

# Conservatives blast MTV over racy teen drama 'Skins'

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(RNS) It happened at the 37-minute mark.

One of the main characters on the new hit MTV show "Skins," Chris (played by 17-year-old Jesse Carere), walked down the street naked, baring his rear for millions of the show's viewers during Monday (Jan. 31) night's episode, the third of the season.

Like its U.K. predecessor, currently airing its fifth season on the British station E4, MTV's "Skins" is no stranger to controversy.

The racy content of the show has prompted the Parents Television Council to label it "the most dangerous program ever" for children, caused major advertisers to pull out, and left the show's British creator wondering what all the fuss is about.

In the three episodes that have aired so far, "Skins" has featured teenagers doing all the things parents worry about their teenagers doing. They drink, smoke cigarettes and pot, pop pills, have sex, get naked and regularly employ colorful language.

But to co-creator Bryan Elsley, the show is about teenagers, from the point of view of teenagers. The episodes are crafted by writers in their early 20s, and teenage consultants come in to make sure that slang

and language are true-to-life.

"`Skins' is a very simple and in fact rather old fashioned television series," Elsley, wrote on MTV.com. "It's about the lives and loves of teenagers, how they get through high school, how they deal with their friends, and also how they circumnavigate some of the complications of sex, relationships, educations, parents, drugs and alcohol."

It's one thing to suspect that teens are doing those things, but -- if the reaction to the American show is any indication -- it's another thing entirely to watch 17-year-old actors gleefully popping pills and stripping off their clothing on a popular cable channel. The U.S. version is actually toned down compared to the British series, and features less nudity and bleeped-out cursing.

Still, it wasn't toned down enough for some, and the response was swift.

After the first episode aired to 3.3 million viewers three weeks ago, General Motors announced that its ads had run during the show accidentally, and it would no longer be supporting "Skins." Taco Bell said it was withdrawing as sponsor, followed in the next two days by five other corporations, including Subway, Foot Locker and L'Oreal.

"We advertise on a variety of MTV programs that reach our core demographic of 18- to 34-year-olds, which included the premiere episode of `Skins.' Upon further review, we've decided that the show is not a fit for our brand and have moved our advertising to other MTV programming," said Rob Poetsch, a spokesman for Taco Bell.

Many of the concerns came from the PTC, a conservative Los Angeles-based watchdog group that monitors TV shows marketed to children and teens. The group wants to see advertisers held accountable for their

choices, said PTC spokeswoman Melissa Henson.

"We were pleased with the quick response of many of the brands," Henson said.

Though the PTC did not call for a traditional boycott, the organization often screens episodes of controversial shows for advertisers to "show them what their sponsorship dollars are paying for," she said.

The main issue with "Skins," Henson said, is that it glamorizes the bad behavior of a few teens instead of realistically portraying the more responsible actions of the majority of the demographic.

"It's possible to deal with the realistic issues facing teens in a real way, and I don't think that was done here," Henson said, though she was not able to name a current show doing a better job. "What they show reduces teenage behavior to a narcissistic quest for sex and drugs, and I think there's more to teens than that."

For his part, Elsley said many of the characters can be moral in a way often overlooked by critics. For example, he said, in the first episode of the U.K. version, dorky Sid sets out to lose his virginity to the more experienced Cassie, but ultimately changes his mind when he realizes he's not ready.

"I have lost count of the letters we have been sent by viewers who tell us that they have been able to approach their parents or teachers with their difficulties after watching the show," Elsley wrote on MTV.com. "It is something that we take a great deal of pride in and which can unfortunately be eclipsed by some of the negative attention."