. Complex adolescent characters have been the focus of popular and well-renowned American television for at least the last two decades in series such as *My So-Called Life*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Freaks and Geeks*, and also as part of other mature adult series such as *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos* and *Friday Night Lights*. To reiterate Brittain's earlier point, what makes *Skins* notable is its position as one of the first thematically mature adolescent dramas to come from the U.K. and it serves as a clear reminder that teens today are well versed in mature material from television and films like these which have widespread

popularity in the Anglophone world. Elsley noted the influence of American television on the writers of *Skins* when he said:

America is not short on good teen drama. We, on "Skins," have always watched American teen drama because it leads the market. There's a lot of it, and it's very good, very focused and knows what it's doing. We do think that our show is a little bit different, but that doesn't stop us from thinking that "Gossip Girl" is an amazing show written by clever people. In the U.K., it's different. There really wasn't any teen dramas, so the gap in the market was a mile wide and being filled by "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" -- which we all watched religiously in the "Skins" writing room when we were creating the show (Elsley qtd. in Berman, par. 18).

What works for *Skins*, and further sets it apart within its genre is its highly watchable mode of 'storytelling,' which fits squarely into the bildungsroman genre, or 'coming of age story,' that has been popular since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, first in literature and then in films and television. Each episode of *Skins* is 'narrated' from a specific character's point of view, which in the case of television means that the primary action and plot of that episode features the eponymous character. Unlike other Teen TV dramas, there is no voice over narration but instead a more nuanced approach to visual story telling. According to Brittain, "the one character per episode thing was completely stolen from *Lost*, which I was addicted to at the time" (Brittain qtd. in Hogan, *afterellen.com*). When determining the format of the series, Brittain and Elsley successfully replicated the technique employed by the American mystery-drama that became well known for its character-driven narrative style, which reached the height of its popularity at the time that *Skins* premiered<sup>1</sup>. Both seasons 1 and 2 of *Skins* conclude with a group episode titled "Everyone" that considers the group's collective experiences while wrapping up some plots and leaving cliff hangers for others; a standard trope in television narrative structure

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<sup>1</sup> *LOST* is a very popular American television series that aired in the U.S. on the ABC network from 2004-2010 and premiered in the U.K. on Channel 4 in 2005.

that allows the audience to anticipate what happens to the characters while they await the next season. It also allows for an expansive experience where the world of *Skins* exists beyond the TV screen, expanding to multiple platforms including the Internet and novelized (fan) fiction. Two *Skins* novels have been published, the second by Brittain's younger sister Jess, that give more detailed 'back stories' to many of the primary characters and how their relationships within the group formed.

Television critic Caralyn Bolte compared the narrative of novels and television when she wrote: "The novel, then, has long served as the most honest and unrestrained location for debates about anything that makes us squirm in real life; we marginalize our discussion of the margins of society to fiction in order to keep those fearful issues away from our settled, everyday experience" (93). The character-driven narrative style of *Skins*, a television series, functions similarly to a novel by drawing the audience in and making them feel invested in the characters in the same way that a first person narrative draws a reader into a novel. The singular character focus also helps viewers gain a better understanding of the psychological ideology of each character so that even when the episode does not focus on them, the audience can fill in the gaps, which then creates a more in-depth understanding of the motivations and reactions the characters have when they are not the specific focus of an episode.

Looking at it in another way, each episode can be viewed as a mini-bildungsroman which functions the way a chapter in a novel does; within a progressive narrative arc that contains conflict and resolution specific to the plot of the individual episode, while simultaneously advancing larger themes and issues (conflict and resolution) that develop over the course of each season. *Skins* advances the

bildungsroman genre beyond the structure established in novels, which often focus solely on the hero/main character. The emotional weight of each episode of *Skins* is emphasized in the interpersonal connections that each character makes (and breaks) which heavily influences their overall identity development. Therefore, we can see that the narrative structure of the series intentionally manipulates the audience as they experience the ‘personal growth’ of each character because they have seen it from both a ‘first person’ and ‘third person’ point of view that the show-runners utilize to create a perceived authentic viewing experience. One *Skins* writer, Lucy Kirkwood, remarked that the young writing team comes to the table with ingrained exposure to and familiarity with television’s visual discourse. “I don't think that writing for TV is a problem for our generation. Most people's access to drama is through television and film rather than theatre: I've probably watched a hell of a lot more telly than I've seen plays. So without realising it, you're already versed in the language of speaking visually" (Kirkwood qtd. in Green, par. 11).

Elsley and Brittain, in what many television industry insiders and media critics considered a bold move, replaced the main cast of characters after the first two seasons, and then again in season five, beginning in 2011. Colloquially the iterations of casts are known as ‘generations’ which reflects the regenerative nature of the series that helps to draw in new waves of adolescent audiences that essentially ‘come of age’ alongside each iteration of the cast. Tony’s younger sister, Effy, a secondary character in the first two seasons, anchors the second generation in season 3 which premiered in 2009. Elsley and Brittain made this decision in part because they felt they had more to explore with Effy’s character and also because it provided continuity for the show’s audience as they began

watching a whole ‘new’ series. When asked about their decision to make a risky move by starting over with a whole new cast every two seasons, particularly in a series that is so heavily character driven, Brittain explained their rationale; “Well, we didn’t know we were even going to get a second series when we did the first one. I think as soon as we did, we decided to do the generation swaperoo. It was scary, but we had to make it work, and luckily we did. *Skins* loses some of its audience with every generation, but it finds new ones too” (Brittain qtd. in Hogan, *afterellen.com*). Brittain and Elsley took a risk by starting over with a new cast at the height of the first generation’s popularity, but they wanted to keep *Skins* young and fresh by setting it apart from other entries in the teen TV genre where the primary actors continue playing teenagers well into their mid to late twenties (see *Saved by the Bell, 90210* and *Dawson’s Creek*). Brittain further explained the impetus for the series:

We were in the right place at the right time. I think a show like *Skins* would have happened if we hadn’t made it first. The atmosphere was ripe, teenagers more empowered than ever, and there was going to be a show sooner or later that showed them as empowered individuals and it was exactly what the channel [E4] was looking for and it was exactly the audience that they were looking for. Part of the success of the show is basically due to the mood of the times (Brittain qtd. in Lacob, *televisionaryblog.com*).

This mood called for an authoritative depiction of the type of ‘empowering’ teenage experience that had not been seen in primetime British television. In other words, Elsley and Brittain sought to create in each episode and re-create in every new generation, an authoritative representation of an empowered and collective teenage experience that they believed characterizes the adolescent experience in Britain in the late ‘aughts (2000s). With its distinct narrative voice, they set out to create a television experience that would

appeal to a broad audience who could make meaningful emotional connections to the characters and situations presented in *Skins*.

#### THE PROBLEM OF HEGEMONY AND ‘NAUGHTINESS’

To simply assert that the rebellion seen in *Skins* is simply a stereotypic ‘teenage’ reaction against the dominant hegemonic societal culture; the parents/adult authority figures, or simply rebellion for the sake of rebellion, does not go far enough in explaining the ways in which the show situates its characters’ actions and responses to emotional conflict. Rather, escalated ‘naughty behavior’ can be seen as a simultaneous challenge of the values of the dominant culture and as an attempt to gain acknowledgement by the people who should care most about them—their parents. Similar to other teen oriented films and television series, the majority of the parents are depicted as more ‘screwed up’ than their children—and this is one of the primary sources of tension for many of the individual characters within the cohort.

Furthermore, *Skins* problematizes the characterization of the parents who cannot be deemed as representative of the hegemony because in many ways they are even more powerless than their own children, and are depicted in the series from the perspective of the teens themselves, and therefore are not represented as fully developed individuals. However, they are far more complex than other Teen TV parenting tropes where adults endlessly nag their kids to clean up their rooms, do their homework, and go to school. Conversely, they are not depicted as having overly close bonds with their children, such as the parents and children in *The Gilmore Girls* and *Parenthood*.

The parents, teachers, and other adult authority figures with whom the cohort interact consist of individuals identified as 40-50 year old, working to middle class, suburban, mostly secular (with the notable exception of Anwar Kharall's parents who are Pakistani Muslims), mostly white (Jal Fazer's parents are black), and the producers and writers of the series have a definitive stance on the overall ineptitude and selfish conduct the adults in the series display and this motif is repeated in various iterations throughout each generation of the series.

To better understand the transgressive cultural system at work in *Skins* is to problematize the idea that 'hegemony' as a dominant power structure and its perhaps stereotypical association with the parents, as the group of people most likely to possess power and authority in the series. In his book, *Making Sense of Cultural Studies* (2002), cultural studies scholar Chris Barker argues, "one must hold that hegemony is never socially over-arching but fractured into divergent domains. One might then ask whether or not the various hegemonies are connected or articulated together in any way" (Barker 59). The way that the adults in the series are represented can be viewed as 'fractured into divergent domains' because they are all over the spectrum on their level of engagement in their children's lives; some are entirely absent, some are fairly present, and some are decidedly overbearing. What unites these 'fractured domains' within the cohort is that almost every member is to some degree, negatively impacted by their parents, which increases their already biologically and culturally ingrained predisposition to act out by engaging in risky, 'naughty' behavior.

The members of the cohort are then left to act with a level of agency that contributes to the conditions of delinquency that results in few 'real world' consequences,



punishments, or reprimands for those in the position of authority. Elsley argues that “consequences do flow from incorrect or selfish behavior but in the show, these are shown to be unexpected, hard to predict, and more to do with the loss of friendship than anything else, which in any context, is a disastrous outcome” (Elsley, *mtv.com*). The selfish behavior that Elsley addresses can be attributed to both the teens and the adults in the series, with the most significant difference being that the parents are supposed to know better and should still be available to their children who have not fully developed yet, and still need emotional support and guidance. Elsley correctly emphasizes the point that for the cohort, the most dramatic consequences are how their excessive behavior challenges the characters and creates conflict and tension within their friendships, which are characteristically the most important element to not only the series, but to the collective and individual experiences of Western adolescent culture.

These ‘naughty behaviors’ can also be described as ‘spectacles of excess’ and are in many ways glamorized by the producers of the show who intentionally make the partying, the drug use, and the binge drinking appear habitually carefree, and without directly negative ramifications. The parents fail to hold the cohort accountable for their behavior and when they do attempt to intervene, the ‘tone’ of the show intentionally derides their efforts and paints them as incompetent, which is evidenced by the fact that their children easily manipulate them or ignore them altogether. Elsley wrote to defend the series and clarify its position in relation to some of the more sensationalized aspects of the show that had been excoriated by American conservative groups when he attempted to launch an American version on MTV in 2011:

In the UK, viewers and commentators very quickly realized that although there are some sensational aspects to the show, *Skins* is actually a very serious attempt to get to the roots of young people's lives. It deals with relationships, parents, death, illness, mental health issues, the consequences of drug use and sexual activity. It is just that these are characterized from the point of view of the many young people who write the show and has a very straightforward approach to their experiences; it tries to tell the truth. Sometimes that truth can be a little painful to adults and parents (Elsley, *mtv.com*).

In order to better understand the position of the adults in the series and the ways that they fail to inhabit the role of the hegemony, it is useful to examine reasons why *Skins* may be attractive to a wider range of audiences beyond the 1:1 ratio (subject age to audience age). We can easily understand why teenagers watch *Skins*; it is a show about teens, written by young adults with their teenage years barely in the rear view mirror, which promotes a specifically disdainful view of the credibility of adults in the series. The writers and producers intentionally make choices in the way that the adults are depicted. What little authority they should have by taking an active role in continuing to raise and support their children is consistently undermined and negated by the writers, which then erodes any hegemonic position it may be assumed they should have. The question then becomes, why would anyone over the age of 22 want to watch *Skins*? Or rather, how could anyone over the age of 22 relate to the decidedly one-sided, adolescent centric subject matter on which this shoe hinges? Shouldn't older viewers be more sympathetic to the parents than the teens since they are farther removed from their own adolescent experience?

The answer to these questions may be found by coming to terms with how the dominant majority, or systems of power work that contextualize the cultural reality in which *Skins* is located. According to Barker, "It is surely good enough – and indeed more

flexible – to talk of ‘explanatory authority,’ ‘lived world-views,’ and the operations of power rather than deploy the concept of hegemony. Further, the concepts of ideology and hegemony continue at best to hint at certain knowledge, values and interests and at worst to claim them as their own” (Barker 61). Because *Skins* addresses universal humanistic themes that appeal to the dominant, distinctly Anglophone social/political/cultural groups, many more people are able to bring their ‘lived world-views’ and ‘explanatory authority’ to the table as members who comprise the ‘age diverse’ group to whom the show could potentially appeal.

Therefore, specifically relating to *Skins* and the question of hegemony, the refusal of those representatives of cultural power (the parents) to acknowledge and respond to the needs of the cohort results in unchecked ‘naughty behavior.’ Simultaneously, the glamorization of some of these behaviors establishes a cultural normative reality in which the audience perceives a presented authentic reality. The presented authentic reality then becomes part of a discourse that is promoted by the show’s producers (writers, directors and producers), the network that airs it (E4), and the critical media that interprets the content, heralding *Skins* as the ‘new standard’ for the post-millennial adolescent experience in Britain. In other words, *Skins*’ frequent depictions of ‘naughty behavior’ whether described as ‘calculated hedonism,’ or as ‘spectacles of excess’ exists as mediated representations of an ‘authentic’ adolescent cultural experience that warrants exploration into how ‘naughty’ teens really are in the ‘aughties.’

## CHAPTER ONE – ESTABLISHING THE CULTURAL REALITY OF *SKINS*

E4 is a channel on British digital television, launched as a subsidiary of Channel 4 on January 18, 2001. The “E” stands for entertainment and the channel mainly caters to the lucrative 15-35 year age group. E4’s programming consists of an Anglo-American hybridization that includes contemporary American shows: the new *90210*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Cleveland Show*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *One Tree Hill*, *Smallville* and *Friends*. In addition to *Skins*, E4 broadcasts other original British, teen-oriented programming such as teen soap staple *Hollyoaks*, *The Inbetweeners*, and *Misfits*. *Skins* has proven to be E4’s most popular series with an audience share of an average of 1 million viewers per episode and “the launch night of the first series back in January 2007 drew 1.4 million viewers, setting a record for E4's best ever audience for an UK-originated programme other than *Big Brother*” (Tryhorn, par. 6). Since its premiere in the U.K., the first two seasons of *Skins* have aired in the U.S. on BBC America and episodes of all seasons can be viewed on Netflix and Hulu, which has facilitated the series’ small but ‘cult-like’ following in the U.S. Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein in *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom* (2008), explain how subsidiary networks capitalize on the niche market of dedicated (and sometimes fervent) Teen TV audiences:

Indeed, Teen TV lends itself to cult status, with much of it existing on smaller networks and relying on a core audience to “spread the word” about any given program. Collectively then, Teen TV straddles mainstream and marginal, popularity and quality, and combines traditional narrative programming and the punctuated seriality of soap operas (Ross and Stein 8).

E4 can then be compared to U.S. cable networks such as the CW (formerly the WB) and UPN—networks that have built a large portion of their programming model around Teen TV. Television scholar, Caralyn Bolte further explains that:

Teen TV, often alienated from ratings success both because of its seemingly specific and exclusive audience niche and through its presence on “minor” networks like the WB and UPN, steps into the gap left by these [more mainstream] adult-g geared programs, and operates in much the same way as the novel did before it as a means to interrogate contemporary cultural ideologies (94).

Therefore, because E4 is a subsidiary network of Channel 4, it has more freedom to target niche markets and take chances on more challenging, age specific material. While the adolescent and young adult age group is widely considered the ‘golden egg’ of target television audiences, when an otherwise ‘niche’ series achieves a broader, more mainstream appeal, it helps to solidify its place in mainstream culture helping to ensure its longevity and overall cultural relevance and influence. In today’s television landscape, mainstream appeal for a ‘niche’ show can build over time, surpassing its early cult status, because of technological advancements, which facilitate exposure to a show through internet-based platforms. The internet makes it possible for broader audiences to access ‘niche’ shows like *Skins*; audiences that might not otherwise have watched when the episodes originally aired because they do not generally subscribe to (paid) digital television.

According to Bolte, “programming born of this freedom, especially shows that focus on alienated teenage protagonists [...] offers a particularly insightful and powerful narrative perspective, as a view originating from the margins most incisively highlights the fissures in our cultural fabric and, in the process of constructing and presenting such

vocal commentary, reevaluates the definition of desire” (94). Therefore, we can investigate how fissures in the cultural fabric situate *Skins* in *context* and provide the first of Rojek’s four key terms that can be used to analyze how *Skins* operates within and outside the boundaries of its genre (teen) and medium (television). Rojek explains that:

Context refers to the general power structure that allocates resources through institutions designed to achieve normative coercion. The term ‘normative coercion’ simply means the normal types of behaviour in everyday life that we are encouraged and persuaded to apply irrespective of the economic, political and cultural milieu in which we are located and the habitus from which we originate. Context also refers to the historical and structural dimensions behind location, emplacement and embodiment (92).

Later in this chapter we will look at some of the historical context surrounding the development of youth culture in Britain in the twentieth century that shapes location, embodiment and emplacement, the other three terms of Rojek’s cultural framework.

*Skins* can also be contextualized by examining the failed American version that aired for one season (January through March of 2011) before MTV pulled the plug on it amidst a cloud of controversy surrounding its racy images of sexual encounters, rampant drug and alcohol use and consequence-free debauchery. Conservative groups led by the Parent Television Council lambasted the American iteration, also created and run by Elsley, before the first episode even aired by accusing MTV of promoting child pornography. One conservative critic and popular religious celebrity leader, Rabbi Schmuley Boteach, remarked (having admittedly never actually watched the series):

The media called me to ask my opinion on MTV's "Skins." I told them I had not watched it but read all about it. My take? Simple: irresponsible and exploitative on the part of MTV. Man, what are we coming to when even 15-year-olds are sexualized on TV and actors who can't drive a car or buy a beer are filmed in sexual situations for national consumption? (Boteach, *aolnews.com*).

It should be noted however, that these same conservative groups did not raise the same level of uproar when the original U.K. series aired on BBC America. Perhaps because BBC America did not take great strides to promote the ‘scandalous’ aspects of the series to the same degree that MTV did with its widespread advertising campaign that featured images of scantily dressed teens with wily, knowing expressions on billboards, subway and bus ads, in addition to continually airing trailers and commercials that proliferated the network’s airways before the show’s premiere.

Perhaps more so than the uproar over its sexualized teens actors, what doomed the American version was the dilution of what one *Newsweek* critic argued made *Skins* successful in the U.K. “The challenge for the producers will be whether it gets close enough. Fans of the U.K. series are already miffed over the new version, worried that Hollywood-style production and American actors will strip *Skins* of its gritty appeal” (Bennett, par. 7). That ‘gritty appeal’ can be viewed as another way of saying that the American discourse around the show promoted the aspects of adolescence that provided the most ‘shock value,’ but lost sight of the other aspects of teenage experience that make for compelling television. The *Newsweek* critic further remarked after her conversation with Elsley: “but compared with the airbrushed glam of more exaggerated dramas like *Gossip Girl*—or even the cutesy preachiness of shows like *Glee*—*Skins* lets its characters be kids, flaws and all. ‘The cast are beautiful young people, obviously, but they’re not that kind of picture-perfect, cookie-cutter, idyllic,’ says Elsley. ‘There’s a reality to them’” (Elsley qtd. in Bennett, par. 8).

Ultimately, the producers of *Skins* (in both versions) seek to create a viewing experience that reflects an ‘authentic adolescent reality’ in order to appeal to its target

audience of 16-25 year olds, people who have grown up consuming a television diet steeped in reality TV. Like other teen television series, this 'authentic reality' is packaged in a fictional dramaturgy that simultaneously glamorizes seemingly consequence free debauchery that "provides satisfying jolts of smut, reducing the chance that anyone might switch channels" (Nussbaum, par. 6). However, viewers do not have to go far beyond the 'shock and awe' to see that Elsley and Brittain, along with the twenty-something-year-old writing team, purposefully address current cultural issues head-on, utilizing an ethnically, racially, and class diverse cast of teenagers played by adolescent-aged actors with very little or no prior acting experience which, they assert, gives credence to the show's authenticity.

Because the producers seek to make the series 'authentic' in the aspects of adolescence that, in the mediated world, often are the most controversial, the characters in *Skins* are portrayed as operating with a sophisticated level of free agency (empowerment), which informs the way their choices and actions, and conflicts and resolutions are represented. Elsley's direct rebuttal to the criticism aimed at the American version of the series directly supports this claim and reiterates the mission of the series in both of its versions:

We proceed from the idea, not that teenagers are inherently likely to misbehave, but rather that they are intensely moral and disposed to make judgments on their own and others' behaviour. Sometimes, but not always, they get things wrong. In this teenagers are remarkably similar to adults. Their morals may not be the same as those of their parents and teachers, but they are nevertheless, highly developed and active in their world (Elsley, *mtv.com*).

Therefore, we can see by exploring the context under which the American version proved unsuccessful, that *Skins* is a complicated offering of teenage life. Would it have had a



better chance at success if it had been aired on another network that already had a broad, 'mature' audience in place such as HBO or even AMC? Perhaps, but ultimately *Skins* exists in the dustbin of failed British shows that have been remade for American audiences, where some key aspect of the show is 'lost in translation' between two seemingly similar cultures. These failed 'remakes' show that even in the new millennium, with globalization and the pervasiveness of Western culture, that some TV viewing audiences still have differing views on what is 'appropriate' for teen audiences, and that is a conundrum that situates *Skins* within a complex multi-cultural reality.

#### HOW THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH CULTURE DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY FURTHER CONTEXTUALIZES *SKINS*

Are teenagers today so very different from previous generations of adolescents? In many ways yes, but most of the issues faced by the cohort in *Skins* have long been a part of the adolescent experience in the United Kingdom and other parts of the Western world. In order to better understand contemporary influences on the youth culture in which *Skins* is located, we can turn to the past to investigate the origins of Western youth culture, which as we have come to view it today, originated in the late nineteenth century. However, what we know and understand to be "teenage" in Anglophone culture, and specifically British culture, is firmly rooted in the early part of the twentieth century, from the 1920s onward. Cultural observers<sup>2</sup> (past and present) have described the hedonistic excess enjoyed by upper class British youth as the period of 'Bright Young Things.' During the 1920s and 1930s until the onset of World War II, intense media

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<sup>2</sup> See: Taylor, D. J. *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. Print.

coverage (that contributed to the genesis of ‘celebrity’ culture) documented a growing class of adolescents and young people who experienced more freedom, mobility and economic consumerist power since the beginning of the industrial revolution. This period can be seen as the dawn of the age when a large portion of society roughly aged 16-25 began to amass cultural and capital resources that would solidify their collective empowerment. Jon Savage, a youth culture historian, in his work, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (2007), describes the lavishness of this period as:

Only one example of the pleasure-bent youth culture that spread throughout Europe during the 1920s. Concentrating on diversion and on the moment, partying was a way of life directly opposed to the Christian morality of the nineteenth century. It was also an ideal method of signaling the postwar generation’s flagrant and public rejection of their forbears’ values. Idealism had become a dirty word. All the great themes had been vaporized by the Great War, and in their place came a heedless, headlong hedonism (Savage 235).

This age of ‘Bright Young Things’ has important connections to *Skins* because of the similarities in the ‘spectacle of excess’ that characterize both eras in adolescent experience. Noted author and cultural observer, Evelyn Waugh, in his work *Vile Bodies* (1930), satirized the glittering lifestyles of carefree London aristocrats and self-styled bohemians whose sybaritic lavishness draw many similarities to today’s idealized youth culture. One could draw many similarities between the ‘Bright Young Things’ of 1920s London and *Gossip Girl*, *Skins*’ peer in the Teen TV genre, which focuses on the lavish lifestyles of teenagers and young adults in contemporary, upper class New York. Ultimately, by the age of the new millennium, the pursuit of pleasure can easily be seen in all economic levels of adolescents and emerging adults and the pursuit of pleasure in leisure activities has become a cultural benchmark when discussing the conventions of youth culture on the whole.

Also critical to this formative period in the development of youth culture is the economic power that the working class and the newly minted middle class experienced at the beginning of the twentieth century, which escalated during both post-war periods. Young people were leaving the country in droves, descending upon urban centers all over the United Kingdom to enter the commercial and manufacturing work force. This industrial, urban migration garnered attention from many departments within the government that suddenly had to contend with the growing middle-class and their demands for social reforms that included better housing, affordable healthcare, more efficient transportation options, and pensions. Shop keepers and other economic entrepreneurs quickly began to see the economic potential that existed in catering to the new, young, jet set with their disposable incomes that could be spent on the lifestyle of readily accessible food, drink, and leisure activities. Savage writes that:

The age of materialism had arrived. In the early twenties, Britain's traditional heavy manufacturing industries were supplanted by the manufacture of leisure items like cars, wireless sets, gramophones, cosmetics, and artificial fabrics. Large sections of the public were employed in white-collar service occupations like bookkeeping and accounting, selling and advertising—the last of which being an industry that successfully popularized psychology to the tune of 100 million pounds turnover during 1921 (Savage 239).

The advancement of the advertising industry helped fuel the development of media outlets that could reach the masses – print media: newspapers and magazines, followed by radio media, films and eventually television. However, because Britain's radio and television media were institutionalized as part of the British welfare state in the government sanctioned and controlled monopoly held by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), commercialized 'entertainment' media would not have as large of an influence in the United Kingdom on the development of adolescent culture as it did in

America, until much later in the twentieth century<sup>3</sup>. The few youth oriented programs aired by the BBC focused more on educating its pre-adolescent youth than entertaining them. By 1982 when E4's parent network, Channel 4, first began broadcasting, it was required to adhere to the government's long-held television standards by demonstrating that it had a "commitment to 'public service' principles and to the fostering of a cultural heritage and historically overridden demands for a 'free market' in broadcasting, [which] sharply differentiated [from] the United States, where channel proliferation within an essentially commercial or free market framework had been the outcome of a different sort of public policy" (Harvey 93).

In fact, much of the commercialization of youth culture in the second half of the twentieth century can be attributed to American cultural influence through films, music and other media sources that, in spite of the BBC's control over television and radio media, had a significant impact on the changing moral and social values sweeping the United Kingdom during the post-war (WWII) period. Savage notes that, "American culture was very popular among young workers. It went hand in hand with the new values they sought to live by: greater class equality, less parental control, greater personal and sexual freedom, and more mobility. As respect for adults lessened, there was more adolescent drinking, more hanging around street corners" (Savage 242). The themes of

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<sup>3</sup> Television's popularity did not become as widespread in the U.K. as it did in the U.S. during its genesis arguably because of the BBC's control and because of its lack of commercialization. Because of BBC's governmental control, television was (and still is) a service that one had to subscribe to just like a newspaper or magazine. Commercial television did not become widely available until the later part of the twentieth century when Channel 4 (the parent network of E4) became the first network to 'publish' original programming outside of the BBC and ITV duopoly. According to television and media scholar, Sylvia Harvey, "The idea of public service and public duty, reaching back well over a century into the ethics of the Victorian civil and colonial services, is manifest in the 1980 public service requirement that the new television channel should serve a variety of audience tastes and interests, encourage innovation in programming-making, and show a suitable proportion of educational programmes" (93).

reduced respect for adults, drinking and seemingly aimless loitering can all be seen in *Skins*, and the origins for these cultural behaviors can be traced back to this time period.

As any viewer of *Skins* knows, these behaviors are almost commonplace to the type of twenty-first century adolescent culture experienced by the cohort. The influence of ‘Americanism’ though perhaps can most ironically be seen in episode 2.2 (“Sketch”) when Roundview College produces an original musical titled “Osama: The Musical” which exploits and misguidedly satirizes the events of 9/11. The influence of ‘Americanism’ also features prominently at the end of the series. When Cassie decides to leave Bristol it is to New York City that she chooses to go in order to ‘reinvent herself,’ just as many young people from all over the world have done for many decades. Cassie’s decision to flee Bristol for New York (rather than London or another European city) represents her view that New York symbolizes the ideal place to start over when you’re on the verge of impending adulthood and you want to escape the reality from which you came.<sup>4</sup>

So, as we have seen within the historical contextualization of the early stages of the development of youth culture during the early to mid-twentieth century, many adolescents and young adults took advantage of periods of economic prosperity for personal advancement. Rather than marrying and having families right away they could instead focus on extending the period of personal growth (to a certain degree); a period that was spent focused on urban development, in serving their country at home or abroad,

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted however, that Cassie’s experience in New York is one of the most unrealistic aspects of the show in that she seemingly has little money, no apparent employment or educational prospects, and she just happens to be taken in by an all-American looking boy from Iowa, named Adam, who lets her live in his apartment rent free ‘while she gets on her feet.’ He then abruptly and almost inexplicably leaves, and she continues to reside in his apartment, which the audience is to understand she pays for by working in the diner where they first met when Cassie arrived in the city. Cassie’s utterly unrealistic success in New York exemplifies one (of many) instances of pure fantasy that exist within the series.

and/or working in jobs that created and sustained economic and social mobility.

However, some sub-sets of youth culture were not exactly received by mainstream society with open arms.

By the mid-twentieth century one such group ‘hanging around street corners’ were the Teddy boys. Michael Brake in *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Subcultures* (1985), describes the Teddy boys as a delinquent subculture of post-war, working-class, rebellious, male youths “left out of the upward mobility of post-war British, affluence” (73). They were characterized visually by “appropriating the Edwardian suiting of the prosperous upper classes, which they combined with a Mississippi gambler image, drape jackets, velvet collars, pipe trousers, crepe-soled shoes and bootlace ties” (73). The Teddy boys fashioned themselves after their cult heroes such as Brando’s menacing biker-hipster, James Dean as the sensitive mixed-up kid; but their prime masculinity model was Elvis Presley. Demonized by the moralistic center, the Teddy boys were blamed for bouts of social unrest and overt challenges to authority. George Melly, author of *Revolt into Style* (1972), describes the atmosphere of the period:

The fights and cinema riots, the gang bangs and haphazard vandalism were produced by a claustrophobic situation. They were the result of a society which still held that the middle classes were entitled not only to impose moral standards on a class whose way of life was totally outside its experience; of an older generation who used the accident of war as their excuse to lay down the law on every front; of a system of education which denied any creative potential and led to dead-end jobs and obligatory conscription; of a grey, colourless, shabby world where good boys played ping-pong (Melly qtd. in Brake 74).

We can draw many similarities between the post-war period of the twentieth century and the ‘aughts; a decade which has seen a dramatic economic recession, followed by periods of high unemployment most especially experienced by young adults. Recent

unemployment numbers for young adults are the highest of any age group in Britain at 22.3 percent of 16-24 year olds, or 1.3 million people (Thomas, par. 5 and 7). These tough economic challenges have been marked by periods of rioting by unemployed youths; rioting that wrecked havoc on lower-class London neighborhoods as recently as 2011. Predominant societal groups and government agencies, both in the mid-twentieth century and the present, have struggled to find emplacement and integration for undereducated and unemployable youth populations. This failure creates ripe conditions for the kind of anxiety, alienation and rebellion first seen with the Teddy boys of the 1950s, which has now also left a large proportion of the generation featured in *Skins* potentially 'left out of the upward mobility of British affluence.'

The ramifications of these challenging economic and social conditions are evident when examining some of the boys in the group. For example, Maxxie's father wants him to stay in Bristol and work with him in construction, and they are in conflict because he wants to go to London to be a dancer, and Sid has discord with his father over his scholastic ineptitude and his lack of motivation to do much of anything besides hang out with Tony and the rest of the cohort. The economic difficulties of the post-millennial period can also be traced in Chris's attempt to find employment after flunking out of school and when he struggles to hold on to the employment he is able to find. The teens in the first generation of the series sit right on the cusp of the economic crisis that marks the later part of the 'aughts, and one wonders how they (as characters) would have fared as young adults caught up in economic and social unrest.

Another seminal period in the development of youth culture where the glamorized lifestyles of adolescents and young adults can be compared to present day can be seen in

the 1960s in the halcyon days of British youth culture—the Mods and ‘Swinging London.’ Brake describes the Mods as “suspect because they were too elegant, their dances too elaborate, their drug use – pills – too laid back. They were the pioneers of consumerism, inspiring Mary Quant<sup>5</sup> and Carnaby Street” (74). Their music was ska, West Indian popular music, as well as the leaders of the British Invasion: the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Manfred Man, The Who, and American Rock and Roll, Motown and the California sounds of the Beach Boys. The Mods and other youth groups led much of the societal and cultural change that occurred during the 1960s; a seminal period which saw the collapse of the British empire, challenges to the moralistically dominated welfare state, the civil rights movement, the rise of communism and the cold-war politics, and mass immigration to the United Kingdom from formally colonized countries such as India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean (West Indies). These cultural waves irrevocably changed the face of British culture and society—changes that still greatly impact post-millennial British culture today.

During the later part of the twentieth century ‘rebellion’ kicked into high gear with the punk generation of the 1970s. According to Brake (78), “Punk rock originated in New York [...] and took off in Britain in 1977 after Malcolm McLaren (once manager of the New York Dolls) put together the Sex Pistols,” one of the most definitive musical groups of the age. The Sex Pistols took a distinctively nihilistic stance, describing themselves as anti-social and ‘into chaos’. Punks, like other pioneering youth subcultures, were characterized by their distinctive dress, which exemplified their ‘anti-identity’ and

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Quant (1934-) was a popular British fashion designer well known for innovating many of the ‘Modish’ looks of the era. Carnaby Street can be considered as the nexus of ‘Swinging London.’ It is located in SoHo and was well known for its fashion boutiques and other popular consumerist wares.



utter rejection of conformity, and now symbolizes our understanding of the term ‘punk.’

According to D. Hebdige, in *Subcultures – The Meaning of Style* (1979):

The punks wore clothes which were the sartorial equivalent of swear words, and they swore as they dressed – with calculated effort, lacing obscenities into record notes and publicity releases, interviews and love songs. Clothed in chaos, they produced Noise in the calmly orchestrated Crisis of everyday life in the late 1970s (Hebdige qtd. in Brake 78).

Perhaps the most definitive example of Punk rebellion can be seen in the Sex Pistols anthem, ‘God Save the Queen’ (1977), that condemned the conformity of the dominant society and its deference to the monarchy. Their self-styled outrageous appearance was drawn from old school uniforms, plastic garbage bags, safety pins, bondage and sexual fetishism, and developed into a self-mocking, and shocking image. Punk hairstyles featured hair that was shaved close to the head, dyed bright neon colors, and then later, spiked up into cockatoo plumes of startling design, individual to each person (Brake 77).

This period of rebellion was also characterized by austerity and economic contraction that marked the late 1970s through 1990 and was helmed by Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, head of the Conservative government. ‘Thatchersim’ is a term that has come to describe the era surrounding her time in office that is remembered for being nationalistic, pro-capitalistic, pro-privatization, anti-communist, and anti-trade union. In reaction to the widespread cultural liberalism of the 1960s and early 70s, the conservative government led by Thatcher attempted to return British society back to its more traditional and moralistic foundation. This call for increased rectitude can also be seen as a reaction to the destabilization of the family unit, which had been occurring during the 1960s and 1970s when the age of individualization flourished. Rojek describes this period:

Although subsequent governments in the Anglophone world have been critical of many aspects of the Reagan-Thatcher years, they have not sought to reverse the central values of support for self-reliance, controlling state expenditures and restoring national pride. To be sure, many leading players have continued the international policing role pursued by Thatcher and Reagan (Rojek 95).

This period is particularly relevant to our examination of the parents in *Skins* because it is under Thatcherism that they would have been young, and it was a period of significant societal and cultural constriction, steeped in complex ideological and philosophical changes, that had wide reaching affects on all aspects of society and culture. Keeping this influential cultural history in mind helps to inform our larger understanding of some of the potential cultural systems that contribute to the parents' selfish tendencies, which will be explored in greater depth later in this work. Television scholar Valerie Wee summarizes the importance of this exploration of twentieth century cultural history when we get to the implications of these hallmarks on the development of the Teen TV genre, which really took off in the 1990s:

It is worth noting that by the 1990s, the notion of 'teenage' and the teenage identity had evolved; the term "teen" had less to do with biological age and increasingly more to do with lifestyle and shared cultural tastes and interests. "Teenage" in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has achieved a much broader appeal and has come to represent a range of idealized qualities such as vitality, excitement, vigor, promise, and cutting-edge interests. These qualities may be associated with youth, but increasingly, more of society embraces this mindset, regardless of age (Wee 47).

In summary, cultural historians can trace the emergence of youth culture in Britain to the early part of the twentieth century; a period characterized in many depictions of the hedonistic pursuits by the young jet set. Widespread leisure activities were made possible by the expansion of individual freedoms that resulted from modernization, mass-urbanization, commercialization, and significant gains in cultural

and economic capital. This brief exploration of some of the critical moments in the evolution of British youth culture in the twentieth century informs our understanding of many of the themes reflected in teen TV as a genre, and *Skins* specifically. One can draw similarities between many of these youth culture movements and the *Skins*' generations. The teens depicted in *Skins* can certainly be described as 'Bright Young Things' with Teddy boy and punk-inspired influences that are evidenced in the popular music they listen to, the clothes they wear, and in their attitudes and language use. One can't help but wonder if this generation of 'bright young things' will have similarly influential longevity as their sybaritic forbearers.

#### SITUATING *SKINS* WITHIN ITS CULTURE: LOCATION, EMOBIDMENT AND EMLACEMENT

Teenagers today, according to recent surveys, are sad, anxious, isolated, hyper-sexualised. They "ruminate about failure"; they sleep with each other before they feel ready, and pass on diseases in the process. They're malnourished, they're violent, they're vulnerable, but "feral"; they're optimistic about money, but at the same time, feel hopeless. They want to be famous, though they don't mind for what – more than half of British teenage girls would consider a career as a glamour model. They drink. They burn things (Wiseman, par. 3).

The content creators for E4.com, the web site for the network that airs *Skins*, have done a lot of work to establish the characters of *Skins* in multimedia platforms where the characters are represented as 'real people' with 'real identities.' Each character of the series, inclusive of past and present seasons has a dedicated web page stemming from the *Skins* main web page, that resembles a personal blog.<sup>6</sup> This supports media scholar Will Brooker's observation that "contemporary television increasingly 'overflows' from the

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<sup>6</sup> Each character in the third generation of *Skins* has their own Facebook page and viewers can friend them to keep updated on their lives—as if they were living in real time (even when the series is not currently airing).

primary text across multiple platforms—particularly onto dedicated internet sites--and that certain programmes invite a participatory, interactive engagement which constructs the show as an extended, immersive experience” (456). E4 and the makers of *Skins* have capitalized on this trend and like many of its contemporaries (*The Inbetweeners*, *Gossip Girl*, *Glee*), created media content that extends the viewing experience into the world of the internet and mobile technology which includes video ‘extras’, full episodes, music playlists that link to sites where music from the series can be downloaded to iTunes and Spotify, as well as quizzes, contests, and related advertising content that appeals to their teenage audience.

Research from the leading U.S. media firm, Nielsen Media Research, confirms Brooker’s observation. According to their 2009 study, “How Teens Use Media,” Nielsen researchers found that teens are not abandoning TV entirely for online or other multimedia viewing experiences, but they utilize these platforms to supplement their TV watching, which Nielsen found was up 6% over the previous five year period in the U.S. “What we have found, across a variety of studies, is that teens embrace new media not at the cost of traditional media, but in supplement to it. *Taken on whole, teens exhibit media habits that are more similar to the total population than not*” (“How Teens Use Media,” p. 1) [original emphasis].

At the time his blog post was written<sup>7</sup>, dating to when the show first aired in the U.K., Tony Stonem describes himself as living in Bristol, England, which establishes the series’ setting. With a dash of irreverence akin to his character, Tony writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Compared to current web content for the series and its contemporaries, the blog and web pages for the first generation of *Skins* are rudimentary, which is indicative of the rapidly changing media landscape since, at the time of this work, they are only, or already (depending on how you look at it) five years old.

I live in a city full of hills with a river running through it. There's a beautiful bridge and parks and old buildings and music and clubs and drugs and black people and white people and sex and violence and death and life. And shoe shops, for some reason. Loads of them ("Tony," *e4.com*).

Bristol is England's sixth most populous city and is geographically located on the southwest coast, tucked in a nook between the Bristol Channel and the southern most tip of Wales. The city is built around the River Avon and much of its pre-twentieth century history is tied to its establishment as a western port city. As industrialization swept through the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Bristol became known as one of the group of English core manufacturing and commercial hubs. Brittain explains Bristol's importance as the setting for the series:

The city is very important to the show and we chose a city like Bristol because it's big enough to have a lot of interesting places to go to but small enough to have sort of a community center to it. The word Bristol is never used in the show and we've only ever used the Clifton Suspension Bridge once, a big landmark that. I like to think that the city is sort of a strange, unknowable place in *Skins* and the characters move through it in a slightly confused sense (Brittain qtd. in Lacob, *televisionaryblog.com*).

By not explicitly indicating that the cohort lives in Bristol, the producers of the series want its setting to be interchangeable for any number of mid-sized, suburban, post-industrial commercial centers. They want the audience, no matter where they are watching the series, to feel as though they could see any of these characters walking down the streets of their own towns and cities. Even though its location is not explicit in the series itself, because of media coverage and the 'cyber-life' of the series facilitated by the internet, the audience knows the setting is Bristol and therefore each viewer's opinion and perception of Bristol influences their viewing experience.

Additionally, the location of the series is depicted as having substantial nightlife options with a wide range of bars and clubs aimed at a young adult clientele. It is ethnically and culturally diverse, with a large student population and noticeable separation between the leisure spaces of predominantly white middle-class students and the suburban row-houses where Tony and Sid's families live, and the more ethnically diverse but predominantly working-class council housing where Maxxie and Sketch (a secondary character) live. All of these spaces function as locations that visually represent the world in which the cohort inhabits.

According to Rojek, *location* is a term cultural studies scholars employ to describe "where culture is directly made as individuals interact, help, represent, struggle, conflict and co-operate with each other, in relation to scarce economic, social, political and cultural resources" (70). Rojek's definition of location positions culture in relation to scarcity of resources, which seems to be at odds with *Skins* which often emphasizes the excess of capital resources such as drugs and alcohol which seem readily available. The resources that seem to be the scarcest to the cohort are interpersonal resources: consistent and meaningful attention and support from their parents. In the series, teen culture is made when the cohort helps each other deal with the challenging situations created by their parents.

For example, Sid's first call after he discovers that his father has unexpectedly died is to Tony, not his mother who is absent after having separated from Sid's father, and is living with another man at the time of her husband's death. After Chris's mom abandons him, Jal helps Chris reluctantly seek support (which he does not get) from his father. Michelle also experiences the scarcity of meaningful attention from her mother,

who is constantly occupied by her latest husband; first Malcolm and then Ted. Relative to location Michelle literally *dislocated* from her family and left to set up her new room in what was previously a closet in Ted's house after she and her mother move in. In each of these examples we can see how multiple members of the cohort are *located*, or rather *dislocated* within relationship to their unstable family units.

In *Skins*, like any television series, location visually establishes the settings, both in interior and exterior settings where character interaction occurs. In addition, many locations represent the spaces where the cohort's dual identity development occurs. In terms of individual identity development, as with most Teen TV series, interior shots of the characters' bedrooms function as visual guides that provide a lot of information to the audience about who these characters are.

For example, Tony Stonem's introduction to the audience in the first episode of the series functions as a key to understanding how character identity is located within the interior space of his bedroom. The scene opens with an overhead shot of an adolescent boy lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. He is lying underneath a duvet cover superimposed with the image of a headless body of a naked man and naked woman. Tony's bedroom is tidy, orderly, and furnished with a modern bedroom set and expensive electronic equipment, which illustrates his upper-middle class status. It has a large window where he can survey his neighborhood, in the suburbs of the city, and watch his neighbor across the street give him a peep show as she dresses in front of her bedroom window. These visual cues locate Tony's identity through the interior space of his bedroom and they convey a lot of information about Tony before the audience is formally introduced to him by name. In this way, bedrooms serve as crucial settings in the series

where individual culture is made because they are places where teens spend a lot of time and they are places that provide ample opportunity for ‘naughty behavior’ to occur.

Besides the characters’ bedrooms, which give insight into identity markers as we saw with Tony’s room, *location* also occurs in many public spaces such as parks, the green outside of the school, where the group gathers when they are not in class, or within school they attend – Roundview College, as well as pubs and clubs – essentially, all the places that teenagers spend their time. These public spaces function as the locations where the collective identity development of the cohort occurs. Rojek explains the significance of these spaces:

The most obvious setting to explore location is through *on-location* behavior. By this is meant the interaction between people in definable cultural settings. Among the settings in which students of cultural behaviour have investigated on-location practices and forms are schools, work-places, clubs and pubs. The list is potentially infinite. Any cultural setting that engages individuals in culturally patterned sequences of interaction qualifies (Rojek 70-1).

In other words, identity development involves a ‘gathering together’ where the ‘presentation of self’ occurs. The presentation of ‘self’ especially at the adolescent development stage, occurs as teenagers continually ‘try on’ new identities as means of advancing the process of self-discovery. In these public spaces where ‘gathering together’ occurs in peer-groups, each individual engages in performative acts of identity discovery. Social Psychologist, Margaret Wetherell, in *Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2009), synthesizes this idea when she explains:

Identity, in other words, is about becoming intelligible to oneself and to others. And being intelligible, as Butler (2004) argues, involves engaging with current forms of social recognition. It also requires repetition over time – one gesture alone would be insufficient to count as characteristic – as Fitzgerald states, a series is required (Wetherell 3).



Furthermore, these public spaces encompass formal and informal codes that dictate expected patterns of behavior and “although they are compatible with a degree of latitude in how people actually behave, they also discipline behaviour and curtail conduct that is challenged as *infractious* or ‘rule-breaking’” (Rojek 71). One example that illustrates how these social codes dictate expected behaviors in an adult-dominated setting occurs in episode 2.5 (“Chris”) when Chris goes to see the careers counselor (Josie) at his school after he has flunked out. The sign on her desk reads, “Be daring, try and express yourself without swearing,” which the exuberant Chris finds very difficult to do:

CHRIS. Right, I’ve been to the job centre, yeah...and they’re a bit, well...they’re all just... [He wants to say fuckers.]

JOSIE. Fuddy-duddies. [She interjects to prevent him from swearing.]

CHRIS. Yeah! They are fuddy-duddies. Right. They’re like, ‘just queue up here, fill in this box here, don’t steal that.’ It’s a load of... [He wants to say crap.]

JOSIE. Cranberry juice! Do you want cranberry juice? [Chris looks at her confusedly] and she asks: How can I help?

CHRIS. Well, I was thinking, seeing as you’re a careers officer... [He looks at her like she’s supposed to know where he’s going with this. It is obvious, but she is depicted as good naturedly daft.]

CHRIS. I thought you could...you know, help me get a job?

JOSIE. Oh, yeah, totally. [She smiles and nods.]

CHRIS. Great, fucking A!

JOSIE. Chris! Swearing. [She points to the sign, mildly scolding him.] (Episode 2.5, 5:17).

This scene illustrates that in Josie’s space, swearing is not an acceptable behavior and by interrupting Chris before he utters foul language, she alters his behavior in her

space. As the episode proceeds and Chris returns to her office after having been repeatedly fired for various transgressions, he animatedly (and stereotypically) blames his misfortunes on anyone (and anything) besides his own irresponsibility. Chris changes his normal behavior pattern (where he would have cursed throughout his dialogue) and instead, he humorously substitutes g-rated words that creatively flavor his conversation in order to conform to Josie's no-swearing rule.

Therefore, by comparing these scenes we can see how the behavior of the cohort changes in private (bedrooms) and public spheres such as school, pubs, and parties. In these spaces adolescent experiences occurs as either a part of, or away from cultural expectations. In some instances when adults are present (adults like Josie for whom the characters have some basic level of respect), their transgressive behavior is modified their 'excessive' behavior is tempered, but when they are located in their bedrooms they can be 'themselves' and do not have to perform specific patterns of behavior that conforms to adult expectations. By looking at how location functions and influences individual and collective identity development in the series, we can gain a better understanding of how adolescents view themselves and others in relation to and outside of cultural and societal expectations. That is, as long as adults (the parents) are involved in the lives of the children and consistent and fair in enforcing these expectations. Otherwise, the cohort is left to self-regulation and they must hold each other accountable for their excessive behavior.

Another way to culturally frame *Skins* is in the visual motif from the opening scene in Tony's bedroom where he is lying in the middle of the bed between the images of bodies of the man and woman on his duvet, so his head is exactly in the middle. This

image introduces the second cultural concept discussed by Rojek; *embodiment*, which refers to representations of the human form as a “cultural, social, economic, and political resource and construction” (76). This scene, Tony’s body literally occupies the space between the male and female bodies, and foreshadows his exploration of a homosocial,<sup>8</sup> sexual experience with Maxxie that occurs in episode 1.6 (“Maxxie and Anwar”).

Embodiment in cultural analyses is also frequently utilized in gendered ways when looking at the commodification of women’s bodies. An example of this occurs in the moniker “Nips” that Tony playfully, but also misogynistically bestows on his girlfriend Michelle when he claims one of her nipples is bigger than the other. At first Michelle is offended by this nickname, but she later uses it to get back at Tony by querying Sid as to whether he agrees with Tony’s assessment. What this reveals about Tony’s character is surprising because instead of Michelle’s desired reaction of jealousy or anger at Michelle for exposing herself to Sid when she “belongs” to Tony as his girlfriend, Tony instead laughs because Michelle has embarrassed Sid whom they both know has a crush on her. Therefore, we can see that the way Michelle’s reappropriation of the nickname “Nips” in this scene functions on multiple levels in constructing the complex sexual dynamic between Michelle, Tony and Sid who take part in a complicated love triangle (which is really more like a quadrangle as Cassie is a major player in their dynamic) for the better part of both seasons.

The third term that we can use to situate *Skins* culturally is *emplacement*, which “simply means the position that individuals and groups occupy in relation to *resources*”

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<sup>8</sup> Homosocial is a neologism coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) where she argued that ‘male homosocial desire’ referred to the whole spectrum of male bonding and desire and that categories defining masculine sexual identity could not be easily distinguished from one another since ‘erotic desire’ is fluid, not static.

(Rojek 85). Resources are defined as economic, cultural, social and political capital.

Rojek explains that:

Capital is understood as a type of value and as such, it is bound up with relations of power. If *habitus* refers to generative principles – conceptual frameworks, schemes of classification and ways of positioning ourselves in the world – power refers to how these assets are valued in society and culture (Rojek 85).

In terms of *Skins*, even though the cohort has a high level of free agency, mobility, and consumerist power, they are still culturally emplaced in relation to their parents' capital, both economically and emotionally. In terms of employment, Chris is the only one seen attempting to work for money to support himself. He and Cassie pool resources but it is never made clear how they pay for the (Angie's) apartment that they are sharing—even if they don't pay rent, how they afford groceries and other necessities.

Emplacement directly influences embodiment since it conditions the resources that are allocated to diet, clothing, education, housing, travel, transport and health care, all things that (even in late adolescence), parents are still responsible for providing and allocating. One example of emplacement can be seen in episode 2.4 ("Michelle") where Michelle is alienated from her comfortable position (in her family), as her mother has remarried (again). She and her mother move into her new husband's ultra-modern "poncy" home. Michelle experiences discomfort due to isolation, as she is literally *out of place* in her mother's new life with this new man. To make matters worse, Michelle has to contend with a new, obnoxious, physically well-endowed, and emotionally manipulative stepsister, Scarlett, who inserts herself in the cohort, diverting the attention that Michelle normally enjoys within the group. Before she knows what's happening, Scarlett is invading her life, co-opting her friends and offering her unwanted advice on

what to do about Tony, who is still emotionally adrift after his accident. So when Scarlett inveigles herself onto Michelle's birthday camping trip to the beach and starts to move in on the emotionally fragile Sid, Michelle has to assert her superior social position (place) within the cohort. The way she regains her position and the attention of the cohort is by seeking emotional solace by sleeping with Sid, an act that dismisses Scarlett's temporary novelty in the group, but also results in upending the social balance of the group. Because she uses her sexuality to regain social dominance within the group, we can see this as an example of how "embodiment and emplacement situate us in locations that pattern the trajectories of behavior that we pursue" (Rojek 85). In other words, it can be argued that Michelle's actions and choices are heavily influenced by the instability created by her mother's re-marriage and the alienation she feels from her unstable family life; these feelings of resentment then spill into her social life as Scarlett invades Michelle's 'territory' (emplacement within the cohort).

In conclusion, we have seen how the development of youth culture in Britain contextualizes the way that the series is styled, themes that affect the characters, and our overall understanding of British youth culture. By exploring Rojek's four key terms, context, location, embodiment, and emplacement we have examined some of the ways that the dual identity development—individual and collective is depicted in interior and exterior locations where patterns of behavior are changed by cultural structures that are both self regulated, and regulated by adults who should be there to hold the teens accountable. This leads us to our next exploration of what happens when adults are not present in the lives of their children, and brings us to the question some of the reasons why the parents are depicted as selfish and negligent?

## CHAPTER TWO – WHO ARE THE ADULTS HERE?

### PARENTING IN THE AGE OF INDIVIDUALISM

In focusing on emplacement in *Skins* we find the intersections of force and resistance that influence the alienation that occurs between the parents and their children. The resource of parental emotional support is by far the most scarce resource for members of the cohort, both individually and collectively. The producers of *Skins* execute a definitive position on parental authority, as the depictions of the parents in the series are fraught with negative episodes that have profound effects on their adolescent children's identity development. Looking at examples from several of the characters, we can see how not only the absenteeism but also their total self-involvement and personal and emotional problems perpetuate the collapse of stable family units.

From the very opening scene of the series where Tony cheekily outwits his father by creating a diversion so that his younger sister Effy can sneak back into the house after a night of debauchery, the audience becomes oriented to a world where the teens outsmart their parents at almost every turn by operating with complex free agency and a large amount of cultural capital that allows them to take normative teenage experiences to excess. But as the situations of debauchery are established, simultaneously an undercurrent of need is also established, and it is in the quest of the cohort to fulfill this emotional need within their relationships with each other, that the emotional heart of the show is located. In most instances of emotional conflict with their parents, members of the cohort turn to each other to fill the emotional void left by their absentee, selfish, or otherwise negligent parents. In order for each character to complete their growth

(bildungsroman) and become fully functioning and independent young adults, they must achieve an intimate exchange of interdependence and acknowledgement within their group so that they are equipped to communicate and illustrate this need to their parents.

One trend of the new millennium that many cultural scholars such as Wetherell, Rojek, and Barker have observed is the increase of individualism, a social theory favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control, which has come to characterize much of the later half of the twentieth century in many parts of the West and through globalization, also in many developing countries. With distance provided by time, cultural theorists are just beginning to understand the origins of this shift in society. Some cultural theorists<sup>9</sup> have postulated that, “modernization processes lead to what has been called a ‘crisis of erosion’, where traditional values have been denaturalized and partly worn down. The apparent self-evident naturalness of conventional identities has been questioned in more and more life areas by deepening changes and transformations of everyday life” (Fornas 43).

Individualization then functions as a term closely related to modernization and can be traced to the dawning of the industrial age with the end of agrarian based society where people no longer worked for the good of the community, and instead worked for the advancement of the individual family unit. Other causes under exploration are the rise of the free-market economy, social Darwinism, a conservative rejection of socialism, which occurred during the second half of the twentieth century and culminated in the

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<sup>9</sup> Fornäs, Johan. *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*. London: Sage Publications, 1995. Print. Fornas references the work of cultural theorists Thomas Ziehe and Herbert Stuberbrauch (1975, 1982, 1991).

‘Greed is Good’ mantra of the 1980s; a colloquial ideology which has also been attributed to the global economic meltdown of the late ‘aughts.

According to social psychologist Margaret Wetherell, because of the increased specialization of labor markets and work forces, as well as changing patterns of family life:

Individuals are becoming disembedded from older, communal ways of life, and must now develop their own life worlds unanchored by tradition, constructing identities that are more negotiable, looser, reflexive and autonomous. People’s senses of self are thought to be more provisional as a consequence, less firmly rooted in the ethics of duty, responsibility and self-sacrifice, dominated instead by the ‘religion of me.’ Life as a result has become more risky and uncertain, although exposure to this risk remains highly unevenly distributed (Wetherell 5).

This sense of individualism is the key theme that unites the (arguably under-developed) characterizations most of the parents in *Skins*; adults who seem more focused on their own problems and personal lives and are therefore unable to consistently and actively engage with their teenage children. Even so, it is important to note that cultural parenting styles vary significantly between many European and American parents, where the trend of ‘helicopter parenting’ has become common. Sociology researcher Joseph E. Davis, explains this trend:

A new term has been coined, “helicopter parents,” to describe those who hover over and obsess about the achievements of their children. These parents have been criticized for producing anxious, over-scheduled, and sleep-deprived teens, good at conforming to expectations but lacking in independence and skills for coping with adversity. Such criticisms certainly have merit, and both journalistic accounts and research studies document the stress that such family environments can produce (Davis 40).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Davis references the works of Honoré; Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); Denise Clark Pope, *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise, *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000).



Many European parents, by contrast, employ a more hands-off approach that advocates allowing their children to develop free agency and independence in critical thinking skills at an earlier age. One American mother living in France, Pamela Druckerman, recently published a lowbrow parenting book, *Bringing Up Bebe* (2012), where she writes about her cultural observations on the different parenting styles of French mothers:

The more laissez-faire French style of parenting may be hard to swallow for some Americans who are used to hovering over their children, but Druckerman thinks it's worth it in the long run. "As an American, you know, at first I was really surprised by this kind of approach to parenting. But after a while, I realized, you know what, my daughter is proud of her independence (Druckerman qtd. in Martin, *npr.org*).

In addition to more laissez-faire parenting, systems of education for European (including British) children allow adolescents to leave school between the ages of 14-16. Those who want to pursue university education remain enrolled in school through the age of about 17, completing A-Level entrance exams during the 'sixth-form' year (final year of high school), the results of which determine the universities they are eligible to attend. Because of this educational structure, it is theoretically possible for a sixteen-year-old to leave school and enter the work force, whereby they may also leave their family unit to live on their own or with peers, which is seen in *Skins* when Cassie and Chris share an apartment together. While many American viewers may question the plausibility of this scenario (for 17-18 year olds), it is not necessarily impossible or all that unusual for European teens/young adults considering that at the time (2007-8) the global recession had not yet occurred, and unemployment for young adults had not yet taken affect on economic prospects for young adults.

The effects of the social trend of individualism, whatever its causes or attributions, are widespread in the world of *Skins*, as is evidenced in the de-stabilization of the family unit. According to social researchers Pahl and Pevalin, “the past 40 years have seen a decentring of the family as a primary source of intimacy and care in contemporary British and US society” (Pahl and Pevalin qtd. in Griffin et al. 215). They utilized data from the 1991 and 2001 British Household Surveys [like the U.S. census] to argue “that younger (18-25) people are most likely to nominate their closest friends as being outside the family, *although families are still viewed as important*” (Pahl and Pevalin qtd. in Griffin et al. 215) [my emphasis].

While the importance of friendship in adolescent development is certainly not new, nor is its thematic importance to Teen TV as a genre any less than previous teen oriented shows, there may be evidence of the growing importance of friendship in delayed matriculation into adulthood as more and more emerging adults remain unmarried and pool financial resources by cohabitating with friends and peers. Graham Allan in *Friendship: Developing a Sociological Perspective* (1989), notes: “Research on friendship indicates that informal, private social relationships are likely to take on increasing significance as marriage is a less stable institution and employment is more ‘flexible’ and uncertain” (qtd. in Griffin et al. 215).

Therefore, to relate this data to *Skins*, we can see that friendship is an important attribute to the adolescent and young adult experience, and however ‘unstable’ families may be, the surveys indicated that young adults still understand the importance of a strong and cohesive family unit has on individual adolescent development. Yet, for multiple reasons, some of which we have seen, the show is constructed and plot lines are

intentionally devised to highlight the affects of unstable families on each of the members of the cohort, and this theme has prevailed in all seasons of *Skins* thus far.

It can be argued, conversely, that what we're seeing is not actually bad parenting per se, but rather underdeveloped adult characters that are intentionally viewed from the self-involved teenage perspective of the characters who are not depicted as fully evolved as parents in other (notably American) teen oriented shows such as *My So-Called Life* or *The Gilmore Girls*. The depictions of other adult figures in *Skins*, in addition to some of the parents, including Tom the good-natured, doofus history teacher, are mostly satirized which is observed by one critic, Ian Johns, from *The Times*:

The portrayal of the adults jarred. Understandably on the periphery in this teenage world, they were stock figures – the over-emotional “progressive” teacher [Angie], the tweedy authority figure [Doug the assistant principal] – to be laughed or sneered at. Perhaps that’s why comic actors have been cast as the parents. Still, they add to the sense that the series primary aim is to entertain rather than raise issues with a helpline number at the end (Johns, par. 5 and 6).

Even if the adult characters provide many scenes of comedic fodder, it is hard to deny that the origin of much of the drama in the lives of the cohort has a direct relationship to the influence of the characters’ parents, and for many of the characters, confrontation and reconciliation with their parents are a large part of the arc of their coming of age in the series. Some characters such as Chris and Cassie, and Tony and Effy, never get the opportunity or choose not to confront their parents, while others directly address their conflicts (Sid, Jal, Michelle) bringing resolution and better understanding between the two sides (parents and adolescents)

## ABSENTEE PARENTING, MOMENTS OF 'CRISIS' AND EXCESS 'NAUGHTINESS'

In an interview with Catherine Shoard of *The Telegraph* at the time of the show's premiere, the first generation *Skins* lead actor and cohort anchor, Nicholas Hoult (Tony), explained the show's position: "It doesn't tell people what to do, and it isn't for parents," says Hoult. "Though if they did watch it maybe they'd understand more why their kids are being a pain in the arse" (Hoult qtd. in Shoard, par. 18). Hoult highlights the characteristic tension between parents and their teenage children who watch the series and observes that if parents watched *Skins* they could gain a better understanding of the pressures their sons and daughters face on a daily basis. Parents who watch *Skins* would also see a world where the disassociation between adults and adolescents has significant repercussions in terms of the excessively 'naughty' behavior of adolescents. In closely examining some of examples of the strained relationships between the primary characters and their parents we can see the causal correlation between the disaffectedness and absenteeism of parents and the extremity to which the characters take their otherwise normative 'teenage' behavior. Hoult further explains:

They've got a lot on. Exams can be stressful. Not living up to expectations is hard. Keeping everybody happy is tricky. Trying to be independent. Everything seems a big drama. You're under a lot of pressure, though that's not to say people in the olden days weren't as well. But just because you're 17 doesn't mean your life isn't as complicated as it is a 30. Probably more so, because of your hormones (Hoult qtd. in Shoard, par. 19).

Hoult's observations support the idea that being a teenager in the new millennium is stressful and disconnect between parents and their adolescent children only adds to that stress.

Each of the primary characters experience significantly challenging situations in their lives, and many of those problems are directly caused or exacerbated by their parents' self-involved neglect (and then overcompensation), which manifests itself in overbearing domination (see Sid's father and Jal's father) or utter withdrawal and absenteeism (see Cassie's mother, Chris's parents, Sid's mother, Jal's mother and Michelle's mother). Rojek's cultural framework helps us to see how each member of the cohort is positioned against their parents as they struggle to find or hold on to emplacement within their own families.

Many of these challenging situations can be viewed as 'moments of crisis,' which stem from, or are a direct result of fractures or disruptions in the linear placement of their relationships to their parents. According to the adolescent development theorist, Erick Erikson, "the word "crisis" no longer connotes impending catastrophe [...]. It is now being accepted as designating a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (16). Erikson argues that every person goes through 'crises' at certain points during the developmental stages of their lives, noting that the period of school age to young adulthood, which encompasses adolescence, is particularly characterized by multiple 'crises.' He also theorizes that in order to resolve the 'crisis,' the previously held values and beliefs must be reexamined, reevaluated and redefined. Adolescents, whose brains have not fully developed, are especially known for engaging in cognitive periods of 'trial and error,' periods where attempts are made to problem solve, attempts, which often involve engaging in 'risky behavior' where cultural norms are challenged.

Looking at it another way, these ‘moments of crisis’ can also be characterized as periods of what G. Stanley Hall, the founder of the scholarly study of adolescence, dubbed as ‘storm and stress.’ According to Hall, it is normal for adolescence to be a time of considerable upheaval and disruption. As Hall explains, adolescent ‘storm and stress’ is reflected in especially high rates of three types of difficulties during the adolescent period: *conflict with parents*, mood disruptions, and *risk behavior*, such as substance abuse and crime” (Hall qtd. in Arnett 10) [my emphasis]. Therefore, we can understand this quest for attention through ‘naughty behavior’ as functioning in the same way that young children act out in order to gain their parents’ attention. ‘Naughty behavior’ in adolescents may result from their attempts to gain the attention of their parents by engaging in risky, excessive behavior. Adolescent psychologist and researcher David P. Ausubel, in his seminal work *The Problems of Adolescent Development* (1954), advanced Hall’s theory when he wrote, “It is not at all surprising [then] that the incidence of delinquency is so much greater under conditions of child rearing that lead to an absence of satellization, when parents are rejecting and neglectful and make children feel unloved, unwanted, and insecure in affectional relationships” (Ausubel 528).

Arguably, the character who experiences and struggles with the affects of bad, or rather, non-existent parenting of any other character throughout both seasons 1-2 of the series is Chris Miles. E4.com’s profile of Chris illustrates the affability and irreverence his character uses to greet the world. He is the good-natured, up-for-anything, party animal of the cohort. Chris’s home life is also the most troubled. His older brother died of a hereditary subarachnoid hemorrhage at a young age, which effectively destroyed Chris’s family. His parents divorced, his father remarried and then started a second

family. At the beginning of the series Chris lives in a suburban row-house with his mother who, by episode 1.4 (“Chris”), abandons him with an envelope full of cash left on the kitchen counter of their home which he blows in the course of a weekend, pill-popping and partying with his friends and quite a few strangers. When the realization that his mother is not likely to return sets in, Chris experiences an understandably emotional response.

After he has blown the wad of his mother’s cash, in search of any extra money in the house to pay for a stack of pizzas he ordered after a particularly epic night of partying, Chris goes into his mother’s bedroom and sees it devoid of all her personal items, clothes etc. He opens her wardrobe, goes inside and closes the door as if he were a small child. Chris’s normally positive outlook utterly fails him in the moment of realization of the starkness of his situation. This moment of reflection is then shattered when Sid and Tony come into the room looking for Chris. Startled by the disruption, the wardrobe falls over and Chris crashes through the back of it. Standing there, embarrassed, Chris, Tony and Sid share a moment between characters where nothing is said, but all is explicit; a moment where the emotional stakes are particularly high and all that needs to be ‘said’ is communicated through a glance; something the series does particularly well.

Television critic Chris Green affirmed this when he wrote, “anyone who has ever watched *Skins* will know that the silences between characters are just as important as the words: many of the scenes are short and rely on the actors' expressions as much as the script” (Green, par. 12). The silence is broken when Sid says, “Alright mate?” and Chris responds, “Yeah, of course,” but what really occurs in this scene is Sid and Tony’s

acknowledgment of their friend's dismal situation, and of his vulnerability. In this moment Chris recognizes the full implications of his mother's abandonment.

Things rapidly decline for Chris when, by the end of the episode, in a simultaneously comedic-tragic scene, Chris wakes up in his bed with a chemically induced erection—this scene, shot for shot mirrors the opening of the episode. Next to Chris's bed is a large bulletin board that runs the length of the bed in which Chris has tacked layers upon layers of empty pill packets of every substance he has consumed. The bulletin board serves as a symbolic representation of Chris's drug induced excess. At the beginning of the episode the bulletin board could be viewed as a trophy—'look at what I've accomplished—look at all the drugs I've taken,' but by the end of the episode, Chris's bulletin board visually symbolizes the instrument of Chris's escape from the emotional toll of his situation and illustrates the direct correlation between the dissolution of his family unit and his excessive drug use.

Chris copes by taking any medication that will make him feel something other than the pain of loss and rejection—even medication that causes an erection. The scene proceeds with Chris stumbling out of bed; he goes to the bathroom to urinate (just as he did at the beginning of the episode). Only now the toilet is gone so Chris gets in the shower to urinate only to find a homeless man sleeping there. When Chris realizes what has happened he and the homeless man quarrel over the homeless man's supposed (squatter's) right to be in the house, which is completely trashed and does not resemble a home in any discernable way. Graffiti mars the walls and most of the belongings are long gone or are utterly trashed. Ultimately the homeless man outwits Chris and locks him out



of the house and the episode ends with Chris briskly walking nude down the suburban street of his neighborhood, his nakedness embodying the starkness of his situation.

In Chris's situation, having been totally abandoned by his family, we see the direct correlation that leads to his excessive abuse of drugs and alcohol. The next example of absentee parenting can be seen in episode 2.7, ("Effy"). The episode opens in the Stonem household where Tony and Effy's father (Jim) calls and leave a voicemail informing them that his business trip to France has been extended and he will be returning later than planned. The house is in total disarray having clearly fallen to pieces in his absence. Effy is sitting on the stairs screening the message, in her underwear with messy hair as if she has been out partying during the previous night. She and Tony have an exchange about her doing laundry badly that has resulted in turning everything pink. The milk is off and the rubbish is piling up outside. Anthea, Tony and Effy's mum, has been using Tony's prescription medication and hovers at steady level of unconsciousness, as if she were in a dream-like state. A little later in the episode Sid and Effy's friend Pandora are in the kitchen with Tony and Effy. Anthea comes into the kitchen in her dressing gown, smoking a cigarette.

ANTHEA. So who wants to hear my best cock gag?

EFFY. No, mum...

SID. Hello Anthea.

EFFY. Oh, Jesus.

ANTHEA. No listen. Best cock gag... [She clears her throat.]

EFFY. Mum, you don't need to... [Anthea mimics the actions of giving a blow job with her hand, mouth and tongue, and then mimics retching.]

ANTHEA. Thanks very much. My name's Anthea Stonem, I shall be here all week.

EFFY [gets up to attend to her, and she says,] Come on mum. I think you need a lie down. [She escorts her back to her bedroom.]

ANTHEA. Did they like my gag?

EFFY. Yeah, they loved it. [Effy tucks her into bed and puts out her cigarette, soothing her. She passes out and Effy's friend Pandora comes into the bedroom.]

PANDORA. Is she mental?

EFFY. No. Just tired. [Pandora picks up a framed photograph of the family during better, happier times and looks sad for them.]  
(Episode 2.8, 10:33)

This scene vividly illustrates another example of the collapse of a family unit, which, in the case of the Stonem family, was not that strong to begin with when the series opens, considering their fourteen year old daughter (Effy's) predilection for sneaking out and engaging in risky behavior, which, due in part to Tony's elaborate, selfish manipulations, results in her hospitalization due to an accidental drug overdose (see episode 1.8 "Effy"). The final, total collapse of the Stonem family is seen after Tony's bus accident where it is understood that all of Anthea's energy has gone to Tony's rehabilitation, leaving what little attention her parents had for Effy, totally taken up by Tony. By the time we get to episode 2.7 ("Effy"), Tony is well on his way to making a full recovery, which has left Anthea entirely emotionally drained, and their father deals with the stress by retreating to his work to escape the difficulties of his family situation. That leaves Effy, their fourteen year old daughter, to pick up the pieces of her broken family. Instead of lamenting her situation, Effy looks at it as an opportunity to utilize her

quick wits to orchestrate the world around her, seeking outcomes that ultimately benefit her the most.

Effy spends the remainder of the episode stealthily employed in returning some sense of balance and stability to the various fractured elements of her family life. Because she cares deeply for her brother (arguably above anyone else in her life) she also works to fix her brother and Sid's fractured friendship, which occurred when Sid and Michelle began their sexual relationship. Effy does all of this maneuvering and orchestrating while taking care of her own art coursework (which she has to complete successfully so that she won't fail out of school), a tiresome project that she clearly scorns).

By the end of the episode when Jim Stonem returns from his business trip, he finds his house just as he left it (miraculously) all tidied up. Tony comes down in clean (non-pink) shirt and tie, happy to see him and there is no trace of the dismal state his family has been in while he was away. Jim asks where Anthea is and Tony says she's sleeping. They have an exchange about how he's happy to be back and Tony is genuinely happy that he has returned. He goes up to see Anthea and as he enters their bedroom, Anthea wakes up as if she were Sleeping Beauty. The effects of the prescriptions have since worn off and Anthea shows no sign of recognizing that she's been completely incapacitated as long as he's been away, or that her fourteen-year-old daughter has kept things going, and restored order to their lives. The scene cuts to Effy's room where she's in bed, in her school uniform, reading a book. She looks directly at the camera and smiles knowingly; she is immensely pleased at her ability to pull it all off, and she clearly enjoys the (surprisingly) amount of ability she has to control her otherwise uncontrollable life and the lives of those around her. Even though this provides a satisfying outcome for Effy

(and a satisfying conclusion for the audience too) is it really appropriate that a fourteen-year-old girl should have to go to such lengths to restore balance to her family life, or that she should have to engage in such adult-like behavior?

As is evident in this episode, the Stonem family life is marked by conflict, isolation and disharmony. While it is evident that Anthea Stonem cares for her children's welfare, their traumatic experiences have left her emotionally unstable as she has used up all her energy and emotional resources in helping them recover from significant accidents. Anthea's incapacitation and Jim's retreat into his work has left their two children to function with a high level of free agency where they essentially care for themselves (even if the milk is off, and the laundry is pink), and for each other as they are very close. In addition to their family life, we see them struggle with 'typical' teenage issues, because they are after all teenagers, and even though they are highly developed, they have not fully reached the full embodiment of emerging adulthood where they do not need the emotional support their parents should be there to provide.

While in many ways they demonstrate high-functioning behavior, and their actions that can be considered very 'adult-like,' they still make very questionable choices and engage very in risky behavior (see episode 1.8 ("Effy")). This is especially true for Effy, who, in the first generation of the series, is fourteen and fifteen. In seasons 3 and 4 Effy anchors the 'next generation' cast and we see her struggle with her own 'coming of age' in significantly challenging ways—while her pattern of risky behavior, that was established in seasons 1 and 2 continues to escalate. By seasons 3 and 4 the fracture of her family is complete; Tony is off at university and her parents have separated. She lives with her mum who is understood to be engrossed in her own 'midlife crisis' and

ultimately Effy winds up in a mental institution having suffered from a nervous breakdown.

So we have seen examples of the effects of bad parenting with Chris and Tony and Effy. It is, however, important to note that within the *Skins* cohort not every single member's family unit is fractured or features negligent parents. Anwar is the youngest and only son (he has three sisters) of a traditional Pakistani, Muslim family. According to adolescent psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach* (2010), "traditional cultures differ in a variety of ways, but they have in common that they are firmly grounded in a relatively stable cultural tradition, and for that reason they provide a distinct contrast to the cultures of the West" (Arnett 5t). In the series, the way the contrast is manifested is that his parents may be viewed as overbearing in that they govern both his faith and his life located inside and outside of the mosque. They expect him to conduct his behavior according to the tenants of his Islamic faith, which includes formal and informal codes of behavior patterning that are in accordance with their traditional spiritual and cultural beliefs.

Unlike the other members of the cohort with parents who are neglectful, Anwar's rebellion can be seen as an act of defiance against these traditional codes. "But of course, through the process of growing up in families, communities, social classes and ethnic groups, individuals develop informal rules of practice and ways of seeing the world that also pattern behavior on-location" (Rojek 71). Anwar's on-location behavior, (the way he acts when he is with his friends) demonstrates his struggle with the conservative values imparted on him by his family and his desire to pattern his behavior on the individualism of Western culture, and the youth culture codes that contextualize his environment when

he is with his friends. He drinks, has premarital sex, takes drugs at parties, and curses; yet he also prays five times a day and believes homosexuality is against the teachings of his faith, which creates tension and conflict with his best friend, Maxxie, who is gay. In episode 1.9 (“Everyone”) it is Anwar’s 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and Maxxie calls to wish him a ‘happy birthday,’ but says that he will not attend his big party until Anwar tells his parents that he is gay. Anwar is conflicted about this and on the evening of his party Maxxie confronts Anwar outside the party venue. Mr. Kharall (Anwar’s father) sees Anwar talking to Maxxie:

MR. KHARALL. Maxxie!

MAXXIE. Hi, Mr. Kharall. [They embrace.]

MR. KHARALL. You’re just in time for the food.

ANWAR. Dad. Maxxie’s gay.

MR. KHARALL. We’ve got a fantastic lamb-boura. My wife made it especially because she knows how much you like it.

ANWAR. Dad did you hear me? Maxxie’s gay.

MR KHARALL. ...and the spices are not too hot, just right...

MAXXIE. I’m gay Mr. Kharall. I always have been.

MR. KHARALL. [He looks at him a moment and says:] It’s a fucking, stupid messed up world. I’ve got my God and he speaks to me every day. Some things I just can’t work out, so I leave them be. Ok? Even if I think they’re wrong, because I know one day he’ll make me understand. I’ve got that trust. It’s called belief. I’m a lucky man. Right? [He turns to look at Anwar.]

ANWAR. [He nods in affirmation] Yes dad.

MR. KHARALL. Now come Maxxie, the food’s ready.

Maxxie and Anwar exchange a glance that confirms their conflict has

abated and their friendship is restored.  
(Episode 1.9, 30:58)

In this very poignant scene, Mr. Kharall models for Anwar the wisdom of reconciling traditionalist, conservative beliefs with the culture in which they currently live. He knows that Maxxie is a good person and that he is a good friend to his son. Therefore, we can see that because Anwar comes from a traditional, conservative family he is given good values and his parents take an active role in his development into early adulthood. Anwar makes choices that they would not agree with (such as engaging in a pre-marital sexual relationship with Sketch), and he hides this behavior from them, but ultimately he knows they care for him very much and their presence in his life, overbearing as it may be at times, has a positive impact on his identity development. In that scene we see the resolution to a ‘moment of crisis that’ helps Anwar grow—a key moment in his bildungsroman.

Another example of good parenting can be seen in the way Maxxie’s father confronts the gang of hoodlums that bullies him in the council housing where they all live. Here the writers of *Skins* directly oppose the stereotype of what may be expected of lower-class families, i.e. that if you live in ‘the projects’ you have an automatically fractured family unit—i.e. that all kids from the projects have deadbeat dads. Episode 2.1 (“Tony and Maxxie”) introduces Maxxie’s parents, Jackie and Walter Oliver. Like Maxxie, his father enjoys dancing in a clever routine with their dog Taz (in their spare time), and that his dad expects him to finish school (his A levels) and then join him in construction work. Maxxie rebels against this plan as he tries to convince him to let him drop his A-Levels and leave school to audition for musicals in London. In spite of this

conflict with his dad, it is evident that his father cares deeply for him as is seen in the way he confronts the group of bullies harassing Maxxie for being gay. As Maxxie and his father walk past the group of ‘chavs’ one of them, Dale says:

DALE. Fucking turd-burgler. [The group sniggers and Taz starts barking.]

MR. OLIVER pushes DALE against the fence with his hand on his throat:  
You got somethin’ to say kiddo?

DALE. I can say what I like! It’s a free country innit?

MR. OLIVER. Fair point. But here’s my suggestion son, you tell your dad what you said to Walter Oliver. Alright my lover?” [Dale, nods slightly and Walter lets him go. He turns to the group and nods to them.]

MR. OLIVER. Alright lads?

Maxxie and Mr. Oliver (and the dog) walk away. The group laughs at Dale and chides him for getting ‘fucked up good’ by Mr. Oliver. Dale in retaliation punches the youngest and smallest member of their group. (Episode 2.1, 9:25)

Even at this point in the episode when Maxxie and Mr. Oliver are in conflict over Maxxie’s future, he stands up for him against the injustice and discrimination he faces. There is no hint whatsoever that Mr. Oliver has a problem with Maxxie’s sexual identity.

Later in the episode Dale and his father visit the Oliver flat and Dale’s father makes Dale apologize to Mr. Oliver and to Maxxie. Dale then gives Maxxie an ‘apology cake’ that says “sory” (humorously spelled incorrectly) written on it in icing. Humor aside, this exchange is important because it establishes that there are codes of respect that govern the community that exists in the council estate, and clearly Mr. Oliver and Dale’s father have a previously established relationship where respect is implicit in their on-location behavior. They live in a “cultural setting that engages individuals in culturally



patterned sequence of interaction” where there are codes that “discipline behaviour and curtail conduct that is challenged as infractious or ‘rule-breaking’” (Rojek 70-1).

Ironically, as it turns out, Dale has homosocial feelings, which he reveals to Maxxie by isolating him in what appears to be another attack, but instead he pins him to the ground and kisses him. Eventually by the end of the episode, after Walter has had time to reflect on his relationship with his son, he convinces Maxxie that it is in his best interest to finish his A-Levels, so that he will have something to fall back on, and then he can go to London to pursue his goal of becoming a dancer, even if it means that he will not join his father and become a builder as Walter would prefer.

Given these examples we have seen a comparison of the effects of negligent, absentee parenting juxtaposed to overbearing and involved parenting. There are many more examples of how parents interact with their adolescent children in the series that cannot be covered here, however, there are some generalizations on the effects of family life that can be made and are supported by adolescent development theory (Ausubel) and understood through Rojek’s Cultural Studies framework. For most of the members of the cohort in *Skins*, as Ausubel writes, “their family life is marked by conflict, hostility, and disharmony” (528), which is evident when examining Chris and Tony, and Effy’s family life. “They lack close emotional ties with their parents, seemingly having little regard for them, and tend to disavow the values the parents prize most highly” (528). This may seem true on the surface when looking at Anwar’s family in that through in his ‘typical’ adolescent behavior, he actively rejects his parents’ values, but he does have regard for them even though they annoy him, and his mother and sisters frequently emasculate him (humorously), he does show respect for them and has close emotional ties to them. At the

end of the series Anwar chooses to go with Maxxie and his boyfriend to London after they have completed their sixth-form year, and it is reasonable to hope, based on the modeled behavior of his father, that as Anwar moves into the emerging adulthood stage of his development, where the traditionalist values he grew up with, will find balance with the Anglophone lifestyle he enjoys.

Maxxie's refusal to put aside his dreams of becoming a dancer to enter into the construction profession may initially be seen as example of how "they [teens] resent parental authority and training measures since they do not feel that their parents truly have their welfare at heart" (Ausubel 528). But as evident in the way Maxxie's father defends him against the bullies, as well as his willingness to compromise while still ensuring that Maxxie completes the last year of his education, shows that his father really does have Maxxie's best interests at heart. Maxxie's father just wants to make sure that he is happy and he has every opportunity for success, at least as much as he is able to give him from his humble, albeit loving background.

Ausubel writes that, "since aggression at home leads to swift reprisals, they transfer their rebelliousness and hatred of authority to other adults, turning on society for the revenge they seek against parents. In some instances the desired revenge is obtained by merely participating in disapproved activities" (528), which is another way of framing the cause/effect correlation of absentee parenting to excessive behavior of the cohort. However, the key point here is that regardless of how neglectful, absent, selfish or derided the producers of the show choose to portray the parents in the series, it is very clear that for many of the members of the cohort, is important that their conflicts with their parents be addressed and at least some attempt at resolution is made. This is made

possible through the strong bonds of friendship within the cohort where they encourage each other to confront their parents about these issues. Unfortunately, as is the case with Cassie's mother (and stepfather) and arguably Chris's father who forbids the cohort from attending his funeral during the last episode of the second season, "not infrequently, however, rejecting, narcissistic parents are not at all concerned over the anti-social behavior of their offspring as long as they themselves are not put to any trouble by it" (Ausubel 528).

This last assertion by Ausubel is arguably the one most aligned with the perceived reality put forth by the makers of *Skins*. In many scenes throughout the series we see examples of members of the cohort conducting themselves with more adult-like behavior than their parents, and as evidenced in the Effy episode in season 2, where she provides better care and support to her parents than they do. It is also seen in Michelle focused episodes, where she helps her mother and Malcolm, her mother's first boyfriend, problem solve their own emotional and personal issues. See also Sid in his attempt to help his father win back his mother, after she leaves (and before his father dies unexpectedly).

However, as Chuck Nelson, a Developmental Neuroscientist at the University of Minnesota notes, "With teenagers, it's especially hard to remember that their brains are [still] developing [during adolescence] because they look like adults. But even though teenagers have the bodies of adults, they are not adults. We must keep that thought in mind—if we can" (Nelson qtd. in Strauch 207). Therefore, just because teenagers may embody many characteristics of adulthood they still require emotional support to help guide them through the 'periods of stress and storm,' to make good choices and decisions. In the end, social scientists and adolescent psychologists agree that parents still

need to be there for their teens to provide love and support as they make their way in the world. The makers of *Skins* however, seem to feel that in the new millennium, consistently good parenting remains elusive.

### CHAPTER THREE – CALCULATED HEDONISM 'NAUGHTINESS' IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Your back's against the wall  
There's no one home to call  
You're forgetting who you are  
You can't stop crying  
It's part not giving in  
And part trusting your friends  
You'll do it all again

And I'm not lying  
Standing in the way of control  
Go and live your life  
Survive the only way that you know,  
know...

Gossip – *Standing in the Way of Control*

As we have seen in *Skins* the construction of adolescent identity is a complex process made additionally challenging by neglectful parents whose absenteeism attributes to their children's predilection for excessive, risky behavior. While poor parenting definitely affects the extent to which teens engage in risky behavior, it is certainly not the only cause of it, but rather, it fits into a larger picture of the complex issues that are attributed to the process of adolescent behavior. "There is evidence for it in the increasing prevalence of consumption and life-style as a maker of identity and in the key role of friendship groups play for these young people compared to the former centrality of family" (Wetherell 15). Because of the nature of being a teenager and because the show is a drama, the kids in *Skins* are under a lot of stress, which affects their emotional and cognitive responses to challenges and conflicts. Also because of the banner of authenticity that the show promotes, the teens are depicted as representative members of a generation faced with challenges that include: the onset of puberty at younger ages than ever before, drugs and alcohol that are stronger and more prevalent, and exposure to the internet and other mobile technology that facilitates the ease of their access to prurient images. Barbara Strauch, Deputy Science Editor of *The New York Times*, in her book *The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us About Our*

*Kids* (2004), writes: “That leaves many modern teenagers at the mercy of their own judgment, or at that of their peers. But even peer pressure may not be what we think. Some recent research suggests that teenagers, rather than being pushed by friends, purposely pick friends who do things they want to do” (Strauch 90). The depiction of friendships in the cohort is the heart of the series, as much as the effects of absentee parenting may contribute to the fractures of ‘self’ for individual characters, the bonds of friendships within the cohort are the glue that holds everything together, much in the same way that friendship, for most adolescents, is the glue that holds their worlds together.

One such friendship central to *Skins* is Tony and Sid’s relationship, which functions as a role model relationship where Sid is the less confident, more submissive of the pair who, for the better part of the first season, lets Tony talk him into dubious situations, such as purchasing drugs from the crazy drug dealer, the Mad Twatter, in episode 1.1. At the beginning of the episode Tony calls Sid to hatch a plan to help Sid lose his virginity, and the audience begins to see that Tony is manipulative and that Sid is his good-natured friend who likes to go along for a laugh. Even though Sid is conscious that Tony often takes advantage of him, he lets this happen because he knows that he will usually have a good time along the way and because, in spite of Tony’s selfishness, that he will always have his back due to their friendship that dates back to their early childhood. Tony is also the leader of their group of friends and Sid happens to be infatuated with Tony’s girlfriend, Michelle, and wherever Tony and Michelle go for a good time, Sid and the rest of the gang are likely to be there, ready for anything. “Funny and surreal, *Skins* captures that youthful feeling that anything could happen – and it

usually does, from bacchanalian woodland romps to drug-fuelled clubbing via eating disorders and unwanted pregnancy” (Wilson, par. 3). Wilson remarks on the behavior of the cohort, which can be attributed to the term that social scientists have coined:

‘calculated hedonism:’

Young people’s consumption practices have been referred to as a form of ‘calculated hedonism’ (or ‘controlled loss of control’), within the boundaries of a specific time (the weekend); place (a private party or a club or bar within a ‘wild zone’); company (a supportive friendship group); and intensity (Measham 2004, qtd. in Griffin et al. 217).

In typical teenage behavior, several narratives throughout the series are imbued with images of the cohort binge drinking and engaging in ‘calculated hedonism’ either at a party, the pub, Jal’s father’s night club, or at each other’s homes. In these scenes we see the influence of context in the ways the cohort seeks the pursuit of pleasure, which dictates much of their ‘free time’ when they are not in school, or asleep. As in most Teen TV series, these locations are where much of the action and plot development occurs because they create the emplacement where most of the dramatic action occurs. Much of their free time involves the consumption of alcohol and or drugs, mostly marijuana, but also occasionally cocaine and ecstasy, and rarely do these resources seem scarce or unavailable to the cohort. In order to better grasp how ‘calculated hedonism’ is employed in the series, we can look at two examples of excessive behavior to understand how the show glamorizes this behavior. These two scenes are located in episodes that bookend the series, which provides a nice framework for this exploration.

The first example that demonstrates ‘calculated hedonism’ is the ‘epic party’ in episode 1.1, which sets the tone of how ‘naughty behavior’ is glamorized in the series. Tony, Michelle, Sid and Cassie go to a party that is hosted by Abigail, a posh girl who

attends the all-girls' school across the green from Roundview College. Unbeknownst to Michelle, Tony has been flirting with Abby behind her back. From the moment they enter Abby's large, manor-like home, debauchery in all its forms pervades the agenda. Tables in the living room and dining room are overflowing with bowls of rum punch, bottles of vodka and other types of hard liquor. Beer cans are scattered everywhere; not only in the house, but also all over the front and back lawn. This party scene supports research that argues that the "'new culture of intoxication' operates in the context of simultaneous seduction and repression, such that young people are viewed as being seduced into a culture of normalised excessive drinking, whilst simultaneously being pathologised as disordered and disorderly 'binge drinkers'" (Griffin et al. 217).

It would be one thing if binge drinking were the only 'naughty' behavior on the agenda at the party, but it is not. Sid has a dual mission: to sell the huge pile of weed he procured from the Mad Twater, and to lose his virginity to Cassie, who Michelle informs him "will sleep with anything." At the party, Michelle and Tony (in matching outfits) dance provocatively, tormenting poor Sid, who (they both know) has a crush on Michelle. After a bit, Chris, Anwar and Maxxie show up to the party "only after 5 hours, 4 busses and two bottles of vodka." In spite of Abigail's whining pleas for everyone to preserve the sanctity of her home and its expensive furnishings, a fight breaks out and the house is trashed.

The party's pervasive hedonism culminates when the party ends after Cassie has overdosed on pills and the cohort steals a car to take her to the hospital, but she wakes up just as they arrive, and the episode ends with the stolen car in the canal after Sid accidentally hits the gear shift with his knee as he tries to help Tony get the 'skins'



(rolling papers for joints) out of his back pocket. Everyone is okay, but the big bag of weed that Sid was supposed to sell is believed to be ruined, which is the primary concern of the group—not that the car they stole is at the bottom of the canal. This episode sets the tone of how the cohort behaves when they are not monitored by adults, and at no point do any of the members of the cohort face any kind of consequences from anyone in authority for their actions, except perhaps Sid. At the beginning of the next episode Sid is back at school, trying desperately to avoid the Mad Twater, who wants to collect on the credit Sid used to procure the weed. In this way, the ‘calculated hedonism’ in the show is seen as unrealistically glamorized, and is certainly depicted in the first episode as a means of grabbing the attention of the audience to get them hooked on the series.

In looking at the influence of culture and this kind of excessive behavior, fueled through binge drinking through the television shows like *Skins*, the psychological effects of watching this show, especially on impressionable adolescents, specific examples of its wide reaching influence can easily (and notoriously) be found. One critic of *Skins*, when discussing the appeal of the glamorized ‘naughtiness’ marketed by the show’s media promotion materials (print and television promotions) remarked: “When the first series of the show aired earlier this year, it made the kind of impact on 16-24 year-olds that marketing men dream of. It all started with an eye-catching trailer, featuring a house party full of young things dancing drunk to The Gossip’s ‘Standing in the Way of Control’” (Gordon, par. 5). These kinds of provocative promotions and marketing campaigns may contribute to ‘real world’ consequences.

A widely publicized incident occurred in April 2007, four months after the premiere of the first season of *Skins*, when a suburban family left their teenage daughter

home alone while they went on a camping trip, and she posted an invitation to a “Let’s trash the average family-sized house disco party” on her Myspace page. Shortly after the posting appeared, many people whom the girl did not know descended upon her house, reaking £20,000 worth of damage to her parents’ home. When the girl’s parents and the authorities returned, “they found that teenagers had taken drugs, scattered condoms, urinated on Ms. Bell’s [the girl’s mother] wedding dress and her other children’s clothes, stolen cash and jewelry, ripped out light fittings by swinging on them, stubbed out cigarettes on carpets and left behind buckets of vomit” (Payne, par. 18). During the course of all of this mayhem, the invitation to the party posted on the girl’s Myspace page was tagged as a “Skins party,” making reference to Abby’s party in the first episode of the series. Now in the lexicon of popular culture as seen on such sites like *The Urban Dictionary*,<sup>11</sup> one can look up the term “Skins Party,” and find multiple entries that describe drunken, teenage debauchery.

This is episode fodder for the ‘moral voice of the populist,’ which cried out against the show, blaming it for “the corruption of the youth”—not the first time such cries have been lobbed against a controversial teen show. Before the second series premiered in 2008, a controversial trailer and poster were band by the (British) Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) for depicting another such “Skins party” that was described as an orgy: “We concluded that the poster could cause serious or widespread offense to those who saw it and was unsuitable to be used in a medium where it could be seen by children” (ASA regulator qtd. in Sweney, par. 8). The poster (see appendix 1.1) features Michele sitting in her bra and panties on a bed while her friends are scattered

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com>

about her, they too are mostly naked, are seen as provocatively kissing and embracing. The trailer (see appendix 1.2) takes these same images further by featuring a slow motion panning of ‘the orgy’ while the wall and ceiling cracks and crumbles all round them. Cassie is shown standing outside the house, looking in through a window, and trailer ends with Tony submerged in a bathtub with his eyes open.

This advertisement functions as a direct marketing ploy that glamorizes the most salacious aspects of the show by depicting this raging party and the prurient images of Michelle and Sid sitting on the bed, barely clothed. Even though these images may be perceived as glamorized by some, they also highlight and dramatize the serious repercussions to all this excessive hedonism: Chris looks like the grim reaper, the crumbling walls literally fall down around them, and Tony appears as if he is drowning in the tub. The trailer is overly dramatic and controversial because it depicts teens embodying situations that are very thematically mature. In other words, it seems as if they will pay a heavy price for their ‘calculated hedonism.’ Given the reaction of the Advertising Standards Agency banning the poster, and the controversial nature of the trailer, these images may have gone too far, and some may feel that they instead, promote a ‘moral failure of the self’ and also of society:

If one behaves in ways that are taken to be excessive, unhealthy, irresponsible or undisciplined, then this is constituted as a moral failure of the self. Young people’s public displays of drunken excess are constituted in governmental discourses as volatile acts of irresponsible excess, a willed entry into the realm of chaos, risk and danger and away from the rationality, self-control and moderation that is at the heart of neo-liberal subjectivity” (Griffin et al. 217).

Whether or not the cohort does actually pay a price for their ‘calculated hedonism’ is debatable. Chris dies at the end of the series, not from a drug overdose but from a pre-

existing genetic condition that also killed his brother. Before Chris dies, Jal gets pregnant and chooses to have an abortion. Certainly that is a heavy consequence that Jal will have to live with for the rest of her life, but the show glosses over the event and the emotional repercussions of having the abortion. As for the drug and alcohol use, it seems to be understood that it in the world presented by *Skins* drug and alcohol consumption is ingrained in adolescence and young adult culture and there are no signs that any members of the group will change their drug and alcohol consumption patterns as they transition to emerging adulthood.

The second example of excessive, outrageous behavior that does not directly contain images of alcohol and drug fueled excess, but is glamorized in other gendered ways, occurs in the final episode of season 2 when, outraged that Chris's father has forbidden the group's attendance at Chris's funeral, Tony and Sid steal the coffin containing Chris's remains.

In the mini cooper, after they have driven off with the coffin strapped to the roof, Tony says to Sid:

TONY. Fuck. He's really gone.

SID. Yeah. You know, we could get in real trouble for this. It might be really stupid.

TONY. We need to say goodbye, Sid. We all do.

SID. Thing is though, after this, there's fuck all to say goodbye to. Chris is gone, Dad's gone, fucking Cassie. You and me, we're...

TONY. What are we Sid?

They get interrupted as Chris's father and the authorities are hot on their tails. The naughtiness depicted in this scene can be described as gendered because it plays to male

humor and a sense of heightened exhilaration from the chase, which pays homage to the *Italian Job* (1969). Mirroring the car in the canal from the first episode of the season, this scene is a good example of how *Skins* neutralizes literally criminal behavior by giving more weight to the emotional consequences caused by otherwise questionable decision-making. Again the naughtiness is glamorized because there are no ‘real world’ consequences. Instead Michelle and Jal reprimand Tony and Sid when they return to Chris and Cassie’s apartment and see the coffin:

MICHELLE. Is that what I think it is? What the fuck is that doing here?

SID. Funny story actually. Chris’s dad came to see me and he said we couldn’t come to the funeral because we were all junkies, so I went to Tony, and ...

JAL. What the fuck have you done?

TONY. The thing is Jal...

JAL. Give it back.

MICHELLE. What the fuck were you thinking?

SID. He wouldn’t bury Chris as Chris. We did this for Chris.

JAL. You did this for who?

SID. I’m not saying...

JAL. What right have you? You stupid, stupid...

TONY. You’re not listening...

JAL. No you’re not listening. There’s other ways to do this. Give it back....Now!

TONY. But...

MICHELLE. Tony, you do as she says. [Tony and Sid look at each other.]

BOTH. Okay.  
(Episode 2.10, 21:14)

Tony and Sid are able to (absurdly) pull off returning the coffin to the hearse, as Chris's father and his friend discover its return in the same comedic fashion as they discovered it was missing in the first place—all while Tony and Sid get away without being arrested or punished in any consequential way, which is what would have happened in real life. In the end, the cohort is still able to 'attend' the funeral of their beloved friend from afar and give him a proper leitmotif, 'fuck it,' send off complete with fireworks that adds to the emotional poignancy of the scene, but again can be viewed as unrealistically dramatized for the purposes of emotionally compelling television. Perhaps best summed up by television critic, Emily Nussbaum, the calculated hedonism as seen in *Skins* can be described:

It's a familiar breed of naughty catnip. No sane person would compare *Skins* (either the British or the American version) to *Freaks and Geeks*, *My So-Called Life*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the last decade's trifecta of game-changing teen shows. It is neither subtle nor especially original. [...] *Skins* is more like *Glee* crossed with the film *Kids* then laced with a bit of *Gossip Girl*—a fever dream about appetites fulfilled, set in a lurid universe where poreless packs throw zipless orgies, then weep over their tragic back stories (Nussbaum, par. 4).

## CONCLUSION

Everyone who watches television, regardless of his or her current age of viewership, had to, or will have to pass through adolescence. Even though there are an infinite amount of cultural experiences that separate and specialize human experience during the period of adolescence to young-adulthood, most people in many different cultures experience stages of significant identity development characterized by alienation, love, loss, anger, experimentation, rebellion against figures of authority, separation from parents, bonding with peers, and romantic and sexual feelings and exploits. The popularity (in the West) of Teen TV as a television sub-genre can be attributed to its focused exploration of these experiences, to which many people in a wide age range can relate—either through peer identification (teens watching shows about teens), or for older viewers, nostalgically as an idealized experience that never was. Some viewers may say, “these teens are a lot more wild than I ever was – but wouldn’t it be cool to live like they do, just for one day?” Or conversely, viewers may say something like, “I’m so glad I didn’t have to deal with those issues when I was a teen.” Either way, when audiences make meaningful connections to the characters and situations in the shows they choose to watch, like *Skins*, it does not matter the age of the viewer or the genre of the program; these connections change our understanding of mediated representations of the Westernized adolescent experience.

The makers of *Skins* consciously seek to set their series apart from its Teen TV competition by striving for emotional authenticity in order to connect with its audience. The ‘authenticity’ that *Skins* operates under exists in thematically realistic situations in

which the cohort finds themselves, however many aspects of these situations are glamorized in their depiction to make it especially appealing to its target, adolescent aged audience. This show does not feel, look or sound like their parents' *East Enders*, or even their older siblings' *Hollyoaks*. In *Skins*, the parties are raging to the electro-pop soundtrack of the new millennium, and while the teen-angst and even some of the plot lines are familiar to anyone and everyone who suffered through adolescence—alcohol and drug use, alienation, struggling with school, trying to figure out who they are and what they want, tangled and complicated romantic and sexual situations, unwanted pregnancy—what sets *Skins* apart is the simultaneous realism yet suspension of realism by providing a fantasy styling of the wild-child lifestyle that the teens exhibit. These are all pretty heavy issues packed into (now) six seasons of the series.

Embedded within these dramatic depictions of teenage angst are situations where many characters' parents and other adult authority figures are largely absent, which allows for a freedom and opportunity that makes it possible for the characters to go wherever they want and do whatever they want with little or no consequences from anyone in a position of authority. Drugs and alcohol are accessed easily and are seemingly never ending, and many of the series' most dramatic scenes occur at clubs and pubs or at raging house parties where emotional moments are given the most weight simply with looks that are exchanged between characters. Because the audience can easily relate to the dramatic situations, they come along for the ride, bouncing from one party to the next; when one drink is finished the next spliff is lit, followed by a popped pill or two. All of this drug/alcohol use (and abuse) fuels the dramedy of teenage angst.



Some may think that all of the alluring parties and lack of ‘real-world’ consequences diminish the plausibility of issues faced by the characters, but the anchor holding everything together that keeps audience coming back for more is the ‘novelized’ first person narrative style where the plot lines for the whole cohort move swiftly along as each episode is framed by one character’s point of view. As we have seen, this narrative style allows for a deeper relationship between the audience and the show as it hooks them to an emotional center each week that provides a deeply humanistic and personal feel. While the sex, drugs and booze may initially lure the audience in, they get to know these characters and feel that they could be their friends, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces (and even children, if parents were to actually watch), but most importantly, viewers are able to see themselves or an idealized version of themselves in this group of teens. Who doesn’t want to have Tony’s confidence and bravado, which allows him to wield a lot of power within his social network, or Effy’s enigmatic attractiveness, which draws people to her (whether she wants them or not), or Chris’s affability and up-for anything attitude, or Jal’s quiet wisdom? These kids make you want to know them – and in some cases hold them, and in the words, of the popular anti-bullying campaign aimed at teenagers—tell them that ‘it gets better.’

The language barrier is likely to bug some, too: the oft-used "spliffed" (that's "f--ked up") means little to U.S. teens; even the title, *Skins*—British slang for rolling papers—doesn't inspire the same double-connotation. But compared with the airbrushed glam of more exaggerated dramas like *Gossip Girl*—or even the cutesy preachiness of shows like *Glee*—*Skins* lets its characters be kids, flaws and all. "The cast are beautiful young people, obviously, but they're not that kind of picture-perfect, cookie-cutter, idyllic," says Elsley. "There's a reality to them." *Skins* certainly bares all—but in the end its message might surprise you" (Bennett, par. 9).

In earlier chapters of this thesis we have seen that identity development in *Skins* functions as a doubly conscious representation of the adolescent experience in the new millennium in Bristol, England. Through two seasons of *Skins* we watch as the cohort struggles to find their individual and collective emplacement within their group, and within society at large, while being defined away from the values and actions of their parents. We have also seen how the cohort can be *emplaced* within their peer group in *embodiment* (gendered representations of the teenage body), and in *contexts* that are encompassed by the word ‘teenager’; and also in *location*: the interior and exterior, public and private spaces where cultural behavior is ‘made.’ We have seen that these four cultural mapping terms utilized by Rojek create the habitus, which this paper has used to explore depictions of adolescent culture in *Skins*.

By examining scenes of negligent, self-involved parenting and its effects, we have seen how most of the cohort experiences what adolescent development theorist, David Ausubel describes as ‘moments of crisis.’ What few consequences there are that result from this ‘naughty behavior’ are not administered by their parents, but instead by their peers and romantic partners within the cohort. Therefore, to leave the final word on the matter with the show’s creators; when one interviewer asked Bryan Elsley on how he feels about the auditions they hold to find the next ‘generation’ cast of the *Skins*, Elsley said: "They always fill me with wonder at the niceness of teenage kids. I think in real life, they must carefully hide this from their parents and teachers, otherwise why would they be regarded as so problematic?" (Elsley qtd. in Wiseman, par. 9). In another interview posted on the website AfterEllen.com, the interviewer asked, Jamie Brittain:

AfterEllen: Beyond the mental scripts and stellar one-liners, what do you hope people have taken away from your work on *Skins*?

JamieBrittain: For me, it's a single thing. I hope I have communicated this idea that I feel very strongly that teenagers are the most important emotional signifiers of a society. If we want to find morality, compassion, love, honesty and friendship in a given society the best place to look is at its teenagers. They are, more than adults, I think, the emotional core of western life (Brittain qtd. in Hogan, *afterellen.com*).

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## APPENDIX

1.1 Advertising Standards Agency banned *Skins* season 2 promotional poster:



1.2 *Skins* season 2 promotional trailer:

[http://youtu.be/63LPH5al\\_tk](http://youtu.be/63LPH5al_tk)