

Media Literacy Module

Reality? TV: What is the Media Using Sex to Sell You?

Objectives:

Participants will:

1. Uncover common media messages present on TV and the internet, and in music and movies.
2. Explore how media messages affect/create teens' perception of reality, particularly pertaining to what it means to be male or female
3. Examine how media messages affect teens' ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships and sexuality
4. Demonstrate a strengthened ability to think critically about media messages
5. Explore how to limit the harms of the media.

Target Audience: Grade 8 and 9 students

Facilitator's Background Notes: Media Literacy—What is it? Why is it Important?

The Media's Place in our Lives

Recently David Shaw, the media/technology critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, published a plea for media literacy. North Americans have become a culture of media-consumers. Media is a term used to describe all means of mass communication such as television, movies, the internet, billboards, newspapers, magazines, radio, and newsletters.ⁱ From the time we wake up to the time we go to sleep, our lives are inundated with media.ⁱⁱ

The Media has the Power to Influence

The media is a powerful force in our society. On a daily basis, much of our time is occupied in absorbing the messages the Media has created with the aim of entertaining and teaching us. An American study conducted by the University of South Carolina found that people spend an average of 10.5 hours a day using media, about 25% of that time using two forms of media simultaneously. A Kaiser Family Foundation study found that 68% of kids aged 2 and younger spend an average of two hours a day in front of a TV or computer screen, while children under 6 spend as much time in front of a screen as they do playing outside. Indeed, a professor of media culture at New York University came up with the term “screen-agers “ to describe the state of media immersion adolescents grow up in.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the same, the media is not a direct reflection of our world. Instead, what it focuses on and the way it presents messages provide a representation of the world created by those who have paid for it. Media is primarily paid for by advertising. Advertisers want you to buy something. This means the representation they provide is based on their desire for people to need their product. And, with so much exposure to the media, it is not surprising that the messages presented have a powerful effect in shaping the health behaviours of teens. These signs and messages have great powers to influence people if they are not explored and questioned.

The Parkgate Teen Sexual Health Project found that media had the most influence, out of all external sources, in shaping the values, attitudes, and behaviours of young men and women. On the whole, these messages did not support healthy decisions about relationships and sexuality. Indeed, they tended to reinforce old stereotypes and labels of, for example, women as sluts and men as hypersexual aggressors. In order for people to make healthy choices, we need to be able to think for ourselves. This includes having the skills to uncover what parts of these messages help us and what parts hurt us.

Messages about Gender Sold by the Media can be Harmful to our Health

For the most part, the messages the media reinforces about men, women, relationships, and sexuality follow traditional gender stereotypes.^{iv} Men are portrayed as dominant, aggressive, only wanting sex, and not able to show feelings, while women are portrayed as passive, submissive, only wanting love, and sexy but not sexual. Heterosexuality is portrayed as the normal expression of sexuality. These messages tell youth how they should be and encourage them to make decisions based on assumption rather than through communication.

For example, young women who are interested—or even “too” interested or knowledgeable—in sexuality are often labeled a “sluts,” “whores,” etc.^v This goes back to the old double standard of young women being socially punished for the same behaviours that are praised in young men. It also puts young women on shaky ground when it comes to being prepared for safer sexual activity. A young woman may choose not to carry condoms or negotiate condom use with her partner for fear of appearing to “know” too much. She may also engage in oral sex as a way to keep her virginity and avoid the “slut” label. However, when oral sex is not considered sex, people do not often consider the risks of STI and HIV infection. Young women may also pressure their male partners into sexual activity based on the assumption that men always want sex.

Young men are similarly affected by these stereotypes.^{vi} They may find themselves feeling pressured to have sex before they are ready, or more often than they would like, to live up to the “standards of masculinity.” They may find it difficult to seek out sexual health information and support because they are expected to know about sex. They may also find themselves pressuring their partner into sexual activity based on the belief that this is the man’s role.

All too often, these stereotypes lead both genders into behaviours that are risky for themselves and others. The ultimate goal of encouraging youth to look at how media messages affect our beliefs and attitudes around sexuality and relationships is that, instead of acting based on assumptions, youth are able to make informed decisions from a place of respect, caring, trust, and communication.

Media Literacy

Media literacy is one tool that can increase teens’ ability to make choices that take care of their health. Media literacy is about having the skills to think critically about the messages the media wants to transmit. Instead of passively consuming media, it involves taking an active role in one’s consumption by being able to access, analyze, evaluate, and

create media. It builds upon people's understanding of the role of media in society, their ability to critically explore the messages they encounter, and expressing themselves in relation to these messages.^{vii} As Project Respect says: "Think about it. Question it. Don't just buy into the pressure from media to conform. Create your own meaning and ideas."

What's Media Literacy About?

The Key Concepts of Media Literacy as defined by the Jesuit Communication Project^{viii} are as follows:

1. *All media are constructions.* This is arguably the most important concept. The media do not simply reflect external reality. Rather, they present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and are the result of many determining factors. Media Literacy works towards deconstructing these constructions (taking them apart to show how they are made).
2. *The media constructs versions of reality.* The media is responsible for the majority of observations and experiences from which we build up our personal understandings of the world and how it works. Much of our view of reality is based on media messages that have been pre-constructed and have attitudes, interpretations, and conclusions already built in. Thus the media, to a great extent, gives us our sense of reality.
3. *Audiences negotiate meaning in media.* If the media provides us with much of the material upon which we build our picture of reality, each of us finds or "negotiates" meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, moral standpoint, and so forth.
4. *Media messages have commercial implications.* Media literacy aims to encourage awareness of how the media is influenced by commercial considerations, and how [media messages] impinge on content, technique, and distribution." Most media production is a business, and as such, must make a profit. Questions of ownership and control are central: a relatively small number of individuals control what we watch, read, and hear in the media.
5. *Media messages contain ideological and value messages.* All media products are advertising in some sense, proclaiming values and ways of life. The mainstream media conveys, explicitly or implicitly, ideological messages about issues such as the nature of the good life, the virtue of consumerism, the role of women, the acceptance of authority, and unquestioning patriotism.
6. *Media messages contain social and political implications.* The media has great influence in politics and in forming social change. Television can greatly influence the election of a national leader on the basis of image. The media involves us in concerns such as civil rights issues, famines in Africa, and the AIDS epidemic. The media gives us an intimate sense of national issues and global concerns so that we have become McLuhan's Global Village.
7. *Form and content are closely related in media messages.* As Marshall McLuhan noted, each medium has its own grammar and codifies reality in its own particular way. Different media will report the same event, but create different impressions and messages.

8. *Each medium has a unique aesthetic form.* Just as we notice the pleasing rhythms of certain pieces of poetry or prose, so ought we be able to enjoy the pleasing forms and effects of the different media.

Materials:

- Male-oriented magazines popular with teens
- Female-oriented magazines popular with teens
- Popular music lyrics
- Sheets of flipchart paper
- Lots of markers
- Copies of the Healthy Sexuality Flower, available in the Handouts in the Training Teen Educators section.

Procedure—Stage 1: Understanding “Media”

Estimated Time: 5 minutes

1. Introduce the theme of the workshop: an exploration of what messages the media gives to youth, why the media does this, and how these messages affect people’s sexuality and sexual health.
2. Ask the participants:
 - What is media?
 - Who is it made for? Whose attention does most media want to attract?
 - Why is media made? What’s its purpose?
3. Summarize the following information:

Media: is a word used to describe all means of mass communication such as television, movies, the internet, billboards, newspapers, magazines, radio, and newsletters. It’s a tool that people use to communicate messages to the general public. Just as there is great diversity among people, there could be great diversity in the messages sent through the media. However, the people who pay for the media decide which messages are sent. These messages are created by people and are meant to help the people who pay for the messages achieve their goals. It’s important to be aware of this so that you can be a smart consumer of media.

Procedure—Stage 2: Uncovering Messages

Estimated Time: 10 minutes

1. Explain that the next activity involves some sleuth work. Participants will be divided into 5 small groups. Each small group will investigate one piece of media. Your job is to look for the messages your piece of media wants consumers to pick up. Please write down all the messages that your group members see about:
 - Who boys and girls are

- What sex is about
- What romantic relationships are about

Remember: Not everyone has to agree with every message for you to write it down.

Sample messages found by Project Respect's youth team in magazines and music videos:^{ix}

1. Sex isn't worth anything
2. All relationships are heterosexual
3. It's okay to be different
4. Women like men with money
5. Bodies are sexy
6. Guys can be just as insecure as girls
7. In relationships, you should tease and make the other person want you
8. The younger the better
9. Penis size matters
10. Weapons make guys sexy
11. Glasses, braces, and "defects" aren't okay

Procedure—Stage 3: Categorizing messages

Estimated Time: 10 minutes

1. With participants still in their small groups, explain that the next step of the activity will involve categorizing the messages in positive (+), negative (-), mixed (m), and neutral (n).
2. Explain that because we all have different values and see the world differently, there will most likely be different opinions on how to categorize these messages. Encourage participants to keep in mind that we are exploring media's affect on our sexuality and sexual health.
3. Quickly review the Healthy Sexuality Flower (included in the handouts in the Training Teen Educators section), emphasizing the attitudes and skills needed to take care of yourself. Point out that media and gender stereotypes are two of the things in the environment that make it difficult for the flower to survive. Thinking about how the messages in their piece of media makes it easy or hard to make decisions about relationships and sexuality should make it easier to categorize the messages.
4. Share the following categories^x verbally and post on sheets of flipchart paper or board:
 - **Negative** messages = those that promote stereotypes about men and women, risky sexual behaviour, harmful relationship skills (miscommunication, manipulation, etc.), or provide false information
 - **Positive** messages = those that promote true information and values that help people take care of themselves and make healthy decisions
 - **Mixed** messages = those that give a combination of both positive and negative messages
 - **Neutral** = those that give neither a positive or negative message

5. Have small groups report back to the large group, sharing the positive, negative, mixed, and neutral messages they found in their media.

Procedure—Stage 4: Exploring the impact of these messages

Estimated Time: 10 minutes

1. Group Discussion:
 - What do you notice about the messages?
 - Do they fall more into one category than another? If so, what do you think that's about?
 - What do the messages tell women about being female? Men about being male?
 - How do these messages affect how people see and feel about themselves?
 - Which ones make it easy for people to make healthy decisions about dating and relationships?
 - Which ones make it difficult for people to make healthy decisions about dating and relationships?
 - Which of these messages has the most impact on youth culture?
2. Summarize that, on the whole, the messages we get in the media do not seem to promote healthy relationships or sexuality. You may want to bring things back to the Healthy Sexuality Flower and ask for examples of media messages that would support healthy sexuality. It may be easiest to look at gender stereotypes in the media. Emphasize that blindly following gender stereotypes can put both men and women at risk. For example, young men may feel pressure to have sex before they are ready, or have multiple partners. Young woman may feel pressure to not carry or talk about condoms for fear of being labeled a slut.
3. Group Discussion:
 - Whose reality do these messages reflect?
 - Do they show the reality of youth from different ethno-cultural groups? How might this affect youth from different cultural backgrounds?
 - Do you think these messages reflect the realities of the producer, actor, and /or model's own lives (their values, attitudes, experiences)? (Or, are they based on what will "sell"—sensationalism?) If not, why would they choose to portray life in this way?
4. Working individually, have students trace their hand in the middle of the page. Give the following instructions:
 - On the inside of your hand, write down all the media messages that fit with the beliefs and values of your family.
 - On the outside of your hand, write down all the media messages that contradict the beliefs and values and your family.
 - On the side of the page, write down what would make it possible to discuss with other members of your family media messages and how they fit with your family beliefs and values.

Procedure—Stage 5: Media Jujitsu**Estimated Time: 5 minutes**

1. Summarize what you've done so far: uncovered media messages, analyzed where they come from and their effects, and looked specifically at how they affect teens' choices about sexuality and sexual health. Discuss that this way of looking at the media and what it's trying to sell is called "media literacy," and is meant to help people be smart consumers of media messages so they can make the best choices possible for themselves.
2. Explain that next we are going to look at how people can take care of themselves. Emphasize that these messages have the most power to influence us when we are not aware they exist. So, we have already laid a solid framework for dealing with media messages in the future.
3. In partners, discuss the following questions:
 - How can you make sure you are making your own decisions and aren't being influenced by negative messages in the media?
 - How can you support your peers to make decisions that take care of themselves?
 - How can you create messages that help teens make healthy choices?
4. Ask if anyone wants to share any of their ideas with the group.
5. Reinforce that when it comes to relationships and sexuality, following media messages blindly is harmful to your own health and that of your partner. It's important to communicate openly and honestly with your partner, be prepared to hear and accept a "no," and not pressure someone who is obviously unsure or has trouble being clear.
6. Thank everyone for participating.

ⁱ www.dictionary.com. Cited January 27, 2004

ⁱⁱ Centre for Media Literacy **A Plea for Media Literacy in our Nation's Schools**
http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article631.html. Cited January 27, 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ Centre for Media Literacy **A Plea for Media Literacy in our Nation's Schools**
http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article631.html. Cited January 27, 2004.

^{iv} Project Respect. Media, Gender Stereotypes, Communication. www.yesmeansyes.com. Cited January 20, 2004.

^v Condomania. *What's Gender Got to Do With It?* [Http://www.planetahead.ca](http://www.planetahead.ca). Cited January 27, 2004.

^{vi} Condomania. *Gender Stereotypes Workshop Outline*. Vancouver Coastal Health.

^{vii} Centre for Media Literacy. *Media Literacy: A Definition...And More*.
http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/rr2def.php Cited January 27, 2004

^{viii} Jesuit Communication Project. Key Concepts About Media Literacy.
<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/JCP/concepts/keyconcepts.htm>. Cited January 27, 2004.

^{ix} Project Respect. Media, Gender Stereotypes, Communication. www.yesmeansyes.com. Cited January 20, 2004.

^x Project Respect. Media, Gender Stereotypes, Communication. www.yesmeansyes.com. Cited January 20, 2004.