Relationships and Sexuality in the Media

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

Overview

In this lesson, students learn to question media representations of gender, relationships and sexuality. After a brief "myth busting" quiz about relationships in the media and a reminder of the constructed nature of media products, the teacher leads the class in an analysis of the messages about gender, sex and relationships communicated by beer and alcohol ads. Students analyze the messages communicated by their favourite media types and then contrast it with their own experience.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Apply the key concept that media are constructions
- Apply the key concept that media have social and political implications
- Consider the differences between different media and different genres
- Analyze multiple media types in terms of the messages they communicate regarding gender, relationships and sexuality
- Create a stage presentation or media product

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy or prepare to project the following handouts:

- *True or False? Relationships, Sexuality and Media*
- *Media, Sexuality and Relationships Case Study*

Read the following backgrounders:

- *True or False? Relationships, Sexuality and Media: Teacher's Version*
- *Media, Sexuality and Relationships Case Study: Teacher's Version*

(Optional) Prepare to show the following MediaSmarts videos:

- *Media Minute: Media are constructions* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=UU_jQ4vYf-WPf4_5eSdGABWQ&v=baftkjc5gKs)
- *Media Minute: Media have social and political implications* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=UU_jQ4vYf-WPf4_5eSdGABWQ&v=YZi6s22yktw)

Procedure

True or False

Start by distributing the handout True or False? Relationships, Sexuality and Media. Have students go through it and circle what they think is the correct answer. Tell them not to write their names on the handout and reassure them that nobody will know what they answered to any of the questions unless they choose to share them.

Once students have had a few minutes to answer the questions, have them return the handouts to you. Use the backgrounder True or False? Relationships, Sexuality and Media: Teacher's Version to go through the questions and provide the correct answer for each one. If there are questions where no student wants to share his or her answer, pick a few of the handouts at random to share the answers anonymously. When you've finished going through the handout, briefly discuss how accurate (or inaccurate) students' guesses were.

Now ask students: "Where do we get our ideas about sex and relationships?" Accept any reasonable suggestions (peers and parents are likely to come up) but make sure that media are mentioned as a factor. (Students are more likely to mention specific media, such as movies, music, or social media platforms like TikTok, than to name "the media"; it's useful to have a list of different media for later in the lesson, so you can list them individually and then group them under "the media" as the discussion is ending. **Make sure that students consider digital media such as social networks, multiplayer games and online communities**.)

Media Influences

Remind students that all media are constructions. To help them understand this, ask if they have ever seen a trailer for a movie that turned out to be very different from the impression of it created by the trailer (less fun, less exciting, a different kind of movie than the trailer implied, etc.) Point out that media are to reality as a trailer is to a movie: a small number of carefully selected moments created to create a particular effect. (Because they're actually made at the same time as the movie, trailers often include footage that isn't even in the final film – just as there are lots of things in media that don't exist at all in reality.) Even documentaries are not 100% realistic, since the filmmakers select from hundreds of hours of raw footage to make a two-hour movie.

If you feel that your students need a refresher or a fuller explanation of this idea, show them the MediaSmarts video *Media Minute: Media are constructions* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=UU_jQ4vYf-WPf4_5eSdGABWQ&v=baftkjc5gKs).

Have students make a list on the board of different media, and then identify different genres of the more popular media (for example: different styles of music, kinds of movies, kinds of TV shows, etc.) Point out that some media and genres

are more realistic than others: for example, compare pro wrestling to a sports broadcast of Olympic wrestling. Even with a single medium, different genres are more and less realistic.

Now ask: how do media influence our ideas about sex and relationships?

If you feel that your students need a refresher or a fuller explanation of the idea that media can influence how we think and feel, show them the MediaSmarts video *Media Minute: Media have social and political implications* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=UU_jQ4vYf-WPf4_5eSdGABWQ&v=YZi6s22yktw).

Whether you show the video or not, make sure the following ideas emerge from the discussion:

- Media can influence how we think and feel by showing certain things as *normal* and others as *abnormal* or *invisible*.
- Media can influence how we think and feel by showing that certain behaviours and characteristics are *rewarded* and others *punished*.
- Media can influence how we think and feel by creating *models* of how particular groups (men, women, different ethnic groups, LGBTQ people, youth, etc.) are *supposed to be and to behave*, and how others are *supposed to interact with them.*

Media, Sexuality and Relationships

Distribute or project the handout *Media, Sexuality and Relationships Case Study* and use the backgrounder *Media, Sexuality and Relationships Case Study: Teacher's Version* to lead an analysis of how different kinds of advertising portray:

- Men
- Women
- Relationships
- Sex

Divide the class into two groups of boys and girls, based on students' own gender identification. (Students who don't identify as either may join either group.) Have each group identify examples of media types they enjoy (have them identify both medium and genre, so for example "romantic comedies," not just movies; "teen magazines," not just magazines.)

Have students pick the top 4-6 media types from their list and then subdivide the groups so that 3-4 students are assigned to each media type. Have the students reflect on their experience with this media type to identify the messages it sends about:

- Men
- Women
- Relationships
- Sex

Each group should record their analysis on chart paper or on a section of the board. If using chart paper, tell them to stick to a single side of the page and use a second page if they need more room; if using the blackboard, have them draw a T-chart and only use the left side to record their analysis.

Now have the gender groups trade their charts, so that the boy group is looking at the girls' analyses and the girl group at the boys'. Have each group write "Reality" on the unused part of the paper or board and note the ways in which that medium portrays men, women, relationships or sex is different from their experience.

Assessment/Evaluation: Media and Reality

Have students create a scene, print ad, video or other media product with two parts: one part will communicate a mistaken impression about men, women, sex and relationships in one of the media types they analyzed, while the second part will show a "realistic" picture that is more in line with statistics or their own experience. For accurate information, students can use resources such as the following:

- www.sexualityandu.ca (a sex education website created by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada)

- http://teenhealthsource.com/ (a sex education website created by Planned Parenthood Toronto)

True or False? Relationships, Sexuality and Media

For each of the following questions, circle what you think is the right answer.

Don't write your name on this paper. You will not have to share your answers unless you want to.

1. How many teenagers do you think have had at least one boyfriend or girlfriend?

    25%   35%   60%   80%

2. Compared to twenty years ago, when do you think teenagers today first have sex?

    When they're younger   When they're older   About the same time

3. Through what medium do you think kids are most likely to be exposed to sexual content?

    The Internet   Movies   Music   TV   Video games

4. How many Canadian teens have never looked for adult material (sexual photos, videos, etc.) online?

    1%   8%   19%   34%   42%   77%

5. How high does being exposed to unwanted adult material rank in a list of things teens are worried about online?

    First   Second   Third   Fourth   Fifth   Last

6. How many Canadian students in Grade 9 have sent someone a sext (a nude, semi-nude or sexy photo)?

    1%   7%   11%   12%   19%   31%

7. How many Canadian students in Grade 9 have forwarded a sext that someone sent them?

    1%   4%   10%   15%   21%   33%

8. "Sex sells": movies that include sexual content make more money.

    True   False

9. "Sex sells": ads that include sexual content are more successful.

    True   False

10. Based on what they see on social networks, teens think that their friends have sex

    More often than they really do   Less often than they really do   As often as they really do

True or False? Relationships, Sexuality and Media: Teacher's Version

For each of the following questions, circle what you think is the right answer.

Don't write your name on this paper. You will not have to share your answers unless you want to.

1. How many teenagers do you think have had at least one boyfriend or girlfriend?

   25% **35%** 60% 80%

   According to a study of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17, 64% have never been in a romantic relationship (1% declined to answer the question.)

2. Compared to twenty years ago, do you think teenagers today first have sex

   When they're younger **When they're older** About the same time

   Young people today actually have sex for the first time slightly later than teens twenty years ago: 30% of 15-17 year-olds have had sex, compared to 32% in 1996.

3. Through what medium do you think kids are most likely to be exposed to sexual content?

   The Internet Movies Music **TV** Video games

   75% of youth have been exposed to sexual content on TV, followed by music at 69%. The Internet is actually where youth are *least* likely to be exposed to sexual material.

4. How many Canadian teens have never looked for adult material (sexual photos, videos, etc.) online?

   1% 8% 19% 34% 42% **77%**

   According to MediaSmarts' survey *Young Canadians in a Wireless World*, just 33% of Canadian students in grades 7-11 have looked for adult material.

5. How high does being exposed to unwanted adult material rank in a list of things teens are worried about online?

   First Second Third Fourth Fifth Last

   According to European research, dealing with unwanted exposure to adult material is the number one concern for youth: one in five young people are worried about this. One UK study found that half of boys and two-thirds of girls wished it was more difficult to access adult material online.

6. How many Canadian students in Grade 9 have sent someone a (a nude, semi-nude or sexy photo)?

   1% **7%** 11% 12% 19% 31%

   According to MediaSmarts' survey *Young Canadians in a Wireless World*, just 7% of Canadian students in Grades 9 have sent someone a sext.

7. How many Canadian students in Grade 9 have forwarded a sext that someone sent them?

   1%   4%   **10**%   15%   21%   33%

   According to MediaSmarts' survey *Young Canadians in a Wired World*, just 10% of Canadian students in Grade 9 have forwarded a sext that was sent to them by the person who took it.

8. "Sex sells": movies that include sexual content make more money.

   True   **False**

   A study of almost 1,000 films released between 2001 and 2005 found that including sexual content actually led movies to make *less* money.

9. "Sex sells": ads that include sexual content are more successful.

   True   **False**

   A 2015 study found that commercials that included sex or violence were less effective: the ads were less likely to be remembered, and viewers had a more negative view of the product being advertised and were less likely to buy it compared to brands whose ads didn't contain sex or violence.

10. Based on what they see on social networks, teens think that their friends have sex

    More often than they really do   Less often than they really do   As often as they really do

    A 2015 study found that teens who are heavy users of social networks are likely to overestimate how often their peers have sex, and whether their peers are having sex at all.

Media, Sexuality and Relationships Case Study

This is an exercise in analyzing the picture that a particular medium and genre creates about gender, sex and relationships.

Medium means *the way* that a story or message is delivered: TV, movies, billboards, video games, social media, etc. For this case study we're looking at advertising in social media, digital campaigns, and billboards.

Genre means a particular *kind* of story or message: reality TV shows, romantic comedy movies, first-person-shooter video games, social media, etc. For this case study we're looking at *beer and alcohol ads*.

First, take a look at the beer and alcohol ads below:
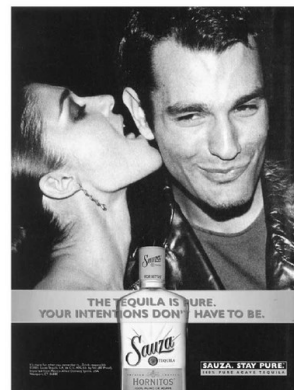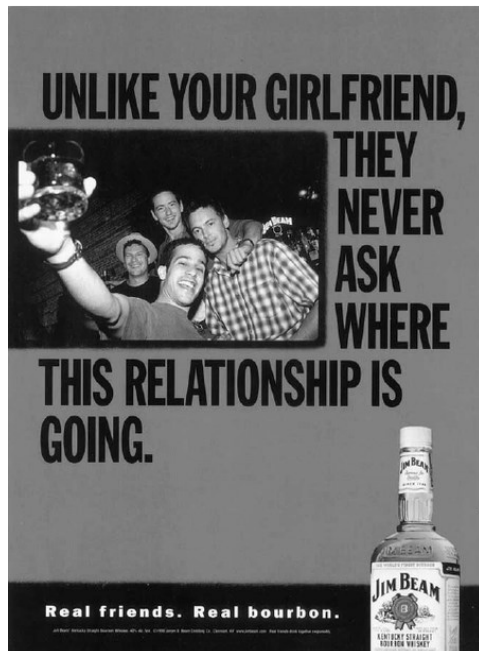
Now answer the following questions on separate paper:

- What audience do you think these ads are aimed at?
- What behaviours and characteristics are shown as being *rewarded*? Is this different for men or women?
- What behaviours and characteristics are shown as being *punished*? Is this different for men or women?
- Who is *visible and normal* in these ads?
- Who is *invisible* or *abnormal* in these ads?

Share your answers with a partner and then, based on your answers, consider the following questions on separate paper:

- What do beer and alcohol ads say about *men?*
- What do beer and alcohol ads say about *women?*
- What do beer and alcohol ads say about *sex and relationships?*

Media, Sexuality and Relationships Case Study: Teacher's Version

This is an exercise in analyzing the picture a particular medium and genre creates about gender, sex and relationships.

Medium means *the way* that a story or message is delivered: TV, movies, video games, social media, etc. For this case study we're looking at advertising in social media, digital campaigns, and billboards.

Genre means a particular *kind* of story or message: reality TV shows, romantic comedy movies, first-person-shooter video games, social media, etc. For this case study we're looking at *beer and alcohol ads.*

Now answer the following questions on separate paper:

- What audience do you think these ads are aimed at?

Men in their teens, twenties and thirties. The exception is the Belvedere Vodka ad, which is aimed at young women.

- What behaviours and characteristics are shown as being *rewarded*? Is this different for men or women?

Men are supposed to be muscular, athletic, attractive, cool and relaxed. Women are supposed to be thin, attractive, sexually available, dressed revealingly and always ready for to have a good time.

- What behaviours and characteristics are shown as being *punished*? Is this different for men or women?

Men are punished for any behaviour that's seen as feminine (admitting to having danced ballet). Women are punished for being too needy (asking "where the relationship is going" is seen as undesirable), not being fun enough, and not being enough overall, as most ads feature one man and multiple women together reinforcing the idea that one woman is not enough.

- Who is *visible and normal* in these ads?

The majority are white people; thin women; heterosexual people; normally-abled people; young people.

- Who is *invisible* or *abnormal* in these ads?

Other ethnicities; overweight men, and overweight and normal-weight women; anyone who isn't straight; anyone with a disability; anyone older than about 30.

Share your answers with a partner and then, based on your answers, consider the following questions on separate paper:

- What do beer and alcohol ads say about *men?*

Men who act in unmasculine ways will be punished for it. Men are also not supposed to try too hard: almost all of the men who are portrayed as being happy are relaxing. Men don't have to be thin but they shouldn't be overweight. Men should not want to be in monogamous relationships and should want to be with multiple women.

- What do beer and alcohol ads say about *women?*

The most important thing for women is to be attractive to men. Women exist to be looked at. Women have to be thin and always ready to have a good time. When men get too close, women can get clingy and expect relationships.

- What do beer and alcohol ads say about *sex and relationships?*

Men who are masculine will be rewarded with lots of admiring women, but they're more interested in socializing with other men (Jim Beam ad.) Men would like to have as many sexual partners as possible (Corona, Ciroc, Sauza ads). Women have to look sexy to attract men's attention (all ads but the first Corona ad and the Jim Beam ad. Men in beer ads aren't portrayed as *initiating* relationships, but they do have the *power* in relationships (all ads except Belvedere Vodka and the second Corona ad). Instead of negotiating a relationship with a woman, men have to compete with other men and avoid sanctions on "unmasculine" behaviour to "earn" women.

Task Assessment Rubric: Media and Reality Project

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Use Skills and competencies that fall under "use" range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email, and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources, such as search engines and online databases, and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.	*Digital Health:* identify habits and behaviours (eg, excessive screen time or video game usage, smoking) that can be detrimental to sexual health and healthy relationships assess and reduce/avoid technology related threats to his/her sexual health and healthy relationships *Consumer Awareness:* understand the technologies he/she is using at a level that is sufficient to underpin consumer activism *Finding and Verifying:* apply digital tools to gather, evaluate, and use information *Making and Remixing:* communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats locate, organize, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and ethically use information from a variety of sources and media	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)
Understand Understand includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us. Understand also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.	*Digital Health:* demonstrate awareness of his/her media habits and the array of media he/she uses on a weekly basis, and the role of digital media in his/her life demonstrate and understanding of the ways that media influence attitudes and opinions relating to sexuality and relationships *Consumer Awareness:* understand the ways media producers use sexuality to influence consumers' spending habits, as well as consider companies' motives in doing so show an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in relation to sexualisation and pornography	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Understand (continued)	*Finding and Verifying:* use overt and implied messages to draw inferences and construct meaning in media texts *Making and Remixing:* understand how meaning is produced through multi-media (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through media portrayals understand the legal and ethical dimensions of respecting creative work select and use applications effectively and productively (e.g. chooses the most appropriate technologies according to the task)	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)
Create Create is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media. The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.	*Consumer Awareness:* develop personal rules of conduct that ensure healthy and safe practices *Community Engagement:* create a work (debate or essay) that clearly communicates their understanding and expresses their opinion on the issues relating to sexualisation and pornography identify and participate responsibly in discussions that foster positive community show an understanding of the interrelationship between rights and responsibilities online *Finding and Verifying:* create new critical or analytical worlds *Making and Remixing:* remix different existing digital content into something new interact, collaborates, co-construct content and publish with peers, experts or others employing a variety of digital environments and media effectively apply the forms and techniques of the medium and genre communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)