WATCHING HIGH SCHOOL: REPRESENTING DISEMPOWERMENT ON TEEN DRAMA TELEVISION

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Abstract

This study investigated the representation of teenage characters on teen drama television. Content from a sample of six television series aired between 1989 and 2006 were analyzed, with the intent of describing the underlying discourse of "teenageness" that shapes the portrayal of young people in popular media. Qualitative content analysis found significant, ongoing trends in youth representation that reflect common cultural conceptions of teens. Teen drama narratives were found to suggest that the experiences represented in television story lines are universally shared amongst young people. Teenagers were also represented in the process of discovering or choosing an identity, while socially preoccupied with peer relationships. These representations position teenagers as irresponsible, unreliable, and ultimately in need of adult protection and control. Narrative contradictions occasionally suggested that young people deserve greater responsibility and respect, but overall, representations of teenagers on teen drama television reflect a discourse that promotes youth disempowerment.

Keywords

Discourse, Disempowerment, Representation, Teenagers, Teen drama, Television, Youth

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Common sense discourses about youth are often thought to be informed by simply that: common sense. But, as Christine Griffin contends in her critical analysis of youth research written in the 1980s *Representations of Youth*, it is crucial to turn "the spotlight onto youth research itself, especially those texts produced during the 1980s, to examine the causal stories and conceptual categories through which 'youth' and 'adolescence' have been constructed, represented and understood" (2). Modern adolescence, far from common sensical, has been discursively constructed, in particular by this body of social research conducted to explain the lives and conditions of young people. Further articulating these "common sense" notions of youth, Nancy Lesko outlines "four 'confident characterizations' of adolescents: they 'come of age' into adulthood; they are controlled by raging hormones; they are peer-oriented; and they are represented by age" (2). These frames for thinking about young people shape the lives of teenagers by informing educational practices and social policy, and more generally, expectations of "normal" teen behaviour. As Lesko continues, "Youth were defined as always 'becoming,' a situation that provoked endless watching, monitoring, and evaluating" (111). Presumed to be in the process of becoming adult individuals, teens are excluded from the privileges of full personhood.

Young people occupy a unique position of powerlessness, considering that every "mature" adult must necessarily "pass through" a stage of adolescence. Unlike race, gender, or class divisions, which structure systems of power and control in society, youth is, in a certain sense, universal. Thus, while all people experience "adolescence," young people are all characterized and affected by universal expectations. As Lesko writes, "the 'discourse of adolescence'—affects

and influences *all* adolescents' lives. All youths become adolescents and are subject to its ideas and expectations" (11-12). These assumptions in turn manifest throughout our culture influencing popular fictional representations of teenaged individuals and populations.

While researchers have shaped the discursive landscape for understanding youth in the late twentieth century, people most likely have access to common characterizations of teens through television and other popular media. As Ross and Stein describe in the introduction to their edited collection *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom,* "Popular discourse also links perceptions of 'teen' with perceptions of consumerism and commercial teen culture" (7). In this sense, to be a teenager is to consume cultural artifacts that are designed to be expressions of youthful identity and are seen to carry some essence of perceived teenage-ness. Conceptualizing young people thus necessarily involves investigating teen cultural products, for the ways in which these objects purport to contain "truths" about the nature of adolescence, and, by extension, impact social *beliefs*. Davis and Dickinson, editors of *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity*, also emphasize this connection, demonstrating how the study of television in particular is of central concern to any attempt at understanding youth culture:

> "The 'teenager' is a relatively new phenomenon, coming to prominence in the Western world (mainly in affluent North America) in the 1950s...[I]n this period of both economic and baby boom, 'the teenager' developed as a recognized cultural identity in close synchronization with the rise of television as a widely consumed domestic medium. Whether or not this was a chance occurrence or part of a greater and inextricably linked socio-economic chain of circumstances, it is still vital that any history of culture aimed at, produced for and consumed by adolescents should pay particular critical attention to television." (Davis and Dickinson 2)

Teen television specifically is an area of study that offers potential insight into how we culturally conceive of young people. By providing cultural products with which teens and their

families interact, as well as modeling teen identities and behaviours through onscreen (often fictional) characters, "television plays a pivotal role in the way teenagers are managed: what they are allowed to do, what is forbidden and what they are encouraged to become" (Davis and Dickinson 10). Describing the domestic conditions that characterize television consumption, generally structured by parents and the hardware of the TV set within the family home, Davis and Dickinson continue: "Teen TV is obliged to be liable for the shaping of both young adults' burgeoning senses of freedom and the prescribed limitations which are still (and perhaps always will be) thrust upon them within their social positions, both present and future" (10). It can be argued that teen television offers televisual texts that attempt to both liberate and contain teenaged subjects.

Although historically teen television programming has largely been dominated by music television and family sitcoms, the end of the twentieth century saw the introduction of the teen drama sub-genre, which "appeared, developed and flourished in the 1990s" (Moseley 53). Describing the content of teen drama, Moseley turns to the experience of being a teenager: "Teenageness is a significant 'in-between' period, and teen drama deals with the stuff of adolescent anxiety: friendship, love, sex and impending adulthood" (54). In this way, she briefly outlines how teenageness has been culturally conceptualized by the television industry. Despite its relatively recent appearance, and the continued popularity of sitcoms and reality programming among young audiences, and as Ross and Stein describe: "Such programs (female-oriented, serial, hour-long melodramas which feature teen characters and are marketed to teen viewers) have shaped (and continue to shape) the predominant perception of Teen TV at this cultural

moment" (17). Since its rise in the 1990s, then, the teen drama has quickly become central to common perceptions of teen TV.

In fact, as Ross and Stein describe, this perception of teen television is intimately linked with the network/programming context of American television in the 1990s. Marketing television to a demographic of young viewers, while as old as the medium itself, took on new meaning following the introduction of new broadcast networks and cable TV in the 1980s. In particular, with the introduction of FOX and MTV, targeting a youth market demographic became a strategy for newer networks in order to pick up significant viewership. While the "big three," CBS, NBC, and ABC, continued to cater to mass audiences,[1] newer networks were likely to entertain niche markets, including teen consumers. By the mid-1990s, the on-going success of FOX's *Beverly Hills, 90210* provided a strong rationale for the continued courting of youth audiences. Around this time, the WB and UPN (later to merge into the CW) both began marketing their fledgeling channels as "Teen TV," developing programming line-ups loaded with hour-long, (melo)dramatic series featuring teen characters. "By the late 1990s, then, WB programming *was* teen programming from a pop culture standpoint" (Ross and Stein 15).[2]

The academic study of teen television is a relatively new field. While film studies has taken an interest in youth, and children's television has been featured in academic literature, "Teen TV itself remains largely unstudied" (Ross and Stein 9).[3] Within this general dearth of academic literature, Davis and Dickinson set a precedent for the study of Teen TV with the release of their

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[1] There are some exceptions, notably *My So-Called Life* (ABC) and *Freaks and Geeks* (NBC), discussed below, however, one of the factors contributing to these series' early cancellation involved their limited (teen) focus, which networks feared might alienate mass audiences.

[2] For an introduction to teen television history see also Wee.

[3] One early contribution to the field is Rox Kaveney's *Teen Dreams* which discusses the style of both film and television that have shaped what she broadly refers to as the "teen genre" from the 1980s through the early 2000s.

edited collection of essays in 2004. Followed by Ross and Stein in 2008, these two foundational anthologies share a broad approach to the genre, inspired by post-structuralist and interdisciplinary genre studies as advocated by Jason Mittell. According to Mittell, "researching a genre as a cultural category requires critics to analyze the broad array of ways institutions and people talk about and use genre categories" ("Genre Study" 12). This work investigates not only the formal features of texts, but also how genres make meaning (and are made to mean) in particular discursive and historical contexts.

Combining analyses of "textual conventions of teen television with an attention to much more wide-ranging practices of consumption and regulation" (Davis and Dickinson 6), this approach widens the study of genre, de-centering the text to explore "surrounding meta-texts, including producer, network, and audience discourses" (Ross and Stein 4). However, while this approach to genre studies has recently dominated discussions of teen television, multifaceted analyses of how the teen genre operates within culture often seem to overlook representations of the teenaged character. In-depth textual analysis, however, offers the opportunity to explore the discursive conventions of *representation* within the genre's programming. After all, these teen—often drama—fictions do provide cultural expressions of what it is "to be a teen." It is my opinion that while the interdisciplinary approach is valuable, by adopting it early on in the study of teen television, there has been a dearth of analysis of the representational content of teen television's texts.

Entering with this perspective, my work is an attempt to address these two factors of the teen drama genre: representations of teens, and televisual texts. My own experience as a young person who loved watching stories about young people on television was one complicated by the

awareness of questions of youth empowerment raised, for me, in my church community. I was left with a sense, growing up, that teens are characterized, discussed, and treated as a population; moreover, that this demographic of young people is a marginalized population, unfairly assumed to be immature, irrational, and irresponsible, and thus, prohibited from contributing to the significant discussions and decisions that affect their lives. My interest in teen drama characters stems from this one-sided perception of youth that seemed all too common throughout our media culture. Is this a perspective supported and sustained by on-screen portrayals of youth? Or does teen television contribute to the emancipation and empowerment of the youth population? The primary question I asked at the outset of this project was ultimately fairly straightforward: how do these televisual texts' teen characters represent young people?

Who are the teenagers that populate teen drama? How has a television genre that has aggressively marketed itself as "teen" represented teenage priorities? What assumptions about adolescent life/style do these programs rely upon? What discourses of teenageness[4] are circulated in teen television culture? These are the questions that this thesis attempts to answer. Hoping to uncover some of the shared discourses of teenage-ness that underlie the representation of teenaged characters on television, I examine a number of texts collectively as a sample of fictionalized adolescence at the end of the twentieth century. In doing so, I am not claiming to uncover any final truths but, rather, am looking to describe the complexities of meaning that have emerged as the teen drama television genre established codes and conventions for displaying teen narratives. My approach is largely deconstructive, in so far as it emphasizes a range of

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[4] Throughout this text I privilege the terms "teenager" and "teenageness" partly because of the biological association with "adolescence" as a stage of life signaled by puberty, and the generalized use of "youth" to include children and often young adults. Teenageness perhaps best describes an assumed yet poorly defined state of being. Teen is privileged by categories such as "teen television" and "teen drama" and is often conveniently conflated with high-school-aged people. That said, I consider teen, teenager, youth and adolescent to be synonymous.

possibilities for interpretation, and uses the contradictions and inconsistencies in these mainstream cultural representations of youth as a way in to the analysis of them. While this type of analysis is bound to the texts, it is my contention that representations of teenagers on TV come to bear on how we culturally interpret adolescence and thus manage and control the lives of young people.

Theoretical Framework

Theories of representation argue for the centrality of the symbolic realm to the construction of meaning in society. Any attempt at understanding the meaning of a particular concept, such as "the teenager," must consider that "meaning is *not* in the object or person or thing, nor is it *in* the word. It is we who fix the meaning so firmly that, after a while, it comes to seem natural and inevitable" (Hall 21). Representations make meanings and circulate discourses, which ultimately influence how we conceptualize objects and roles within social relations. While we often attempt to distinguish between the "real" and the "representational," as Stuart Hall summarizes in the introduction to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* these are not discrete categories that function independently. In particular, representations contribute to our conceptual understanding of the world around us, influencing what we know, who has power to shape practices and beliefs, and how we regulate and control people and things in society.

Representation has been theorized in three fundamental ways for the study of culture. The *reflective* approach theorizes that people and objects in the material world possess meanings independently and that representations simply reflect those meanings back to us. The *intentional* approach places the origin of meaning with the producer/creator of a message, where the meaning of such a representation lies with the intentions of its creator. The third theory, which is

dominant in cultural studies, is the *constructionist* approach, which theorizes that "things don't *mean:* we *construct* meaning, using representational systems—concepts and signs" (Hall 24-25). Following this model, attempts at understanding how representation works—how, for instance, we understand one another when using codes to communicate—resulted in the field of semiotics.[5]

Moving beyond the question of *how* representation works, Michel Foucault concerned himself with the production of knowledge through *discourse*: "Discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice: a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (Hall 6). This shift in focus demonstrates one of the factors influencing a trend that favors post-structuralist approaches to cultural studies. While structuralism is intent on identifying how instances of representation are structured by underlying rules and grammars, post-structuralism recognizes that the system of rules that govern meaning are not static, but open-ended, and influence, while being influenced by, power and historically specific social relations (Hall 35).

> "In the semiotic approach, representation was understood on the basis of the way words functioned as signs within language. But, for a start, in a culture, meaning often depends on larger units of analysis—narratives, statements, groups of images, whole discourses which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority" (Hall 42).

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5 Developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, semiotics studies the systems of signs—arbitrarily determined—which make up languages. Systems of communication are broken down into their conceptual components in order to interpret how they function within particular cultures, and how social conventions rely on shared conceptual frameworks for cultural signifiers (for an introduction to semiotics see Hall 30-41).

Discourse, then becomes particularly important for theorizing representation, as these "larger units of analysis" operate throughout society shaping not only the meaning of concepts, but also relations of power, constructions of knowledge, and accompanying "regimes of truth."[6]

Working with culture and discourse is necessarily interpretive work. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, meaning is not ultimately fixed, but always interpreted, while any "final" meaning is endlessly deferred (Hall 42). With this in mind, deconstruction attempts to articulate those spaces of meaning, the possible contradictory interpretations and internal oppositions upon which texts are founded. Discursive analysis describes the framework for meaning that underlies and situates individual textual articulations within a culture. Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs any given topic (not only what it means, but *what we know it to be* at any historical moment). "It is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces knowledge. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the *episteme*, the *discursive formation*, the *regime of truth*, of a particular period and culture" (Hall 55). Foucault's discursive approach is necessarily complex and open to critique (Hall 62), but this fundamental position—that discursive formations construct cultural knowledge and the meaning of a given topic—underscores the significance of performing interpretive work. Meanings "mobilize powerful feelings and emotions, of both a positive and negative kind [...] We struggle over them because they matter—and these are contexts from which serious consequences can flow. They define what is 'normal,' who belongs—and therefore, who is excluded. They are deeply inscribed in relations of power" (Hall 10).

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6 Foucault's term, "regime of truth" refers for the situated nature of perceived "truths" within existing structures of power. As opposed to seeing truths as objective and universal, Foucault argues that every society creates "regimes" of perceived "truths" particular to the historical context. Relations of power in social structures are significant for understanding the nature of such constructed truths. Power operates by constraint and enablement, influencing thought, behaviour, and the course of events. Power underlies much of my analysis, as youth tend to be subject to the structures of adult power. For a brief introduction to Foucault's theories, see Hall.

It is my belief that teenagers are consistently marginalized within a society that takes for granted its understanding of "teenage-hood." Drawing on folk wisdom or personal memory, intertwined with dominant discourses of youth, adult society shapes, and believes in, a common cultural concept of the "normal teenager," structuring the world that teenagers inhabit and the expectations that they face accordingly. By examining the representations of teenagers in teen drama television, this work contributes to our understanding of the complex dimensions of the North American conceptualization of youth. Demonstrating some of the ways in which televisual texts participate in the production of discourse, I argue that we must think critically about how representations of social relations (in this case determined by age) work to potentially (dis) empower young people.

Introduction to the Sample

My sample consists of six shows that are foundational and representative of realist programming throughout the first twenty years of the teen drama genre (see Figure 1).[7] The subject I am analyzing is the teen character, which is both contextualized and defined by a high school setting, so for any show that extended beyond high school years, the only seasons considered are those that take place in and around high school. Analysis is based on the DVD versions of each program.

Degrassi High (CBC broadcast on PBS in the U.S.A. 1989-91) and the film-length finale "School's Out" (1992) (collectively "*Degrassi*") represent the foundation of a genre of television devoted to dramatic teen stories. Evolving from *Degrassi Junior High*, in which young characters were already beginning to tackle serious problems, this show is known for addressing

[7] Beginning with *Degrassi Junior High* in 1987, television series began featuring narratives that took teen experiences seriously (Byers "Revisiting"). Based on my familiarity with the genre, the titles in this sample in particular stand out as popular, influential, and/or notorious figures of televisual teen culture.

issues head on and for having serious consequences befall main characters. "*Degrassi* was the first teen series to put stories about teen pregnancy, abortion, suicide and girlfriend abuse on prime time" (Byers "Revisiting" 36; see also MacLennan 151). Byers describes the teen TV landscape as largely music-oriented and dominated by family sitcoms before the proliferation of teen dramas in the 1990s: "The other show usually mentioned as an early forerunner of American teen TV, *Beverly Hills, 90210*, began airing in 1990. [*Degrassi*] aired from 1987 to 1991 and was broadcast by the Public Broadcasting Corporation extensively in the U.S." (Byers "Revisiting" 36). Scholarly work collected in *Growing Up Degrassi* emphasizes the cultural impact of the program, including its influence on the development of teen drama in the United States (Byers "Revisiting" 36). Producers intended to create realistic fictions with ambiguous or contrasting moral positions in order to encourage teen audiences to independently interpret and identify with characters. Series co-creator Kit Hood expresses pride in the impact of the series, and the way audience members "would actually make major decisions based on our show" (Hood quoted in MacLennan 153). *Degrassi* is the biggest outlier in my sample: it is the only Canadian program, the only half-hour show, and the only series not to focus on a single leading main character (although arguably, Joey Jeremiah can be considered a leading character, as the narrative of "School's Out" revolves around him.) It is also the only series that does not engage in parallel narratives about the adult parents of teenage characters.

Beverly Hills, 90210 ("*90210*") (FOX 1990-93) is one of the most successful, long-running, and well-known teen dramas. Following rich teens living in Beverly Hills, *90210* claims to demonstrate that no matter their financial circumstances, teens all deal with "issues such as teen pregnancy, safe sex and date rape" (Osgerby 83). Critics often condemn the program for

perpetuating consumerism and stereotypes, and allowing its "very special guest stars" (Byers, "Revisiting" 33) to bear the brunt of the teen issues that characters face: "when it dealt with issues they were the sort of issues grown-ups think kids should be worrying about, not what they actually were" (Whedon 5-6). The show eventually evolved into a prime time soap opera as the teenage characters attend college and begin their adult lives. *90210* has affected the development of teen dramas that followed, acting as trailblazer for the viability of dramatic teen fictions, as well as providing a melodramatic, often moralizing standard, against which producers and critics judge and contrast new series, as noted below.

My So-Called Life ("*MSCL*") (ABC 1994-95 rebroadcast on MTV following cancellation) is the short-lived teen drama that, "got teen girls" (Murphy). It portrays the inner monologue of adolescence through the voice-over narration of protagonist Angela Chase. *MSCL* "is often named by critics as the high point of teen television of the 1990s" (Davis and Dickinson 8). The series is well-known for what is seen to be an authentic portrayal of the awkward confusion of high school. The show reflects in-depth research into the lives and speech of teenagers in high school that was conducted by Winnie Holzman, the creative auteur of the series: "it unlocked my memories. It unlocked my emotions about teenage life; being in a hallway, hearing that bell, hearing the clang of the lockers" ("A Conversation with Marshall Herskovitz and Winnie Holzman"). The series was cancelled after a single season on ABC, when it failed to draw in mass audiences, but it was very popular among its relatively small fan-base of "ten million viewers a week" (Byers, "Timeless" 19). Following its cancellation, *MSCL* was picked up and re-broadcast on MTV, where it gained a considerable audience due, in part, to its unprecedented emotional realism. As Joss Whedon, creator of action/fantasy teen drama *Buffy the Vampire*

Slayer writes: "no show on TV has ever come close to capturing as truly the lovely pain of teendom as well as *My So-Called Life*" (Whedon 8).

Dawson's Creek ("*DC*") (WB 1998-2001) is another very popular teen drama that straddles the lines between soap/quality/cult TV, and like *90210* carries on into its characters' college years. It is well known for the introspective, self-reflexive and highly verbal characters. According to DVD commentary, entertainment news media coverage of the series often cast it as controversial due to its frank portrayals of teen sexuality, although series creator Kevin Williamson describes how unexpected these reactions were: "I was writing about weak knees and sweaty palms" ("*Dawson's Creek*: From Day One"). Widely studied, critics disagree about the cultural impact of the series, praising its introspection and unique style, while simultaneously criticizing its rampant product placement and various ideological positions. For instance, Birchall notes "such values as political nostalgia—a mix of utopianism and conservatism" (183), while Davis suggests that "almost all televisual representations of queer teens [such as Jack of *DC*] are remarkably 'positive': their potential as role models or transmitters of politicized messages seems to have been recognized by liberal drama writers, series producers and television executives" (134). At the time of its release, teen drama was well-established, and the series often situates itself within the genre, making occasional references, in particular, to *90210*: "*Dawson's Creek* also seems to transcend, claim superiority to these other teen texts (by commenting on the naiveté of *90210,* for example). The show both utilizes and rejects the clichés and mythologies of teen-ness" (Birchall 178). Originally based on Williamson's youth as an aspiring filmmaker, *Dawson's Creek* begins a trend of autobiographical teen dramas, including Paul Feig's *Freaks and Geeks,* below. Positioned as "quality television" by its creators and seen

to be "distinguishing itself from notions of TV as ephemeral, industrially manufactured, trashy or non-cinematic" (Hills 54), *DC* walks the line between introspection (à la *MSCL*) and melodrama (à la *90210*).

Freaks and Geeks ("*FG*") (NBC 1999-2000), another short-lived, "cult classic" teen drama, is widely praised for the authenticity and humour in its portrayal of adolescence, as well as for representing often marginalized teenagers as protagonists. Olmstead writes that "[c]ritics raved that *Freaks and Geeks* was the best new show of the season. *Entertainment Weekly* called it 'hip, smart and sharp,' done with tart humor, and noted that it was the only show not featuring a cast of the most beautiful young people in America" (20). In spite of its critical acclaim, there has been very little scholarly attention paid to the series: "Though *Freaks and Geeks* struggled to obtain network-sized audiences, much like its fellow doomed high school cult favourite *My So-Called Life,* the show ranks highly on many lists of quality American television programming" (Gray 121). Creator Paul Feig describes his desire to represent his own, decidedly unglamorous experience of high school, in contrast to the perceived trend in teen dramas at the time: "I decided it was time to write something I'd been wanting to write for a while: a one-hour TV show about my experiences in high school while growing up in Michigan. I wanted it to be about the real people I knew, the people I had never seen portrayed accurately on TV or in movies" (Feig 4). Feig and executive producer Judd Apatow attempted to harness authentic teen realism. Significantly, the series creators actively tried not to talk down to teens: "There was no moral to the story. The show was just about teenagers trying to navigate their world and figure out where they fit in" (Olmstead 31). Set in 1980, *FG* presents teenagers in retrospect, encouraging adult nostalgia, while offering recognizable narratives of growing up.

The O.C. ("*OC*") (FOX 2003-07) brings us back to California and the experiences of rich, privileged teenagers. Although not autobiographical, creator Josh Schwartz describes his inspiration for the series: "It's sort of a little bit based on my experiences at USC, as kind of a neurotic Jewish kid from the East Coast who arrives in the land of water-polo players and their girlfriends. I guess that was the original impetus behind the show, and it's sort of evolved from there" (Schwartz). This program is the only series in the sample set during a time when cell phone use was widespread and social media had begun to dominate youth culture. Although continuing many of the teen drama trends set by its predecessors, *The O.C.* frequently diverges from the series of the 1990s, as (teen) life is rewritten in the twenty-first century: "It is of note that creator Josh Schwartz suggests in DVD commentary that what the FOX network really wanted from *The O.C.* was a new *Beverly Hills, 90210,* but that he and his fellow writers wanted to do 'serious stuff' and create a series like the critically applauded but short lived teen shows *Freaks and Geeks* and *My So-Called Life*" (Turnbull 179). The series often demonstrates a metatextual awareness of the genre in which it is situated "with thoroughly ironic, postmodern winks to the audience" (Becker 16). Just as *Dawson's Creek* produced self-reflexive characters, *The O.C.* frequently refers to its own cultural impact allegorically, with characters discussing a fictionalized version of the series titled "The Valley." As on *90210*, melodramatic narratives frame the lives of teenagers with access to money, but like *FG*, teen issues are often couched in humour and comment on cultural expectations of teen behaviour.

	Degrassi High	Beverly Hills, 90210	My So-Called Life	Dawson's Creek	Freaks and Geeks	The O.C.
Original Run	1989-91, 1992, (1987-89 as *Junior High*)	1990-2000	1994-95	1998-2003	1999-2000	2003-2007
Network	CBC (PBS)	FOX	ABC (MTV)	WB	NBC	FOX
Auteur	Kit Hood and Linda Schuyler (creators)	Darren Star (creator) and Aaron Spelling (executive producer)	Winnie Holzman (writer/creator/ executive producer) and secondarily Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick (executive producers)	Kevin Williamson (writer/creator)	Paul Feig (writer/creator) and secondarily Judd Apatow (executive producer)	Josh Schwartz (writer/creator/ executive producer)
Setting	Toronto, ON	Beverly Hills, CA	Pittsburg, PA	Capeside, MA	Chippewa, MI	Newport, CA
School	Degrassi High	West Beverly Hills High	Liberty High	Capeside High	McKinley High	Harbor School
Leading Characters	Joey Jeremiah	Brenda Walsh, Brandon Walsh	Angela Chase	Dawson Leery	Lindsay Weir, Sam Weir	Seth Cohen, Ryan Atwood

Figure 1: The Sample in Brief

Character Demographics[8]

The teenagers inhabiting the fictional locales of Toronto, Beverly Hills, Pittsburg, Capeside, Chippewa, and Newport of my sample share several significant demographic features (such as race, gender, and religious divisions), while differing in number, location, grade levels and class, family situation, and character interests. These trends and representational choices work together to create certain connotations about "normal" teenage experiences.

Main Characters

Groups of main characters range in number from roughly four to eight people. Generally the main characters are a group of friends attending the same high school, although on *Freaks*

[8] For brief descriptions of individual characters named within this text, see Appendix B: character glossary.

and Geeks main characters are split into two different groups of friends. *Degrassi* offers an exception, following nearly the entire class, instead of a single social circle. Individual groups of friends tend to be in the same grade, with one exception on *Degrassi*, where Joey has been held back a grade, but maintains his old friendships. Characters range from 14 to 19 years old, covering all four years of high school across the sample. Groups tend to include very good and very bad students, with the majority of characters falling somewhere in the middle.

Generally groups are made up of an even split between men and women, with the exception of *FG*, which is dominated by male characters. *FG* also offers the only alternatively-sexed character; Amy was born inter-sex, although she is female-identified. The vast majority of characters are heterosexual, with fewer than one main character identified as homosexual or bisexual on each series. Marissa and Alex, of *The O.C.*, emerge as the sole lesbian couple (although both also date boys), while all other homosexual characters are male.

Characters occasionally seek out part-time jobs, but for many different reasons. On *Degrassi*, Michelle works to support herself, living independently in an apartment. On *90210*, Brandon works to pay for his car insurance. On *DC*, Joey works at her family's business, while Dawson works out of a passion for film. On *OC*, Ryan works because he feels guilty receiving spending money from his guardians. More commonly characters occupy their free time with hobbies (especially creative endeavors), consumption (of food, or media), or extra-curricular activities (school events, newspapers, yearbooks, teams, elections etc.).

Families

Generally each group of friends centres around a lead character (or two) and their family. While friends gather at school, narratives frequently return to the lead family home, while only occasionally visiting friends' homes (although on *Degrassi* there is less stability, shifting to a new lead character each episode). Lead families are all heterosexual, two-parent homes, while friends within the group often come from divorced or single-parent homes. Divorce is frequently referred to as the norm, but this is rarely reflected in the actual number of divorced families. *DC* is the only series in which the lead character's parents get divorced. Lead characters tend to enjoy less autonomy than their friends, whose parents tend to be less invasive, protective, or involved in their lives.

In every series except for *DC*, one of the main characters is identified as Jewish, while lead families tend to be non-practicing Christian (with the exception of *OC*, in which it is the lead family that is half-Jewish). These teenagers are overwhelmingly white, and generally middle class. Once again *Degrassi* is the possible exception, because it includes many non-white characters, although notably, the most prominent characters who receive primary story lines throughout the two-year series—as well as the finale—are mostly white (e.g. Joey, Caitlin, Tessa, Wheels, Snake, Spike). Lucy is the main exception here. Following *Degrassi*, *MSCL*'s Rickie remains the sole non-white main character.

Lead characters generally come from middle-income families, while groups of friends are consistently made up of a range of family circumstances. Characters on *90210* and *OC* are wealthy (with a few characters coming from poorer neighbourhoods). Characters on *MSCL* and *DC* are generally upper-middle class (with a few characters coming from poorer, often single-

parent homes). Characters on *Degrassi* and *FG* are generally lower-middle class (with a few characters coming from poor households, and others from well-off households). Lead families tend to fall somewhere in the middle. Lead family homes are generally in gentrified suburban neighbourhoods filled with detached single-family houses, while friends' homes range from mansions to two-bedroom apartments.

These broad trends result in the privileging of certain narratives, while others are de-emphasized. Narratives involving race are almost entirely absent; the few exceptions depict white characters confronting racism. Although class divisions are present throughout the sample, narratives tend to focus on the possibility of individual escape from economic depression (for instance, by receiving a college scholarship). These types of narratives are almost always individualized, with inequalities treated as individual character traits as opposed to the result of systemic problems: "These programmes as a whole express key cultural concerns through this model of personal, psychological plight, rather than proposing the possibility for larger macro-political or societal change" (Davis and Dickinson 6). It is worth noting the parallel here between cultural representations and the social research context which preceded them. As Griffin describes throughout her critique of youth research, this tendency to individualize social problems, often blaming the victim(s) for their misfortunes, was rampant in academic literature, shaping our cultural perspective on youth (79). Throughout the sample, references to intolerance as "just the way things are" demonstrate a certain acknowledgment of problematic social phenomena, often without critically questioning their sources or implications.

My analysis of textual content is necessarily shaped by these patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and my conclusions must be interpreted accordingly. There are, of course, many

conflicting reasons for these trends which cannot be deciphered from the texts alone. The political leanings of viewers and producers, for instance, are often held responsible for content choices. Realist texts can also run the risk of critique for perpetuating inequality, while attempting to accurately capture its effects. The political ideologies of producers, networks, and of programs themselves are examined in much of the literature on teen TV, reviewed below. Many of these ideological interpretations are somewhat contradictory, showing that teen television performs on the one hand "a conservative function" (Birchall 182), while, on the other, it takes on the role of "building a certain recognized type of future citizen (namely a politically liberal one)" (Davis and Dickinson 3). My own work does not delve into the political reasons behind teen representations, but seeks to uncover how they manifest across the teen drama genre, and how those manifestations support a particular set of discourses of teenageness.

Literature Review

Previous academic work on teen television tends to approach the genre as a comprehensive classification of shows defined by their target audience. These broad categorizations have been reinforced by two foundational anthologies, discussed at the start of this chapter, that take up text and context in their studies of the genre. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson bring together a number of essays engaging in a wide investigation of teen television. Their anthology, *Teen TV*, groups chapters on corporate structuring, fan engagement, and representation. In their collection, *Teen Television*, Sharon M. Ross and Louisa E. Stein likewise combine essays examining generic descriptions of teen television based on industry definitions, while discussing a vast number of issues represented on the shows.

These collections maintain a broad approach to defining the genre by allowing individual authors to make diverse and often unrelated arguments connected only by the vast heading of teen television. As anthologies, the work collected contributes to an investigation of popular cultural conceptions of youth as a demographic of consumers. Limiting my focus to the representations of teenagers, the analysis in this thesis is restricted to dramatic fictional works about teenagers. Thus, teen television, specifically teen drama, for my purposes carries a narrower connotation: television that represents teenagers.

The majority of scholarship on teen dramas consists of individual case studies. In fact, many of the essays included in the foundational collections mentioned above are analyses of single shows. In addition, individual shows, such as *Degrassi*, *My So-Called Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Gilmore Girls* have entire anthologies of scholarship dedicated to them, while shows from *Dawson's Creek* and *Beverly Hills, 90210* to *Smallville*, *Roswell*, and *Veronica Mars* (among many others) have each received an abundance of individual critical attention. My study attempts to draw connections between shows within the genre. Thus, unlike a case study, my analysis explores a sample of six different shows in order to make claims about commonalities and trends across the teen drama genre.

Existing academic analyses of these teen programs often criticize producers' motivations in the creation of teen TV. Some note the tendency to see white, middle-class teens on television as promoting hegemonic notions of "normal" while targeting lucrative demographic groups who can afford spin-off paraphernalia (Bindig). Scholars also note the representations of marginalized groups, most notably visible minorities and queer teens, which tend to be approached hesitantly and in "safe" frames that stop short of delegitimizing the white, middle-class target audience's

lifestyle. On the other hand, teen television is also read as a site for fan engagement and empowerment (Murray). Marginalized within the cultural landscape, teen TV is also said to occupy a position from which social criticism is possible (Bolte). Occasionally, critical readers of these programs assess and compare teen culture across national borders (Simonetti) and over time (Byers "Revisiting"), or even between TV networks. In general, however, I see these existing projects as searching for the broader message about culture expressed *through* teenage representations on television. What concerns me is the message within the representation of teenagers on teen TV. What is being expressed *about* teenagers specifically? This literature review will focus largely on the scholarly attention paid to the teen dramas that make up my sample, attempting to draw out the lingering gaps and nagging questions that prompted my own research.

Cultural Significance of Teen Dramas

Teen dramas are most often studied for cultural significance by covering topics from feminism and hegemony to authenticity, audience response, and identification. *Dawson's Creek*, for example, has been studied from a number of different perspectives. Lori Bindig, Clare Birchall, and Matt Hill all analyze *Dawson's Creek* stylistically, in terms of cinematic production choices, drawing conclusions about the program's cultural message. Each comes to see the show as reinforcing hegemonic values, appealing to audience nostalgia, or appealing to culturally-valued self-reflexivity producing "quality" television. My study does not attempt to comment directly on any individual program's coherent message.[9] My analysis of the teen drama genre is an attempt to draw out the perspective about teenage subjects that teen television (to a certain

[9] Rather, in pointing out inconsistencies I am more likely to question the coherence of a program's message.

extent unwittingly) inherently assumes, a perspective that is undoubtedly connected to a wider cultural view of adolescence.

Audiences

Another significant way in which television programs are studied is through audience reception research. These studies allow researchers to not only make claims about the message of a given show, but also how that message is received by specific audience groups. For instance, Will Brooker analyzes *Dawson's Creek*, in terms of the extent to which audiences in the U.S. and Britain use available extra-textual artifacts when engaging with the show. While Brooker describes the media teen audiences consume in conjunction with watching television, Naomi R. Rockler and E. Graham McKinley examine the attitudes of audience members in their studies of *Beverly Hills, 90210*.

In her audience response study, Rockler pays particular attention to the perception of realism in *90210*. She warns that a view of television as "just entertainment" opens audiences up to the impact of ideological values and attitudes portrayed by the program. McKinley agrees, expressly studying the production of identities forged by audience members in conjunction with *Beverly Hills, 90210*. She pays particular attention to how those identities seem to reflect hegemonic gender and beauty norms depicted on the show. However, while these researchers attempt to articulate the effect that these television shows have on audiences, they often take for granted the nature of the content of the programs—in the case of *90210*, assuming that the female characters maintain unhealthy preoccupations with beauty. While this may be the case, these authors spend little time actually examining the content with which their respondents are interacting. My content analysis aims to provide researchers with an in-depth and nuanced

picture of teen drama teenagers. Focusing in detail on the images and narratives present on television, I hope to offer a reliable source for such comparisons.

Approaching audiences from various perspectives has also produced some scholarship on how and why viewers identify with teen programs. *My So-Called Life* has been a consistent subject for this kind of work on questions of identification because fans of the show were extremely vocal in their attachment to the series and its main character, Angela. Susan Murray takes a direct approach to studying fans of *MSCL* by analyzing online fan behaviour on message boards, while Caryn Murphy explores narrative strategies in *My So-Called Life* in an attempt to explain why the show had such an impact on teenage girls. Murphy's analysis emphasizes the significance of the intimate voiceover narration. Focusing less on the possible motivations of the viewers themselves, my analysis attempts to lay bare the narrative content of the shows that prompts such strong identification. A focus on the intimacy of the style of Angela's voice over, while significant, does not detail the content of her intimate thoughts, which resonate so strongly with teen audiences. Additionally, these audience response studies invariably focus on teenaged viewers. Assuming television's cultural effects to be significantly limited to young viewers ignores the potential discursive effects of popular culture on wider audience demographics. Influencing adult decision-makers and authority figures, perpetuating long-standing cultural beliefs and attitudes towards youth, pop culture shapes not only teen identities, but a cultural mindset. My analysis explores how televisual representations of teens might have an impact on the social order in which we (teens and adults alike) live.

Issues

Further work in the field focuses less on the effect of a series, and more specifically on the representation of issues within individual shows, or across programs, often for the sake of making distinctions on the bases of "quality," "authenticity," and cultural difference. The representation of sexuality, for example, is addressed by both Jolie Braun and Michele Byers in the context of *MSCL*. Braun studies the connection between sexuality and writing on *MSCL*, emphasizing the adolescent need to express emotions in writing, as well as how questions of ambiguous authorship suggest a fluidity of insecure, teenage sexual identities. Byers also discusses sexuality in *MSCL*, addressing the types of sexual identities represented on the show. She describes the show's propensity for hegemonic, prototypical sexual identities, and the suppression of active queer or divergent sexualities. More recently Maura Kelly has studied virginity loss narratives on teen dramas from 2003-05, including *The O.C.* She describes the cultural scripts which perpetually frame teens' emerging sexualities: virginity as a gift, as a rite of passage, and as stigma. Identifying significant trends in the portrayals of teenage sexualities, my analysis takes up these issues as they emerge throughout my sample.

The representation of queer sexuality in particular is a common issue that has been analyzed and compared in much scholarly study. Michaela Meyer focuses on the question of whether homosexuality constitutes or informs teen identity on *Dawson's Creek*. Glyn Davis discusses the representation of queer male teens on both *MSCL* and *Dawson's Creek*, two of the earliest (if not the first) teen dramas to count queer teens among their cast of main characters. He discusses the emphasis placed on the coming out scene, and homosexual identity as a "teen issue," maintaining a sense of "otherness" for queer teens, despite the liberal acceptance that

tends to underly these portrayals. These conclusions are significant for my study, as teenage sexuality is a central component of many of these teenage characters' constructed identity. Other possible markers of identity, such as aptitude at school, or artistic tendencies, have been largely ignored, as scholars emphasize controversial or problematic aspects of emerging teen identities. This preoccupation with sexuality confines "distinctly teen" experiences of identity to hormonal development, ignoring the social/institutional experience that is equally, if not more, "distinctly teen": high school.

Representations of gender identity have also been addressed in academic work on teen dramas. Sue Turnbull analyzes the portrayal of masculinity on *The O.C.*, drawing connections and distinctions between the male in the teen drama and previous teen character tropes, going back to James Dean's infamous Rebel. Michele Byers similarly considers the representation of feminist girl characters on *Degrassi*, comparing the original series in the 80s with *The Next Generation* (*TNG*) of the early 2000s. Her conclusions demonstrate a significant drop in the naming of and identification with feminism in *TNG*, despite the ongoing representation of activist teenage girls. While gender underlies all representations of teenagers on television, it is only occasionally directly discussed by characters within the diegesis of the shows themselves. More often, gendered character "types" are simply assumed. Gender is frequently an element of my analysis, but is rarely the object of study itself.

Discussing the portrayal of issues on a series often leads to comparisons between programs. Critics praising the realism, complexity, or authenticity of one program frequently make brief references to other series, citing unsubstantiated differences (for instance, *DC, OC,* and *90210* are often referred to as "shallow" or "mainstream" in contrast to "quality" programming). The

most common comparison has been made between *Degrassi* and *90210*, most often concluding that *Degrassi* is superior in terms of authenticity or quality representations of teens and teen issues. Tom Panarese, Bettina Spencer, Jennifer MacLennan, and Kylo-Patrick Hart have all described the contrasting styles of teen television from the deliberate realism and authenticity of *Degrassi Classic* (including both *Junior High* and *High* series) to the fantasy of *90210*.

Comparing the real teens of *Degrassi* with the older actors of *90210*, MacLennan outlines the significance of actors to audience readings of authentic portrayals of teens. Hart compares the representation of HIV/AIDS in *Degrassi* and *90210*. His analysis finds a more realistic depiction of HIV sufferers on *Degrassi*, as compared to the stereotypical portrayal of a white, gay male dying of AIDS on *90210*. Along the same lines, McLennan emphasizes the realistic style of representing ongoing teen issues on *Degrassi*, in comparison to the episodic nature of issues that are usually wrapped up by the end of each hour of *90210*. These conclusions all make claims about the relative accuracy of teen television programs in depicting the reality of teenagers' lived experiences. As a close reading of the programs' content, my analysis is not directly concerned with authenticity (which necessarily compares fiction with reality). I am, however, interested in exploring the nature of these fictions, and to a lesser extent the role they go on to play in shaping the reality in which teenagers exist.

Marie-Claire Simonetti compares the same two programs for cultural significance, attempting to characterize Canadian and American culture by their respective iconic TV teen dramas. *Degrassi* and *90210* in this comparison are assessed as representative of cultural values, such as diversity (on *Degrassi*) and individualism (on *90210*). Michele Byers responds to Simonetti's article, evaluating this comparison within the greater context of the teen drama genre

ten years later. She concludes, unsurprisingly, that the claims made about Canadian and American culture are essentialist and overly reductionist, but that the observations about the two shows have merit.

While these kinds of comparison studies tend to rank shows by their differences, my work attempts to locate the similarities within the fictions. Although *Degrassi*'s cast is ethnically diverse, characters are just as likely to be encouraged to develop independent interests and passions. While it is true that the actors on *90210* are generally ten years older than those on *Degrassi*, my concern is entirely with the teenaged characters that those actors play. While each series in my sample might offer contrasting narrative styles, and may or may not exhibit differing qualities, the teenage characters that inhabit somewhat different diegeses are the focus of my analysis, since they collectively contribute to a common sense cultural discourse of youth.

Focusing on the impact of individual shows, many in-depth case studies do not attempt to make broader claims about the genre. Individual shows are taken to hold meaning or have an impact on audiences independently of one another. While there are many of these individual studies, there is far less work on teen drama as a genre. In fact, as seen in the comparisons described above, dramas are more likely to be assessed for their difference rather than analyzed together as a collection of texts within a single genre. My work attempts to address this gap, emphasizing the shared discourse of teenage-ness that programs within the genre collectively shape and rely upon. Additionally, while there are a number of these analyses of individual issues within teen dramas, with quite a bit of emphasis on questions of gender and sexuality, these studies often comment on the program's representation of the issue, without necessarily exploring how the issue might be connected to representations of teenage identity, specifically.

Very few existing scholarly works address the overall representations of the teenage characters central to the genre.

Among the few exceptions, Louisa Ellen Stein comes closest to my intention of analyzing the discourse of teenageness within teen dramas by describing the thematic focus on adolescent constraints in teen television. Paying attention to fan engagement with television, she does not go into detail about how teen series depict "the sense of struggle against outwardly-enforced limitations through the seemingly universal experiences of adolescence" (Stein 224). She implicitly argues that this transitional phase of growing up and forming identity in the face of constraint is central to prevailing definitions of teenageness. Caralyn Bolte similarly sees the simultaneous desire to "be normal," and a perpetual sense of marginalization as central to adolescence. Metaphorical or exaggerated constraints—for example social ostracism on *Veronica Mars*, or evil demons on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—represent the struggles of people existing within the liminal state of adolescence, who are attempting to develop a sense of self while managing the social expectations of peers and authority figures. As I delve further into the characterizations that shape these prevailing definitions of teenage-ness, Stein's emphasis on constraint and Bolte's descriptions of marginalization resurface as social frameworks within which teen experiences are situated.

While television studies and teen culture studies continue to gain academic standing as fields deserving of critical attention, the majority of research concerning youth populations has historically been conducted in the fields of psychology and sociology. Reflecting this historical trend, along with dominant frameworks within cultural studies, research about youth culture overwhelmingly attempts to outline the impact, effect, or significance of media on real, flesh-

and-blood young people. My research does not do this, or at least not directly. In presenting the teen drama discourse of teenageness, which underlies and connects generic depictions of teenage characters, I hope to offer insight into how convenient concepts of adolescence are perpetuated and contribute to ways in which such common sense notions come to be considered "facts."

Research Methods

The research I conducted was a qualitative content analysis of a sample of six shows from the teen drama genre. This consisted of two primary stages: viewing and analysis. The majority of my time was spent watching episodes of the series in question while taking detailed notes about their content and the dialogue between characters that addressed various teen issues. My notes were then consolidated, analyzed and organized, and framed by larger, recurring themes. The following sections detail this research process.

Choosing the Sample

My sample examined a selection of teen dramas where the content of the show is particularly focused on the teenage characters themselves. My guiding question—how are teenagers represented on teen television?—framed my selection in a number of ways. First, my interest was in fictional depictions, not the interaction of real teen audiences with television. My study was not designed to analyze the reactions of viewers, or the lives of actual high school students, but to paint a picture of the fictional representations of young people. This also resulted in excluding reality television[10] (such as *Laguna Beach,* or *The Hills*). Second, I chose to focus

[10] Reality television is a broad classification ranging from competition or game shows (such as *American Idol*), to documentary style series that simply "watch" the lives of real people (such as *The Real World*, or *Jersey Shore*), and also semi-scripted series that purport to follow the lives of real individuals, but create a narrative through editing and the hiring of actors to play friends and acquaintances (such as *The Hills*).

on programs set in realist frameworks in order to avoid disentangling the metaphorical and exceptional from the "everyday teen." As a result the sample is made up of shows that are nominally set in the "real world." This excluded any cross-genre programming that delves into the supernatural or animation (such as *Buffy*, *Smallville*, *Roswell,* or *Daria*). Third, I narrowed my focus to emphasize shows that prioritize "teen" narratives, excluding programs where family drama or special ability (detective work, athletic prowess) eclipses ordinary teenage life (such as *Gilmore Girls, Veronica Mars, One Tree Hill,* or *Friday Night Lights)*. This also resulted in the decision to exclude comedies (such as *Popular,* or *Saved by the Bell*), and focus on the teen drama sub-genre, which tends to showcase more dramatic and often more serious "teen issues," positing frameworks for the ups and downs of teen life. Finally, due to necessary limitations in the scope of the project, I decided to limit my sample to English-language, North American television (excluding British series, such as *Skins*, and *The Inbetweeners*), and analyze television series that are no longer on the air (excluding currently airing *Glee*, and remakes of *90210* and *Degrassi*).

With these criteria in place, I decided to begin with what is widely regarded in Canada as the first teen drama, *Degrassi High* (see Byers "Growing up"). Following *Degrassi*, the teen drama genre evolved largely in the United States, producing several well-known programs throughout the 1990s and into the first decade of the new century that each put their own unique spin on the genre while maintaining the signature focus for my purposes, daily teenage experiences. Attempting to explore an underlying discourse of teenageness on television (separate from any particular producer or dramatic style), I have chosen a sample of programs that range from the successful, to the single-season cult classic; from groups of rich, unhindered

teenagers, to working class, struggling teenagers; from competent, graduating seniors, to geeky, entering freshmen. My resulting sample spans the first two decades of the teen drama genre and consists of:

Degrassi High, complete series: seasons 1 and 2[11] (1989-92)
Beverly Hills, 90210, seasons 1-3 (1990-1993)
My So-Called Life, complete series: season 1 (1994-95)
Dawson's Creek, seasons 1-4 (1998-2001)
Freaks and Geeks, complete series: season 1 (1999-2000)
The O.C., seasons 1-3 (2003-2006)

Thus I began by considering 14 seasons of television, consisting of a total of about 301 episodes, which amounts to a little over 200 hours of programming.

Genre Definition

As described above, the study of genre is a complex process. Defining genre in terms of formal characteristics of texts stems from the tradition of literary criticism, but has fallen out of fashion for the study of (broadcast) visual culture. The complex systems within which television programs are produced, marketed, managed, and consumed contribute to the proliferation of genre as a distinguishing category in previously unheard of discursive contexts, complicating the textually-focused literary history of genres. Attempting to make significant claims about the role of a television genre in society might involve researching production, programming, industry, audiences etc.[12] While my project takes as its focus teen drama (as a sub-genre of teen television), I am not attempting to study the genre in any kind of holistic way. My interest is in the diegetic teenagers that populate fictional series, so it is with this in mind that I have narrowed the genre focus of this study to teen drama.

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[11] *Degrassi High* is also sometimes referred to as seasons 4 and 5 of *Degrassi Junior High*.

[12] For an introduction to genre studies, see Mittell or Creeber.

For my purposes, teen drama refers to a set of television programs that centre on groups of teenaged high school students. Teen dramas approach teen narratives with a dramatic tone, identified by serial, overarching narratives, which are characterized by an emphasis on emotionality and character/relationship-driven stories; "recurrent topics of discussion...are sex and sexuality, drug and alcohol use, family tensions and negotiating one's place among one's peers" (Davis and Dickinson 3). As Moseley puts it: "At the imaginative centre of the teen drama, as in soap [opera], are place, character and relationships, and emotional drama is often heightened through the use of close up and (generally romantic pop) scoring" (54). Despite this stylistic connection to (exemplar of "low culture") soap opera, dramatic teen series have come "to assert a strangely paradoxical claim to being a 'quality' product—paradoxical in so far as both television and adolescent culture have not had the greatest access to critical approval and prestige in the past" (Davis and Dickinson 7). As Davis and Dickinson go on to note: "The 'quality' shows [...] present what is generally held to be a more sophisticated set of references and ideas, an aspiration towards auteurism [...] and a preconceived knowingness and questioning of the teen genre itself" (7-8). In this context, teen drama can be identified by these tensions between melodrama, marginalized youth culture, and quality production values.

Preliminary Viewing

After determining the sample to be analyzed, and collecting the DVD versions for the seasons in question (in which the characters are in high school), I proceeded to watch the entire collection of episodes in narrative order. This preliminary viewing allowed me to better acquaint myself with the material, and assess how best to analyze this wide sample. Throughout this stage

of watching, I kept limited notes, keeping track of what narrative events took place in each episode.

Categorizing Patterns and Frequencies

My next task was to determine the major patterns of characters and content that persisted throughout the sample. Focusing on themes and narratives that recurred, categories emerged by grouping similar and relatively common content (for example, characters attend a school dance in every single series, therefore school dances emerged as a topic section). Several topics that, seemed significant to teenage identity within the narrow focus of a single program failed to make it to the next round of viewing since they did not persist throughout the sample (such as bullying, of central importance to a few characters on *Freaks and Geeks*, but rarely present in the other shows being analyzed).[13] When addressing topics obviously present throughout the sample, episodes would make it through to the next round of viewing. In some cases, broad topics were further narrowed down by selecting episodes that dealt most directly with the topic (for instance teen romance underlies the majority of the sample so in order to analyze romantic motivations I chose to narrow the focus by primarily selecting episodes depicting the beginnings of relationships).[14]

Targeted Viewing

After grouping episode storylines into categories based on common themes, I began the second round of viewing. This involved focusing on each group of episodes, categorized by

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[13] A focused interrogation of the anomalies or discrepancies in content would likely also yield an interesting analysis, but for the purposes of this study, similarities across the sample and on-going trends were taken up.

[14] For a complete list of episodes analyzed by topic section, see Appendix A.

topic, in turn. Working chronologically through each topic section, I took detailed notes on the targeted themes while viewing, often pausing to record exact quotations when characters spoke about the topic in question directly, and fast forwarding through parallel story lines when episodes included unrelated content.

System for Note-Taking

In preparation for re-viewing the content grouped by section, I developed a system for taking notes while watching each group of episodes. Considering that I was searching for some underlying discourse about teenageness in the genre, I looked to Norman Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis*, to see what textual features might be singled out for analysis as discursively noteworthy. From there I settled on a system designed to highlight seven primary characteristics of an episode's narrative framework: (1) Character inclusion (point of view and priority); (2) Context (within the episode, or framing the specific story in question); (3) Perceived cause (of the specific action or perspective demonstrated, or in some cases calling attention to the topic in question); (4) Character agency (who demonstrated some form of control over the situation); (5) Choice (what choice, if any, did characters perceive they had, and how were choices made); (6) Characterization (how did specific narrative elements affect character portraits, or were characters assigned a "type"); (7) Assumptions (how dialogue and broader episode framing reflected a certain attitude or perspective towards the topic in question). For each topic group, notes were thus broken down into smaller analytical sections.

Content Analysis

Following the targeted viewing, my final task was to analyze the notes I had taken. At this point I reviewed my notes once again, pulling out and synthesizing common themes and their frequency underlying the individual stories that populated each topic section. This often took the form of removing unique identifiers for easy comparison between story lines (for example, the perceived cause of a break up might be rewritten as "another guy/cheating" for both Caitlin's developing crush on Claude (*Degrassi High*) and Andie having sex once with her friend Mark, and regretting it (*Dawson's Creek*)). Looking for trends and patterns, commonalities as well as inconsistencies, content was analyzed with the intent of describing the genre's depiction of teenageness. The analysis that follows (Chapters 2-4) is the result of this in-depth, close reading of a large body of teen drama texts.

Outline and Argument

My analysis is divided thematically, exploring the various, often overlapping ways in which the teen drama genre articulates teenageness and teen identity. Chapter 2 describes the "teen condition," focusing on experiences that are consistently framed as universal,[15] and thus characteristic of teenageness in general. Chapter 3 outlines the persistent emphasis on individuality as a culturally valued form of identification, highlighting different manifestations of personal identity. Chapter 4 illustrates the peer-centred nature of teen social identities, and the public nature of high school. Finally in my concluding chapter, I attempt to draw these strains of

[15] Implications of universality throughout this analysis refer to the vague sense that the characteristic, experience, or perspective in question is shared amongst all teens. Of course this sense is generally connected to the dominant cultural concept of teenageness, which is, in this case, specific to North America. Pervasive throughout the teen drama sample, "universal teen experiences" are thus suggested to be common in youth circles across the continent.

teen identity together, to articulate the discourse that teen drama television simultaneously shapes and reinforces.

Throughout my analysis several themes emerge that reflect Lesko's portrait of the cultural concept of adolescence. Teen characters on the threshold of adulthood are repeatedly depicted in a state of "becoming," where identity and personhood remain in flux until they "come of age" and "into their own." Teenage characters are almost universally portrayed in a disempowered state, and as hormonal, emotional, and defiant. While relying on standard tropes of biology and irrationality to characterize teens, the genre still manages to create sympathetic, intelligent, interesting, and diverse characters, prompting audiences to identify with and support them.

As a result, teen dramas tend to perpetuate contradictions about teen identity, naturalizing teenage disempowerment while simultaneously championing teens in their attempts to overcome their limitations. Continually reinforcing problematic conceptions of youth, the genre nevertheless underlines the potential for teenage self-empowerment. Offering youth-centred narratives, it validates teenage feelings and experiences, even as it both laments and perpetuates the constraints that shape young people's lives.

Chapter 2: The Teen Condition

Our common sense perception of "teenageness" is of a universally shared experience. As Nancy Lesko describes, "the dominant life script of adolescence is a slow, over-a-long-time development from young person to adult. This coming-of-age narrative is assumed to be universal" (146). All teenagers, it is presumed, share some form of identity due to the shared experience of growing up. More specifically, we come to expect adolescence to be a painful, or at least uncomfortable, experience, shaped by a characteristic lack of power. Teenagers are reminded that they do not have autonomy, that adults continue to shape the world that we all inhabit, while teens are consistently "denied power over decisions or resources" (Lesko 123).

These common ideas about teen identity result in expectations about universal teenage behaviour. This chapter explores the teen drama genre's depictions of teen experiences; from conflict with parents, and authority figures at school, to rites of passage, and coping with death, teens are consistently characterized throughout the sample by their inability to control the circumstances of their lives.

Adult Authority

There comes a time when teenagers on teen dramas are faced with the fact that their parents are people too. Specifically, that parents are individuals with their own problems and that they are human beings who make mistakes. Of course, these characters' parents are learning to recognize similar facts about their children. Teenagers in the sample demand the freedom to make choices, even to make their own mistakes. They need independence in order to grow into the individuals they are becoming. As such, teen dramas often engage in narratives about parent-teen relationships that seem contradictory. On the one hand, teens struggle when they learn that

their parents have lives independent from the family. They tend to want things to stay the same forever.[16] On the other hand, teens grow frustrated when parents continue to treat them like children. Rules and limits placed on teen behaviour often result in rebellion in an attempt to exert control over their lives. In these stories, change is exactly what is demanded by teen characters, change in the way that parents treat their children—with the respect that young adults deserve.

Respect, in fact, emerges as the key factor in the representations of harmonious teen-adult relations. Authority figures at school are often divided into those who respect and support students and those who do not. Teachers who support and care for students almost always receive respect in return, and succeed in motivating or inspiring the teenagers in their care. Those who disrespect their students, treating them unfairly or with obvious contempt, spark rebellion and challenge. Teenagers recognize when adult authority threatens their autonomy, and repeatedly assert their right to independence and respect.

Managing Expectations

Strained relationships between teen drama teenagers and their parents often occur when expectations result in feelings of inadequacy. These characters are depicted as sad and frustrated when they fail to live up to the expectations of their parents. Frequently, narratives depicting parent-teen relationships remind teenagers that a parent's love should not be tied to accomplishment. As Jack McPhee explains: "That's how our parents *should* love us, Jen, unconditionally" (*DC* 221 emphasis mine). However, teen drama parents continually frame the teenage process of self-discovery with their own hopes for their children. Often feeling

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[16] This theme is frequently explored through narratives involving parental infidelity and divorce. Characters are consistently reminded that while parents will always love their children, they are independent, fallible individuals. Unfortunately, space constraints limit my ability to describe these narrative trends more fully.

constrained by the perceived pressures to conform to their parents' expectations, whether those expectations are real or imagined, teenage characters navigate emerging identities. As teenagers grow into "self-hood," they must untangle who they are and want to be from who their parents' believe they are and should be.

In each case, narratives remind teenagers that parents, while often well-meaning, should not determine their future. Parents make mistakes and are blinded by their own desires, biases, and experiences. For instance, encouraging his son to attend his own alma mater, Berkley, Sandy Cohen inadvertently pressures Seth to go to school in California. Fearing that he might disappoint his father, Seth postpones revealing his desire to move to the East coast:

> Seth: I don't want you to get upset, OK, but I'm not going to Berkley. I want to go to Brown.
> Sandy: I'm not upset. Brown's a great school. I wish you would have told me.
> Seth: Dad, I've been trying to tell you for years. You didn't want to hear it.
> Sandy: It's that I want you to have the same amazing experience I had.
> Seth: That's exactly why I need to go East. It's exactly what you did. You left everything behind and forged your own path. I need to do that.
> Sandy: You're already doing it. (*OC* 308)

Finally confronting his father's expectations, Seth discovers that the pressure he felt from his father was simply misplaced encouragement. Failing to realize that his "nudge" (Sandy, *OC* 308) towards Berkley was causing undo strain on his son, the character of Sandy demonstrates the potentially huge effect that parents' seemingly trivial expectations have on their children. On these shows, parental expectations shape the world in which teens exist, framing their discovery of who and how to be.

Due to her experience as a former model, Kelly Taylor's mother, Jackie, naturally shares advice and beauty tips: "Kelly, every woman needs to know how to hold her head so she looks her absolute best. For a model, that is the difference between making $10 000 a day, and nothing.

Don't worry, we will make you look unforgettable" (*90210* 325). Yet, as Kelly eventually realizes when she finds herself in an eating disorder group after overdosing on diet pills, Jackie's constant primping has amounted to the perceived expectation that Kelly *must* be beautiful. Confronting her mother as the source of her insecurities, Kelly exclaims: "You know, when I was 12, it was 'of course you're pretty Hunny Bun, but let's see if Weight Watchers can do the trick'" (*90210* 325). Living under the shadow of a mother who was exceedingly beautiful and popular in high school, Angela Chase feels the same pressure to be pretty:

> Angela: Mom, just face the facts, OK.
> Patty: What facts?
> Angela: That I'm ugly, OK. Just face it. I have.
> Patty: How can you say that?
> Angela: By looking in the mirror. By looking at you, the way you look at me. By the way you instruct me on how to wash my face so I don't get zits. Like you have to fix me. Like you're ashamed of me. (*MSCL* 105)

At times, attempting to offer advice or help, teen drama parents unwittingly create feelings of inadequacy in their children. Other times, an inability to separate one's own personal history from the reality of one's children results in these parents shifting their own failed hopes or dreams onto teenage shoulders. As Jen Lindley discovers when she confronts her mother about sending her to live with her grandmother: "Let me see if I understand. Mother finds daughter in compromising position and instead of sharing her own experience as a teenager, when she actually got pregnant and had a child, mother turns into a hypocrite and instead sends her daughter into exile" (*DC* 308). Learning of her mother's secrets and self-hatred, the character of Jen comes to realize that her own banishment was a way for her mother to distance herself from her adolescent past.

Significantly, in their representations of teens feeling as though they are a 'disappointment' to their parents, these dramas underscore teens' intense desire for parental approval. Yet this desire for approval often lies in conflict with the need to be oneself. Feelings of pressure to live up to a parents' desires are shown to manifest specifically when teens perceive those expectations to be beyond their current capabilities or identities.

Frustrated by his father's continual verbal abuse, as, for instance, when he vocalizes his expectations of disappointment in a moment of congratulation: "Be proud of yourself son, you earned this moment. You probably won't have many more like it" (Mr. Whitter, *DC* 212), Pacey nonetheless strives for some acceptance. Ruefully explaining to his friend Dawson the troubled dynamic of their relationship, he poses, "Do you know how many times I've set myself up for that one? I mean over and over and over again I just can't seem to stop myself from trying to get one unqualified 'good job son' out of that bastard" (*DC* 212). Incapable of expressing this frustration to his father directly, Pacey waits until he is passed out drunk to explain: "It is your job to love me, *no matter who I am, or what I become* because you're my father" (*DC* 212 emphasis mine). Like Angela and Kelly, Pacey is depicted as feeling incapable of being the person his father might approve of, but who wants his father to love him for the person he actually is.

In this way, teenagers are represented as having an inner conflict between their developing selves and the hopes of their parents. Driven by a desire to develop an identity independent of their childhood family, while simultaneously conditioned to live up to their parents' expectations, these teens unsurprisingly are shown feeling pain, anger, and frustration as they navigate their developing identities. Ultimately, the necessity for freedom and independence in discovering

one's identity pushes teen drama teenagers to veer away from the limitations of parental pressure.

Independent Teen Self

Teenagers on teen dramas often recognize that as they grow up they develop an identity independent of their families and of their parents' expectations. In this way, the genre characterizes the teen years specifically by this discovery of identity. Often in defiance of the limits placed on teenage behaviour, characters attempt to claim autonomy over the self. As Cindy Walsh attempts to assuage her daughter's frustrations with the constraints of high school: "I know it sounds hokey, but it's all part of growing into who you are" (*90210* 118). Often trapped between the child their parents continue to attempt to protect and the young adult they are fast becoming, teen drama teens tend to rebel against protective parenting, claiming the right to develop independently. As Diana Economopoulos exclaims, challenging her brother's strict rules: "How can I find out who me is if you won't let me make mistakes?" (*Degrassi* 108) The freedom to make choices becomes an essential method of self-expression. Since these teenagers generally exist within the confines of school and home, where adults structure the rules and behavioural expectations, the freedom to make their own decisions is essentially the only way they can be shown "becoming" their own person.

Parental rules are shown to not only hinder teen behaviour, but stifle individuality. Teenage freedom to socialize, to date, ultimately to make the decisions in their own lives, is depicted as essential to the discovery of the self. Insisting on staying behind when his father moves the rest of the family back to Rhode Island, Jack's resistance to living with his father stems directly from his father's inability to accept his son's homosexual identity. Needing the freedom to be his own

person, unhindered by his father's disapproval (or simple failure to understand sexual orientation) Jack explains: "I can't live with you, not the way things are" (*DC* 221). Similarly, as Brenda declares when her parents disapprove of her relationship with Dylan McKay, "If my parents don't approve of *my life*, they don't have to watch me live it" (*90210* 301 emphasis mine). This insistence on her life as separate from her parents' wishes results in Brenda temporarily moving out of her family home.

Frequently representing the confines of childhood identity via the family home, living independently becomes a primary narrative method to represent escape and self-discovery. As Alexa counsels her best friend, Michelle, whose father won't allow her to socialize with her friends, even on her 16th birthday, "You know what you should do, move out and live on your own!" (*Degrassi* 109). Leaving home demonstrates a kind of agency the teenagers seem to crave. Seeking the stunned reaction on her mother's face that accompanies Julie Cooper's inability to stop her from leaving, Marissa casually announces "I'm moving out" (*OC* 214), as she packs some clothes and walks out of the house.

These acts of defiance are juxtaposed against parental concern and a desire to protect. Denying Brenda's request to drop out of high school, take a high school equivalency test, and begin her life for real, her father, Jim, explains: "We're not going to let you screw up your life" (*90210* 118). In each case, when teenagers leave their parents in search of freedom, parents insist on their right to protect their children. Fearing the potential repercussions of Angela's friendship with Rayanne Graff, after the latter overdoses at her own party, Angela's mother, Patty, expresses the anxiety that comes with granting the freedom that teenagers demand:

> Patty: Angela, what I'm seeing in your future is so frightening, I mean, it scares the hell out of me. What do I do? Do I just not let you see her any more. I mean would that even work?
> Angela: No. Mom I can't... she's my friend. Please, just trust me! (*MSCL* 110)

Trusting teenagers to develop independently into individuals, while difficult, is represented as necessary to the functioning parent-teen relationship. Respect for teenagers' freedom to be and discover a coherent self, reflects their growing independence that is frequently desperate to assert itself. As Dylan's mother, Iris, realizes, after coming back into her son's life years after divorcing his father: "Dylan, I'm here for you but you don't need a full-time mom any more than I know how to be one" (*90210* 210). Recognizing that her attempts to mother caused more harm than good, pushing Dylan to rebel by indulging his alcoholism, Iris grants Dylan his freedom.

Insisting on the need for freedom in order to develop an independent sense of self, the teen drama underscores the significance of respect. Feeling disrespected, teens rebel, while when granted even limited freedom that acknowledges their independence they are often willing to make compromises. Failing to respect his daughter as an individual with thoughts and opinions, when Lindsay is offered the opportunity to attend an academic summit for two weeks in the summer, Harold Weir refuses to hear his daughter's reservations: "You're going to that summit, Lindsay, this isn't even open for debate" (*FG* 118). Shutting down the possibility of even talking about alternative options, Harold denies Lindsay not only the opportunity to make her own decisions, but also the respect of hearing her point of view:

> Lindsay: Can't we have a normal discussion about something?
> Harold: When it comes to something like this, no! (*FG* 118)

Frustrated by her father's inability to respect her desire for adult conversation, Lindsay silently rebels, indulging her longing for freedom while avoiding the inevitable conflict with her parents.

Playing the part of the dutiful daughter, she leaves for the academic summit, but never arrives, joining her new friends as they tour with the Grateful Dead instead (*FG* 118).

On the other hand, in response to her father's request for her to move back home, Michelle decides, "If I come back, I think we need a contract" (*Degrassi* 208), forcing her father to accept her terms and respect her independence by creating a document, outlining their respective household roles, that they must both agree to. Realizing that their children have become capable, independent individuals deserving of respect, parents on teen dramas are regularly forced to accept that their desire to protect limits the freedom of teenagers, who are in the process of growing into and developing newfound identities.

Respect and Professional Ethics

Respect is often considered in contrast to the parental urge to protect. A need for protection necessarily implies an inability to manage independently. Often difficult to accept that teenagers are in fact prepared to encounter reality, teen drama parents inadvertently fail to respect their children's autonomy. For instance, when Angela's class produces a literary magazine including an erotic poem, her mother, who has offered her print shop to reproduce the magazine, initially refuses to print it. Deeming erotic material unsuitable for young readers, Patty confronts the teacher who has sanctioned the poem: "These are children. We are adults. This is not censorship. This is guiding adolescents who need... guidance" (*MSCL* 106). Insisting that her daughter and her daughter's classmates are "children" Patty is represented as ignorant of the fact that these teenagers understand and appreciate the feelings and events expressed in the poem in question; that one of them chose to write down her lived experience.

Unmoved by Patty's desire to protect, Mr. Racine, the substitute English teacher who encouraged the students to write from their hearts, takes a stand in support of student rights: "This journal should be about giving students a voice, not about having their thoughts edited. If these kids aren't afraid to put their heart on the page, why should we be?" (*MSCL* 106) Significantly, Mr. Racine's willingness to respect his students' right to express themselves is positioned as the narrative event which inspires Angela to begin questioning and thinking independently about the world around her. Respect for students fosters respect in return, as Angela explains to her family at the dinner table the impact that her new teacher has had on her: "I know I've been talking a lot about him but he's... I just respect him, you know. He's smart. He's like, an adult I can look up to—finally" (*MSCL* 106).

Authority figures who command respect repeatedly demonstrate the need to appreciate student independence while simultaneously providing care and support for teenagers. As Pacey remarks while criticizing his English teacher, Mr. Peterson's use of intimidation, "I've learned that respect is not commanded through fear, it's earned through compassion" (*DC* 215). Demonstrating compassion for their students, caring teachers foster the mutual respect necessary for meaningful relationships. For instance, Mr. Meyers cares deeply about his students on *90210*, to the extent that he would choose to leave his job instead of labeling a troubled girl a liar when she falsely accuses him of sexual misconduct (*90210* 311). On *MSCL*, Mr. Katimsky takes on the responsibility of helping Rickie Vazquez find a place to live when he is abandoned by his uncle and aunt. While looking out for Rickie's safety, Mr. Katimsky demonstrates sincere caring, ultimately inviting the homeless teen to live with him (*MSCL* 116).

In contrast, when Dawson Leery turns to Ms. Kennedy, the new film teacher, whom he initially regards with a kind of "hero worship" (Dawson, *DC* 217), she fails to offer the caring or support that might foster a close relationship between the two. Criticizing the film that Dawson has made, Ms. Kennedy is represented as harsh and mean, claiming it is "completely uninspired" (*DC* 217). Failing to offer any encouragement whatsoever to her student, she insists that his film is not good and does not suggest he might do better in the future, causing him to doubt his own abilities and life goals, and ultimately losing his respect.

While Ms. Kennedy demonstrates how authority figures might simply fail to inspire, the teen drama frequently demonstrates the potential unethical abuses of authority that tend to accompany a lack of respect for teenage students. Often old, grey, and close to retirement, disrespectful teachers create unfair grading systems, or openly ridicule or criticize students. Frequently abusing their positions of power, disrespectful administrators are represented as attempting to manipulate student behaviour by way of threats of expulsion. These forms of intimidation are shown to inspire fear in students (and as a result general compliance), but rarely do unethical abuses of power go unchallenged for long on these shows.

Reacting to Mr. Peterson's unethical teaching methods, which include forcing Jack to read a poem out loud that reveals his homosexuality, as well as threatening to manipulate student marks, "Hell I can't, I've been waiting to fail you all quarter!" (*DC* 214), Pacey challenges the authority granted to the adults who run the school:

> "Every day, we, the students of Capeside [High], come to a place where you guys are in charge. You tell us when to arrive and when to leave and when to move rooms and when to eat. You tell us when we're doing well and when we need to be doing better and we never ever question it because we're afraid to. Because to question it is to go against the belief that the entire system is built upon. The belief that you guys know what's right. And I am not afraid to tell

> you that what happened in that classroom yesterday was not right. To make a student cry, to embarrass him, to strip him of his dignity in front of his classmates is not right." (Pacey, *DC* 214)

Although Pacey is clearly positioned as being in the moral right, challenging the status quo of power and authority is generally something that students are shown as afraid to do, in part because to do so is to risk angering those individuals who have the power to affect their academic future. Despite the validity of his position, Pacey is suspended following his act of defiance. The risks that teens incur in an attempt to assert themselves demonstrates the entrenched, naturalized state of adult power.

Unlike the majority of narratives condemning unethical abuses of power, *The O.C.* suggests that in some cases ethical correctness does not necessarily right the balance of power. Notably, while Dean Hess relishes expelling Ryan and Marissa (*OC* 302), blackmails Seth and Summer with threats of expulsion (*OC* 303), and carries on a sexual relationship with a student (*OC* 304-5), his actions are never publicly challenged as unethical on the show. Fighting manipulation with manipulation, Summer Roberts discovers the Dean's secret affair and uses the information to shame him into leaving the school quietly to avoid scandal. Despite the fact that the Dean's behaviour was immoral and likely illegal, his power is represented as so absolute that to question his methods would be to invite repercussions.[17] As such, no one confronts him in the way that Brian Krakow stands up to Principal Foster, on *MSCL*, when he is threatened with expulsion if he fails to reveal any information he might know about the gunshot heard in the school:

> "If you, or these men, or anybody else threatens me anymore, or pressures me anymore, then I will insist on having a lawyer and I will sue you for harassment and anything else I can. And if you try to expel me in order to solve

[17] While narrative decisions such as this may be motivated by dramatic effect, it is significant to note the rationalization for this behaviour within the diegesis. Characters explain their illogical decisions with reference to the Dean's academic power, not his role as a source of narrative conflict.

> your public relations problems, then I will reveal to anyone who will listen just who is destroying the spirit of this school." (*MSCL* 103)

Brian's challenge to the principal's authority reminds us that despite the power imbalance between students and educators necessary to a world structured and controlled by adults, unethical and illegal abuses of power are wrong. In particular, the semi-frequent disregard for student rights and professional ethics portrayed in these narratives signifies a systematic lack of respect for the teenagers being threatened or intimidated.

While occasionally characterized as vindictive or mean (as Mr. Peterson, or Dean Hess), authority figures often seem to have simply forgotten where the boundaries of their power lie. Principal Foster, though frustrated that he has not uncovered a suspect in the shooting, appears surprised by the legitimacy of Brian's challenge. On *Freaks and Geeks*, Bill Haverchuck stands up to Coach Fredricks, explaining how it is just not fair that he always gets picked last for baseball in gym class. Initially failing to see how his authority as a teacher affects the students' game, Fredricks denies his responsibility:

> Coach Fredricks: It's not my fault you get picked last.
> Bill: Yes it is. I mean, *you've got all the power*. You could change everything. (*FG* 110 emphasis mine)

Insisting that Coach Fredricks acknowledge his powerful role in the situation, Bill effectively reminds his teacher that responsibility must accompany authority. Educators, the genre reminds us, hold authority over their teenage charges and as a result should be responsible for ensuring that teen-adult relations are conducted with respect. Intrinsic to these representations of teen-adult conflict is the assumption that teenagers need and deserve to be treated with respect.

In depictions of teen-adult relationships, teen dramas consistently represent the teenage years as a time of finding identity. In conflict with, or in defiance of, the adults in their lives, teenage characters seek greater freedom as they discover a coherent sense of self. As such, the genre suggests that teenagers, embedded in the process of establishing or discovering identity, are, as yet, unfinished. However, ever closer to discovering a sense of self, sensing their imminent entrance into the adult world, the teenagers depicted in these shows challenge the power imbalances granted to adult authority figures. In so doing, teen drama teenagers effectively challenge adults to begin perceiving them as peers; as (nearly) full-grown persons with (percolating) identities and (budding) independence, who deserve respect.

Coming to recognize their parents' flaws, and questioning their teachers' authority, teenage characters cultivate a greater understanding of the adult world that awaits them. Nothing unique or special grants adults the ability to shape teenage lives, simply age and station. As teens discover an independent sense of self, recognizably similar to the lives of individual parents and teachers, they are shown as frustrated by the continual limitations placed on their freedom and autonomy.

Rites of Passage

The teen experience as represented on these shows is shaped by participation in rites of passage that stand out as essential events in a teenager's life. Teen dramas aim to represent both the shared experiences of teenagers (such as coping with death or trauma), as well as the social events (such as school dances, and parties) that make up the "teenage experience." While the previous section explores direct, adult-imposed limitations on teen behaviour, rites of passage

narratives focus more specifically on the teen experience, which is consistently shaped by a lack of control. In these narratives, teenage disempowerment is abstracted from adult authority and emerges as a natural state within which teens exist. As such, these narratives depict a lack of agency as the teen condition.

Social Events

There are certain events that are so ubiquitously pervasive in teen dramas, so universally revisited, that they become cliched representations of significant moments of growing up. These rites of passage come to signify those moments where teenagers live up to what is expected of their demographic, and notably, those moments that are believed to be so significant that to miss out would be tantamount to missing a necessary checkpoint on the way to adulthood.

The attitude that *to be a teenager* means taking part in these high school rituals pervades the genre. Teen drama parents insist that they are valuable social experiences, while Principal Green of *Dawson's Creek* goes so far as to beg his young charges to "reclaim your youth!" (*DC* 301). Trying to persuade her children to attend the homecoming dance, Jean Weir argues, "High school is about learning, but it's also about socializing. That's what High School Dances are all about," to which Lindsay snidely responds, "No they're not. They're just a chance for the popular kids to experiment with sex in their cars" (*FG* 101). Yet despite her apt critique, Lindsay does end up at the dance (although not of her own free will), and is shown having fun opening up to the experience and dancing, with the mentally handicapped boy, Eli.[18]

The trend represented throughout the sample is teens attempting to avoid mundane, school-sponsored events, "We'd rather watch a movie about a high school dance than actually set

[18] Specifically attempting to be kind to the boy who is often teased or left out by his classmates, Lindsay's choice to dance with Eli is depicted as her attempt to make the best out of her (dreary) high school experience.

foot in an over-decorated gym" (Joey, *DC* 206), but eventually discovering the power of participating in significant teen moments. Despite the frequent presumption amongst characters that dances and parties are largely excuses for teenagers to drink alcohol and make out, rites of passage are nevertheless continually upheld in these narratives as significant teen moments. As such, despite many characters' hesitations, they inevitably partake in these mythologized events. Narratives continually validate the assumption that the teen experience is one made up of these rites of passage by framing teenage characters' emotional experiences or moments of clarity within social events. Coming to her senses at the end of the episode and deciding to attend the spring dance unescorted, Andrea Zuckerman explains: "I don't want to wake up ten years from now and realize I totally missed out on *high school*" (*90210* 122, emphasis mine). Although initially disappointed that her crush did not ask her to the dance, Andrea comes to realize the significance in attending the event, even though the experience did not turn out as expected. Emphasizing the fun that can be had when friends participate in the high school experience together, teen dramas situate rite of passage moments at these social events.

While characters frequently insist that dances themselves are generally likely to disappoint, the genre insists that they are worth attending, if only for their value as a teen experience. Inviting his ex-girlfriend and current crush, Joey Potter, to their junior prom, Dawson argues, "It's a rite of passage" (*DC* 322). Convinced that "we must partake in the magical rite of passage that is prom" (*OC* 223), Seth attempts to convince Ryan of the significance of attending the dance with the right girl. In its attempt to prove the importance of the event, this episode of *The O.C.* invokes a seemingly irrefutable voice of authority to emphasize the point. George Lucas, director of teen movie classic, *American Graffiti,* in a cameo performance underlines the

essential nature of the experience: "The prom is a great American tradition. It's important to experience *being a teenager* as a teenager" (*OC* 223, emphasis mine). Notably, the rites of passage that Lucas describes as "being a teenager" are marked by their emotional significance to characters. Inspired by his hero, Seth experiences a moment of clarity about his current priorities and rushes off to find his on-again-off-again girlfriend, Summer.

Providing a narrative framework for these types of moments of emotional clarity, the teen drama genre embraces school dances as a brilliant plot device, useful for prompting teenage characters to confront their emotions. As a rite of passage, dances offer an opportunity for teenagers to come to understand themselves and their priorities. From the sorting out of confusing love triangles on *Degrassi* (112), to Brenda's choice to lose her virginity at the spring dance on *90210* (122), Brian's foolish decision to stick with his heart despite knowing that his crush is a hopeless one on *MSCL* (111), and Dawson's annual romantic statement (*DC* 102), fight (*DC* 322), or break up (*DC* 420) at one dance after another, Sam's chance to finally ask out Cindy Sanders in *Freaks and Geeks* (101), and Seth and Summer finally sorting out their on-again off-again relationship at prom (*OC* 323), dances are figured as places that are emotionally charged, providing the perfect opportunity for honesty, romance, and the occasional punch in the eye: "As lame as these school dances can be, there's always that one moment that seems to make it all worthwhile" (Christy, *DC* 206).

Of course, while providing moments of emotional clarity, the end result of the dances rarely arrive as planned and teenage characters are represented as being forced to accept their lack of control once again. Though Angela hopes desperately for a romantic evening with Jordan Catalano, all she gets is a cryptic exchange:

> Jordan: "Why are you like this?"
> Angela: "Like what?"
> Jordan: "Like, the way you are."
> Angela: "How am I?" (*MSCL* 111)

After which, he walks off leaving her (and the viewer) both exhilarated and let down. A conversation initiated by him is, after all, a step forward in their communication. While Sam fails to take Cindy to the dance as he had hoped, asking her guarantees him a saved dance (*FG* 101). Time after time, the characters of *Dawson's Creek* realize that they cannot remain in control of the moment however they might try to manipulate a romantic situation.

Unexpected endings abound in rite of passage story lines. From school dances to house parties, a similar message remains: they are a necessary requirement of growing up, and try as you might to keep everything under your control, you cannot. Convincing her brother Brandon that they should throw their own party, Brenda effectively sets up the premise to be used repeatedly throughout the genre: "It's our turn. You know throwing a party when your parents are out of town is practically a tradition in Beverly Hills. It's a great way to let people get to know you" (*90210* 110). Of course this particular tradition is not confined to Beverly Hills, but is so widespread throughout the genre that it appears to be another rite of passage that defines our cultural conception of teenage-ness.

What prompts participation in these rites of passage within the narrative bears examination. As Brenda describes with "it's our turn," the hosting of a party is rarely undertaken for the sake of good ol' fashioned fun. Parties are most often social events designed to impress others, while staking a claim on teenage independence. Unsurprisingly, however, these events rarely turn out as expected. Assuming that hosting a party might positively affect one's social status, teen drama teens participate in rites of passage mistaking them as opportunities to take control. Throwing a

party to attract his attention, Heather Farrell mistakenly believes that it will prompt her crush, Wheels, to start liking her (*Degrassi* 107). Failing to have any effect on the host's social status whatsoever, Pacey realizes at his birthday party, "I thought I could at least be Pacey Whitter, guy who throws a good party, but no, I'm just Pacey Whitter, guy who's failing biology, but now I'm a year older" (*DC* 202). Coming to understand that all the effort put in to what was supposed to be a good time has gone to waste, Lindsay realizes she didn't really have any control over the situation from the start: "I didn't even want to have this party. I only had it because Daniel wanted me to, and now he's making out on my bed with Kim" (*FG* 102).

Parties on teen dramas continually emphasize the lack of control that is represented as a characteristic of adolescence. The arrival of unexpected guests, in particular, is routinely employed as a device to signify the lack of control that hosts have over their own parties. In the most extreme cases, this lack of control manifests itself in particularly dangerous ways, with drunk driving accidents (*Degrassi* School's Out; *90210* 110), accidental overdoses (*MSCL* 110), and strange girls passing out in the pool (*OC* 219). But, despite the unexpected, and at times tragic results, these rites of passage continue to populate teenagers' lives on teen drama. Despite having ended up in the hospital with a pumped stomach, Rayanne's desire to throw "A party! Like an event. Like a memory I'll have for the rest of my life!" (*MSCL* 110), is fulfilled. While not necessarily the memory she had planned on, the experience is framed as a valuable one that contributes to her desire to partake in the teen experience. Perhaps the point that these narratives are trying to present is that teenagers must learn to manage their expectations; the rite of passage includes not just the romantic slow dance at the prom, but also the public break up, or the arrival of the police. More specifically, these rites of passage narratives remind teenagers that despite

their growing desires to take agency over their lives and their selves, they remain bound by the lack of control intrinsic to the teenage experience.

Drugs and Retreat

In the context of narratives about the teenage search for identity, drugs provide a dramatic and exceptional circumstance. Unlike the moments of clarity that characters experience at socially sanctioned rites of passage, teens often use drugs when the constraints they face become overwhelming. Sensing their own lack of agency, characters occasionally give in to the lack of control. While adolescence is characterized as a time to assert one's personal identity, on these shows drugs become a symbol of stagnation. Behaviour while on drugs is frequently extremely atypical and is often rationalized by: "It wasn't me" (Melanie, *Degrassi* 207), "That wasn't you" (Andrea, *90210* 215), or "I didn't know who I was anymore" (Jen, *DC* 406). In this way, on these shows, drugs are situated in contrast to teenage assertions of identity. Drugs offer a perceived escape from difficult realities. Kathleen's experience with pot, for instance, is connected with her abusive ex-boyfriend, Scott (*Degrassi* 107). Both Rayanne and Nick's use of drugs is connected to their difficult relationships with their fathers: Nick retreats by smoking pot, in anticipation of his father's disapproval (*FG* 113), while Rayanne uses the money her absent father sends her for her birthday to throw a party and get high on ecstasy (*MSCL* 110). Prompted by stress about college, both Andie and Seth attempt to relax by using drugs: Andie takes ecstasy in an attempt to combat the emotionally numbing effect of her antidepressants and feel happy again (*DC* 406), and Seth's anxieties about leaving home for college fuel his short-term pot smoking habit (*OC* 313). Characterized as the antithesis of growing up and discovering a true

sense of identity, drugs are generally scripted as an escape by those characters who, for one reason or another, are afraid to face their own realities.

When faced with difficult constraints that complicate their independence or selfhood, characters occasionally become agents of their own lack of control. Fraught with unexpected consequences, teenage-hood is consistently framed as a time of becoming. Learning to grow up in the context of external limitations is the nature of adolescence, and those teens who experiment with drugs are depicted as recognizing that this cannot be avoided. Unsurprisingly teenagers who willfully lose control by taking drugs, are frequently placed in dangerous or damaging situations.

Dangers of Life

The theme of lack of control is particularly emphasized in narratives involving danger and death. Accidents or illness resulting in hospital trips, traumatic events and experiences of death are generally presented as a result of bad luck, unfortunate accident, or the random cruelty of the universe. With this narrative focus on the uncontrollable, teenage characters often learn how to contend with the inevitable tragedies of life. Learning to exist in the adult world, teens are reminded that while maturity brings greater agency, life is ultimately out of anyone's control.

Underscoring the total lack of agency that characters possess in these situations, the causes behind why characters end up in the hospital are rarely explained in the narrative. While the desire to blame someone (or themselves) for the consequences is frequently displayed as a form of grief, characters are forced to remember that accidents and illnesses are no one's fault. There is no *reason* for LD getting Leukemia on *Degrassi* (107)*,* while on *90210,* the lump that Brenda discovers in her breast is benign (*90210* 117); illness just happens. This is often underscored with

reference to luck. Following Dylan's dangerous surfing accident, Brenda declares, "You're lucky to be alive" (*90210* 203), ignoring the fact that Dylan chose to enter the water despite the dangerous conditions.

The frequency of near-death experiences and the emphasis placed on how near those individuals actually were to death reinforces the view that no one is really in control of their fate. Angela's mother, Patty, phrases it more delicately on *MSCL*, explaining that Rayanne "had a very close call" (*MSCL* 110) when she overdosed, while Bill, waking up from a short, peanut-allergy-induced coma inquires, "Did I almost die?" which is answered with a resounding "Yes!" (*FG* 113). The fact that it is luck either way that might kill us or keep us alive is noted reflectively by Joey on *Dawson's Creek* following Andie's accidental overdose, when ecstasy mixes unpleasantly with her antidepressants: "It does make you realize, any one of us could go at any moment for the stupidest reason" (*DC* 406).

Of course, as Sadie, in town for her cousin's funeral, reminds us, "I think it's a hard thing to accept—that life's completely out of our control" (*OC* 315). In the face of tragedy, characters are shown trying to regain control of their lives. Prompted by the threat of danger, characters are depicted seeking comfort from those around them, fear at times overshadowing existing conflicts between individuals. Recognizing the role he filled by spending an unusual amount of time with Sharon Cherski in the wake of her father's near-fatal heart attack, Brian explains: "She needed me. Not me. Somebody. Anybody" (*MSCL* 108). This desire for closeness prompts the narrative détante between Angela and Sharon once they are both finally honest and admit that they miss each others' friendship on *MSCL* (108). It is also used to reignite Brenda and Dylan's relationship following the dangerous surfing accident that places him in her care (*90210* 203).

Although generally portrayed as a natural, if not healthy response to grief, seeking closeness can materialize in somewhat inappropriate ways as well. While the desire for closeness may result in increased honesty and sharing, occasionally self-destructive (often alcoholic) teens craving intimacy manifest a desire for sex. For instance, lonely in her grief after the death of her grandfather, Jen reverts to her "bad girl" persona, drinking alcohol and attempting to seduce Dawson (*DC* 203). Following the death of her friend Johnny, Marissa similarly indulges in an unhealthy binge, numbing her pain with alcohol and sex on *The O.C.*, explaining her reasoning to Volchok, "If I wanted to be treated right, I wouldn't be with you" (OC 319). Significantly, both of these examples tell cautionary tales about the self-destructive potential of two sexually active, emotionally damaged, young women.

While it is often repeated amongst characters that grief is extremely personal, that there is no "right way" to grieve, there remain significant warnings throughout the genre about more or less appropriate ways to behave in traumatic situations. The assumption that the death of a loved one excuses certain rules of etiquette is depicted as disguising unhealthy, potentially dangerous, behaviour. Avoiding the truth that his mother has developed a serious dependence on alcohol, Seth rationalizes, "Her dad died. She's sad. She had a few drinks" (*OC* 224). Similarly, encouraging Millie to rebel following the death of her beloved dog, Goliath, Kim Kelly argues: "You're in mourning, you can't be expected to do homework" (*FG* 114), which begins a downward spiral of destructive behaviour previously unknown to "good girl," Millie. Andie's mental illness on *Dawson's Creek* is explained by her brother, Jack, to stem from "complicated grief" (*DC* 220), as a result of her repressed emotional response to their older brother's death.

Similarly, bad dreams and flashbacks plague those individuals who try to avoid dealing with trauma at all.

Educating teenage characters on ways of existing in the adult world, the genre continually counsels healthy responses to grief. Often repeated in the face of traumatic experiences, Spike suggests the most effective way to deal with difficult emotions. "You've gotta talk to someone who can help" (*DH* 206), she implores of her friend Liz, who has finally revealed that she is experiencing post-traumatic symptoms from having been sexually abused as a child. Examples throughout the genre contribute to the understanding that talking about one's feelings will help deal with them. "Why doesn't she want to talk about it?" (*90210* 225), wonders Andrea after Brenda, held up at gunpoint, attempts to go about her business as usual. "Talking itself sometimes makes people feel better" (*MSCL* 103), explains a counselor brought in to help students deal with the experience of hearing a gunshot in school in *MSCL*.

The "talking cure" is frequently revisited, as teens are encouraged to talk through difficult feelings in counseling. The value of expressing one's feelings is emphasized when characters finally speak up after keeping their emotions bottled up. After rudely snapping at Joey when he tries to talk to her about her recently deceased ex-boyfriend, Claude, Caitlin eventually thanks him for listening (*Degrassi* 211). David yells at his friends, frustrated by the attention the school has been paying to his formerly unpopular friend, Scott, in the aftermath of his death (*90210* 214). Tempted by his alcoholism following the death of his father, Dylan eventually shouts: "We are gonna get through this and I do not want to drink!" (*90210* 322), silencing the internal debate he has been having with himself. Jen, perhaps most spectacularly, opens up at her friend Abbey's funeral, criticizing everyone in the community for ignoring Abbey's "toxic personality" (*DC*

219) in light of her death. Even when expressing emotions at inappropriate times or places, the genre focuses on the pronounced sense of relief experienced by grieving teens, demonstrating the necessity of putting words to our difficult emotions.

Apparently as consolation for the knowledge that we cannot control the tragedies of life, teen dramas emphasize healthy ways to handle difficult situations. As Dylan is reminded when Brandon brings him to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, we must each learn to "accept the things (we) cannot change" (AA mantra, *90210* 210). Similarly, Marissa's traumatic history weighs her down until she learns to let go of those events she cannot change. Avoiding talking about her problems, she experiences traumatic flashbacks and bad dreams after she is nearly raped by her boyfriend's brother, Trey (*OC* 222). After shooting Trey and putting him into a coma in an attempt to save Ryan's life, Marissa is plagued by traumatic memories once again (*OC* 308). Eventually realizing that the tragedies in her past should not define her future, Marissa acknowledges, "As awful as the shooting was, if I don't let it go it's just going to ruin my life" (*OC* 308). While trauma can be paralyzing, as teens face an overwhelming lack of control, the teen drama genre reminds us that we must accept this lack of agency. Learning how to face the unpredictable nature of reality, teen drama teenagers struggle with the realization that even as adults they will not gain full control over their lives.

Teenagers' repeated discovery that they lack control over significant events in their lives frames the teen drama discourse of teenage identity. Eager to participate in defining high school experiences, teens come to understand themselves and their place in the world, while learning to accept the limits they face; teenagers learn they do not control their surroundings. Simultaneously, life lessons in accepting a loss of control extend to the world at large, teaching

appropriate grieving behaviour and how to manage expectations. This message demonstrates an underlying assumption that teenagers must learn how to exist in the wider, adult world, and that teenagers' lives are simply a sheltered precursor of what is to come, a time to be "a teenager" in preparation for being "a person."

Conclusion: Struggling for Autonomy

Depictions of the universal experiences of youth frame adolescence as a series of rites of passage. Teens are represented by their shared conflicts with authority, the shared experience of learning the life lessons that accompany tragedy, the shared moments when agency is lost. The suggestion throughout the genre is that all young people experience this lack of agency over their lives, all young people must learn how to be a fully independent adults. The teen drama teenager is characterized as perpetually struggling for autonomy.

The significance of this characterization lies in its universal implications. Not only do these teen characters lack control over their lives, but this is represented as a *naturalized* state of being for teens. Shifting the emphasis from the adults who are generally responsible for constraining teenagers' behaviour to the shared experiences of teens, the lack of agency common throughout teen drama becomes ascribed to teenage-ness itself. To be in control is cast as an abnormal and illegitimate "teen" experience. Yet teenage characters throughout the sample are empowered to assert their independence. Within the context of naturalized disempowerment, the genre contradictorily represents the legitimacy of teenage characters' claims to maturity. Encouraging teens to express their desires for independence, the genre seems to support these characters' attempts to take control, even while narrative constraints undermine their abilities to do so. Thus, by framing the teen experience as a *struggle* for control in the context of omnipresent constraints,

teen drama reinforces this naturalized state of disempowerment for youth while simultaneously supporting teenage autonomy.

Denying teenage characters independence, the genre reflects what Griffin refers to as the discourse of dependence: "Dependence and independence are crucial to constructions of adolescence as a transition point between the dependency of childhood and the economic, social and psychological independence which is associated with adult status" (Griffin 188). Continually denied their independence, teenage characters are subject to the constraints imposed by the world around them. As Stein describes, "Teen TV often dynamically represents adolescents struggling to find [a] sense of self while facing a wide range of constraints, be it from school and peer-pressure, the challenges of dating and romance, [or] the expectations of adults" (224). In a display of outstanding circular logic, adults counsel teens to expect adolescence to be a painful, confusing, frustrating time of life, and yet it appears to be painful, confusing, and frustrating because of the constraints placed on teenage behaviour by adults. As Lesko describes, "youths' passive temporal position, always "becoming," waiting for the future to arrive, may *effect* the identity crises that, in turn, *prove* adolescents' need to be kept with little power and few decisions" (131). Perpetuating a *naturalized* state of disempowerment, the teen drama genre transfers the source of limitation from adult-decision-makers to the ineffable teen condition.

The following chapter turns from these generalized, universal experiences of youth to the identities teenage characters are shown to adopt. While teens are represented by a shared "teen experience," characters are generally provided with identifiers, suggesting acceptable/available "teen" identities. Yet as teens are individuated, the common lack of power that characterizes them as "teen" persistently underlies narratives of self-exploration.

Chapter 3: Individualized Identity

Situated within the constraining world of adults, teenagers on teen dramas are depicted as desiring freedom to discover a personal sense of self and working to develop identities that emphasize individuality and personal self-discovery. In short, teen drama teens attempt to take agency over their circumstances by defining the self, and the teen drama genre, as a result, reinforces the cultural value of individuality. Adolescence is generally shown to be the time when these identities emerge, or develop. As Lesko explains, "the adolescent came to occupy a highly visible and recognizable place, as a being who was defined as 'becoming,' as nascent, unfinished, in peril—in today's terms, 'at risk'" (49). As such, emerging teen identities are continually monitored, judged, and criticized by adult authority figures. This chapter explores three different contexts within which teen drama teens express a sense of self amidst adult expectations and limitations: passions, school, and sexuality.

Passionate Self-Discovery

Passion and ambition are significant markers of character and identity. Narratives depicting teenagers pursuing artistic dreams or passionately taking up political causes demonstrate how teens might exercise agency. In spite of the characteristic lack of control that teenagers face, the need to express themselves serves as away around this lack. The context leading up to teenagers taking action is most often portrayed as a perceived opportunity for self-expression, or meaningful action. Teen drama teens are shown pursuing their passions with a kind of need or compulsion, which is often explained with reference to core individuality. Discovering or pursuing a passion is tantamount to discovering one's self.

Art

This intrinsic link between art and self is expressed in various ways throughout the teen drama genre. For example, while breaking up with her boyfriend, Joey, on *Degrassi*, Caitlin invokes their differing passions as evidence for their growing apart and into different people: "It's nobody's fault, we've just gone in different directions. You have your band, I like politics and the environment. You're fun and outgoing, I'm quiet and boring" (*Degrassi* 105). Here, having a band or liking politics function as identity markers, characterizing Joey and Caitlin by what they're "into." Demonstrating the central role of artistic passions in self-definition, Nick Andopolis explains the crucial significance of his drums to his sense of identity on *Freaks and Geeks*:

> "Look these teachers want us to work, you know? And I say 'fine, I'll work. But you gotta let me do the kind of work that I wanna do.' And for me, Lindsay, it's my drum kit, man. This is my passion, you know. *This is the essence of who I am now*, but before I had this, I was lost too. See what I'm saying? You've gotta find your reason for living. You've gotta find your big, gigantic drum kit." (*FG* 101, emphasis mine)

Rejecting the pressures in his life to work harder at school, Nick chooses instead to self-define through his collection of drums. His passion is represented as an identity marker in the same way that Joey's band represented his difference from Caitlin.

Artistic passions create identities for teenage characters to inhabit, while simultaneously offering methods to explore individuality on a personal, emotional level. For instance, Dawson's passion for film characterizes him as a film buff, but also gives him the opportunity to explore himself through his favourite medium. In fact, while offering an opportunity to explore identity, art is depicted as also producing a certain kind of self-exposure. As Dawson discovers after a disappointing screening of one of his films, "I need to dig deeper—expose more of myself" (*DC*

310). Similarly, Brenda realizes on stage at a comedy club's open mic night, "I think I found me right up here [on stage]" (*90210* 118). Following the advice of her short-term mentor, Sky, Brenda succeeds in evoking a heartfelt round of applause from the audience by exposing something deeply personal in her act.

The representation of artistic passion as a method of expressing individuality, provides narrative opportunities to develop characters more fully. Attempting to manage difficult emotions by putting them on film, Dawson is shown exploring his passion as a means to recover from a difficult breakup (*DC* 210-13). Similarly, after losing his girlfriend, Summer, Seth obsessively draws superhero versions of himself and his friends, ultimately creating a semi-autobiographical graphic novel about life in Orange County (*OC* 210-12). Artistic expression is represented as a cathartic experience, as in the case of Andrea encouraging Dylan to write about his father as a method of coping with his horrific death on 9*0210* (323-25).

Partaking in someone else's passion also provides opportunities for emotional bonding between characters on these shows. After attending one of his band rehearsals, where Jordan sings a song that he has been writing, Angela receives a perfect goodnight kiss from her long-term crush (*MSCL* 107). After witnessing his disastrous audition to drum in a professional band, Lindsay kisses Nick (*FG* 106). These romantic connections emerge as characters expose something personal and honest to each other through art. Engaging one's passions is depicted as an emotional experience, often taken up in spite of the potential risks of self-exposure.

Of course while artistic passions offer a method of uncovering deeply personal emotions, exposing one's inner self is also shown to be a risky endeavor. On teen dramas, personal relationships are often strained by the teenage need to explore artistic individuality. Couples can

dissolve as a result of differing passions (as seen above), or can experience difficulties when emotions, expressed through art, are misunderstood. For example, Kelly feels inadequate and under-appreciated when Dylan refuses to show her his very personal writing until he has finished (*90210* 325). Similarly, Joey and Dawson fight when he belittles her new-found love of art. Challenging his flippant attitude about her current search for individuality she snaps: "Why is it your obsession with movies is a life passion, while my interest in art is a hobby?" (*DC* 204) Teen drama teens learn that exposing themselves through their passions can be risky because they cannot control the reactions of others to it. But, even though teens characteristically lack control over their surroundings and cannot predict how their art will be received, developing their individuality through pursuing their passions is depicted as a valuable and necessary teenage experience.

Causes

Taking up a cause tied to a person's values, or sense of justice, is represented as another empowering expression of self on teen dramas. While artistic passions are generally more introspective, speaking out against a perceived injustice is often depicted as a more public expression of a developing worldview and morality that come to bear on individual identity. Similarly, while artistic passions are more likely to be emotionally risky, causes are often taken up despite "professional" risk. In direct defiance of the school administration, Angela distributes copies of a banned literary magazine produced by her English class. Justifying her actions to her parents, she explains: "I just think it's wrong to censor people and I'm willing to get suspended for it" (*MSCL* 106).

Teenage characters stand up for their beliefs as a way of taking agency over their individuality in the context of the adult-run world. As such, a willingness to face potential consequences persists, from Lucy's campaign for gender equality in high school sports on *Degrassi* (205), to the Brandon-led "Donna Martin Graduates" march on the school board in *90210* (328), to Joey's efforts to save Principal Green's job and reputation on *Dawson's Creek* (316). Interestingly, while teenage characters consistently take up causes they support throughout the genre, the risk involved with doing so diminishes radically as the genre develops.

Most drastically, in the first season of *Degrassi*, Caitlin risks arrest (and winds up with a criminal record) to fight the production of nuclear weapons in her neighbourhood (*Degrassi* 111). While marching to save Donna from summer school, the cast of *90210* all risk their own graduation (*90210* 328), and Angela faces almost certain suspension for her actions on *MSCL* (106). By the time of Joey's campaign for Principal Green, however, the most she appears to be risking is a few nasty phone calls from disapproving parents (*DC* 316). When Vice President George Bush visits her school, Lindsay's stand against his staff's rejection of difficult questions has absolutely no consequences (*FG* 117), and the gang on *The O.C.* successfully campaign to have Marissa readmitted to their elite private school,[19] risking at most Taylor's relationship with her domineering and unlikeable mother (*OC* 311).

While there are fewer risks associated with protesting as the genre evolves, the continued presence of some form of resistance to top-down authority by teen drama teens intensifies. Protests and campaigns are generally only necessary because the power to make important decisions is entirely in the hands of school boards, parents' associations, principals, etc. As Pacey

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[19] In homage to *90210*, they are seen campaigning with "Marissa Cooper Graduates" posters.

reminds us, teenagers are "routinely denied the opportunity to participate in decisions that concern them," (*DC* 316). Reacting to the lack of control that teenagers have, expressing one's perspective and campaigning for one's values becomes a significant method of exposing one's individuality. As Lindsay challenges: "Oh, so if you have a zit you're not entitled to an opinion?" (*FG* 117)

Although the causes that teenage characters take up might be considered trivial, their right to protest and campaign is often validated in the narrative with reference to the previous generation's activism. As Angela emphasizes, comparing her own conflict with school censorship to her parents' stories of activism in the 60s: "You told me to pick my battles. Well this is it. It may not be a war protest of a civil rights demonstration, but it's all I've got!" (*MSCL* 106) In addition, teens justify their right to support what is meaningful to them by appealing to the ubiquitous, liberal adult presence. Like Angela's parents, Caitlin's mother, Brandon's father, and Seth's father each recount stories of their politically active youths, such as getting arrested while chained to a fence (*Degrassi* 111), participating in Vietnam war protests (*90210* 328), or getting involved in the activist culture at Berkley (*OC* 311). Lindsay is inspired by her guidance counselor, Mr. Rosso, who admits to having "rocked the boat a bit in my youth" (*FG* 117); while Joey's campaign to save Principal Green is openly compared to the civil rights movement, as rich, white parents appear to be pressuring the school board to fire the black principal (*DC* 316). Calling on well-recognized tropes of activism and justice, teen dramas situate teen causes as valid expressions of self within the context of a world run by adults.

While the risks attached to teen drama teens' expressions of individuality have diminished over time, these narratives continue to assert the value of developing sense of self through

passions and causes, even in the face of adult restrictions. Significantly, although the genre validates these teens' desire to take agency over their identity, the power that accompanies full autonomy continues to be withheld. Situated within the naturalized state of teen disempowerment, as reviewed in the previous chapter, teenage expressions of individuality on teen drama often manifest as individualized claims to meaning in spite of general constraints.

Ultimately these claims to meaning exist within the frame of adult decision-makers or unpredictable audiences. Teenagers who take up action with passion cannot control the outcome. After all, petitions and protests are designed to change someone else's mind, someone with real power. However, within this frame, these narratives continue to emphasize the value of self-discovery through passionate pursuits.

School Pressures

Academic achievement is another way that characters are individuated. Within the context of school, teens are often primarily identified as good or bad students by their peers, teachers, and even their parents. Performance at school, and the expectations that accompany success or failure, is represented as a central determinant of these teens identities. Good students are universally expected to perform, on any given test, in any given class. Bad students, on the other hand, are generally expected to fail, and as a result are often dismissed by teachers as a waste of time.

While success at school significantly shapes teenage characters' public identities, these are not simply characterizations of "smart" and "stupid." Although good students are generally smart, their success at school is narratively attributed to hard work, perseverance, and a certain understanding of the system that contributes to their safe passage through high school. Bad

students, we are frequently reminded, are not "stupid," they simply do not "fit into the cookie cutter mould the public school system deems acceptable" (Andie, *DC* 208). As such, there is a frequent emphasis on the value of "people smarts," and on the fact that teens must choose their own identity.

People Smart

When a student falls into perpetual failure, there is a tendency on teen dramas to blame the system in which he[20] fails at least as much as the student. Perceiving these students to be disruptions, teachers are depicted as failing to provide any support to teens who are not keeping up with the class work. Asking for an extension for her friend, Daniel, Lindsay attempts to explain that he is just a student who needs extra help, and is shocked to hear the math teacher, Mr. Kowchevski's refusal:

> Mr. Kowchevski: Daniel's the kind of student who needs to just disappear.
> Lindsay: Excuse me?
> Mr. Kowchevski: Look, he wastes my time, he wastes class time, and now he's wasting your time.
> Lindsay: No, he's not wasting anybody's time. I mean, come on, isn't it your job to teach him? (*FG* 105)

The idea that bad students are not worth the time it might take to teach them permeates teacher dialogue. Teachers are represented as not willing to put in extra time to help those who are already doing poorly because it detracts from those students who appear eager or, at the very least, willing to learn.

As Ms. Lerner echoes, when insisting on Jordan Catalano's presence in class, "Tell him he better quit ditching class. I want him in here tomorrow or I'm gonna have his butt kicked out of

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[20] Within this sample of teen dramas, while teen girls occasionally have trouble on individual tests, or classes, the students who fall into this type of perpetual failure are universally male.

school. There are too many good kids, I mean I just don't have time for the bad ones" (*MSCL* 109). Suggesting that a teacher's time and resources are scarce commodities that may by divided among students, Ms. Lerner expresses the frequent attitude among teen drama teachers that schools must support those "good kids" who choose to learn and participate. Frustrated by this often transparent attitude, Pacey confronts a teacher who jokes about his frequent ill-preparedness, when Pacey's pencil breaks before an exam: "If you ask me, you're the one who doesn't care. None of the teachers care. I mean, for the honours students you bend over backwards, but for me, a student who could actually use that help, you can't wait to get rid of me!" (*DC* 422) Pointing out the flaws in the education system, Pacey challenges his teachers to take some of the responsibility for his poor academic standing. Within the context of this school system, teachers are shown focusing on good students, and ignoring the needs of bad ones, expecting them to fail.

This omnipresent expectation of failure tends to hang over students, symbolizing their own lack of potential. Surrounded by a culture that expects nothing of them, bad students are shown expecting nothing of themselves. These characters often begin to derive a sense of identity from their scholastic incompetence, referring to themselves as losers or lost causes. As a result, these students are often tempted to give up, give in to expectations, and drop out of school. As Pacey, exasperated, declares: "I don't know why I bother at all" (*DC* 422), before walking out of what would be his last exam. Giving in to failure is often shown to be the easiest way to take agency over one's life. As discussed in the previous chapter with reference to drugs, giving in to pressures becomes a way of accepting, and thus taking control over, one's lack of agency. When Ryan announces "I'm done with school" (*OC* 305), and decides to get a job instead, a frustrated

Marissa explains, "he doesn't think he can get into college, so he's giving up" (*OC* 305). After being told he has a learning disability and would be transferred to a Special Education class, Joey initially refuses: "Forget it. I'm quitting" (*Degrassi* 113). Tired of school, Daniel flirts with the idea of dropping out, when he comes across a former classmate working in a convenience store who did just that (*FG* 115). Jordan, accustomed to teacher threats, initially rejects Angela's attempts to get him back into class:

> Angela: You know you're gonna get expelled. Don't you care?
> Jordan: Doesn't matter.
> Angela: Of course it matters.
> Jordan: She's looking to throw me out, OK. She's been waiting for this. She thinks I'm a loser.
> Angela: You're crazy to let her tell you what you are. (*MSCL* 109)

Consistently reminded of their own failure, bad students are often shown believing that they are who they are seen to be. After hearing Mr. Milo, his guidance counselor, summarize his school profile: "Whitter, Pacey. Grade point average 1.7, currently failing Biology, and U.S. History. Extra-curricular interests: none. Tendency to be disruptive in class. Has difficulty with tests requiring a No. 2 pencil" (*DC* 208), Pacey parrots this version of himself to others: "I've spent so long being a screw up, I'm past the proverbial point of no return" (*DC* 208).

Yet as Angela points out to Jordan, "what you are" should not be determined by teachers who expect the worst. The teen drama genre often depicts teens striving to work against their bad student reputations to claim a sense of identity. Indeed, success is often depicted as simply a matter of trying, but students need to *want* to improve in order to make a difference in their grades. Inspired by Andie, who rejects his defeatist attitude, Pacey succeeds in turning around his grades enough to eventually graduate with his classmates (*DC* 422). Prompted by Angela, who encourages him to stay in school and signs him up for peer tutoring, Jordan accepts the help that

Brian, his tutor, might offer (*MSCL* 116). On the other hand, Daniel's perpetual failure is directly attributed to his utter lack of interest, and as a result his unwillingness to put in the effort to pass without cheating: "If I studied I could do it. It just doesn't interest me. It's so lame" (*FG* 105).

Disinterest in school is often positioned on teen dramas as an indicator that some teenagers are simply better at other things. Knowing how to deflect accusations and talk his way out of trouble, Daniel demonstrates his people skills when he and Lindsay are accused of cheating on a math test: "Lindsay, you're good at math, I'm good at this sort of thing" (*FG* 105). Similarly, in the same episode where Pacey is characterized by his failure at school, he simultaneously demonstrates how he is "good with people" (Andie, *DC* 208) by helping Andie take care of her mentally ill mother. While barely literate, Jordan barters his interpersonal communication skills with Brian for help in English: "You can even uh, start with the basics, you know. I mean, even if it seems too basic, start with that. And then after, if you want, I can teach you how to get someone's phone number" (*MSCL* 116). The ease with which Jordan talks to girls stands in stark contrast to Brian's perpetual inability to articulate the simplest sentences in their presence.

In the same way that Angela describes Jordan: "say there's someone who's smart in a lot of ways, but isn't doing real well in school" (*MSCL* 116), the teen drama genre continually reminds teenagers that failure does not indicate stupidity, and that success in school is not the only source of value for characters in high school. Identity must be freely established, despite pressures from adults to succeed at school. As Brandon remarks, "What are grades, anyway? I mean, they're just some weird arbitrary reference that can't measure what a person really knows" (*90210* 107).

Book Smart

As it were, grades on teen dramas are rarely celebrated for their own sake. For teens characterized as bad students, good grades represent work and progress. For those students expected to succeed, those who are characterized by their school involvement, good grades signify possibility. Universally, teen dramas depict students who work hard to achieve the best grades possible as working under the assumption that their future depends on it. Describing her reasons for continually working hard at school, including taking on an extra-credit assignment to improve her already remarkable 98% midterm grade, Joey explains how success in school is a means to an end:

> "You want an explanation? Look around you, Pacey. I mean, look at what my life is. I mean, I'm a boarder in my sister's house, I share my bedroom with the living room and my social life consists of a part-time job. And as far as I can tell there are only two ways to make my life better, and the one that doesn't involve waking up and realizing it's all been a dream involves a college scholarship. When I apply I better have the grades that don't give them a choice, because a scholarship is pretty much my only way out of Capeside." (*DC* 111)

Attaching all hope for the future to a college scholarship, Joey demonstrates two significant, underlying assumptions about academics on teen dramas: that good grades are generally a means to achieve an end (often a scholarship), and that college signifies all hope for a brighter and better future. In this way, good students on teen drama perpetually self-define by their future identity, working hard now to create opportunities for themselves later.

Concerned about the amount of pressure Michelle has been putting herself under to succeed on her exams, her boyfriend, BLT, suggests she relax:

> BLT: Come on, you're smart and you can pass even without studying.
> Michelle: Passing isn't enough! My dad says I'm hurting my future by living on my own, and it's true, my marks have dropped. (*Degrassi* 115)

Accepting the premise of her father's criticism, Michelle fears that a drop in her marks will pose a threat to her future. In her attempt to prove him wrong, she does not argue with the idea that lower marks might hold her back, but pushes herself to do better by studying night after night. Good grades are consistently seen throughout the genre as a gateway to the future, if not the only way to escape the limitations of an underprivileged life.

Encouraging Ryan to dream beyond the working class background he was born into, his guidance counselor, Ms. Fisher, claims that good grades leading to a college education is all that is needed to create a desirable future: "Ryan, you have great test scores, a solid GPA, and if you work your ass off when you get out of here, you can do whatever you want. The question is, what do you want?" (*OC* 202). Gaining entry into college tends to be depicted as the end goal for many studious teens. As Andrea explains, "getting accepted into the right college is the most important thing in my life. It's everything I have ever worked for" (*90210* 309). Andrea's years of hard work and studying are here represented as serving only one purpose: to make it into the right college.

College is often perceived by characters as an escape from the constraining pressures of high school. On the same night that Daniel flirts with dropping out, Lindsay flirts with Barry Schweiber, Neal's older brother, visiting home from college. Offering a new start, Barry describes how going to college allows teens to redefine themselves from scratch: "When you get to college, it's funny, all that high school stuff disappears" (*FG* 115). As such, while socially defined by their academic achievement, good students postpone asserting their individuality. Working for a better future, teens buy themselves a blank slate, from which they are assured they can become whoever they want without pressure.

Ignoring the chance to go to college, or failing to make the grades that one is capable of, is often regarded as a way of hurting one's future, no matter what that future may hold. For instance, concerned about her friend's decision to quit the Mathlete team, Millie has Lindsay's brother, Sam, ask her, "Why are you throwing your life away?" (*FG* 101) Students who demonstrate the ability to succeed at school are thus expected to continually perform. Despite keeping her grades up, Lindsay is accused of throwing her life away by dropping the extra-curricular activities that support her identity as a "brain," and is pressured by her old friends, her parents, and her guidance counselor to reconsider. Even as a sophomore, with college years away, Brian describes the pressure that good students feel to maintain their success:

> Brian: You couldn't even begin to imagine the pressure I'm under. You think you're under pressure, you? That's so like, laughable.
> Angela: Brian, you're completely right, OK, but could you please just explain Geometry to me anyway?
> Brian: Are you completely insane?
> Angela: Yes, I probably am.
> Brian: You think I care? You could not possibly conceive of the studying I have to do tonight. Have you ever even heard of Calculus? Geometry is a paid vacation compared to Calculus, OK. I mean, do you have any idea what it's like to be in accelerated? Do you realize the pressure on a person when it's like, assumed that they will always get As? 'Hey Brian, pull another A?' 'That Brian, he always gets an A.' You have the option of insanity. I do not. And that makes me crazy! (*MSCL* 112)

Accentuating the pressure that good students are shown to feel, teen dramas often represent academic achievers as tightly wound, or over-burdened. Andrea's full schedule seems to underlie her fast-talking mannerism and tendency to obsess over details, "Between the paper, classes, and the rap line, this is the only time I have to prepare" (*90210* 309). Piling extra-curricular activities onto their already heavier-than-average workload, these teens frequently appear close to the breaking point. Snapping at her boyfriend, Kyle, Sharon explains how all her commitments take

too much time and energy to allow for uncertainty in her personal life: "Look, Kyle, I am under a ton of pressure here, OK? Dance committee, student council, yearbook, band. I don't have time to worry about being alone at the very dance I organized!" (*MSCL* 111)

Of course, while teachers and parents are sometimes depicted as putting pressure on teenagers to succeed at school, good students are often portrayed to be this way by nature. As Andrea describes above, college is all she has *ever* wanted. Inseparable from her academic self, Andrea is, and has always been, a brain. Gesturing to the character's persona, Jordan misreads Brian's name when he is assigned as a peer tutor: "Are you Brain?" (*MSCL* 116) Embedded in his very name, Brian cannot escape his characterization as a good student, it is just who he is. Even in non-academic contexts, Brian frames his own life by his work:

> Brian: So in conclusion, I guess the truth is I can't you know work like, 24 hours a day. All work and no play, or whatever...
> Delia: Brian, are you asking me to the dance?
> Brian: Uh, yeah. (*MSCL* 111)

For many characters throughout teen dramas in the 1990s, a public identity as a brain or an achiever reflects a certain natural inner quality of studiousness. Notably, in the 2000s, there is a significant move away from the obsessive, high-strung characterizations. While Brian and Andrea simply *are* good students, meaning they *will* succeed and go to college, beginning with *Freaks and Geeks*, and Lindsay's decision to disregard her previously academic lifestyle, working hard and going to college is reframed by the choice students make to indulge their academic individuality.

In *The O.C.*, academic success stories take on a significantly different tone. Far from spending their entire lives working and studying, both Ryan and Summer are informed late in their high school careers that they are smart enough to succeed at college. Revealing her

unexpectedly incredible SAT scores, Summer explains to Seth: "Dr. Kim told me that every few years they have a female student who's academically gifted, but just didn't apply herself, you know, just focusing on boys, and shopping, and celebrity gossip, and if I studied for my finals, I could get my grades up enough to go to Brown with you!" (*OC* 309) Doing well at school thus becomes an identity choice to be made *in high school,* not a defining, naturally inherent character trait.

Moving away from the notion that those students who achieve academic excellence are pre-formed and programmed to do so, the teen drama genre drastically shifts its emphasis from the pressures of success to the choice to succeed. Teens are increasingly reminded that social pressures to live up to adult expectations should not define them and that identity should be a choice. Far from dismissing college as the primary method to achieve success in life, after learning that she has the test scores to get into any college she might choose, Summer begins planning a real future for herself: "for once in my life I actually want to do something with my life" (*OC* 309). Continually extolling the values of higher education, the genre encourages teenagers to realize that it is not too late to try or to redefine one's self.

While success or failure at school tends to characterize certain teenage identities, the teen drama genre consistently repeats the theme that high school is not everything. Failure to succeed in high school simply indicates a teen's alternate interests or an unwillingness to adapt to the requirements of the establishment. Academic success offers the opportunity to eventually escape to college. School pressures demonstrate the strict constraints that teenagers navigate as they negotiate a sense of individuality. Often framed by the limitations of the system, such as the need to perform on standardized tests, or the inaccessibility of many teaching methods, high school is

often represented as a stage that all teenagers must simply get through. As Angela's voice over describes while introducing her life in the pilot of *My So-Called Life,* "My parents keep asking how school was. It's like saying, 'How was that drive-by shooting?' You don't care how it *was*, you're lucky to get out alive" (*MSCL* 101).

Reflecting the general reluctance that most teens feel when faced with school in the morning, *Freaks and Geeks* opens with Lindsay opining, "Man, I hate high school" (*FG* 101). Forced to put up with systems of authority that seem arbitrary or outdated, teen drama teens rationalize cheating, "I'm not gonna let a fossil in a leisure suit ruin my GPA!" (Steve *90210* 107), or find excuses to skip classes, "Would [drama club] get me out of anything?" (Rayanne, *MSCL* 112) Taking into account the disdain teenage characters have for the structures imposed on their lives, the genre seems to accept that the majority of high school students, even those who achieve good grades, do not enjoy school. Although frequently defined by their academic performance, teens are reminded that self-identity need not conform to the expectations of others. As such, even as they are set within the context of the high school, teen dramas often represent classes as those periods that repeatedly interrupt teen socializing.

Teen Sexuality

Sexuality for teenagers on teen dramas is represented as central to identity development. Frequently defined by sexual orientation or level of sexual experience, characters express a sense of selfhood and develop their social reputations through their sexual behaviour. Given the age of characters, sexual exploration is a new, intense, means of self-discovery. As relative newcomers to the world of sexuality, teenage characters are shown to want nothing more than to fit in and 'be normal' in the world of high school sex.

Like many risky activities that teenagers enjoy participating in, sex on teen dramas is frequently framed in terms of the physical and psychological dangers involved. Teens are consistently reminded that they may not be ready to take on the responsibility that accompanies sexual activity and that sexual expression can (and perhaps should) be postponed until mature adulthood. By questioning their readiness, the genre reminds teens that they are incomplete (i.e., immature). However, while this is the most common perspective the genre takes, it is also an incredibly gendered approach, focusing almost exclusively on female sexuality and placing male teenage sexuality in the background, as a common and far less risky occurrence. Consistently framed by risk and consequence, sexuality is depicted as a universal teenage priority. As with artistic passions and causes, staking a claim on one's sexual identity, despite potential risk, is positioned as a worthwhile and necessary expression of teenage individuality.

Queer Sexuality

Continually characterized by their difference, queer teen characters frequently express a desire to be "normal," while discovering or coming to terms with their own sexual identity. As Jack laments, after suffering undue agony over a simple kiss (his first with another boy), "I don't want to be different. I didn't ask to be gay" (*DC* 323). The difference of queer sexual identities is reinforced on teen drama by the characteristic exclusion these individuals face and fear. The expectation is that queer teens' lives are more difficult, more painful, and far more filled with adversity. As Jack explains: "It's like having all the problems of a typical teenager and then there's this whole other level of constant fear and pain" (*DC* 323). Reflecting the social stigma against homosexuality, the constraints that queer teens face as they come into their individuality are depicted as particularly trying. This added level of fear and pain is often alluded to by queer

characters, explaining how difficult it is to exist in a gay kid's skin in high school and by pointing out how much easier or less confusing life would be without the "burden" of homosexuality.

Discovering that Delia Fisher has developed a crush on him, Rickie confides in Brian: "Do you realize how much easier my life would be, if I could just like her back? Hey Brian, this could be my chance—to be straight" (*MSCL* 119). Similarly, on *90210*, as Kyle abashedly explains his poor performance on their date to Kelly, "I just know that I wish I would've been attracted to you. My life would be a lot less confusing right now" (*90210* 203). Expressing the desire to shed their extra burden, queer teen characters remind audiences that being gay carries a social and psychological price. Notably, the genre also consistently emphasizes that homosexuality is not a choice, but, rather is something teen drama teenagers are born with. If it were a choice, as these three central gay teens emphasize, they would choose to like girls.

The assumption that queer sexual orientation is a painful identity position is reinforced in teen drama narratives by the intolerant reactions of peers and society at large. Overtly confrontational reactions are repeatedly depicted on *MSCL*, where Rickie is frequently beaten up at school, and, it is suggested, at home by his uncle. Due to his tendency to dress flamboyantly, wear eye-liner, and hang out with his friends in the girl's bathroom, Rickie is excluded and bullied. While Jack is shown to be a "typical teenager" in every way, his sexual orientation is represented as the reason for his social exclusion. From being denied tickets to junior prom (*DC* 322), to ongoing taunts and rumours and controversy over his short tenure as a kids' soccer coach (*DC* 405), Jack's social isolation is entirely attributed to his publicly-known sexuality. Even Alex, who otherwise faces no obvious exclusion due to her queer sexuality on *The O.C.*, casually

refers to her parents' willingness to sign off on her emancipation paperwork after learning of her relationship with another girl (*OC* 210).

Queer teen characters are often depicted as unwilling to speak openly about their sexual orientation. Even after revealing to Kelly that he is not attracted to women, Kyle still shies away from the label:

> Kyle: I've never slept with a girl before, and I don't know if I want to.
> Kelly: You mean you're gay?
> Kyle: No, I don't know. (*90210* 203)

Kyle decides to stay in the closet out of fear of his classmates' reactions. Kelly responds to Kyle's request that she not to mention anything about his sexuality to anyone, with a conspiratorial "I understand" (*90210* 203), positioning Kyle's choice to remain closeted as an obvious one. Significantly, on teen dramas, the queer character rarely names their own alternative sexuality. Alex never once utters the words "lesbian" or "bisexual" when describing herself on *The O.C.*, Jack dodges other people's direct questioning for several days before finally coming out on *Dawson's Creek*, and notably, Rickie's sexual orientation is only confirmed by him in the final episode of the series; once again, this happens in response to a question:

> Delia: Umm, you're gay, right?
> Rickie: Well I... you, you...
> Delia: (interrupting) I'm sorry.
> Rickie: No it's, it's ok.
> Delia: That came out so rude.
> Rickie: See I try not to umm, I... I don't like... uh... yeah. I'm gay. I just don't usually say it like that.
> Delia: How do you usually say it?
> Rickie: I don't usually say it. I mean, I've actually never said it. Out loud. (*MSCL* 119)

Teen dramas represent the difficult experience of being queer in high school in terms of characters' extreme unwillingness to come out of the closet. By repeatedly placing queer

characters in hostile, and occasionally dangerous environments, the genre reinforces the expectation that queer sexuality will result in a painful teen experience.

The representation of queer sexuality as a source of significant difference and social risk for teenage characters works to suggest that there is no place for non-mainstream sexual identities in high school. As Rickie frequently expresses: "It's like I don't fit" (*MSCL* 111); he is repeatedly reminded that he does not really fit in, and other characters are shown grappling with the reality of his sexual orientation. Arguing with her mother to let her go out with her friends on a school night, Angela's defense of Rickie is met by Patty's unwillingness to process the concepts "teenager" and "queer" together:

> Patty: I find Rickie a little confusing.
> Angela: OK, so maybe he's bi, who cares? His cousin can still drive.
> Patty: What? He is what? Do you hear these terms she's throwing around. He's bi?
> Danielle: It means bisexual.
> Graham: (to Danielle) Who's bisexual?
> Patty: How can he be bi-anything. He's a child. He's obviously very confused.
> Angela: No, he's not confused.
> Patty: He wears eye-liner. (*MSCL* 101)

Patty's unwillingness to recognize the existence of queer sexuality before adulthood is reflected later in the episode when Rayanne challenges Rickie's impatience with the generic comment, "Haven't you ever waited for anything?" to which he suggestively replies "Yeah, for my life to start" (*MSCL* 101).

Confronting the double barriers of intolerance and isolation, queer teen drama teens are depicted as being incapable of actually dating or pursuing their sexual development in high school. Sexual identities, the genre insists, cannot really take effect until full maturity. Significantly, although as the genre moves into the 21st century, gay relationships become more and more common—by the fourth season of *Dawson's Creek*, Jack has met a potential boyfriend,

whom he takes to prom (*DC* 420), while on *The O.C.* Marissa dates and even for a time moves in with, her girlfriend Alex, even though they remain consistently absent from high school while they do so. Jack and Tobey get together just as Jack graduates, beginning their relationship as they leave high school behind. Alex, who has dropped out of school, lives the life of an independent, emancipated, working minor, and never brings her relationship with Marissa to school. In fact, the two break up when high school commitments come between them:

> Alex: I didn't ask you to give up your life, I just wanted to be a part of it.
> Marissa: (gesturing at the pep rally she has organized going on behind her) Well this is my life, OK, all of it. So what do you think?
> Alex: I think... this is your life and... *I don't fit* in... Pep rallies, cheerleaders... boys." (*OC* 216 emphasis mine)

Echoing Rickie's lament from ten years prior, Alex recognizes high school as one place where her bisexuality does not fit. Constrained by social stigma, exploring sexual identity is depicted as a constant struggle for teen drama characters.

Virgins, Sluts, and Typical Guys

The fear of being different extends to heterosexual relations as well, specifically when teenage girls consider having sex for the first time. Deciding to lose one's virginity is frequently portrayed as scary and troubling for teen girls and they are shown to agonize over whether or not they are ready. These stories offer models for acceptable female sexual identities. The characters who are sexually active in these narratives generally serve as warnings for those characters considering sex. A casual attitude toward sex is shown to result in increased pain, loneliness, depression, and often alcoholism in these characters, and sexual activity can lead to "slutty" or wild reputations. Taking control of one's sexuality is represented as a major step in a teen's developing identity; it is a decision that implies maturity and one that can never be unmade.

Framing a casual sexual attitude as deviant, teen girl characters are rarely encouraged to discover pleasure through sex. Rayanne, who is shown to actively enjoy her sexuality, attempts to convey this attitude to Sharon:

> Rayanne: Look, Cherski, take me and Bobby...
> Sharon: Who's Bobby?
> Rayanne: That guy I was with when you and Kyle interrupted us.
> Sharon: That guy's name is Phil.
> Rayanne: Whatever. I mean, it's not like Bill and I are in love or anything.
> Sharon: Phil.
> Rayanne: Whatever! I mean, you don't have to like, be in love to have a good time. (*MSCL* 116)

Yet while Sharon turns to Rayanne for advice about sex, she is portrayed as firmly unwilling to adopt Rayanne's attitude, recognizing it as deviant. Engaging in casual sex is represented as unacceptable, especially for teen girls. Teen dramas consistently represent sexually active teenage girls as somehow damaged. For instance, Rayanne is characterized primarily by her promiscuity, but also by her alcoholism, unstable home life, and tendency to skip classes. This framework results in a devaluation of female sexual pleasure. For example because she takes sex seriously, Sharon feels guilty about using her ex-boyfriend for pleasurable sex while she fantasizes about Brad Pitt (*MSCL* 116).

The threat of being perceived as sexually deviant is shown to hang over teen virgins as they consider whether or not they are ready to begin a sexual relationship. Teen girls are repeatedly told that they will "just know" when they are ready, placing them in a situation of having to recognize a feeling they have never felt before. Unsure of what it means to be ready, Angela attempts to base her decision on statistics, putting the question to her doctor: "It's a question about percentages... of what's normal... you know in terms of what people actually do... I mean people my age. I just need to see some statistics" (*MSCL* 113). The emphasis on

"readiness" is also underscored by references to the potentially scarring experience of sex too soon, or with the wrong person. As Jen dramatically recounts after revealing to Dawson that her history is far from virginal:

> "I lost my virginity when I was 12 to some older guy who got me drunk. I don't really remember his name, but after the first pregnancy scare I went on the pill and I used condoms... most of the time. Some of the times, um... it's kind of blurry. I was really drinking a lot, and having blackouts. I was sexualized way too young, and I don't wish that on anybody." (*DC* 105)

Similarly, Kelly's painful memories of her first time with an older guy who took her to a clearing in the woods and never spoke to her again (*90210* 114), demonstrates how failure to follow accepted virginity loss scripts can be emotionally painful and socially detrimental. Kelly's revelation is used to justify what is frequently referred to throughout the series as her "bimbo reputation." Teen drama girls' general hesitation to have sex, combined with warnings about the potential harm of premature sex within these narratives, reinforces the assumption that teenage girls are ill-prepared for the responsibility of sexual activity and should probably wait until they're older. As Andie reminds us, "deciding to lose my virginity is a big deal" (*DC* 210).

Teen dramas do acknowledge the reality of teen sex in high school, however, and the genre's virginity loss narratives emphasize appropriate romance and successfully choosing the right partner. For example, Brenda is romanced in a beautiful hotel room by her boyfriend, Dylan, and wonders, "how many girls get to have sex for the first time with someone they really love" (*90210* 122). Similarly, Andie is wooed into having sex with Pacey after a romantic dinner and a surprise stay at a Bed and Breakfast, where she continually assures him, "you make me wanna do it" (*DC* 210). The suggestion is that sex, especially a first sexual experience, is a meaningful, significant moment deserving of romance and the perfect partner. As Seth realizes

after an awkward first attempt at sex with Summer: "This was a huge moment in both our lives and we just blew past it" (*OC* 119).

Emphasizing the significance of making the right choices, narratives depict characters asserting their choice of partner. Joey's decision to have sex with Pacey is preceded by her explanation that he is the right guy for her—countering his fears that she may still love her ex-boyfriend, Dawson (*DC* 414). Marissa's choice to have sex with Luke is shown as an active attempt on her part to cement their relationship and deny her feelings for Ryan (*OC* 106). The emphasis on finding the right person is underlined on *MSCL*, where Rayanne, generally cavalier about sex, reveals the reality of her own sexualization in conversation with Sharon:

> Rayanne: When I saw you making out with Kyle in the hall, I mean, you act like you're reaching ecstasy.
> Sharon: Well, yeah. Well, I mean, you know how that is.
> Rayanne: In a way. I mean, it's fun and all. I... don't always feel anything. Sometimes I feel like, numb or something.
> Sharon: Maybe you just haven't found the right person.
> Rayanne: I've tried every type of person. (*MSCL* 107)

Rayanne's inability to understand the importance of sex with the right person underlines that, in spite of her vast experience, she still fails to understand that sex is meant to be intimate and meaningful.

Teen drama girls who choose not to lose their virginity often encounter the "virginity as gift" sexual script. For instance, when considering having sex, Donna consults her priest who advises her to make sure that her boyfriend, David, is the right person to receive the gift of her virginity. Ultimately, Donna decides to wait: "I think we should wait until we're out of high school" (Donna, *90210* 312), providing a model for girls who lack the maturity to handle sexual

relations. Teen girls are consistently reminded that the decision to lose their virginity, cannot be reversed and is a significant moment in a their developing identity.

In contrast, when teen boys consider sex for the first time the question of readiness is conspicuously absent. For instance, in counter-balance to Donna deciding whether or not she is ready to have sex, her equally virginal boyfriend, David eagerly chimes in, "Look if you're ready, I am. I mean, I *really* am" (*90210* 312). The question of readiness for boys is usually addressed in comedic dialogue, if addressed at all, working to reinforce a male teen stereotype of constant sexual desire. Embodying the stereotype on *Degrassi*, Joey begins a sexual relationship with Tessa when his girlfriend, Caitlin, asks him to wait. "Caitlin can take her time, wait for the right moment—meanwhile, I get laid!" (*Degrassi* School's Out), brags Joey, typifying the male eagerness for sex, as well as the insensitivity that often accompanies it. As Angela discusses with Brian after fighting with Jordan about sex:

> Angela: I just think it's sad, about boys.
> Brian: What about boys?
> Angela: Just how they only care about, you know, getting you into bed, or something. I mean, don't they?
> Brian: Not all boys. (*MSCL* 113)

While Brian attempts to speak up on behalf of those sweet boys who do not only care about sex, the stereotype remains entrenched. Phrases such as "normal" or "typical guy" are frequently used to describe teen boys interested in sex. Explaining her irrational jealousy at seeing her boyfriend flirting with another girl, Kim claims: "Daniel is a *normal guy*. I mean, *he'll screw anything that moves.* That's why I've got to stay alert" (*FG* 104 emphasis mine). Similarly, both of Pacey's long-term girlfriends comment on his potential to "turn into a *typical guy*" (Andie *DC* 211 emphasis mine), after they first have (or talk about having) sex.

The assumption that teenage boys want and expect sex results in the genre simultaneously criticizing misogynist attitudes, such as the insensitivity expressed by Joey above, while naturalizing male sexual desire. As Summer casually remarks to Marissa while discussing Marissa's as yet chaste relationship with Luke, "you'd better figure out [what you're waiting for] because he is not going to be able to wait forever" (*OC* 106). Teenage characters are consistently shown to be aware that "normal" male teens want to have sex.

Consequences and Risk

Considering this representation of teenage boys as (as Seth describes himself) "always ready to go" (*OC* 119), the decision to have sex is almost universally portrayed as one girls make. Narratives dedicated to the subject tend to follow female characters' thoughts and decisions and place male characters' concerns in the background. This becomes particularly significant in narratives which emphasize the risks of sexual activity. While boys are represented as having a general desire for sex, there are almost no narratives featuring sexual promiscuity or the consequences of sexual activity from a male perspective.[21] Boys getting tested for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) tend to do so not because of a sincere risk, but rather as a romantic gesture for a current girlfriend (*90210* 111; *DC* 210).

As a result, we are frequently reminded by teen dramas that sexual risks and consequences are far more serious for girls than for boys. Aside from the (very) occasional STI, girls almost universally bear the brunt of any physical or social risks or consequences; their reputations will suffer from public sexuality, and they carry the risk of getting pregnant. As one doctor puts it to

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[21] The one exception is *Degrassi* 201-02, in which Dwayne discovers he has contracted HIV. More commonly, male sexual promiscuity is depicted as somewhat sleazy, but harmless, as when Steve attempts to pick up a girl outside a club, only to have his car stolen. Later the same night, however, the police recover his car, no harm done (*90210* 114).

Brenda: "When a woman becomes sexually active, she's got to start dealing with a whole new set of responsibilities" (*90210* 201). Teen dramas' focus on the girl's decision to have sex reminds us that it is also her fault when risks materialize.

Most strikingly when Brenda, on *90210*, and Joey, on *Dawson's Creek,* have pregnancy scares, both girls feel as though pregnancy would not be their boyfriends' problem. Realizing she is not actually pregnant, Joey fails to even mention the scare to her boyfriend, Pacey:

> Joey: I thought I had a huge problem, but I don't.
> Pacey: What kind of problem did you think you had?
> Joey: It's nothing you should worry about. (*DC* 419)

Taking all the responsibility by sparing Pacey knowledge of the risk, Joey sees sex and its consequences as entirely her problem. Although Brenda shares her fear of pregnancy with her boyfriend, Dylan, who offers support, she similarly rejects the idea that what happens in her uterus is his problem:

> Dylan: Bren, it's my problem too.
> Brenda: Well it doesn't feel that way. (*90210* 201)

Reflecting this sense that pregnancy is a girl's problem, in every case where a girl gets pregnant on these teen dramas, the responsibility to deal with the situation is depicted as entirely theirs. The boys involved are consistently absent from pregnancy narratives. On *Degrassi* (where over half the pregnancies that occur in the sample take place), Spike, a teen mother at the start of the series, raises her daughter with the help of her parents, the father having transferred schools after an accident left him brain damaged (114); Erica, left pregnant after a fling at summer camp, decides independently to have an abortion (102); Tessa, discovering she is pregnant at the end of a summer romance, is forced to make her decision to have an abortion alone, since Joey, the father, is preoccupied by his actual girlfriend (School's Out). Similarly, on *90210*, Melissa raises

her baby alone with no explanation as to why the father is not involved (113). On *The O.C.* Theresa's pregnancy somehow coincides with her decision to call off her engagement to the father (128), after which she actively avoids support from her male friend and former lover, Ryan, faking a miscarriage to manipulate him into leaving her to deal with the baby on her own (201). These absent teenage boys reinforce the perception that pregnancy is something teen girls will have to face alone; these shows depict pregnancy as a woman's problem, and, more significantly, suggest that sex holds more risk for girls than it does for boys. As Kelly matter-of-factly counsels Brenda about birth control, "Basic rule number one: never rely on the guy" (*90210* 111).

The idea that sex carries a social risk for girls and not for boys is demonstrated directly in the Walsh household, where the twins, Brenda and Brandon, face very different reactions from their father when each of them considers sex for the first time:

> Brenda: Why is it with Brandon you just wanted to make sure he knew about birth control, but my whole value system is on the line?!
> Jim: Brenda, it is different with girls, it just is. (*90210* 111)

Fearing the social consequences sexual activity might create for his daughter, Jim reinforces the view that sex is far more serious for girls. Throughout the 1990s on these shows, girls are the ones who face real social consequences following sexual activity. For example, after Rayanne has sex with Jordan, Angela stops speaking to both of them. After some well-intentioned apologizing, Angela decides to forgive her crush but not her former best friend (*MSCL* 119). On *Freaks and Geeks*, Kim's friendship with Lindsay suffers when Lindsay's parents decide that the fact that Kim has had sex at all makes her a bad influence (*FG* 110).

Kelly, Jen, and Rayanne, in particular, are persistently characterized by their promiscuity and the social consequences that accompany it. Their sexual experience results in similar slutty reputations: "Most slut potential, do ya love it!" (Rayanne, *MSCL* 105), a delineation of their fixation with boys: "Kelly, can you stop thinking about guys for one second?" (Brenda, *90210* 201), and a greater understanding of how to flirt with, and seduce men: "Jen, you're a sex kitten!" (Abbey, *DC* 203) However, this sexual maturity is shown to mask deep personal issues, or carry unforeseen consequences. Jen, for instance, indulges in her reputed wild behaviour in response to depression following the death of her grandfather, the death of her friend Abbey, and conflict with her parents. Attempting to achieve some kind of happiness by way of alcohol and sex, Jen's insistence that she is "not out of control, all I'm doing is having fun" (*DC* 208), is framed as obviously false, as she is depicted as drunk, vomiting, and crying.

Similarly, Marissa, on *The O.C.* who begins the series as the virginal girl next door, eventually becomes the most promiscuous character on the show, pursuing sex as a form of rebellion, culminating in a bingeing affair with bad boy Volchok following the death of her friend Johnny (*OC* 319). As she copes with conflict with her mother and the depression that comes with losing a friend, she is shown turning to sex, drugs, and alcohol to ease her pain. Ultimately, Marissa faces the most drastic consequences for her sexual activity when her unstable, inebriated, former fling Volchok, pursues her and ultimately drives her off the road to her death (*OC* 325).

Kelly and Rayanne also experience serious consequences as a result of their active sexualities. Rayanne's alcoholism and casual attitude towards sex finds her sleeping with her best friend's crush while drunk, ultimately ruining their friendship. Rayanne's pained explanation that

"I woulda never done it... it's not something either of us really... it was just like, this thing, that like, happened. It was just like, there" (*MSCL* 117), underscores how her casual approach to sex caused her to unwittingly break social boundaries, resulting in painful isolation and social ostracism. Kelly, confident enough to wear an incredibly revealing costume to a halloween party, narrowly escapes date rape supposedly precipitated by her revealing outfit and flirtatious behaviour:

> Kelly: I'm such an idiot. I thought I was being all sexy dressing like this—look where it got me.
> Brenda: Kelly, I tried to tell you that dress was a little too much.
> Kelly: It wasn't the dress though, it was me, what I did.
> Brenda: Kelly, you said 'no.' He should have listened. Period. (*90210* 213)

Simultaneously condemning her would-be attacker and her own behaviour, this episode reminds us that girls entertain risks by embracing a sexually active identity. While these girls tend to believe they know what they're doing when it comes to sex, both Kelly and Rayanne suffer when their "knowledge" conceals a failed understanding of "normal" and acceptable teenage social-sexual behaviour.

Interestingly, there are notable differences between series in how sexual risk is framed. Series shift between cautioning teens about physical risks and/or social consequences. On *Degrassi,* for instance, three girls get pregnant and one boy contracts HIV, but not a single character is labeled a slut. In fact, these types of derogatory, gendered labels are actively negated. Tessa's fear that "I hope he doesn't think I'm easy," after having sex with Joey sooner than she had intended is countered by Spike's progressive response: "If you're easy, he's easy" (*Degrassi* School's Out). In contrast, both *MSCL* and *Freaks and Geeks* emphasize the social consequences of an active sexuality, showing how sex can come between friends. Dividing story lines by

character, *90210* and *Dawson's Creek* occupy a central position, cautioning Joey and Brenda about the risk of pregnancy, while shaming Jen and Kelly for their sexual experience. *The O.C.* is an exception, possibly as a result of shifting viewer attitudes towards teenage sexuality in the 2000s. Rarely framed by risk, sex is generally portrayed to be pleasurable and intimate (although naturally awkward the first time), but may become self-destructive and rebellious. Marissa's "slut spiral" (Summer, *OC* 319), which ultimately results in her death, is condemned by other characters not because of the sex involved, but because it is so clearly a result of her larger psychological problems.

Accepting the inevitable occurrence of sex, narratives featuring explorations of sexual identity recur throughout the teen drama genre, with varying amounts of didactic warnings about risk and consequence. The heightened fear of AIDS in the 1990s may be a central reason for the genre's frequent insistence on the use of condoms and warnings against having casual sex. These shows assume that sex is natural for boys and a struggle for girls, and place the decision to engage in sexual activity squarely on the girls' shoulders. As a result, teen girl characters are almost always given the agency to initiate sexual activity.[22] This emphasis on female agency, however, tends to be limited to virginity loss narratives, while the complexities of ongoing sexual relationships are generally ignored. As Sharon explains to Angela, after losing her virginity, she lost her agency as well: "The only strange thing is that after that, having sex was like, expected. Because you can't like, go back. I mean, it kinda stopped mattering if like, *I* wanted to" (*MSCL* 113).

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[22] The two exceptions to this are a) sexual assault, when consent is clearly withheld, and b) narratives involving male teens and more experienced, often older, women. In these cases, sex is often initiated by boys.

Teen dramas depict ever-present adult resistance to teenage expressions of identity through sexual behaviour or sexual orientation. Reinforcing the assumption that teen identities are emerging and incomplete, sexual narratives tend to be framed by messages of postponement, maturity, responsibility, and irreversibility. Presenting sex in terms of the potential risks involved, the genre underscores the fact that active sexual identities are risky, especially for girls, and are often considered deviant in society at large.

Although some aspects of these representations evolve over time, Maura Kelly's analysis of virginity loss narratives on teen dramas from 2003-2005 describes sexual scripts remarkably similar to those of the 1990s. The only significant divergence between her findings and my own is that in the twenty-first century, "there are more female than male queer characters" (Kelly 483). Considering the social constraints constructed by adult resistance to teenage sexualities, representations of characters attempting to develop sexual identities often highlight the challenges that come along with general social and parental disapproval. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as a result, promiscuous girls and homosexual boys are often grouped together by their perceived deviance. Supporting one another's right to individuality, these teens regularly bond in friendship,[23] culminating in the convergence of promiscuity and queer sexuality in the character of Marissa on *The O.C*.

Conclusion: Choosing an Acceptable Self

Teenage characters in search of a sense of identity are routinely individuated based on a dominant interest or behaviour. On teen drama, you are what you like, or in some cases, what others see you doing. This system of differentiation based on individual interests underscores the

[23] These pairs of friends include Rayanne and Rickie (*MSCL*) and Jen and Jack (*DC*), and on *90210* Kelly is the one to make friends with Kyle.

value placed on individuality on these shows. Of course, within the confines of the constrained "teen" experience, characters come to understand themselves within the limits of available identity markers. As such, the teen drama teenager establishes individuality while being labeled "deviant" or "normal" by others.

This framing of teen identities by the establishment of more or less "normal" identifiers underlines the expectation that teenagers "come into" their identity during these years. To already be comfortable with who you are, or postpone such decisions, it is suggested, is decidedly un-teenaged.[24] While the genre maintains the idea of adolescence as a time to choose an identity—tantamount to choosing one's path toward future adulthood—characters tend to be assigned identity labels by others based on past behaviour. Contradictorily, teens are encouraged to self-identify in the face of other people's expectations. Counseling teens to develop independent of social pressures, teen drama empowers characters to make choices about who to be. Yet these choices are consistently framed by social stigma and perceptions of deviance and acceptability. Situated within society's pressures to be normal, characters' assertions of selfhood are subject to the limitations of intolerance. While teens are granted the freedom to choose, they are reminded that choosing "unsanctioned" or "deviant" identities is risky and difficult.

This emphasis on *choosing* acceptable identities works to individualize the adolescent experience of self-definition. As Davis describes in relation to queer identities, "On the whole, drama series individualize the struggle of characters like Rickie Vasquez; any wider examinations of systematic social and cultural homophobia, of institutionalized inequalities and differentials of power are beyond the representational regimes of the programmes, the networks

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[24] This suggested flexibility in teen identity is taken up in greater detail in the chapter 4. Significantly, teens who appear to have concrete identities often experience moments of self-doubt. For example, Dawson (*DC*) is generally confident in his goal to be a filmmaker (discussed above), but becomes uncertain of his identity in season 3.

and the medium" (130). This focus on the individual's struggle with identity (whether that struggle comes from conflict within or between characters) places the responsibility of developing "correctly" onto teenage shoulders.

While characters are consistently individuated in these ways, teen identities remain highly social on teen dramas, structured by and within the social context of the teen drama high school. The following chapter investigates this link between teen identities and their social relationships.

Chapter 4: Social Identities

The quest for self-knowledge on teen drama television takes place within the peer-oriented world of high school: "To speak of peer orientation is to claim that teenagers are less individuated than adults" (Lesko 4). Teens are depicted attempting to discover who they are specifically in relation to others. In this way, their identity is intimately connected to social status, shared and cultivated among peers. Teens are defined by their friendships and relationships, and any attempt to rewrite identity is directly connected to a reorganization of their social life. Peer relationships are thus seen to be among teenagers' top priorities. This emphasis on sociality coexists with the push to cultivate an individuated and independent self. As Lesko contends, "to be fully under the influence of others implies that adolescents are not fully autonomous, rational, or determining, all of which are valued characteristics for successful, modern adults" (4). This chapter explores the relationship between teens' social lives and identity on teen drama, highlighting the complexities of friendship and romance for teen drama adolescents in high school.

Identity as Social Construct

The frame of high school is a significant backdrop for the characterization of teenagers searching for individual identity. Within high school, friendships and identity are public, and subject to artificial hierarchies, unwanted labeling, and negotiations between the "self" that is publicly known, and the "self" the character wishes to be. Beyond simply having someone to talk to and share experiences with, friends and cliques are represented as pockets of social identity. Reputations are shared constructions, as teen drama teens come to be recognized by their sub-groups of self-selected peers. To become a freak, a brain, cool, or a geek on teen drama, one must

have or make the appropriate friends. As such, friendships are represented as variables that must be managed by teenage characters as they try to assert agency over their public identity.

Peer relationships intersect with individualized identity in complex ways throughout the genre. Characters frequently refer to conventional social labels in order to self-define, either by accepting or rejecting their current status. Self-knowledge becomes significant to romantic relationships, as the genre depicts the need for shared intimacy in romantic relationships. Individuality is also developed within the context of friendships, as friends are shown discovering their senses of self together via conversations and shared experiences. So, teen drama represents the fact that teens' developing identities, while deeply personal and individuated, remain intimately linked to social connections. As teenage characters change, social relationships also reflect this change. As they provide points of reference for evolving identities, friendships and romance offer abundant opportunities for teen drama texts to explore shifting teenage priorities.

The High School Social Scene

High school friendships in teen dramas work to build and cement social status and identity; being friends with geeks tends to make you a geek, and so on. Groups of friends are publicly recognizable in high school halls and cafeterias and operate as units of shared identity amongst individuals. As a new student in town, Brenda describes: "Nobody knows me here. I could be somebody. I could be anybody" (*90210* 101), suggesting that she has an open opportunity to make the kind of friends that will grant her any number of different social identities.

Despite the evidently arbitrary nature of stereotypical high school social hierarchies, a complex system of identity and reputation markers clearly underlies representations of teenage

friendships. Teenagers are repeatedly classified as cool or geek, brain or slut, jock or freak. Most often these statuses are assigned to characters by others, but tend to reflect an individual character's narrative of developing a sense of individuality. Characters tend to acknowledge, if not embrace, their labels. As discussed in the previous chapter, as sexually active teen girls, both Jen, of *Dawson's Creek*, and Rayanne, of *MSCL*, are labeled "sluts" by their classmates. Discussing a poll, rating the sophomore girls on *MSCL*, Rayanne and Rickie agree on the accuracy of Rayanne's description:

> Rayanne: A potential slut, now where do people get that kind of idea about me?
> Rickie: Research. (*MSCL* 105)

Though sarcastically outraged, Rayanne relishes her public image and her sexual liberation. Although she is ambivalent about the negative connotations associated with the word, Rayanne is comfortable with her active sexuality dictating her public identity. Reflecting on her social identity on *Dawson's Creek*, Jen expresses an understanding of her public self at a ladies' night sleepover: "In New York I was the precocious ingenue, and in Capeside all I'll ever be known as is the New York wild child, *the slut*, or the bad girl" (*DC* 212, emphasis mine). Jen's phrasing, "all I'll ever be known as," demonstrates a kind of defeatism with which she is shown to accept the power of reputations, and grants others the privilege of naming her. Referring to the differing social circumstances of New York and Capeside, Jen explains how her social identity is shaped by *others' perceptions* of her sexualized individuality.

The central theme of social identity is featured in the very title of *Freaks and Geeks,* but the series explores the limitations of being labeled by others, "I'm sick of being called a geek. I mean, what's so geeky about us anyway, we're just guys!" (Sam, *FG* 118), as well as the possibility of overcoming, or self-directing social identities, "Does [Daniel] wanting to play

[Dungeons & Dragons] with us again mean he's turning into a geek, or we're turning into cool guys?" (Bill, *FG* 118) Reflecting the public knowledge of her academic prowess, Lindsay is initially rejected by Kim as a "brain," while Nick remembers her as "that chick who got an A" (*FG* 101) in their English class. While Lindsay makes friends with their clique of "freaks," her former identity and reputation as a Mathlete precedes her. Referring to developing individuality, such as sexual activity or academic success, the language with which teenage characters on teen drama describe each other, and themselves, continually emphasizes these well-known identity markers.

On *The O.C.,* when some anonymous jock threatens Seth with "Go home, geek" (*OC* 101), Seth responds with the self-aware quip: "You guys really wouldn't hurt me because that would be so cliché, right," and when they proceed to beat him up, "Oh I guess you're fans of the cliché" (*OC* 101). Frequently referencing these cliché trends in his comedic dialogue, this comment is typical of a tendency throughout these shows to reduce the role of jocks to romantic competition or bully.[25] While main characters throughout the sample occupy various social positions, being cool, brainy, geeky, freaky, and outcast, jocks and cheerleaders tend to be relegated to a contextual omnipresence and are usually positioned as antagonists.[26]

In light of these repeated characterizations, it is safe to say that the teen drama reproduces cliché and arbitrary social differentiations. Harris puts it eloquently to a concerned Daniel: "No, you're not a loser 'cause you have sex. If you weren't having sex, we could definitely debate the issue" (*FG* 111). The use of stereotypical high school social labels ubiquitously frames the

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[25] This trend is noted by Davis and Dickinson as one manifestation of the teen genre's tendency to represent marginalized positions and "root for the outsider" (7).

[26] The one exception comes in season 3 of *Dawson's Creek* when Jack joins the football team, and Jen is made head cheerleader against her will. Resistant to their respective roles, however, both join "ironically," as neither wishes to be characterized by the implied social identities "dumb jock" or "air-head cheerleader."

depictions of teenagers navigating friendships and self-discovery. Depicted as a stage of life when identity is fashioned, teenage characters often attempt to take control over their social reputations. Managing reputations comes to the fore of teen priorities as a desire to understand and take control of how one's identity grows. The social nature of identity is shown to function in such a way that friends are intimately affected by each others' reputations. As such, friendships are significant factors in identity management.

Reputation and Self-Construction

Demonstrating the effect that friendships have on social perceptions, characters who develop new social relationships are regularly granted new social identities. As a freshman, David Silver is called "some geek," and a "dorkmeyer" (*90210* 101) by Kelly and Steve (who are cool). The following year, David begins to be considered a friend by Kelly and her clique, when her mother begins dating (*90210* 205) and eventually marries (*90210* 228), David's father. Reminding us that David's social identity has changed along with his social circle, his old friend Scott exclaims, "Oh yeah, I forgot, now that you hang out with Kelly Taylor, you're Fred Cool" (*90210* 208).

More specifically, characters are not only frequently implicated in a shared group identity but in their friends' reputations. Outraged by a sexist poll, which ranks girls in her class by their physical features, Angela rejects Rayanne's reputation as a "potential slut":

> Angela: I don't want people to say that about you.
> Rayanne: Or maybe about you... 'cause we're friends.
> Angela: Rayanne, that's not it.
> Angela Voice Over: ...or maybe it was... kinda it. (*MSCL* 105)

Angela rejects her friend's reputation because she assumes that she will likely be affected by it, just as Lindsay, on *Freaks and Geeks*, is assumed to smoke pot and likely to "put out" because her friend Kim does. Having made friends with the group of stoner freaks, Lindsay is approached in the halls by a boy she doesn't know, who asks: "If I give you a joint, will you have sex with me?" (*FG* 111) Often wary of being falsely characterized by rumour and reputation, teen drama teens attempt to differentiate themselves as individuals. Yet despite this desire to be recognized for their individuality, these teens are depicted as developing identities in concert with one another.

The intimacy of bonding with friends, sharing secrets, perspectives, and experiences, contributes directly to the construction of the self on these shows. Casual leisure time, hanging out, spending time getting to know each other and talking, all contribute to a depiction of teenagers expressing themselves, their world views, and their priorities. Peer relationships offer teens the opportunity to express certain aspects of a developing self as they emerge, prompting and shaping that development. Notably, the majority of close, intimate friendships are forged between members of the same sex, with two glaring exceptions: openly queer teen boys, Rickie and Jack, whose best friends are Rayanne and Jen, respectively. Given their reliance on social stereotypes, it is unsurprising to witness self-segregating, gendered peer socialization depicted on these shows. It becomes even less surprising as we note the central role of sex and romance in friendly conversation.

The implication throughout the genre is that identities are formed through talk with friends. Friends discuss school, movies, music, projects, problems, looks, family, the future, and food, but the subject that preoccupies teenage conversation dialogue above all else is that of romance,

dating, and sex. Talking about boys or girls becomes inextricably linked with friendship. Demonstrating the central role of talking within friendship, Joey offers Dawson a friendly ear: "Passing up a chance to dish about the girl of your dreams? I thought that's what friends are for" (*DC* 104). The genre suggests that talking about sex and romance actually sustains friendships. For example, at the start of an awkward girls night out Summer tries to start the conversation: "OK, well we can at least talk about them, right, 'cause let's face it, without that we got nothing. So... boy talk!" (*OC* 209) As confidantes and sources of comfort, friends actively participate in each other's developing social lives, talking through problems, processing experiences, and helping each other make intimate decisions.

For example, Caitlin turns to her more experienced friend, Lucy, for advice when considering having sex for the first time with her boyfriend, Joey, on *Degrassi* (School's Out). Similarly, on *The O.C.,* after a first, awkward attempt at sex, Seth asks Ryan for advice: "That's something I was hoping to get a little more of: tips, tricks of the trade (I think Summer's used to driving a higher performance vehicle)," to which Ryan replies, "Yeah, I don't know if I'm the guy to talk to about romance these days" (*OC* 119), sharing the fact that he's been having girl problems of his own. The primary subject of conversation between Seth and Ryan are the problems Seth is having with Summer, and occasionally problems Ryan is having with Marissa. Getting right to the point: "Let's break bread and let's discuss girls" (Seth, *OC* 204).[27]

Relationships tend to dominate teenage conversation, whether the preoccupation is actual or hypothetical. On *Degrassi,* the "Have-Nots"—named for their shared lack of "decent clothes," "popularity," or "hickies,"—fantasize about the perfect man (Diana, Melanie, Kathleen, *Degrassi*

[27] In requesting to talk about girls over a meal, Seth references the overwhelming trend throughout the genre to situate friends hanging out in restaurants (The Peach Pit, The Ice House, The Crab Shack, and "The Diner"), cafeterias, and friends' kitchens, while also prominently featuring junk food and pizza at sleep overs.

107). Indulging her own fantasies, Angela constantly discusses her obsessive crush on Jordan with Rayanne and Rickie on *MSCL.* Sam, Neal, and Bill frequently discuss girls while hanging out on *Freaks and Geeks*. For instance, after spending the afternoon with Maureen, a new girl in their class, Sam asks his friends, "So is this what having a girlfriend is gonna be like? She's your best friend, she's beautiful, you can say and do anything in front of her?" (*FG* 107) In particular, as a bonding exercise, or a get-to-know-you game, the topic of sexual history is consistently depicted as extremely significant to the teenage expression of self-identity.

For example, Brenda's slumber party, "A chance for us [girls] to get together, talk about what's really important" (Brenda, *90210* 114), results in the sharing of "skeletons in the closet," revealing Kelly's traumatic first sexual encounter, Brenda's having kissed an old friend's boyfriend, and Andrea's crush on Brandon. Though repeatedly bringing the girls to tears, these stories are constructed as a bonding experience, after which the friends are closer. When Abbey and Jen forge a friendship based on similarly deviant, promiscuous reputations, Abbey is very clear about what she considers important in getting to know her new friend: "What do you mean, what do I want to know. I want to know about the guys!" (*DC* 202) At another all-nighter, Pacey confronts an offended Andie after a purity test reveals his sexual history (having slept with Ms. Jacobs, his sophomore English teacher): "I'm a sexual creature, Andie, and so are you. Why do you think we talk about it so much? Why do you think we joke about it, why do you think we give each other tests to see how pure we are?" (*DC* 207) Pacey's query can be answered with the explanation that teenagers are not only interested in dating and sex, but also derive a sense of identity from their sexual experiences and histories.

Teen Romance

Romance is completely central to teen drama narratives. Questions of romantic interest ranging from one-sided crushes to lasting relationships and romantic break ups are universal when they are not primary plot points they are always simmering in the background. Romance is also a frequent topic of conversation among teenage characters, reflecting the significance of relationships and dating to teenage identity.

Beginning in the mid-90s, we can note two shifting trends in representations of teen romance. Beginning with *MSCL*, there appears to be a loosening up of structured, teen dating, as well as an intensification in the language used to describe teenage romantic feelings. Alongside these major shifts there remain several trends that reinforce consistencies in the teen drama discourse of teen romance, including friendship-relationship dynamics and a distinct divide between casual dating and "real" relationships.

Foundations of Relationships

Teenage romantic relationships throughout the teen drama genre are most often shown to be founded on honesty, trust, and above all a sense of intimacy that frequently comes from personal sharing. When two characters get together, kiss for the first time, or decide to become a couple, some kind of shared moment of intimate knowledge almost always precedes their decision. For instance, immediately before kissing for the first time, Pacey and Joey have been talking about how they've known each other all their lives, and Pacey claims "you know me in a way nobody besides Dawson does" (*DC* 317), which opens the space for romance to ignite between them. Intimate knowledge of the other person is shown to be flattering and romantic, as this speech by Seth demonstrates:

> Seth: The point is, that guy doesn't know you, he doesn't care about who you really are. In fact, he has no idea that every day of third grade you shared your lunch with that little skinny squirrel that kept getting its nuts stolen by that fat squirrel...
> Summer: (interrupting) I hated that mean squirrel!
> Seth: and none of those guys were there when you had to read your poem aloud in class and your hand was shaking because you were nervous and you cared what the other kids thought. (*OC* 106)

By sharing the depth and detail of his long-ongoing crush with Summer, Seth reinforces the fact that relationships should be founded on intimate knowledge. The devoted interest that Seth has for Summer paves the way for their future long-term, on-again-off-again relationship.

Romantic narratives also operate as coming of age stories in which teen identities are entwined with romantic affection. Teens are attracted to those who know them best—those who recognize, appreciate, and love their individuality. Frequently, choosing to reveal otherwise hidden information about one's life is shown to produce the potential for romance. Brenda and Dylan's first date on *90210* stands out as intense and revelatory in this regard. After taking Brenda to the hotel room he has been living in, in quick succession Dylan discovers his (usually absent) father, argues with his father, threatens to get drunk, argues with Brenda, pursues her down the street yelling as she runs away, grabs her, breaks down in tears, reveals how difficult his relationship with his father is, and they kiss (*90210* 111). Revealing his vulnerability for the first time, sharing details of his family and his personal history, Dylan allows Brenda intimate knowledge of his inner self, resulting in *their* long-term, on-again-off-again relationship.

In response to a similar disclosure of personal information, Angela's crush on Jordan develops into something more when she discovers his near-illiteracy, something he "never told anyone before" (Jordan, *MSCL* 107). Later, afraid of the intimacy he shares with Angela, Jordan keeps his distance, and his silence, explaining to Rickie, "She wanted me to meet her parents. I

just... it's like I wasn't in the mood, you know. It's just like, *she knows too much about me*, or something" (*MSCL* 107 emphasis mine). Perceiving this intimate knowledge to be a detriment to his identity, Jordan reveals his preference for casual romantic encounters and his discomfort with their developing relationship.

The primary difference between casually dating and a real relationship on teen drama is the foundation of intimacy required to really connect with someone. In contrast to the frequent insistence on honesty, trust, and knowledge of the other's true self at the outset of a relationship, intimate knowledge is also seen to hinder casual dating. Revealing the same reservations as Jordan, Brandon rejects Kelly's advances:

> Kelly: Don't you think we'd make a great couple?
> Brandon: I guess I don't. It's like I know you too well, or something. (*90210* 122)

Brandon's romantic history, one of short-term, casual dating with girls who frequently remind him "You don't know anything about me" (*90210* Karla 115; Sandy 202), results in his rejection of Kelly's intimate, romantic advances. Demonstrating discomfort with the idea of a real relationships he, like Jordan, rejects the romantic potential of intimate knowledge.

Significantly, intimacy is perceived to somehow get in the way of casual dating, itself a way of getting to know someone new, in a romantic context. While real relationships require this foundation of intimacy, casual dating is generally a question of physical attraction and mystery. As Dawson explains when Joey questions his obsessive attraction to the new girl, Jen:

> Joey: Dawson, you hardly even know this girl.
> Dawson: I know, that's the magic in it! (*DC* 102)

In contrast, when Ryan takes Theresa, his childhood sweetheart, to the prom—as friends—she reminds him, "Nothing could ever be casual between us. There's too much history there" (*OC*

323). While they might be attracted to each other, and tempted to make out, because of the intimate knowledge they already share any romance between them would be too real and complicated.

Dating on teen dramas is depicted as casual, short term, and often fueled by a desire to make out; it is not serious, or a commitment, but "just" a date. As Joey puts it, defending his decision to go on a date with Tessa, while in a relationship with Caitlin: "Look this is just a date, man, it's no big deal. We go out, we see a movie, get pizza, I take her home, it's over" (*Degrassi* School's Out). Of course what Joey conveniently forgets in his rationalization is the making out. Dawson's jealousy when Jen accepts a date with Cliff to the dance is informed by his assumption that a date leads to making out:

> Jen: It's not like a date or anything, he asked me if I wanted to go and I said yes.
> Dawson: Well call me confused, but that's the dictionary definition of a date, Jen.
> Jen: I know. (*DC* 102)

After establishing that their arrangement is a date, Dawson agonizes over what he perceives to be the inevitable kiss at the end of the night.

While the nature of a date changes as the genre develops, the centrality of making out remains the same. As Sam prepares for his first date with Cindy, Harris counsels, "you better get ready to make out, otherwise she's gonna think you don't like her" (*FG* 116). Considering the centrality of sexuality to the teenage characters' developing sense of self (discussed in the previous chapter), this preoccupation with making out on these shows is not surprising. As it is far less risky than sex, kissing becomes a priority for teenage characters, often eclipsing other things in their lives. As Angela describes, after finally becoming involved in a casual relationship with Jordan, "My life became divided into kissing and not kissing" (V.O. *MSCL* 112). And while

"not kissing" she continues to talk about kissing with friends and daydreams about kissing instead of paying attention in class. Making out is depicted as a *normal* teenage priority, as the teen body is characterized by its developing libido. Dating more generally tends to be depicted as a normal teenage pastime, a relatively harmless, but fun and exciting distraction. As Tricia, a world-class athlete first and teenager second, puts it to Brandon, "At least you have a normal life, I've never had a date" (*90210* 219), suggesting that the primary example of "normal" teen behaviour is dating.

Notably, while earlier series' saw teens taking each other out on the types of traditional dates described above by Joey, depictions of dating shift and change across the evolution of the genre. Beginning with *MSCL*, characters rarely engage in traditional dates. Moving away from these patterns of structured dating, teens adopt a more open, less defined tendency to "hang out." In fact, when asked about her love life by her father, Angela is visibly embarrassed by the suggestion of a "date":

> Graham: So was this like a date?
> Angela: Dad! It's... we're not... people just hang out. We're not... it's not dates, it's just people... together... in a bunch. (*MSCL* 102)

Reflecting this shifting pattern in teenage dating, Seth, in *The O.C.,* remarks, somewhat sarcastically, "Ryan, kids our age don't even date anymore. They hang out in groups and then peel off to make out" (*OC* 204). While the nature of casual dating in the second half of the sample has changed, the central concern, a chance to potentially "peel off to make out," remains at the core of casually seeing someone. This emphasis on making out stands in stark contrast to the foundation of intimate knowledge required to have a lasting, significant relationship.

Love

In addition to this trend toward informal "group hangs," the second major trend in the genre is the growing emphasis on love and even obsession in the affairs of teen romance. Beginning with *MSCL*, love is frequently invoked outside the confines of a relationship, to describe new and/or unexpected feelings. Angela's declaration in her opening voice over monologue sets the tone for all future crushes: "I'm in love. His name is Jordan Catalano. He was left back. Twice. Once, I almost touched his shoulder in the middle of a pop quiz" (*MSCL* 101) she begins, explaining that he doesn't even know her and that they have never spoken. With this, there appears to be an intensification of teen romance in the genre, or at least in the language used by teenage characters to describe their feelings.

Throughout *Dawson's Creek*, for instance, characters describe their romantic adventures making frequent references to love. Asking Dawson if he has feelings for Joey, Jen poses: "Are you in love with her Dawson?" (*DC* 113); advising Pacey not to hastily break up with his then-girlfriend, Andie, Joey explains, "don't let yourself get so angry you stop loving" (*DC* 302); later, coming to accept her own feelings towards Pacey, Joey admits directly: "I think I'm in love with you" (*DC* 323). Similarly, on *Freaks and Geeks*, Sam is frequently described as "in love with Cindy Sanders," Bill interprets Cindy's kindness towards Sam to signify "Cindy Sanders is in love with you, man" (*FG* 101), Nick laments that he is "still in love" with Lindsay after they have broken up (*FG* 112), while Cindy, confiding in Sam about her crush on Todd, a star basketball player, amends her claim:

> Cindy: Remember how I told you I have a crush on Todd?
> Sam: Yeah.
> Cindy: Well I don't.
> Sam: You don't?

> Cindy: No. It's not like a crush, it's like, an obsession! (*FG* 109)

The tendency to obsess over a crush in this way can be seen throughout the more recent shows in the genre. Seth's crush on Summer, for instance, has lasted for years, during which he has continually noticed and memorized minute details about her, despite the fact that he has "never talked to her before" (*OC* 101). Incapable of containing obsessive thoughts, characters are depicted as unable to escape crushes or redirect their affections. As Brian realizes, in an attempt to move on from his hopeless crush on Angela: "Even though I've established verbal communication with Delia Fisher I still think about Angela constantly. Why am I like this?!" (V.O. *MSCL* 111) Indulging her own obsessive crush by talking incessantly about it with her friends, Angela notes the extent to which romantic feelings take over the mind:

> Rayanne: I think part of him is definitely partly interested. I mean he's got other things on his mind.
> Angela: But that's the part that's so unfair, *I have nothing else on my mind*. How come I have to be the one sitting around analyzing him in like microscopic detail and he gets to be the one with other things on his mind? (*MSCL* 102 emphasis mine)

Often granted overwhelming power over individuals, romantic feelings are frequently depicted as autonomous and unruly. Teenage characters cannot control who they fall in love with, or the timing of their feelings. Reflecting some sense of "true love" teen romance is often portrayed as subject to the workings of fate.

Teen dramas frequently underscore the idea that certain couples are destined to be together. Interestingly, however, the strength of a fated relationship tends to be measured by the capacity of a couple to reunite following a break up. True love does not halt conflict or put off romantic dissolution. It does, however, persuade teenage lovers to give their love a second (or third) chance. The tendency to find a way back to a fated lover is often alluded to in break up scenes,

where characters decide to "cool it for a bit" (BLT, *Degrassi* 202), "stop seeing each other, at least for a while," (Brenda, *90210* 201) or "take a break for a while" (Nick, *FG* 109), realizing, or perhaps hoping, that they are meant to get back together. As Dylan laments at his first break up with Brenda, "if we're meant to be together, time will tell" (*90210* 201). Joey, upon breaking up with Dawson for the first time, assures him that they are, at least in a way, meant for each other: "You're what I'm going to want" (*DC* 206), she explains, foreshadowing their eventual reunion(s).

Break ups, for these couples, do not guarantee that they plan to move on. As Spike warns when Tessa begins pursuing a relationship with Joey: "Be careful Tessa, he and Caitlin have been breaking up and getting back together for years" (*Degrassi* School's Out). Similarly, when Lindsay hosts a party at her crush Daniel's suggestion, she is dismayed to discover him making out with Kim on her bed:

> Lindsay: I thought they broke up.
> Nick: Yeah, I don't know, they break up like every week. (*FG* 102)

Even while broken up, fated couples often fail to fully let go of former relationships, straining new ones. Recognizing that his girlfriend, Summer, is still hung up on her ex, Seth, Zach encourages her to follow her heart, assuring her, "You can't fight fate" (*OC* 214). As Marissa continually fails to stay away from her former flame, Ryan, Alex, her girlfriend at the time, turns to Seth for advice: "Will you just tell me if I'm fighting for a lost cause here. Are they just one of those couples that will always be a couple?" (*OC* 216) Of course "always" is somewhat relative on teen dramas, most couples do not actually stay together through the end of high school, or the series. But in response to Alex's question, Seth acknowledges the tendency of

certain couples to remain involved, whether currently dating or not. Emphasizing the significance of peer relationships to the self, teens are frequently identified as half of a pair.

The tendency across the genre for couples to reunite after time apart reflects a significant trend in the matter of teenage break ups. When teen couples break up, their cited reasons frequently have nothing to do with a loss of love. Break up scenes tend to emphasize the fact that the individuals still like each other, "just, not like before" (Caitlin, *Degrassi* 105). As BLT summarizes while breaking up with Michelle: "I think we should just cool it for a bit, but I still want us to stay friends because we still like each other" (*Degrassi* 202). This desire to maintain or return to friendship, recurs. So, while teenage characters are no longer fulfilled by a romantic relationship, they are also shown to still feel affection for their former partner. Most characters want to end the romance, not the relationship. Teen drama breakups rarely emphasize the failure of a relationship, but the distraction or appeal of new interests, new people, or new, changing selves.

As teenage characters grow into their identities, their priorities and interests naturally grow and change as well. While a relationship may validate an expression of self, romantic attachment can also limit the growth and development of an individual self. Teen dramas narrate the fact that teens sometimes need to prioritize their own self-knowledge, self-care, or self-discovery over a relationship. As Joey explains when pulling away from her relationship with Dawson:

> Joey: This isn't about some stupid kiss, Dawson.
> Dawson: Yeah, it's about us.
> Joey: No, it's about me. For once it's about me, Dawson, that's what I've been trying to tell you. (*DC* 206)

As she goes on to explain, "I don't know who I am, let alone what I want to be and accomplish. I guess I need to figure that out" (*DC* 206). Describing how, up to this point, her sense of self has

been completely bound up in her connection to Dawson (first as his friend, then his girlfriend), Joey ends her relationship, citing a need to know herself independently before becoming attached to someone else. When Jen breaks up with Dawson, she cites similar reasons: "I've always been the same stupid girl who's always found it easier to escape into a relationship than face life on her own...I've got to try life on my own for a while" (*DC* 108). In these scenes, the genre emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge (in particular for teen girls), in fostering successful relationships.

In addition to the need to prioritize one's self and one's values, the most common reason for a breakup on teen drama is the development of an interest in someone new. Demonstrating how teen identities, reflected in their social relationships, change and grow, characters develop new feelings for new romantic interests. Couples "grow apart," while others develop things in common. For example, when Caitlin initially breaks up with Joey, it is after a growing friendship based on similar interests sparks new feelings between her and Claude. Ironically, after getting back together, when Joey and Caitlin break up a second time, it is when Caitlin discovers Joey's preoccupation with sex that has been distracting him from their relationship: "You were fucking Tessa Campinelli?!" (Caitlin, *Degrassi* School's Out)

When teen drama teens fail to make their relationships a priority, the romance crumbles. When teen characters choose to prioritize other things first (mental health, self-exploration, other people), relationships can rarely take the back seat. Once characters re-establish a coherent sense of self or are able to indulge their other interests, old relationships often resurface as a top priority once again, reigniting those on-again-off-again romantic flames. The narratives continually assert the truism that love that is meant to be will return when it is ready.

Navigating the Friendship Line

Of course breaking up does not always suggest reunion, especially for those couples that are not depicted as fated to fall in love. In general, break ups are shown to be painful experiences for both individuals involved. Tears are common and the pain is shown to include both the instigator and victim of the break up. Teenage characters are shown avoiding break ups, and are frequently talked into them by their friends. As significant sources of comfort and sounding boards, teen drama friends are privy to, and often intimately involved in, the romantic decisions of their friends. Both Tessa and Caitlin of *Degrassi* put off breaking up with their current boyfriends, despite a developing interest in other boys, while their friends look on in disapproval. Maya, scolding Caitlin for her on-going flirting with Claude, counsels: "Don't you think you should break up with Joey first? You're stringing him along. You shouldn't treat boys like that" (*Degrassi* 105). Tessa similarly discusses her conflicted feelings with Dorothy, who tries to convince her to do the honourable thing:

> Tessa: We've been going out for three whole months and I just like Yick.
> Dorothy: You have to break up with Alex, then.
> Tessa: I know. But what if Yick doesn't like me like I like him?
> Dorothy: What! You only break up if you've got a back up? (*Degrassi* 212)

Frequently, characters drifting away from their current relationships are shown to come to terms with how they feel by processing their situation with friends. In those cases when the break up is initiated by a boy, the character is shown feeling guilty about his decision, and worrying about hurting his girlfriend. Despite avoiding his girlfriend and getting angry whenever she attempts to smooth over their arguments, Brandon postpones breaking up with her due to his protective feelings, explaining: "I don't want to see her become the outcast just because I break

up with her. She's not a bad person" (*90210* 216). Turning to his friend, Steve, for advice, Brandon is reassured in his decision; when you're not happy in a relationship, you have to let the other person know it's over: "If she's not getting the message you just have to be firm. Spell it out" (Steve, *90210* 216). The message on teen dramas is that relationships should reflect and support teens' current priorities and identities.

Sam also postpones breaking up with Cindy because he feels lucky to have such a pretty girl to go out with him in the first place. Conflicted, he turns to everyone available for advice—his friends, his sister, his sister's friends—finally accepting his own decision to end things: "It's just, we don't have anything in common, she thought *The Jerk* was stupid...we don't have anything to talk about. She doesn't like anything that I like. We never have any fun together" (*FG* 117). As he ends their relationship, he asks if they can be friends. While friendship is proposed in the majority of break up scenes, it is rarely accepted as a suitable alternative to the previous relationship. As Alex honestly puts it when Tessa asks "can we still be friends?" following their break up: "I don't think so" (*Degrassi* 212). For those denied romantic development, the notion of being "just friends" becomes "a bizarre form of torture" (Pacey, *DC* 422).

In spite of the perceived binary between "just friends" and "a couple," relationships are frequently depicted as existing on an (often confusing) ill-defined continuum. As Lindsay and Kim debate the status of Lindsay's relationship with Nick:

> Kim: So what's the deal with you and Nick? This is gonna be like you guys' first real date.
> Lindsay: I don't know, not really. We're *not going out* or anything.
> Kim: Yeah, but you're definitely *more than friends*. (*FG* 107 emphasis mine)

Particularly in the later series in the sample, when casual dating has shifted to open-ended arrangements, relationships are seen to develop as teens navigate the intricacies of the ambiguous spaces between friendship and romance. Real relationships, those founded on shared intimacy, demonstrate the complex interaction between friendship and romance. Honesty, caring, trust, and intimate sharing—all significant markers of friendship—are considered to be the building blocks of romantic relationships. Unsurprisingly, the majority of crushes spring from friendships, and, as discussed above, in the majority of break ups teen drama teens attempt to retain some form of friendship.

Friendship thus precedes, outlasts, and is the foundation for teen romance. Relationships with peers, as the genre consistently depicts, are rarely straightforward, despite their absolute centrality to the lives of teen characters. Continually placing teenage characters in the complicated spaces between friendship and romance, the teen drama genre positions teen relationships as inevitable, perplexing, intimate, ill-defined, obsessive, and occasionally painful priorities in teenagers' lives. As teen drama teens develop and explore new identities, peer relationships shift and change, develop and dissolve, reflecting the complexities of an emerging self.

The End of Friendships

While friendship is often proposed as an alternative to a failing relationship, romance is also seen to compete with existing friendships. For instance, it is Joey's incessant bragging about his sexual relationship with Tessa and teasing Snake about still being a virgin, that results in the dissolution of their friendship on *Degrassi* (School's Out). The painful end of friendships, usually over romantic competition or betrayal, is a repeated trope throughout the teen drama

genre. When teens are put in the position of choosing between romance and friendship, they tend to choose romance.[28] However, when that romantic choice takes the form of a friend's ex, the choice is represented as a betrayal of trust and the friendship tends to dissolve. With very little variance throughout the genre, the argument that follows such a betrayal is succinctly summarized by Kelly, who is discovered to be dating her best friend Branda's ex:

> Kelly: You said Dylan could go out with whoever he wanted.
> Brenda: And you said you were my best friend. (*90210* 313)

Relationships are forged in spite of the damage they might cause to friendships, with the rationale that it is important to be true to oneself. Exploring romance is often positioned as synonymous with exploring individuality because personal emotions are acknowledged and exposed. The loss of friendship as a result of a relationship, while painful, is frequently depicted as necessary. Choices made in the interest of self-knowledge are not always easy, but as the genre rationalizes, teens must indulge their desires in order to sort out their identities.

Notably, attitudes about the relative importance of friendships and relationships seem to shift in the more recent shows. Alexa feels sad and guilty for simply making friends with BLT's new girlfriend, which is perceived as a betrayal to Michelle on *Degrassi* (203). Kelly is intensely remorseful about losing Brenda's friendship on *90210* (313). Rayanne utterly regrets having hurt, and as a result lost, Angela on *MSCL* (117). Joey is even willing to break up with a boy she's in love with in an attempt to mend her friendship with another on *Dawson's Creek* (320). By *Freaks and Geeks*, however, Kim dismisses her former friend, Karen, for flirting with Kim's boyfriend, Daniel, without a backwards glance from either of them (*FG* 104). Most spectacularly, the

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[28] The one major exception to this is from *DC* 320, when Joey specifically chooses her friendship with Dawson over her relationship with Pacey. Refusing to risk losing their friendship, she waits until Dawson himself tells her to indulge her romantic feelings in *DC* 323. Consistent with the pattern, however, Dawson and Pacey's friendship dissolves.

cavalier attitude with which Zach challenges Seth's relationship with Summer demonstrates the primacy of romance to twenty-first century teens: "Look Seth, I've always liked you, but if I have to sacrifice our friendship to be with Summer, I'll do it" (*OC* 222).

Significantly, romantic interests contribute not only to a teenage character's sense of individuality, but are intimately intertwined with social status. For example, geek status is repeatedly coupled with romantic impotence, thus developing a relationship often corresponds to overcoming social ostracism. Formerly a "freshman geek," David officially becomes a member of a cool clique when he begins dating Donna (*90210* 217). Sam finally goes out with Cindy Sanders, which grants him access to the jock/cheerleader table in the cafeteria on *Freaks and Geeks* (115-17). Henry, a geeky jock, eventually woos Jen into a loving relationship, achieving social status as a football star in the meantime on *Dawson's Creek* (beginning 311). Seth gets the girl of his dreams, Summer, partially overcoming his geek status on *The O.C*. (120).

The desire to evolve beyond the limitations of one's social group is frequently depicted in teen drama narratives where characters navigate the high school social scene. Peer relationships offer options for identification, and as teen identities take shape, opportunities to explore new environments and new social identities are also explored.

Growing Up

As significant as friendships are in the process of sorting out self-identity, it is somewhat common for teen dramas to depict individuals growing apart from friends. As teens explore new possibilities for the self, social ties and identities are tested or broken. A perceived need for growth often characterizes teenage understandings of self. In short, teenage identities are in flux.

Turning to new friends who might help redefine them, individuals are shown grasping for a coherent sense of self.

Attempting to explain her recent altered appearance and change in attitude to a concerned teacher, Angela describes: "It just seems like you agreed to have a certain personality or something, for no reason, just to make things easier for everyone. But when you think about it, I mean, how do you know if it's even you?" (*MSCL* 101) Concerned that the life she has been living might not really be *her*, Angela makes new friends, quits yearbook, and sets off on a path of self-discovery. Lindsay has a similar transformation on *Freaks and Geeks,* altering her dress, quitting the Mathletes, and making friends with the freaks. After questioning this change in her life and briefly rejoining her old friend Millie in the Mathletes, Lindsay chooses to leave again, explaining: "I mean, it's been great hanging out with you. It's just not where I'm at anymore. Things are different now" (*FG* 111). Recognizing that she is at a different place than where she was the year before, Lindsay accepts that her identity has changed along with her social circle.

Both Lindsay and Angela actively take part in their own social growth, rejecting former social identities, and forging new friendships. More often, change occurs subtly, as characters grow up, and occasionally, apart. For example, on *90210,* after spending the summer apart, old friends David and Scott fail to find the common ground they used to share as two outsiders:

> David: You sure changed this summer.
> Scott: I just went away for vacation. I didn't change that much.
> David: Well, maybe I did.
> Scott: Yeah, you're a big man around here now, and I'm still a geek. (*90210* 208)

Though the change seems to have taken place over the summer without his having noticed, the presence of David's old friend acts as a reference point for an evolving identity. Growing up is shown to bring about a shift in certain friendships. For Joey and Dawson, on *Dawson's Creek*,

the added complication of a male-female dynamic in (newly) teenage bodies results in significant changes to their friendship:

> Joey: We can't talk to each other the way we used to. I mean there are some things we just can't say.
> Dawson: That's not true! Joey, I can tell you anything.
> Joey: Oh yeah? How often do you walk your dog, huh? What time of day, how many days per week? (*DC* 101).

Though Dawson initially rejects Joey's take on the fate of their friendship, he is forced to agree that things can't stay the same forever when he refuses to answer her intentionally awkward, masturbation-related question. Unlike many friendships that grow apart, however, as they each grow and change, Joey and Dawson's relationship evolves into an on-again-off-again romance. Yet while the nature of their relationship changes as they grow up, they both alternately cling to their past friendship, a symbol of their childhood selves.

While often feeling nostalgic for former relationships associated with the simplicity and comfort of childhood, characters are frequently reminded that social evolution is necessary. As Lindsay explores new friendships with the freaks, Millie is clearly characterized as part of her past. After spending the evening together when Lindsay finds herself stoned for the first time and in over her head, she reflects on their changed relationship:

> Lindsay: I love you Millie. Why aren't we friends anymore?
> Millie: I thought we were friends.
> Lindsay: Well we are. It's just, you know, we're not, really. But we're still the same people we were when we were five, it's just different now.
> Millie: You're different now. (*FG* 113)

Millie reminds Lindsay that people grow and change, especially teenagers. On teen drama, change becomes symbolic of the process of becoming that characterizes the stage of adolescence, which precedes full, adult personhood. Angela's attempts to redefine her self result in a painful

falling out between her and Sharon. Coming to accept that a change in their relationship was a necessary and positive evolution, Angela and Sharon appear at ease with the altered state of their relationship:

> "There are so many different ways to be connected to people. There are the people you feel this unspoken connection to, even though there's not even a word for it. There's the people you've known forever who know you in this way that other people can't because they've seen you change... they've let you change" (Angela V.O., *MSCL* 108).

Recognizing this need for change as they grow up, we see Angela and Sharon accept their emerging social identities while fondly remembering the childhood they once shared. Because identity for teenagers in high school is subject to change, self-discovery is often depicted with reference to the distance that develops between friends. While it may be sad to experience the loss of formerly meaningful friendships, the acceptance and understanding expressed by these characters demonstrates a certain need for change.

Shedding one's former childhood persona is represented as a necessary precursor to coming into one's adult identity. Demonstrating the difficulty of distancing oneself from one's past, Ryan confronts his former self when his brother Trey, a spectre of Ryan's old life, is released from prison (*OC* 217). Managing an evolving self, while attempting to hold on to certain aspects of an old relationship, Ryan becomes torn between two selves: old Ryan Atwood (who beats people up, including Trey), and new Ryan Atwood (who does his homework and stays out of trouble). Consistently emphasizing the significance of change to the process of growing up, teen dramas characterize teenage-hood specifically as a time of transition.

Underlying narratives of social evolution, public identity, and shifting relationships lies the assumption that adolescence is a liminal state, within which individuals develop a coherent sense of self. Teenagers grow and change, exploring friendships and romantic relationships, while in search of the right adult identity. While occasionally painful, narratives depicting the loss that accompanies growth and change remind teens that although it may be difficult, it is the nature of young people to shed their childhood ties in order to enter the adult world as fully-formed citizens. Thus, the teen drama discourse of teenage identity ultimately emphasizes this inescapable trajectory of growing up.

Conclusion: Socializing the Pre-Individual

Teenagers are consistently represented as preoccupied by uncontrollable emotions and hormones, which manifest as they engage in social relationships. Friendships and romance are depicted as highly valued experiences that enrich and sustain a teen's sense of self. Characters are reminded that they do not exist in isolation; within the context of the teen drama high school, identity must be socially validated. The search for identity, which characterizes the "teen" experience, relies on these social ties to navigate the shifting terrain of teenage emotion. Depictions of high school socializing emphasize how the teen drama teenager is in the process of growing up and changing.

This focus on change is significant, as it suggests that teenaged individuals are incomplete. Underscoring the suggestion that people discover their identity as teenagers (discussed in the Chapter 3), this representation of on-going change implies that teenage expressions of self are unreliable. Not only do teens learn to define themselves in relation to others, but they are

expected to change and explore various identity options. In a sense, maintaining unwavering relationships lies outside of the "teen" norm. Notable contradictions persist, however, as characters are situated within the highly structured environment of the high school, complete with its stereotypes and social labels. Teen drama teens are consistently encouraged to denounce these labels, however, as the genre empowers characters to circumvent convention as they assert their individuality. Yet teens are simultaneously reminded that true individuality is a mark of adulthood, and cannot fully be accessed before its time. Individuality is represented as valued, but for teen drama teens codependent identities are the norm. Framed by omnipresent relationships (which emphasize the emotionality of young people), teen identities are always in flux. Situating teenage characters in this pre-adult stage, denying them stable identities and emotions, teen drama relies on the discourses of human development that frame youth as not-yet-finished-growing (Griffin 168). Emphasizing the inevitability of growing up, the teen drama genre consistently places teenagers on the cusp of personhood. The social world of high school is framed as a characteristically "teen" stage of life preceding the highly individualized world of (complete) adult personalities.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Who are teen drama teenagers? What are their priorities? What assumptions about adolescent lifestyle underlie their representation? Media representations of young people rely on convenient stereotypes, which perpetuate myths about the youth demographic. As described in Chapter 1, the teenagers that populate teen drama fictions are fairly homogenous. They are "typical" white, middle class youth from relatively liberal households. These are the teens who represent, through their dominant presence, "normal" adolescence. As discussed in Chapter 2, the teen drama genre often frames teen narratives as *universal* high school experiences. Thus, these (white, middle class, liberal) characters and their actions and adventures are positioned as representative of universally shared "youth" experiences. What they are shown to feel and do are presented as common amongst all teens. How their priorities and lifestyles are depicted thus influences perceptions of typical teenage priorities.

Teen priorities represented throughout teen drama tend to reflect Nancy Lesko's "confident characterizations" of youth. Teenage characters are depicted as primarily concerned with social relationships, as discussed in Chapter 4. This preoccupation with peers shapes a picture of youth that is particularly susceptible to peer pressure, where young people have not developed the independence characteristic of adulthood or competent decision-making skills. The narrative priority placed on sexuality and romance further characterizes the teen drama teen as controlled by unruly hormones, which suggests a corresponding lack of control over emotions and behaviour. Teens who are ruled by uncontrollable hormones are represented as irrational, emotional, and unreliable when it comes to making important decisions in their lives.

Teenage characters show interest in a variety of activities and are represented as occupying a variety of lifestyles. As discussed in Chapter 3, teen drama teens establish a sense of identity through various interests and pass-times. Media culture is featured prominently, as youth lifestyles include watching movies, television series, or listening to music. Depictions of creative pursuits position youth as media producers as well, making music, movies and visual art, or writing for school publications. These fictional representations reflect and reinforce common cultural perceptions of young people as consumers described by Griffin (138) as well as Ross and Stein (7) and Davis and Dickinson (9). In comparison to other significant institutions that shape teen lives on these shows (such as school and family), which face scrutiny or narrative exploration, media consumption is ubiquitous and this ubiquity remains unquestioned.

The dominant discursive framework that shapes these representations of teenagers on teen drama television positions youth as incomplete, immature, irrational, and unreliable. Self-centred and hormonal, peer-oriented and rebellious, youth are depicted as distinctly pre-adult, although *nearly* fully formed. Teen drama continually offers young people a promise that escape from the confines of adolescence is near, but also maintains current "teenage" limitations. Teenageness is constructed as a tumultuous, pre-adult stage of human development as teens are not yet seen to possess identity:

> "Adolescence is defined as a discrete age stage in a linear path of physiological, psychological and social maturation into 'normal' adulthood. This process is represented in psychological terms, such that adulthood is signified by a whole, coherent and unitary identity, whilst adolescence is marked by a 'natural' period of hormonal and psychological turbulence and confusion." (Griffin 202)

Recognizing that this perception of adolescence is actively socially constructed and reinforced within a dominant form of representation, such as teen TV, however, can work to demystify it and move us towards accepting the humanity (and thus autonomy) of youth.

The representation of teenagers in teen drama television does not simply reflect the reality of young people, nor does it directly convey the intended message of any particular writer, producer, or network. Representations work to construct meanings of adolescence by helping to shape what viewers know and think about it (Hall 25). It can be argued that the consistent representation of teenagers as incomplete beings who lack agency over their lives dovetails with a more general cultural understanding of this "truth." Interpreting the meanings that are constructed through representations of teenagers on teen drama television opens a space to think critically about where our understandings of youth come from and how they may be shaped or distorted for a variety of purposes. Through representations of teens as "becoming," many might come to *assume* that teenageness is a time for discovering identity.[29] By representing youth as powerless, the dominance of adult power in society as "natural" is underscored.

Patterns emphasizing this naturalized adult power emerge throughout this analysis. For instance, framing high school experiences by teenage lack of control or emphasizing the tragedy that constantly surrounds teen characters implies that teens are immature. Reflecting a scientific discourse that links adolescence with unfinished brain development (Dobbs), these narratives imply that teens *naturally* make bad decisions, are prone to recklessness, and cannot reliably protect themselves from negative outcomes. This interpretation justifies the perceived need for adult protection for teens' "own good."

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[29] This suggests that identities expressed by young people need not be trusted as they have not yet been "set" and also implies that identity is fixed, complete, and does not change throughout adulthood.

This “natural” adult power and control over teenage behaviour is also reinforced by an underlying support for current social relations—an endorsement of the status quo—on teen dramas. Teenage characters rarely participate in campaigns for wider social change, focusing instead on personal, local issues. Comparisons between teen drama teens and the activism of their parents’ generation may legitimize teen protests within the narrative, but also suggest that all significant social change has been accomplished by the movements that precede them. This necessarily implies that the status quo is already ideal and that there is no need to subvert the current social order that has come about since the social unrest of the baby boomer generation.

When depicting teenage campaigns and political causes, teen drama narratives emphasize personal meaning and an expression of individual values. This potentially works to reinforce a perception of self-involved teens who are unwilling to support a cause unless they perceive it to have personal significance. In particular, however, this also reflects a trend within the genre of individualizing issues of a systemic nature. Protests on teen drama have far more to do with the individual who is moved to campaign, than the issue they are attempting to resolve. Teens are represented as fulfilled so long as their social movement provided them with self-knowledge or personal meaning. Thus, although Joey (*DC*), Andrea (*90210*), and Lucy (*Degrassi*) each fail to effect the desired change in their community, they are depicted as satisfied for having tried (and unlikely to pursue the same issue further). This framing also potentially works to legitimize the status quo, by containing youth unrest within limited or sanctioned low-risk boundaries.

Teen drama series also actively avoid criticism of social systems by individualizing teen issues. For instance, access to higher education or even successful completion of secondary school are depicted as individual problems. This is underscored by an emphasis on choice,

positioning success as an identity that an individual teen might *choose* to adopt, while ignoring the systemic factors that limit access to academic advantages. As such, the financial burden of attending a private university is positioned as an individual problem for characters like Joey (*DC*) and Andrea (*90210*), who cannot afford an education without a scholarship. Characters such as Daniel (*FG*) and Jordan (*MSCL*), meanwhile, are represented as failures unless they *choose* to put an effort into their education despite the ongoing refusal by educational professionals to adapt their systems of teaching to take these students' needs into account.

Individualizing issues such as social intolerance also places the burden of difference squarely on the shoulders of individual teens. Queer youth are represented to expect conflict and pain. They are depicting as learning how to accept themselves and their sexual identities within a largely unchanging, hostile social reality. In comparison, heterosexual male teens are represented *as* the status quo, normalizing sexually active hetero-masculinity and further marginalizing queer teen boys from perceptions of "normal" adolescence. Individualizing struggle and dissent tends to naturalize the limitations against which teens rebel. Desiring social change is cast as a personal struggle for autonomy in the face of unrelenting and unchangeable, external conditions.

What do these representational patterns *mean* for television, for cultural studies, and/or for youth? First, the persistence of these dominant representations of teenagers suggests that the discourse of teenageness which I have been describing is (with limited variation) unrelenting and implies a certain cultural utility in its acceptance. The meaning that is reinforced by the persistent repetition of these tropes is a view that teens lack control and are *incapable* of managing control. Such widely disseminated conceptual understandings of youth can work to structure systems of organization, rules for behaviour, and age-based prohibitions and policies that materially shape

the lives of young people; at the very least, they contribute to a discursive formation about youth that positions young people as immature, emotional, or incapable of making reliable decisions, which in turn provides a rationale for maintaining adult control over teens.

Of course, teen drama characters are frequently represented as frustrated by the limitations they continue to face and as questioning the legitimacy of the systems and institutions that shape their lives. These depictions of teen struggles do suggest a willingness to support and encourage young people in their attempts to take control over their lives. On an individual level, these teen drama series empower teenage characters to take control of their identities, fight for the freedom to discover themselves and their passions and talents. Yet these individualized narratives of self-determination remain situated within the broader discourse of adolescent limitation. These narratives of individual success inevitably undercut any systematic critique, emphasizing the exceptional teen instead. The argument may be made that while characters like Dylan (*90210*) or Alex (*OC*) may *individually* be mature enough to live independently, *in general* teenagers are not. This formation allows teen drama series to make somewhat contradictory claims about the nature of teenageness, while ultimately maintaining the status quo.

In a certain sense, it is not surprising that teen drama seems to express contradictory or dual meanings about teenageness. As described by Davis and Dickinson, the genre must speak simultaneously to young viewers and their parents (4). This results in narratives which simultaneously offer of a sense of teen freedom and an emphasis on teen limitations (10). Attempts to model positive behaviours may be undercut by representations of bad choices, mistakes, and consequences, and vice versa. Evoking realism, authenticity, and believability risks controversy if representations of (for instance) drug use, casual sex, or school failure are seen to

advocate irresponsible behaviour. On the other hand, heavy-handed morality and cautionary tales may support characterizations of teens as unreliable, irresponsible decision-makers who need to be taught life lessons. Courting both teen and adult viewers, teen drama series offer opportunities for engagement and identification from a number of perspectives. In general, however, discourses of "irresponsibility" and lack of control construct adolescents as an alien "Other" (as distinctly different from adults and children), and further suggest the need for adult "surveillance and control" (Griffin 180).

By representing only certain experiences, the teen drama genre places representational limits around the range of behaviours and identities that are deemed acceptably teenaged. While this analysis has explored how these "normal" teenagers are constituted in these shows, there are notable absences. The teenagers represented on teen dramas tend to be emotional, self-conscious, angst-filled, or nervous. This suggests that confident, easy-going, level-headed teenage-hood is anomalous. Representations tend to depict teens who want to go to college, or at least recognize that to go to college is the normal thing to do following high school. Teenagers who want to work immediately following graduation are not generally represented.[30] While representations of (female and queer) sexuality are already framed by deviance, their inclusion obscures a greater absence. Young women and queer teens are consistently represented as afraid or intimidated by sexuality, suggesting that sexual confidence and healthy sexual behaviour would be abnormal for these characters' narratives.

These televisual representations seem to reflect and contribute to prevailing perceptions of "normal" teens, described by Lesko, including an acceptable range for "deviant" behaviour. For

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[30] While Pacey (*Dawson's Creek*) is one of the few characters to begin working after high school, his decision not to go to college is consistently represented as a point of stress and shame in his life. See Chapter 3 for discussion.

instance, while it is considered normal for teens to feel disenfranchised with school, even to *consider* dropping out, teen dramas do not represent high school drop outs as "normal," acceptable versions of adolescents. Any representation of those who actually do drop out remains absent and stigmatized. Additionally, just as the limits of "normal" teen experiences are reinforced, teenagers are represented as extremely anxious about failing to be considered normal. That is to say, while television defines a normal teen, embedded within that definition is the drive to adhere to those normal characteristics, for fear of being labeled weird or "abnormal" (Jordan, *MSCL* 113). In this way wanting to "be normal" is normalized.

Some of these absences are remarkably similar to characterizations of deviant youth described in Griffin's *Representations of Youth*. Biases towards white, heterosexual, middle-class male experiences as the model for "normal" adolescence can be found in both academic and popular discourses of youth at the end of the twentieth century. Concerned with problems (such as the *problem* of female sexuality, or the *problem* of unemployed youth of colour), youth research has tended to ask questions about perceived deviance and individual youth "failure" to adhere to the "normal" experience of aging into adulthood (Griffin 123).

Of course many of these absences may be explained by the nature of television production exigencies, which tend to produce easily deployed personas who can fit into many dramatic story lines and narratives. Obviously, care-free, self-confident characters do not provide the crises and tensions required for effective storytelling within this genre. But, surely youth of colour, career-oriented youth, or comfortably sexual women (to name a few) can have problems and intrigue in their lives as well. Teenagers are consistently represented as disempowered, and any attempt to take control over their life situation is depicted as a struggle within the expected, established

confines of the youth experience. Absent are teens who experience the power and freedom to make decisions that has not been granted by (or somehow taken from) adults, reinforcing this naturalized power hierarchy.

Limitations

Inherent limits of textual analysis obviously restrict my ability to make conclusive arguments about the nature of television's discourse of teenageness. My study is limited to televisual texts belonging to the teen drama sub-genre, so my conclusions may not apply to analyses of other genres where teenage characters appear.[31] Textual analysis also cannot assess context and meaning beyond what is shown to be present within the text. As such, I have pointed to similarities between my reading of teen drama and the social research of Griffin and Lesko to offer some suggestion of the significance, impact, and pervasiveness of a dominant discourse of youth in society. Of course these comparisons remain largely speculative and cannot imply causal relationships between representations and cultural perspectives.

Textual analysis is also limited by the open-ended nature of cultural meaning. My reading is necessarily subjective and different interpretations may suggest alternative meanings by focusing on different aspects of teen drama. For instance, my study emphasizes similarities between shows; were differences prioritized new meanings would surely emerge. Understanding cultural meaning from a social constructionist perspective implies that others may interpret and construct meanings from these shows that differ from my own. While attempting to convey a thorough portrait of dominant themes and characterizations of teens in the genre (by relying on

[31] These might include comedies, adult-centred dramas, reality series, news media etc.

frequency patterns), my interpretations inevitably reflect my own perspective. My conclusions thus cannot be considered final or fixed.

Of course, this project has not been able to address many potentially rewarding questions related to the study of adolescent representations. For instance, studies of teen television from an institutional or political economic perspective might explain the commercial or technical imperatives producers face in the creation of teenage characters and teen drama series. Why might television creators want (or need) these discourses of youth to continue to circulate? While producers shape the content that I have analyzed, the meaning that I have presented reflects interpretive work and cannot be related to the intentions of series creators. Interpreting representations of teens within a wider cultural context might also offer insight into how popular or fictional discourses interact with various other social sectors, such as the educational or legal sector. The social realities of young people change over time and broader research might assess how new generations of young people come to be reflected in, or choose to resist televisual narratives in the future.

Opportunities for Further Research

There are a number of potential avenues of research that might stem from this project. Offering a coherent picture of the representations of teenageness in teen drama television, my work provides a useful departure point for scholars interested in examining the methods and meanings of the distribution and promotion of such cultural meanings among youth (and other) audiences. It is my hope that this portrait of teen drama characterizations may provide a point of comparison for scholars interested in television audiences and in the lives of young people. It might be worth asking whether the priorities and behavioural patterns described throughout this

analysis correspond in any way to the lived experiences of young people in high school, and if so, to what extent.

Additionally, further research might test the validity or influence of my interpretation of teen drama content by assessing the responses to and meaning made from these television shows by viewers. This type of audience response study may offer insight into the extent to which (youth) audiences internalize, accept, or resist messages about teenageness expressed through programming. Alternatively, emerging practices, such as DVD commentary offering producers' explanations about narrative decisions, provide potential sources of meaning for those interested in taking up an intentional approach[32] to television studies.

Further research might also provide an opportunity to better understand the role of school in the construction of adolescence. The high school features prominently in my discussion, framing adult authority, individual identity, as well as peer socializing, yet the nature of the high school experience is itself highly constructed by social norms and precedents. The centrality of educational institutions as a backdrop for the teen experience on television emphasizes the interconnectedness between teenageness and high school. Teens are consistently shown to dislike the school experience, which begs several questions. First, is it accurate to assume that the majority of teenagers are unhappy with their required education? And if so, why do we cling to such a flawed educational system? Does student resistance stem from a rejection of the lessons taught, or the structure of the teaching? While I have not had the time to delve into the intricacies of the teen drama high school, its televisual representation as well as the institutional realities that affect young people remain promising subjects for youth/culture research.

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[32] As Hall outlines, an intentional approach interprets meaning from representations based on the intentions of producers. Often difficult to ascertain such intended meanings, commentaries by writers and directors provide a unique inside perspective into what was meant by particular narrative choices.

Final Thoughts

Discourses about youth proliferate throughout society. The teen drama series analyzed in this thesis are not uniquely responsible for pervasive cultural conceptions of youth, but contribute to a larger portrait of teenageness. Dominant trends extend across media platforms, social institutions, and fields of study, while contradictions and disagreements complicate any interpretation of the current status of youth in North American culture. For instance, running parallel to the assumption that teens lack control over the decisions that affect them is the assumption that young people are uniquely influential to our culture due to their perceived freedom and purchasing power. Moral panics about juvenile delinquency (potentially connected to representations of drug use, sex, or rebelliousness) suggest that youth abuse their limited freedom, leading to advocates for *increased* control over young people's behaviour. To assume that all young people share the same, universal experience is itself flawed, as demographic variations, from family situation, purchasing power, or location, to racial or sexual identity all work to condition the experiences of growing up.

Despite these contradictions, dominant discourses about the nature of adolescence continue to circulate, while teenageness is continually associated with, as David Dobbs of *National Geographic* describes, "angst, idiocy and haste; impulsiveness, selfishness, and reckless bumbling" (1). This portrait, I believe, is stereotypical and should not be the basis for social interactions with young people. As Robert Epstein describes in "The Myth of the Teen Brain," scientific discourses that attribute irresponsible teen behaviour to immature brain development neglect social and cultural factors which influence brain structure. Brain imaging studies, such as those discussed by Dobbs, fail to provide any evidence of a causal relationship between teenage

brain physiology and behaviour. Rationalizations for the institutionalization of teens in high schools and laws restricting the behaviour of teens seem to stem from *myths* about adolescence, and are likely to induce the very immaturity they are allegedly meant to address: "Isolated from adults and wrongly treated like children, it is no wonder that some teens behave, by adult standards, recklessly or irresponsibly. Almost without exception, the reckless and irresponsible behaviour we see is the teen's way of declaring his or her adulthood or, through pregnancy or the commission of serious crime, of instantly *becoming* an adult under the law" (Epstein 63).

Although teen drama television participates in the perpetuation of these myths, it is significant to note the narrative lines that seem to support the notion that teens may be competent, thoughtful individuals. In fact, these series offer many empowering narratives and opportunities for diverse identification, as I have attempted to point out. The creative auteurs of these teen dramas strive for some version of authenticity in their storytelling (see Introduction to the Sample), and this care for the work they produce is often palpable in their fictions. Yet these producers are operating within a particular discursive formation, which limits the possibilities for teenaged stories. I argue that it is this underlying discursive framework, often fed by these kinds of representations, that works to disempower teens. Recognizing the power of this discourse, and identifying opportunities for change in representations of teens, teen drama may be significantly poised to help foster social recognition of the dignity, power, and autonomy of youth and an equitable future for people of all ages.

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Appendix A: Episodes

Archive of episodes analyzed in topic sections addressing various aspects of teen life.

Parental unfaithfulness/divorce:

Degrassi High

- "103 Breaking Up is Hard to Do," Michelle's mother moves out as a result of having an affair.
- "203 Loyalties," Caitlin discovers her father having an affair.
- "204 A Tangled Web," Caitlin confronts her parents about her father's affair.
- "209 Extra Curricular Activities," Caitlin's parents reveal their plans to move forward together.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "109 Seventeen Year Itch," Brenda and Brandon's mother nearly has an affair.
- "226 Things to do on a Rainy Day," Donna discovers her mother having an affair.

My So-Called Life

- "104 Father Figures," Angela suspects her father of having an affair.

Dawson's Creek

- "104 Discovery," Dawson discovers his mother, Gail, having an affair.
- "105 Hurricane," Gail admits to her affair to her husband.
- "205 Full Moon Rising," Dawson's parents decide to separate.
- "222 Parental Discretion Advised," Gail decides to leave town for a job offer.
- "308 Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," Dawson's parents' divorce is finalized.

Freaks and Geeks

- "112 The Garage Door," Neal discovers his father is having an affair.
- "115 Noshing and Moshing," Neal confronts his mother about his father's affair.

The O.C.

- "107 The Escape," Marissa discovers her parents are getting divorced.
- "221 The Return of the Nana," Seth's mother, Kirsten, contemplates having an affair.
- "222 The Showdown," Kirsten explains her feelings about problems in her marriage.

Managing parental expectations/disappointment:

Degrassi High

- "208 Home Sweet Home," Michelle decides to move back home, provided her father respects her independence; Wheels is homeless after he takes advantage of his friends.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "106 One on One," Brandon tries out for the basketball team, with his father's encouragement.
- "318 Midlife...Now What," Kelly begins worrying about her appearance.
- "324 Perfectly Perfect," Kelly stops eating and passes out from taking diet pills.
- "325 Senior Poll," Kelly confronts her mother about her expectations of beauty.

My So-Called Life

- "105 The Zit," Angela confronts her mother about her expectations of beauty.
- "115 So-Called Angels," Rickie leaves home after his parents beat him up.

Dawson's Creek

- "212 Uncharted Waters," Pacey copes with his father's continual disappointment.
- "308 Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," Jen confronts her mother about her disapproval.

Freaks and Geeks

- "116 Smooching and Mooching," Nick leaves home after his father sells his drums.

The O.C.

- "308 The Game Plan," Seth confronts his father about his expectations about Berkley.

Desiring independence:

Degrassi High

- "108 Little White Lies," Diana rebels against her brother's rules by smoking and drinking.
- "109-110 Sixteen (parts 1 and 2)," Michelle moves out to escape her father's rules.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "118 Stand (Up) and Deliver," Brenda considers leaving high school to live on her own.
- "210 Necessity is a Mother," Dylan rebels against his mother's presence in his life.
- "301 Misery Loves Company," Brenda leaves home to escape her parent's rules about dating.

My So-Called Life

- "110 Other People's Mothers," Angela rebels against her mother's rules about her friends.

Dawson's Creek

- "221 Ch..Ch..Changes," Jack stays behind on his own when his father moves the family away.
- "410 Self Reliance," Joey tries to take on extra responsibilities independently without help.

Freaks and Geeks

- "118 Discos and Dragons," Lindsay rebels against her parents' academic expectations.

The O.C.

- "214 Rainy Day Women," Marissa leaves home to escape her mother's presence.

Engaging with authority:

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "107 Higher Education," Brandon confronts Mr. Danzel about his teaching methods.
- "311 Presumption of Innocence," Sue accuses Mr. Meyers of sexual misconduct.

My So-Called Life

- "103 Guns and Gossip," Brian stands up to Principal Foster's pressuring to reveal a suspect.
- "106 The Substitute," Angela is inspired by Mr. Racine to wake up and think for herself.
- "112 Self Esteem," Mr. Katimsky tries to inspire Rickie to join drama club.
- "116 Resolutions," Rickie turns to Mr. Katimsky for help when he finds himself homeless.

Dawson's Creek

- "214 To Be or Not To Be...," Pacey stands up to Mr. Peterson's treatment of Jack in class.
- "215 ...That is the Question," Pacey exposes Mr. Peterson's unethical teaching methods.
- "217 Psychic Friends," Dawson receives difficult feedback from his mentor, Ms. Kennedy.

Freaks and Geeks

- "110 The Diary," Bill confronts Mr. Fredricks about his method of organizing baseball in class.
- "114 Dead Dogs and Gym Teachers," Bill rebels against Mr. Fredricks when his mom reveals she has been dating his teacher.

The O.C.

- "302 The Shape of Things to Come," Dean Hess uses his authority to expel Marissa and Ryan.
- "303 The End of Innocence," Dean Hess blackmails Summer and Seth into helping Taylor.

- "305 The Perfect Storm," Summer confronts Dean Hess's abuses of authority by exposing his illicit affair with a student, Taylor.

School dances:

Degrassi High

- "212 Three's A Crowd," Everyone tries to get dates for the formal dance.
- "213 One Last Dance," Everyone goes to the end of year formal dance.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "122 Spring Dance," The group goes to the spring dance.
- "327 A Night to Remember," The group goes to their senior prom.

My So-Called Life

- "111 Life of Brian," Sharon organizes a "world happiness" dance.

Dawson's Creek

- "102 Dance," Jen goes to the "victory" dance with Cliff, to Dawson's surprise.
- "206 The Dance," Andie convinces the group to go to the dance.
- "322 The Anti-Prom," Dawson organizes an alternative prom.
- "420 Promicide," The group goes to their senior prom.

Freaks and Geeks

- "101 Pilot," Lindsay and Sam go to the homecoming dance.

The O.C.

- "205 The Sno.C.," Marissa organizes the winter dance.
- "223 The O'Sea," The group goes to their junior prom.
- "304 The Last Waltz," Marissa goes to a dance at her new school.
- "323 The Party Favor," The group goes to their senior prom.

Parties:

Degrassi High

- "107 Just Friends," Heather hosts a party to attract Wheels' attention.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "110 B.Y.O.B.," Brenda throws a party that gets out of control.

My So-Called Life

- "110 Other Peoples Mothers," Rayanne throws a party, ending up in the hospital.

Dawson's Creek

- "202 Crossroads," Pacey throws himself a birthday party.
- "301 Like a Virgin," Dawson throws a party with strippers to raise money.

Freaks and Geeks

- "102 Beers and Weirs," Lindsay throws a party to impress her new friends.

The O.C.

- "219 The Rager," Marissa throws a party that gets out of control.

Drug experiences:

Degrassi High

- "115 Stressed Out," Michelle passes out after taking caffein pills.

- "207 The All-Nighter," The Have-Nots try marijuana at Diana's birthday party.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "215 U4EA," Emily slips "U4EA" (coded ecstasy) into Brandon's drink at a rave.
- "324 Perfectly Perfect," Kelly passes out after taking diet pills.

My So-Called Life

- "110 Other People's Mothers," Rayanne overdoses on ecstasy and alcohol.

Dawson's Creek

- "406 Great Expectations," Andie takes ecstasy, ending up in the hospital.

Freaks and Geeks

- "113 Chokin' and Tokin'," Lindsay tries marijuana after arguing with Nick.

The O.C.

- "107 The Escape," Marissa overdoses on painkillers and alcohol.
- "221 The Return of the Nana," Trey attacks Marissa while high on cocaine.
- "313 The Pot Stirrer," Seth smokes marijuana when stressed about college applications.

Hospital trips:

Degrassi High

- "107 Just Friends," LD learns she has leukemia.
- "School's Out," Lucy ends up in the hospital after Wheels drives drunk.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "117 It's Only a Test," Brenda discovers a lump in her breast and has it tested.
- "203 Summer Storm," Dylan is injured in a surfing accident.

My So-Called Life

- "108 Strangers in the House," Sharon's father suffers a heart attack.

Dawson's Creek

- "404 Future Tense," Jack breaks his arm at football practice.

Freaks and Geeks

- "113 Chokin' and Tokin'," Bill ends up in a coma after an allergic reaction to peanuts.

The O.C.

- "105 The Outsider," Luke is shot in the arm by "the outsider," Donnie.
- "108 The Rescue," Marissa recovers from her overdose in the hospital.
- "211 The Second Chance," Seth's mother is in the hospital after her car is hit by a truck.

Dealing with death/trauma:

Degrassi High

- "206 Crossed Wires," Liz suffers from the trauma of being sexually abused as a child.
- "210-211 Showtime (parts 1 and 2)," Caitlin copes with the death of her ex-boyfriend when Claude commits suicide; Snake deals with the trauma of discovering the dead body.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "214 The Next Fifty Years," David copes after Scott accidentally shoots himself.
- "225 Meeting Mr. Pony," Brenda suffers from the trauma of being held up at gunpoint.
- "322 The Child is the Father to the Man," Dylan suffers after the trauma of his father's death.

My So-Called Life

- "103 Guns and Gossip," A gunshot in school brings in the police and special counselors.

Dawson's Creek

- "113 Decisions," Jen copes with the death of her grandfather.
- "219 Abby Morgan, Rest in Peace," Jen copes with the death of her friend, Abbey.
- "220 Reunited," Andie suffers after Abbey's death triggers her mental illness.
- "414 A Winter's Tale," Dawson deals with the responsibility of his friend, Mr. Brooks' death.
- "415 Four Stories," Dawson copes with Mr. Brooks' death.

Freaks and Geeks

- "101 Pilot," Lindsay discusses the death of her grandmother with her brother, Sam.
- "114 Dead Dogs and Gym Teachers," Millie copes with the death of her dog, Goliath.

The O.C.

- "222 The Showdown," Marissa suffers from the trauma of Trey's attempted sexual assault.
- "224 The Dearly Beloved," Seth's grandfather dies, triggering his mother's alcoholism.
- "308 The Game Plan," Marissa suffers from the trauma of shooting Trey.
- "315 The Heavy Lifting" Marissa copes with the death of her friend, Johnny.

Artistic Passions:

Degrassi High

- "105 Everybody Wants Something," The Zits make a music video.
- "114 It Creeps!" Lucy makes a feminist horror film.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "117 Fame is where you find it," Brenda uses her job at the Peach Pit as an acting exercise.
- "118 Stand (up) and Deliver," Brenda explores stand up/confessional comedy.
- "320 Parental Guidance Recommended," David gets a chance at a recording contract.
- "325 Senior Poll," Dylan writes a memoir about his childhood after his father's death.

My So-Called Life

- "107 Why Jordan Can't Read," Jordan writes a song for his band, Frozen Embryos.

Dawson's Creek

- "204 Tamara's Return," Joey takes up art, following in her mother's footsteps.
- "210 High Risk Behaviour," Dawson writes a film about his relationship with Joey.
- "213 His Leading Lady," Dawson makes his second film, a romance.
- "307 Escape from Witch Island," Dawson makes a Blair Witch Project-style documentary.
- "310 First Encounters of the Close Kind," Dawson goes to a film festival.

Freaks and Geeks

- "101 Pilot," Nick introduces Lindsay to his drum kit.
- "106 I'm With the Band," Nick auditions to drum in a real band.
- "109 We've Got Spirit," Neal indulges his passion for comedy as the new school mascot.

The O.C.

- "202 The Way We Were," Ryan discovers an interest in architecture.
- "212 The Lonely Hearts Club," Seth and Zach pitch their comic book to a publisher.

Causes:

Degrassi High

- "111 All in a Good Cause," Caitlin and Claude vandalize a nuclear arms factory.
- "115 Stressed Out," Caitlin tries to save Miss Avery's job.
- "205 Body Politics," Lucy stands up for the girls' volleyball team's rights.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "221 Everybody's Talkin' Bout It," Andrea campaigns for condoms in school.
- "328 Something in the Air," Brandon leads a march to support Donna's right to graduate.

My So-Called Life

- "106 The Substitute," Angela protests the school's censorship of the literary magazine.

Dawson's Creek

- "316 To Green With Love," Joey supports principal Green when his job is threatened.

Freaks and Geeks

- "117 The Little Things," Lindsay stands up to Vice President Bush when he visits the school.

The O.C.

- "311 The Safe Harbor," Summer and Taylor campaign to have Marissa re-admitted to their private school.

Pressure to succeed:

Degrassi High

- "115 Stressed Out," Michelle tries to prove she can succeed at school while living on her own.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "119 It's Only a Test," Andrea worries about the significance of the SATs to her future.
- "309 Highwire," Andrea is nervous about applying to Yale.

My So-Called Life

- "111 Life of Brian," Brian is characterized by his academic abilities.
- "112 Self-Esteem," Brian expresses the pressure of being expected to succeed at school.

Dawson's Creek

- "111 Double Date," Joey reveals her need to succeed in order to get a scholarship to college.
- "303 None of the Above," Andie cheats on the PSAT.
- "315 Crime and Punishment," Andie admits that she cheated on the PSAT to Principal Green.
- "417 Admissions," Joey succeeds in getting into college, but without financial aid.

Freaks and Geeks

- "101 Pilot," Lindsay is characterized by her academic abilities, and as a former Mathlete.

The O.C.

- "202 The Way We Were," Ryan begins taking AP science classes in preparation for college.
- "309 The Disconnect," Summer discovers she is academically gifted and plans for college.

Pressure not to fail:

Degrassi High

- "113 Testing 1..2..3..," Joey discovers he has a learning disability, and considers dropping out; Most of the grade nines copy an old version of the science test.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "107 Higher Education," Brandon and Steve cheat on their history quizzes.
- "312 Destiny Rides Again," Steve breaks into the school computer to change his grades.

- "313 Rebel with a Cause," Steve fails to change his grades in order to get into college; Dylan is accused of cheating on the SATs.
- "315 The Kindness of Strangers," Steve is nearly expelled from school.

My So-Called Life

- "109 Halloween," Jordan risks expulsion if he continues to skip class.
- "112 Self-Esteem," Angela fails to study for Geometry and considers skipping the midterm.
- "116 Resolutions," Jordan begins to try at school, being peer tutored by Brian.

Dawson's Creek

- "208 The Reluctant Hero," Pacey begins to try to raise his grades, inspired by Andie.
- "422 The Graduate," Pacey manages to graduate high school, against all perceived odds.

Freaks and Geeks

- "105 Tests and Breasts," Daniel convinces Lindsay to help him cheat on an Algebra test.
- "106 I'm With the Band," Nick's father threatens him with the army if he does not make a C+.
- "113 Chokin' and Tokin'," Nick retreats by smoking pot to avoid his father's disappointment.

The O.C.

- "305 The Perfect Storm," Ryan considers quitting school when Dean Hess threatens his future.

Virginity loss:

Degrassi High

- "School's Out," Joey and Tessa lose their virginity together; Caitlin later loses her virginity with her boyfriend, Joey.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "105 The First Time," Brandon loses his virginity with his old girlfriend, Sheryl.
- "122 Spring Dance," Brenda loses her virginity with her boyfriend, Dylan.
- "123 Home Again," Andrea considers losing her virginity with her crush, Brandon.
- "312 Destiny Rides Again," Donna considers losing her virginity with her boyfriend, David.

My So-Called Life

- "103 Guns and Gossip," Angela considers losing her virginity after a rumour circulates.
- "113 Pressure," Angela considers losing her virginity with Jordan when he pressures her to.

Dawson's Creek

- "103 Kiss," Pacey loses his virginity with his English teacher, Tamara Jacobs.
- "210 High Risk Behaviour," Andie loses her virginity with her boyfriend, Pacey.
- "211 Sex She Wrote," Andie and Pacey fight after she decides to lose her virginity with him.
- "405 Family Way," Joey considers losing her virginity and goes to the clinic for information.
- "414 A Winter's Tale," Joey loses her virginity with her boyfriend, Pacey.

Freaks and Geeks

- "108 Girlfriends and Boyfriends," Lindsay considers losing her virginity with her boyfriend, Nick.

The O.C.

- "106 The Girlfriend," Marissa loses her virginity with her on-again-off-again boyfriend, Luke.
- "119 The Heart Break," Seth and Summer lose their virginity together.

Queer sexuality:

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "203 Summer Storm," Kelly discovers that Kyle is gay after failing to make out with him.

My So-Called Life

- "101 Pilot," Rickie is introduced as a gender-bending, queer character who wears eye liner.
- "103 Guns and Gossip," Rickie is bullied for bending gender expectations.
- "111 Life of Brian," Rickie develops a crush on the new kid, Corey.
- "119 In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," Rickie comes out to Delia, who has a crush on him.

Dawson's Creek

- "214-215 To Be of Not To Be...That Is The Question," Jack is outed in English class when he is forced to read a poem he has written about a man.
- "323 True Love," Jack finds the courage to kiss his crush, Ethan.
- "405 Family Way," Jack stops coaching soccer when parents react after learning he is gay.
- "420 Promicide," Jack takes Tobey to the prom.

Freaks and Geeks

- "117 The Little Things," Ken worries he might be gay after Daniel makes a joke.

The O.C.

- "209 The Ex-Factor," Seth discovers that his girlfriend, Alex's ex is a girl.
- "210 The Accomplice," Seth wonders about his relationship with Alex, and her sexuality.
- "211 The Second Chance," Marissa and Alex flirt, building a relationship.
- "212 The Lonely Hearts Club," Marissa and Alex share a first date and a first kiss.
- "214 Rainy Day Women," Marissa moves in with her girlfriend, Alex.

Promiscuity/consequences of sex:

Degrassi High

- "101-102 A New Start (parts 1 and 2)," Erica discovers she is pregnant and has an abortion.
- "201-202 Bad Blood (parts 1 and 2)," Dwayne discovers he has HIV.
- "School's Out," Tessa has an abortion after her affair with Joey leaves her pregnant.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "111 Isn't it Romantic," A guest speaker at school talks about AIDS awareness.
- "113 One Man and a Baby," Melissa deals with raising a baby and trying to get into college.
- "114 Slumber Party," Kelly reveals her sexual history, the source of her "bimbo reputation."
- "201 Beach Blanket Brandon," Brenda worries she might be pregnant when her period is late.
- "213 Halloween," Kelly is nearly date-raped at a party after wearing a revealing costume.

My So-Called Life

- "101 Pilot," Rayanne ends up in a compromising situation after flirting with an older guy.
- "105 The Zit," Rayanne is labelled "most slut potential" by the boys in her class.
- "113 Pressure," Sharon explains the expectations boys develop once you have sex once.
- "116 Resolutions," Sharon uses her ex-boyfriend Kyle for sex, and bonds with Rayanne.
- "117 Betrayal," Rayanne ruins her friendship with Angela by having sex with Jordan.

Dawson's Creek

- "104 Discovery," Jen reveals that she is not a virgin, disappointing Dawson.
- "105 Hurricane," Jen reveals her sexual history, the source of her "bad girl" reputation.
- "203 Alternative Lifestyles," Jen tries to seduce Dawson to get him back.

- “207 The All-Nighter,” Jen and Chris casually hook-up.
- “208 The Reluctant Hero,” Jen parties with alcohol and sex until Dawson intervenes.
- “419 Late,” Joey worries she might be pregnant when her period is late.

Freaks and Geeks

- “110 The Diary,” Lindsay’s parents claim Kim is a bad influence, because she has sex.

The O.C.

- “126 The Strip,” Theresa discovers she is pregnant, and can’t afford an abortion.
- “201 The Distance,” Theresa lies to Ryan about having a miscarriage.
- “319 The Secrets and Lies,” Marissa parties with alcohol, drugs, and sex with Volchok.
- “325 The Graduates,” Marissa’s past (Volchok) comes back to haunt, and kill, her.

Crushes:

Degrassi High

- “107 Just Friends,” Heather tries to get her crush, Wheels, to like her by throwing a party.
- “212 Three’s a Crowd,” Spike develops a crush on Snake while working on a school project.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- “101 Pilot,” David develops a crush on Kelly the first day of high school.
- “114 Slumber Party,” Andrea’s crush on Brandon is revealed at Brenda’s slumber party.
- “122 Spring Dance,” Andrea and Kelly both try to get dates to the dance with Brandon.

My So-Called Life

- “101 Pilot,” Angela’s crush on Jordan is revealed as part of her character introduction.
- “102 Dancing in the Dark,” Angela gets a fake ID as an excuse to talk to Jordan.
- “107 Why Jordan Can’t Read,” Angela and Jordan bond over a love letter he can’t read.
- “111 Life of Brian,” Brian tries to get to the dance with his crush, Angela.
- “116 Resolutions,” Brian deals with tutoring his crush, Angela’s crush, Jordan.
- “119 In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” Brian helps Jordan express feelings about Angela.

Dawson’s Creek

- “101 Pilot,” Joey develops a crush on her childhood friend, Dawson.
- “107 Detention,” Joey’s crush on Dawson is articulated by Abbey.
- “113 Decisions,” Dawson realizes he shares Joey’s feelings.

Freaks and Geeks

- “101 Pilot,” Sam asks his crush, Cindy to the homecoming dance.
- “107 Carded and Discarded,” Nick’s crush on Lindsay grows after they kiss.
- “109 We’ve Got Spirit,” Sam lashes out at his crush, Cindy’s crush, Todd.
- “111 Looks and Books,” Sam tries to get his crush, Cindy to notice him by getting new clothes.
- “112 The Garage Door,” Nick tries to hide his crush on Lindsay after they’ve broken up.

The O.C.

- “101 Premiere,” Seth’s crush on Summer is revealed as part of his character introduction.
- “106 The Girlfriend,” Seth reveals his crush to Summer and is rewarded with a kiss.
- “307 The Anger Management,” Taylor develops a crush on Seth after he is friendly to her.

Dating:

Degrassi High

- "106 Nobody's Perfect," Kathleen deals with her abusive boyfriend, Scott.
- "206 Crossed Wires," Liz panics when Tim tries to kiss her at the end of their date.
- "School's Out," Joey starts dating Tessa, while still going out with Caitlin.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "113 One Man and a Baby," Brandon dates a teen mom, Melissa.
- "115 East Side Story," Brandon dates the new, hispanic girl, Karla.
- "202 The Party Fish," Brandon dates his older coworker, Sandy.
- "208 Wild Fire," Brandon dates the new girl at school, Emily; Dylan also dates Emily.
- "219 Fire and Ice," Brandon dates a world-class figure skater, Tricia.
- "303 Too Little Too Late / Paris, 75001," Andrea says goodbye to republican boyfriend, Jay.
- "304 Sex Lies and Volleyball / Photo Fini," Steve competes with Brandon over athletic girl, Brooke; David is tempted by Nikki while his girlfriend, Donna is in Paris.

My So-Called Life

- "112 Self-Esteem," Angela and Jordan meet in the boiler room to make out.

Dawson's Creek

- "102 Dance," Jen goes to the dance, on a date with Cliff.
- "205 Full Moon Rising," Jen entertains an older guy, Vincent.

Freaks and Geeks

- "108 Girlfriends and Boyfriends," Lindsay and Nick awkwardly begin dating.
- "116 Smooching and Mooching," Sam's first date with Cindy is at a make-out party.

The O.C.

- "204 The New Era," Seth and Ryan try a "group hang" with Lindsay and Alex.

Relationships:

Degrassi High

- "104 Dream On," Caitlin, infatuated with Claude, grows tired of her boyfriend, Joey.
- "213 One Last Dance," Caitlin and Joey get back together again at the dance.
- "School's Out," Caitlin and Joey consider getting engaged before she goes off to university; Alexa and Simon get married after they graduate high school.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "111 Isn't it Romantic," Brenda and Dylan get together despite issues with their fathers.
- "208 Wild Fire," Brenda and Dylan get back together when she gets jealous of his dating.
- "217 Chuckie's Back," Donna and David get together when she decides she's not embarrassed.
- "303 Too Little Too Late / Paris, 75001," Dylan and Kelly flirt, while Brenda is in Paris.
- "304 Sex Lies and Volleyball / Photo Fini," Dylan and Kelly continue to build a relationship.
- "319 Back in the High Life Again," Dylan and Kelly get together now that he is single again.

My So-Called Life

- "105 The Zit," Sharon and Kyle get together after "the big game."

Dawson's Creek

- "201 The Kiss," Dawson and Joey get together after a kiss alters their friendship.
- "205 Full Moon Rising," Pacey and Andie get together after he meets her mother.
- "314 Valentine's Day Massacre," Jen and Henry get together after a disastrous first date.
- "317 Cinderella Story," Pacey kisses Joey, declaring his feelings for her.

- “323 True Love,” Joey and Pacey get together and sail off into the sunset.

Freaks and Geeks

- “102 Beers and Weirs,” Daniel and Kim break up but get back together at Lindsay’s party.
- “104 Kim Kelly is my Friend,” Daniel and Kim fight and make up after he flirts with Karen.
- “115 Noshing and Moshing,” Daniel and Kim break up while fighting, but get back together.

The O.C.

- “109 The Heights,” Marissa and Ryan get together at the kick-off carnival.
- “114 The Countdown,” Anna and Seth get together when she shows up on New Year’s Eve.
- “120 The Telenovela,” Seth and Summer get together following his breakup with Anna.
- “124 The Proposal,” Ryan and Marissa get back together when she’s feeling depressed.
- “214 The Rainy Day Women,” Seth and Summer get back together instead of her leaving for Italy with Zach.
- “323 The Party Favor,” Seth and Summer get back together at the prom.

Break-ups:

Degrassi High

- “105 Everybody Wants Something,” Caitlin breaks up with Joey to be with Claude.
- “201-202 Bad Blood (parts 1 and 2),” BLT breaks up with Michelle to be with Cindy.
- “205 Body Politics,” Spike has broken up with Patrick.
- “212 Three’s a Crowd,” Tessa and Alex break up after she kisses Yick.
- “School’s Out,” Caitlin breaks up with Joey after finding out he had sex with Tessa.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- “201 Beach Blanket Brandon,” Brenda breaks up with Dylan after a pregnancy scare.
- “216 My Desperate Valentine,” Brandon breaks up with Emily after she drugs him at a rave.
- “312 Destiny Rides Again,” Brenda and Dylan break up after they both admit to cheating.

My So-Called Life

- “112 Self Esteem,” Sharon has broken up with Kyle before midterms.
- “113 Pressure,” Angela and Jordan break up when she won’t have sex with him.

Dawson’s Creek

- “108 Boyfriend,” Jen breaks up with Dawson after her ex-boyfriend visits.
- “206 The Dance,” Joey breaks up with Dawson to find her life’s passion/direction.
- “213 His Leading Lady,” Andie breaks up with Pacey while depressed.
- “222 Parental Discretion Advised,” Joey breaks up with Dawson after her father is arrested.
- “302 Homecoming,” Pacey breaks up with Andie after finding out she cheated on him.
- “420 Promicide,” Pacey breaks up with Joey when he feels like a failure.

Freaks and Geeks

- “109 We’ve Got Spirit,” Nick and Lindsay break up when she gets bored of him getting stoned.
- “115 Noshing and Moshing,” Kim breaks up with Daniel because he is unreliable.
- “117 The Little Things,” Sam breaks up with Cindy because she is boring.

The O.C.

- “118 The Truth,” Anna breaks up with Seth because he obviously likes Summer better.
- “119 The Heartbreak,” Ryan breaks up with Marissa after she fails to trust him.

- "216 The Blaze of Glory," Alex and Marissa break up when Alex decides she does not fit in Marissa's life.
- "316 The Road Warrior," Ryan and Marissa break up after drifting apart.
- "320 The Day After Tomorrow," Summer and Seth break up after he lies about getting into college.

Growing up/leaving old friends:

Degrassi High

- "101 A New Start," Yick and Arthur grow apart after Arthur spends the summer in france.

My So-Called Life

- "101 Pilot," Angela starts hanging out with Rayanne, leaving Sharon behind.
- "108 Strangers in the House," Angela and Sharon discuss their old friendship.

Dawson's Creek

- "101 Pilot," Joey and Dawson's childhood friendship is altered as they begin high school.

Freaks and Geeks

- "101 Pilot," Lindsay makes friends with the freaks, leaving Millie behind.
- "103 Tricks and Treats," Sam is considered too old to trick-or-treat.

Social identity:

Degrassi High

- "107 Just Friends," Kathleen rejoins Melanie and Diana in the Have-Not club.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- "101 Pilot," David and Scott are rejected as freshman geeks; Brenda makes friends with Kelly.
- "214 The Next Fifty Years," David rejects Scott and their geeky friendship.

My So-Called Life

- "105 The Zit," Angela worries that Rayanne's slutty reputation will rub off on her.

Dawson's Creek

- "202 Crossroads," Jen and Abbey bond over "bad girl" status.

Freaks and Geeks

- "101 Pilot," Social divisions at school are introduced, separating groups of friends into freaks, geeks, jocks and cheerleaders, bullies, and brains/Mathletes.
- "104 Kim Kelly is my Friend," Sam and his friends are bullied for being geeks.
- "111 Looks and Books," Lindsay's reputation is affected by her friendship with freaks.
- "118 Discos and Dragons," Sam is tired of being a geek; The freaks begin to drift apart.

The O.C.

- "101 Premiere," Seth's lack of friends makes him an outsider and a geek.

What friends do together:

Degrassi High

- "105 Everybody Wants Something," The Zits hang out and make a music video at school.
- "107 Just Friends," The Have-Nots hang out in the cafeteria and go to the movies.
- "207 The All-Nighter," The Have-Nots have a sleep-over; Some boys play poker at Luke's.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- “101 Pilot,” Brenda and Kelly hang out at school and talk on the phone.
- “103 The Green Room,” Brenda and Kelly hang out at the beach.
- “114 Slumber Party,” Brenda hosts a sleep-over for her girlfriends.

My So-Called Life

- “101 Pilot,” Angela, Rayanne, and Rickie hang out in the school bathroom and at Angela’s.
- “105 The Zit,” Angela, Rayanne, and Rickie hang out in the school bathroom.
- “110 Other People’s Mothers,” Angela hangs out at Rayanne’s for the first time.

Dawson’s Creek

- “101 Pilot,” Joey and Dawson hang out and watch movies at Dawson’s.
- “202 Cross Roads,” Pacey feels left out when Dawson is too busy to hang out with him.
- “207 The All-Nighter,” Chris hosts an all-night study group for everyone.
- “212 Uncharted Waters,” The girls hang out at a sleep over; The boys bond on a fishing trip.

Freaks and Geeks

- “101 Pilot,” Freaks hang out on the smoking patio; Geeks hang out in the cafeteria.
- “106 I’m With the Band,” Freaks hang out at Nick’s and play music.
- “107 Carded and Discarded,” Freaks hang out on the smoking patio and try to get to a bar.

The O.C.

- “105 The Outsider,” Seth and Ryan hang out in the pool house.
- “119 The Heartbreak,” Boys hang out in the pool house; Girls hang out on the beach.
- “204 The New Era,” Seth and Ryan hang out in the pool house and the coffee shop at school.

What threatens friendships:

Degrassi High

- “112 Natural Attraction,” Amy and Allison fight over Snake.
- “203 Loyalties,” Alexa and Michelle fight after Michelle and BLT break up, splitting up their double date foursome.

Beverly Hills, 90210

- “313 Rebel With a Cause,” Kelly and Brenda fight after Kelly dates Brenda’s ex, Dylan.

My So-Called Life

- “117 Betrayal,” Angela stops speaking to Rayanne after Rayanne has sex with Jordan.

Dawson’s Creek

- “320 The Longest Day,” Dawson rejects Pacey’s friendship when Pacey begins dating Joey.

Freaks and Geeks

- “104 Kim Kelly is my Friend,” Kim is angry at Karen after Karen flirts with Daniel.

The O.C.

- “217 The Brothers Grim,” Ryan rejects his brother, Trey when he is implicated in illegalities.
- “222 The Showdown,” Zach and Seth discard their friendship, competing over Summer.

Appendix B: Character Glossary

List of characters (alphabetical by first name) referenced throughout the body of this text.

Main Characters

Character	Show	Description
Andie McPhee	DC	Academic achiever, plans to go to Harvard. Jack's twin sister. Dates Pacey for nearly a year. Suffers from mental illness following the death of her oldest brother. Begins as a sophomore, halfway through the year in season 2 and leaves the series early in season 4, but returns as a graduating senior.
Andrea Zuckerman	90210	Academic achiever, school newspaper editor. Dreams of going to Yale. From a relatively poor family, so could not afford a good college without a scholarship. Jewish. Carries an ongoing one-sided crush on Brandon for close to two years. Begins the series as a junior, ends as a graduating senior.
Angela Chase	MSCL	Lead family. Introspective, innocent, and somewhat shy. Childhood friends with Sharon, she makes friends with Rayanne and Rickie. Maintains an ongoing crush on Jordan, resulting in an ill-defined, short-term relationship. Object of Brian's affections. Series takes place during her sophomore year.
Bill Haverchuck	FG	Geek. Loves movies and TV, especially *Dallas*. Immature about sexuality, grossed out by french kissing. Hates Gym class, and is particularly angry when his mom starts dating the Gym teacher, Mr. Fredricks. Series takes place during his freshman year.
Brandon Walsh	90210	Lead family. Brenda's twin brother. Serial dater and object of many girls' affections. Often referred to as a "boy scout" due to his high moral standards. Works at the Peach Pit diner to pay car insurance. Begins the series as a junior, ends as a graduating senior.
Brenda Walsh	90210	Lead family. Brandon's twin sister. Loves acting, often resulting in dramatic outbursts. Dates Dylan, on and off. Best friends with Kelly, until Kelly and Dylan start dating. Begins the series as a junior, ends as a graduating senior.
Brian Krakow	MSCL	Academic achiever. Book smart, but doesn't understand people very well. Jewish. Maintains an ongoing one-sided crush on Angela. Series takes place during his sophomore year.
Caitlin Ryan	Degrassi	Good student. Plans to study journalism at university. Feminist activist, often tries to take action against injustice. Gets arrested for vandalism. Dates Joey on and off. Dates Claude until he runs away, letting her get arrested. Begins the series in grade 9, ends as a graduating senior after working hard to skip a year.
Daniel Dessario	FG	Freak. Terrible student, due to lack of interest. Often skips class and cheats. People-smart, and generally friendly, although an academic underachiever. Dates Kim on and off long term. Relatively poor, he feels trapped by his parents' poverty. Series takes place during his junior year, since he was held back twice in elementary school.
David Silver	90210	Geek as a freshman with childhood friend, Scott. Becomes Kelly's step-brother. School DJ and aspiring musician. Dates Donna. Begins the series as a new freshman, ends as a graduating senior after working hard to skip a year.
Dawson Leery	DC	Lead family. Idealist and romantic and as a result remains a virgin throughout high school. Film enthusiast and maker. Dates Joey on and off. Best friends with Pacey, until Pacey dates Joey. Also dates Jen, becoming the object of her affections. Begins the series as a sophomore, ends as a graduating senior.
Donna Martin	90210	Best friends with Kelly. Raised religious, by a strict mother, and as a result remains a virgin throughout high school. Dates David. Begins the series as a junior, ends as a graduating senior.

Character	Show	Description
Dylan McKay	90210	Emancipated minor, with issues with both his parents, although reconnecting with his father at the time of his death. Rich and independent, does not like talking about private things. Surfer. Recovering alcoholic. Dates Brenda on and off, then dates Kelly. Begins the series as a junior, ends as a graduating senior.
Jack McPhee	DC	Gay, and forced to come out publicly by an unethical teacher. Andie's twin brother. Klutzy, yet athletic. Dates Joey before coming out. Begins to date Tobey at the end of the series. Begins as a sophomore, joining the series in season 2, ends as a graduating senior.
Jen Lindley	DC	Wild new girl from NYC with a promiscuous past and history of drug use, sent to live with her grandmother. Often depressed and turns to alcohol in an attempt to have fun. Dates Dawson, maintains a crush on him after they break up. Dates Henry. Begins the series as a sophomore, ends as a graduating senior.
Joey Jeremiah	Degrassi	Poor student due to a learning disability. In a band, the Zits, with best friends Snake and Wheels. Dates Caitlin on and off, but cheats on her with Tessa. Often sexist or demeaning, but also kind and funny. Begins the series in grade 9 after being held back, ends in grade 11.
Joey Potter	DC	Academic achiever. Childhood friends with Dawson. Lives with her sister since her mother has died and her father is in prison. Relatively poor, works hard at school to get a scholarship to college in order to escape her small-town life. Dates Dawson on and off after maintaining an ongoing crush on him, then dates Pacey. Begins the series as a sophomore, ends as a graduating senior.
Jordan Catalano	MSCL	Terrible student, often skips class. Nearly illiterate, academic underachiever, but people-smart. In a band, the Frozen Embryos. Object of Angela's affections, and interested in her, but unwilling to commit. Series takes place during his sophomore year, since he was held back twice.
Kelly Taylor	90210	Beautiful but insecure, frustrated by her mother, a former model's attitude towards beauty. Acquired a "bimbo reputation" by sleeping around as a sophomore. Temporarily has a crush on Brandon. Dates Dylan. Formerly dated Steve. Begins the series as a junior, ends as a graduating senior.
Kim Kelly	FG	Freak. Often bitchy. Sexually active within relationship, dating Daniel on and off long term. Poor student, but grows increasingly tired of Daniel's attitude towards school. Series takes place during her junior year.
Lindsay Weir	FG	Lead family. Sam's older sister. Academically gifted, but loses interest in school. Childhood friends with Millie, but makes friends with the Freaks. Maintains a secret, ongoing crush on Daniel. Briefly dates Nick. Series takes place during her junior year.
Lucy Fernandez	Degrassi	Academic achiever, valedictorian and student council president. Feminist activist and aspiring filmmaker. Plans to study film at university. Dates Bronco, the former student council president. Ends up in the hospital after Wheels drives drunk and crashes. Begins the series in grade 10, ends as a graduating senior.
Marissa Cooper	OC	Involved in extra-curricular activities. Increasingly alcoholic. Dates Luke until he cheats on her. Dates Ryan on and off. Becomes increasingly promiscuous and sexually active, including a same-sex relationship. Begins the series as a sophomore, ends as a graduating senior, but is killed soon after graduation in a road accident.
Neal Schweiber	FG	Geek. Loves movies and comedy. Discovers his father's infidelity and acts out, although normally a good student. Jewish. Relatively wealthy, his father is a dentist, and as a result concerned with acquiring a well-paid career. Series takes place during his freshman year.
Nick Andopolis	FG	Freak. The biggest stoner among his friends. Aspiring drummer, although not very skilled. Also a terrible student, despite conflict with his father who insists he maintain a C+ average. Briefly dates Lindsay, and maintains a crush on her after they break up. Series takes place during his junior year.

Character	Show	Description
Pacey Whitter	DC	Terrible student, nearly fails to graduate. Convinced he is a loser due to his father's persistent disappointment. Dates Andie until she cheats on him. Dates Joey, ruining his friendship with Dawson. Begins the series as a sophomore, ends as a graduating senior.
Rayanne Graff	MSCL	Wild, and unpredictable, often skips class, and seems to spend most of the time she is at school in the girls' washroom. Promiscuous and maintains a casual attitude towards sex. History of drug use and alcoholism. Series takes place during her sophomore year.
Rickie (Enrique) Vasquez	MSCL	Gay, but does not come out until the end of the series. Wears eye-liner, and hangs out in the girls' washroom. Bullied for being effeminate, and abused by his uncle, who he lives with until he leaves home and they move away, leaving him homeless. Series takes place during his sophomore year.
Ryan Atwood	OC	Lead family. Tough guy from a relatively poor and criminal family. Trey's younger brother. Adopted by Seth's parents when his mother proves unfit and unwilling to take care of him. Becomes increasingly academic. Dates Marissa on and off. Dates Lindsay short term. Begins series as a sophomore, ends as a graduating senior.
Sam Weir	FG	Lead family. Lindsay's younger brother. Geek. Loves comedy and sci fi movies. Often bullied. Briefly dates Cindy, following an ongoing crush on her. Nervous about making out for the first time, and generally behind in sexual development. Series takes place during his freshman year.
Seth Cohen	OC	Lead family. Comic book geek. Lonely until Ryan moves in and desperate to get out of Newport and move to the East Coast. Academic achiever and hopes to go to Brown. Dates Summer on and off, after maintaining an ongoing crush on her. Begins series as a sophomore, ends as a graduating senior.
Sharon Cherski	MSCL	Academic achiever, particularly involved in extra-curricular activities. Childhood friends with Angela. Dates Kyle on and off. Series takes place during her sophomore year.
Snake (Archie) Simpson	Degrassi	In a band, the Zits, with best friends Joey and Wheels. Object of Allison, Amy, Michelle, and Spike's affections, but remains a virgin throughout high school, possibly due to his goofiness or shyness. Begins the series in grade 10, ends as a graduating senior.
Spike (Christine) Nelson	Degrassi	Teen mom, raising her daughter with the help of her parents. Often asked for advice by other girls who are sexually active. Develops a crush on Snake. Begins the series in grade 10, ends as a graduating senior.
Steve Sanders	90210	Terrible student, nearly expelled from school. Son of a movie star and rich. Athletic he-man, and ethically ambiguous (often encourages others to cheat at school or in relationships). Formerly dated Kelly. Begins the series as a junior, ends as a graduating senior.
Summer Roberts	OC	Object of Seth's affections, eventually dates him on and off long-term. Dates Zach in the meantime. Loves *The Valley*, a fictionalized version of The O.C. Academically gifted, but underachiever. Scores high on her SATs and considers attending an Ivy League college. Begins series as a sophomore, ends as a graduating senior.
Tessa Campinelli	Degrassi	Becomes increasingly promiscuous. Dates Alex, then develops a crush on Yick. Begins sexual relationship with Joey without realizing he still has a girlfriend, becoming pregnant and having an abortion without his knowledge. Begins the series in grade 9, ends in grade 11.
Wheels (Derrick) Wheeler	Degrassi	Rebels against his grandmother, due to his parents' deaths. In a band, the Zits, with best friends Joey and Snake. Object of Heather's affections. Increasingly alcoholic, eventually driving drunk and killing a child in a crash. Begins the series in grade 10, ends as a graduating senior.

Supporting Characters

Character	Show	Description
Abbey Morgan	DC	Bitch who everybody hates. Makes friends with Jen, bonding over "bad girl" status. Dies after getting drunk on the pier, falling into the water and drowning.
Alex Kelly	OC	Manager of the Bait Shop club. Passionate about music. Emancipated minor. Queer. Briefly dates Seth, then dates Marissa. Leaves town when they break up.
Alex Yankou	Degrassi	Nerd. Dates Tessa until she cheats on him by kissing Yick.
Alexa Pappadopoulos	Degrassi	Often dramatic about minor problems. Dates Simon long term, eventually marrying him after high school. Best friends with Michelle.
Amy Andrews	FG	Plays the tuba in the marching band. Born inter-sex. Dates Ken.
Barry Schweiber	FG	Neal's older brother. In his second year of college. Has a romantic night with Lindsay at his parent's cocktail party.
BLT (Brian) Thomas	Degrassi	Jock. Dates Michelle despite her father's racial prejudice, and begins a new relationship before breaking up with her.
Christy Livingston	DC	Cheerleader. Object of Pacey's infatuation.
Cindy Sanders	FG	Cheerleader. Young republican, and kind of boring. Dates Sam, briefly, after breaking up with Todd.
Claude Tanner	Degrassi	Political activist, he becomes increasingly militant. Dates Caitlin. Commits suicide by shooting himself in the boys' washroom.
Cliff Elliot	DC	Jock. Dates Jen, becoming Dawson's competition.
Danielle Chase	MSCL	Angela's little sister. Preteen, she is often banished from rooms where people are having private conversations.
Delia Fisher	MSCL	New girl. Friends with Sharon. Has a crush on Brian until he cancels their date to the dance. Develops a safe crush on Rickie.
Diana Economopoulos	Degrassi	Member of the Have-Not club. Smart, but rebellious due to her brother's strict rules. Hates having to go to Greek school.
Dorothy Phillips	Degrassi	Arthur's cousin. Tessa's friend and confidante.
Dwayne Myers	Degrassi	Bully and tough guy. Contracts HIV over the summer and hides it from his friends due to their prejudice.
Eli	FG	Mentally handicapped, so often teased by other students. Loves *Three's Company*.
Erica Farrell	Degrassi	Heather's twin. Has an abortion after a summer romance.
Harris Trinsky	FG	Geek guru. Fountain of wisdom, offering advice to others. Self-confident, and secure with himself.
Heather Farrell	Degrassi	Erica's twin. Infatuated with Wheels. Religious and disapproves of her sister's decision to have an abortion.
Henry Parker	DC	Jock. Freshman geek. Infatuated with and eventually dates Jen.

Character	Show	Description
Johnny Harper	OC	Surfer. Marissa's public school friend who develops an ongoing crush on her. Dies after getting drunk and falling off a cliff when she rejects him.
Karen Scarfolli	FG	Bully and bitchy. Friends with Kim until she flirts with Daniel.
Karla Montez	90210	Dates Brandon. Beautiful, smart hispanic girl who temporarily attends West Beverly Hills High after witnessing a murder.
Kathleen Mead	Degrassi	Member of the Have-Not club after breaking up with her abusive boyfriend, Scott. Prudish and proud.
Kyle Conners	90210	Gay, which Kelly discovers after attempting to seduce him. Plays volleyball at the beach in the summer.
Kyle Vinnovich	MSCL	Jock. Dates Sharon on and off.
LD	Degrassi	Discovers she has Leukemia, but her cancer eventually goes into remission. Leaves the series at the end of season 1 to enjoy life with her father.
Liz O'Rourke	Degrassi	Sexual abused by her mother's boyfriend as a child, leaving her mentally unstable. Was nearly aborted as a fetus, and as a result harasses Erica about having an abortion.
Luke Ward	OC	Jock. Dates Marissa until he cheats on her, then has an affair with her mother.
Mark	DC	Friend of Andie's from when she spends a few months at a mental hospital.
Maureen Sampson	FG	New girl who makes friends with Sam, Neal, and Bill, before making friends with the popular kids.
Maya Goldberg	Degrassi	In a wheelchair. Caitlin's good friend and confidante.
Melanie Brodie	Degrassi	Member of the Have-Not club. Has bad luck with boys.
Melissa Coolidge	90210	Dates Brandon. Teen mom. Wants to get into Harvard, but begins having trouble raising a baby and going to school at the same time.
Michelle Accette	Degrassi	Good student. Shy. Leaves home to live on her own, escaping her father's strict rules and racism. Dates BLT until he cheats on her.
Millie Kentner	FG	Childhood friends with Lindsay. Religious. Mathlete.
Phil	MSCL	Random guy Rayanne makes out with in a closet at school.
Sadie Campbell	OC	Johnny's cousin in town for his funeral. Jewelry maker. Dates Ryan.
Sandy	90210	Dates Brandon. An older woman who works with him at the beach club. Mistress to one of the rich, beach club patrons.
Scott Scanlon	90210	Geek. Childhood friends with David. Dies when he accidentally shoots himself while playing with his father's gun.
Scott Smith	Degrassi	Kathleen's abusive boyfriend.
Taylor Townsend	OC	Academic achiever and social chair after Marissa. Has an affair with Dean Hess. Lonely, friendless, and berated by her mother.
Theresa Diaz	OC	Ryan's childhood friend and ex-girlfriend. Gets pregnant and has the baby, despite lying to Ryan and telling him she miscarried.

Character	Show	Description
Tobey Barret	DC	Gay. Outspoken, but retreats after being gay-bashed. Dates Jack.
Todd Schellinger	FG	Jock. Dates Cindy.
Trey Atwood	OC	Ryan's older brother. Released from prison after stealing a car. Develops a crush on Marissa and attempts to rape her while on cocaine.
Tricia Kinney	90210	Dates Brandon. World-class figure skater.
Volchok (Kevin)	OC	Referred to as the "surf nazi." Violent tough guy. Dates Marissa, and pursues her after she ends it, ultimately driving her off the road to her death.
Yick Yu	Degrassi	Childhood friends with Arthur, becomes cooler than him. Vietnamese boat person. Object of Tessa's affections.
Zach Stevens	OC	Jock. Creates comic book, Atomic County, with Seth. Dates Summer.

Adult Characters

Character	Show	Description
Cindy Walsh	90210	Lead family. Brenda and Brandon's mother. Housewife. Married to Jim, whom she met in college. Considers having an affair when an old boyfriend shows up, and Jim is busy at work.
Coach Fredricks	FG	McKinley High Phys. Ed. teacher. Also teaches health class, including sex ed. Often sympathetic to jocks. Dates Mrs. Haverchuck.
Dean Hess	OC	Dean of Discipline at Harbor School. Expels Marissa and Ryan from school, and attempts to ruin Ryan's chances at college. Abuses his power and threatens to expel Seth and Summer as well. Becomes sexually involved with a student, Taylor, resulting in his eventually leaving town to avoid a scandal.
Dr. Kim	OC	Principal at Harbor School.
Graham Chase	MSCL	Lead family. Angela's father. Works for Patty, eventually leaving to pursue a career as a chef. Married to Patty. Nearly has an affair, but backs out. The more lenient parent, he is upset when Angela becomes distant from him.
Harold Weir	FG	Lead family. Sam and Lindsay's father. Owns a sporting good store. Married to Jean. Attempts to protect his children with cautionary tales. Has trouble granting Lindsay freedom.
Iris McKay	90210	Dylan's mother. Divorced from his father when Dylan was a child. Child of the 60s, seeks out natural highs and believes in the power of crystals. Lives in Hawaii.

Character	Show	Description
Jackie Taylor	90210	Kelly's mother. Former model and drug addict. Divorced from Kelly's father when she was a child. Married and divorced several times since. Marries and divorces David's father Mel Silver, with whom she has another baby.
Jean Weir	FG	Lead family. Sam and Lindsay's mother. Housewife. Married to Harold. A soft and caring parent, she often comes across as more immature than her teenage children.
Jim Walsh	90210	Lead family. Brenda and Brandon's father. Works in insurance. Married to Cindy, whom he met in college. Encourages Brandon to succeed, while fearful of Brenda's emerging womanhood.
Julie Cooper-Nicol	OC	Marissa's mother. Divorces her father, and re-marries Seth's grandfather. Has an affair with Marissa's ex-boyfriend Luke. Eventually dates Summer's father. Accused on being a gold-digger, and generally disdained by her daughter.
Mr. Gil Meyers	90210	West Beverly Hills High English teacher and school paper advisor. Encourages informality with students, attempts to inspire and protect. Accused of sexual misconduct by a student.
Mr. Jeff Rosso	FG	McKinley High guidance councillor. Attempts to help and support students, often offering lessons that tend to go unheard. Out of touch with current trends, and mocked for his hippie looks, but he does occasionally inspire his students.
Mr. Katimsky	MSCL	English teacher at Liberty High. Runs drama club. Secretly gay. Takes an interest in Rickie, trying to get him involved in drama, and encourages him to like himself. Eventually brings him home when Rickie is homeless.
Mr. Kowchevski	FG	McKinley High Math teacher and Mathlete coach. Often barks at students to get to class and has little patience for bad students. Accuses Daniel and Lindsay of cheating on a test.
Mr. Milo	DC	Guidance counsellor at Capeside High. Often reminds Pacey of his dismal grades.
Mr. Peterson	DC	English teacher at Capeside High. Disrespectful of his students, with a particular grudge against Pacey. Outs Jack in class by forcing him to read a personal poem. Retires 6 months early to avoid taking responsibility for his unethical behaviour.
Mr. Vic Racine	MSCL	Substitute English teacher at Liberty High. Inspires and teaches students to express themselves. Supports students rights, printing sexual material in the literary magazine.
Mr. Whitter	DC	Pacey's father. Policeman. Continually berates his son. Disappointed in Pacey's performance and fails to give him any credit.
Ms. Fisher	OC	Guidance counsellor at Harbor School. Encourages Ryan to take AP science classes, apply to college, and pursue architecture.
Ms. Kennedy	DC	Film teacher at Capeside High. Discourages Dawson from becoming a filmmaker by criticizing his work. Dates Dawson's father briefly.

Character	Show	Description
Ms. Lerner	MSCL	Math teacher and temporary English substitute teacher at Liberty High. Threatens Jordan with expulsion if he continues to skip class.
Ms. Tamara Jacobs	DC	Sophomore English teacher at Capeside High. Becomes involved in a sexual relationship with her student, Pacey, eventually resulting in her leaving town.
Patty (Patricia) Chase	MSCL	Lead family. Angela's mother. Owns a print shop. Married to Graham, she gets suspicious when he makes friends with a younger woman. High strung, more strict than Graham, she often sets the rules for Angela's behaviour.
Principal Foster	MSCL	Principal at Liberty High. Attempts to maintain discipline and a good reputation at his school. Intimidates Brian and censors the student literary magazine.
Principal Green	DC	Principal at Capeside High. Attempts to inspire and support students. Asked to resign by parents and the school board after expelling a wealthy, white student for vandalizing a student mural.
Sandy Cohen	OC	Lead family. Seth's father, Ryan's guardian. Defense attorney. Married to Kirsten, tempted to cheat with old girlfriend, but happy in marriage. A cool, approachable parent, he supports his kids whatever they do.
Sky	90210	High school dropout. Stand up comedienne. Encourages Brenda to explore life and herself through comedy.

VITA

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