

dangerous information about sexual and reproductive health. It gave false information about condoms and implied both that teens can't obtain birth control without a parent and that doctors don't keep information confidential.

**Your turn:** Sometimes the media blow it. You can combat misinformation by providing the facts to the media source and voicing your concerns.

A recent episode of The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency, "Fight or Flight," addressed the challenges

many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth face. It highlighted one model's experience as he decided to reveal his sexual orientation.

**Your turn:** Occasionally, the media spotlight an often-overlooked topic. That's a great time for you to express your appreciation if you like what you see.

Now that you get the gist of media literacy, make a list of your own media observations. You can also follow Justin's advice when you encounter messages you don't like: "Ignore them!" **CH2**

partner, it's important to talk about what you want, to be clear about boundaries, and to prepare so that you reduce health risks.

### Music

**What you hear:** Your favorite tunes are filled with lyrics that have sexual overtones.

**Reality check:** When you're listening to an explicit song, think about what you're hearing and saying. Recent research published in the journal *Pediatrics* reports that teens who listen to degrading sexual lyrics are more likely to become sexually active at a young age than those who don't.

### The Internet

**What you see:** You're online and get a pornographic pop-up ad. You click to find streaming video of hard-core sex acts.

**Reality Check:** It's important to realize that this type of pornography generally portrays female bodies that are surgically altered by breast implants, Botox, and liposuction, while porn actors' penises tend to be larger than the norm. In general, pornography sets up false expectations about how a sexual encounter unfolds.

## REALITY CHECK

Ideally, the media are informative tools that relay information to the masses. Yet in certain situations, the media can distort information and warp expectations—doing harm rather than good.

### Advertising

**What you see:** A larger-than-life billboard is using sexy images to sell a product. The models look flawless.

**Reality check:** Often, photos in ads are digitally enhanced: With the click of a mouse, faces and bodies are sculpted to create an ideal look, shape, and size.

Want to see how the face of a billboard model transforms from pimples to perfection? Check out Dove's Web site: [www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/inside\\_campaign.asp](http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/inside_campaign.asp)

### TV and Movies

**What you see:** Two people meet and gaze into each other's eyes. The next thing you know, they're having sex.

**Reality check:** Cutting to suggestive scenes can set up unrealistic expectations about sex. Intimacy isn't something to rush into. Before becoming sexually active with a

### for more info

#### Center for Media Literacy

[www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)

Advocates for media literacy education nationally

#### The New Mexico Media Literacy Project

[www.nmmlp.org](http://www.nmmlp.org)

Empowers children, youth, and adults to become more critical consumers of media messages

#### Scenarios USA

[www.scenariosusa.org](http://www.scenariosusa.org)

Offers a way for young people to speak out, through writing and film, on issues that affect their lives



## Write to Us!

If you would like our human sexuality experts to answer your questions in a future issue, please e-mail us at [currenthealth@weeklyreader.com](mailto:currenthealth@weeklyreader.com).



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## Don't Believe The Hype

### How the media distorts sexuality

By Amy Levine

Justin Timberlake sings "Get yo' sexy on"; MTV's *The Real World* spotlights partying and casual sex; and *Us* magazine reports on celebrities who practice serial dating, making it seem as if few people are in healthy relationships that last. Those are just a few of the messages you are exposed to by the media every day. And they likely influence the way you and your peers think and act—especially when it comes to bodies and sexuality.

### THERE'S NO ESCAPE

Everywhere you turn, someone has something to say about sexuality and body image. It may be a magazine headline, an image in an advertisement, a movie scene, song lyrics, a page on MySpace, or a video on YouTube. Perhaps it's celebrity gossip in a magazine

or dialogue between characters on your favorite TV show. Some of the messages that bombard you every day are factual and truthful. Others, however, set unrealistic expectations and provide misinformation about sexual behavior, body image, communication, relationships, and other aspects of sexuality.

A lot of teens (and adults) don't think about the media's influence on them. Take 14-year-old Leah, who loves music. Many of her favorite tunes have lyrics about sex, and she 'fesses up to singing along. "The song gets stuck in my head," says Leah. "It's annoying because when I sing, I don't think about what I'm saying." Leah may not agree with the song's sexuality message, but the tune is so catchy she can't avoid it. You've probably had a similar experience.

## SEX SELLS

Sex in the media catches your attention, even if you don't realize it. "Sexuality is used to sell for profit and/or power," says Tessa Jolls, president and CEO of the Center for Media Literacy, a nonprofit educational organization. "It works as an effective sales tool, or it wouldn't be used." Messages about sex may be everywhere, but you're not defenseless. You can start by becoming aware.

Confronting the media head-on will help you build critical-thinking skills. You'll become more knowledgeable about sexuality and better able to make healthy decisions now and in the future. Carefully considering the images and ideas you encounter—and rejecting those you don't like—also boosts your self-esteem. When you're aware that a deodorant company is using a hot model to get your dollars or that sexual encounters aren't always as spontaneous and easy as they seem to be in music videos, you're able to say, "That's not me; that's not what I believe. I'm happy with myself and my choices."

Justin, 14, is skeptical of the images he sees in various media. "I see thin women and very muscular

## What is sex?

*Sex can mean gender, referring to being male or female. Sex also refers to certain sexual behaviors. Many people think of sex solely as vaginal intercourse between a man and a woman. Gay men and lesbians have sex, too, meaning that oral and anal sex should also be considered sex. The media don't always make that clear, though.*

men," he explains. "Normally, they are in a very intimate setting. They're a little too perfect for reality."

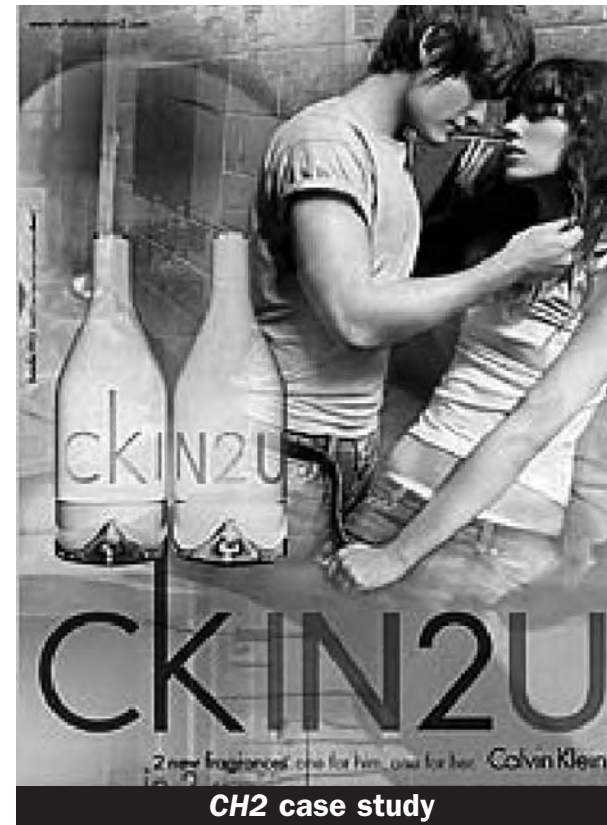
Like Justin, you can pay attention to what you're seeing and hearing and think twice before buying products or believing messages that distort sexuality. "When we buy products that exploit ... or represent sexuality in ways that we might not agree with, we are 'voting' to support that notion of sexuality," says Jolls. The trick is to be media savvy, so you can sift through what you see and hear and make sense of it.

## Instead of mindlessly absorbing what you see and hear, work on being able to read or decode the media's messages.

Emily, 18, is aware of the messages aimed at teens: "The media ... portray young women as sexual objects that should be observed and judged ... solely on physical appearance." She's noticed that messages about sexuality are different for males and females. "The media perpetuate the idea that sexuality should be overt in young women but more masked for guys," Emily says. "You don't see teenage boys wearing belly shirts and low-rise jeans." With observations like those, Emily is definitely media literate.

### CAN YOU DECODE THIS AD?

Instead of mindlessly absorbing what you see and hear, work on being able to read or decode the media's messages. To do that, analyze and evaluate the information you're given by taking into account what is obvious as well as what's below the



CH2 case study

surface. For example, suppose you're flipping through a magazine when the ad above catches your eye:

**The Obvious:** Glancing at the page, you can read the text and learn that Calvin Klein is selling a new fragrance for men and women. You see two bottles and two models. You also can't help noticing their body language: The guy is grasping the girl's hair, and she's grabbing the end of his belt.

**Below the Surface:** There's no doubt that this ad is selling sex. It implies that wearing the scent, whose name—IN2U—reads like a text message, will

## What is sexuality?

*Sexuality is part of who you are as a person. It is the way you feel about your body (whether you feel masculine, feminine, or somewhere in between), the way you dress, how you move, how you speak, how you act and feel about other people, whom you are attracted to and fall in love with, and so much more. Whether you are on your own or sexually involved with someone else, you're a sexual person.*

lead to a casual, intimate experience that starts with the twirl of a curl and the unfastening of a belt.

**Take It Further:** You can build your media literacy abilities by thinking about these questions from the New Mexico Media Literacy Project:

- What are the sexuality-related messages?
- What values, attitudes, or beliefs are represented?
- What are my values, attitudes, or beliefs about this topic or situation?
- If I were to put myself in someone else's shoes, how might I interpret this message?
- Is this information about sexuality accurate?

## SPEAK YOUR MIND TO THE MEDIA

When you're media literate, you can influence the ways the media address important issues. When you notice a media portrayal of sexuality in a healthy or an unhealthy way, you can let your voice be heard. Producers, television networks, the Federal Communications Commission, radio stations, editors of newspapers and magazines, and other individuals or groups that have influential roles in the media are all good targets for sounding off.

For ideas and sample letters, check out the Web site of Take Positive Action for Responsible Television (Take P.A.R.T.), one aspect of the nonprofit group Advocates for Youth's Media Project, at [www.themediaproject.com/takepart/index.htm](http://www.themediaproject.com/takepart/index.htm).

Let's start with TV. Here are some shows with recent sexuality-related storylines; consider some ways you might voice your opinions:

*One episode of Friday Night Lights, "I Think We Should Have Sex," focused on a young couple deciding whether to have sex. It was a positive example of good partner communication, accurate information about condoms, and the complex issues that arise when parents and young people talk about important topics.*

**Your turn:** You can applaud a realistic scenario (or disapprove of one that is unrealistic) by pointing out what affected you and noting the importance of positive sexuality-related programming.

*An episode of Desperate Housewives titled "Not While I'm Around" included inaccurate and*

## What are media?

*Media include TV, movies, magazines, newspapers, music, advertising, books, games, and the Internet.*



Brian DiLucente Photo Illustration / AP Images