



Manipulated Kids: Teens Tell How Ads Influence Them

Roy F. Fox

Are kids taken in by classroom TV commercials? A study of 200 rural Missouri teenagers revealed that this captive audience is far less media-savvy than some might suppose.

realized that they often did not consider commercials to be designed to sell a

Debbie, a 9th grader, explains why she thinks star athletes make the television commercials that she watches on the daily in-school news program, Channel One:

I think it's stupid. I don't know why athletes do that—pay all that money for all them ignorant commercials for themselves. Guess it makes everyone like 'em more and like their team more. Doesn't Emmitt Smith have a bunch of commercials that's makin' everybody like his team better?

For the past two years, I have talked with some 200 kids in rural Missouri schools about these MTV-like ads, which peddle products ranging from Reebok athletic shoes to Sega video games to Snickers candy bars during a 12-minute news broadcast.

Channel One reaches 40 percent of America's classrooms—a daily audience of 8 million kids in grades 6–12. The program now airs more than 700 commercials a year.

We Do it All for You

After hearing Debbie's response, I decided to ask the same question of each of the small groups of students I would tape interviews with that day. Kids at my morning focus group brainstormed all the reasons that they believed star athletes make commercials for companies like Nike. They came up with the following:

- Because it motivates them to play better.
- Because it's a reward for doing excellent work.
- Because it helps their team.
- Because it elevates their status and reputation among their peers.
- Because athletes are sponsored by different companies.

Upon talking further with these students, I

product or service. Amazingly, most kids saw commercials as aiming for the very opposite end that most of us see: they viewed them solely as advertisements for *the athletes*, which the athletes themselves paid for in order to bolster their egos and their team's reputation. The product endorsed the athlete. As one senior said, "If you're good at what you do, you need to be recognized for it."

It's Been Real

Most students I talked with found many ways to embrace commercials—to trust them, to view advertisers' motives in a positive, even warm light. One of these students, Heather, became frustrated because she couldn't better articulate why she and her friends believed that the kids in a Pepsi commercial were not paid actors.

Well ... I know that I'd be terribly disappointed if the kids in that commercial turned out to be paid actors—they're just real kids off the street, like us.... They just *couldn't* be actors, ya know?

In fact, students often "blurred" or mistook commercials for public service announcements. Frequently, the students confused Pepsi's "It's like this" commercials with two public service announcements—one on drunken driving and the other called "Stop the Hate." Mindy, for example, described her favorite public service ad as follows:

This commercial is mostly about inner-city kids, about how one got shot and stuff. Ya know, it's like this.

Note how Mindy uses the phrase "it's like

Amazingly, most kids viewed the ads solely as advertisements for *the athletes*, which the athletes themselves paid for.

this,” which is Pepsi’s slogan for its series of ads that also aired on Channel One at that time.

Pepsi’s “It’s like this” commercials do indeed look real, and not by accident. They are designed to look very much like public service announcements, specifically, documentaries in which kids talk about their problems. One ad’s rapid-fire editing and its swinging, seemingly random camera angles communicate a knock-about day at the beach, with kids cavorting with pals. Interspersed with the black-and-white and muted color shots of kids talking directly into the camera are several closeups of bright red-white-and-blue Pepsi cans.

Students’ confusion between the two genres, and their insistence on the ads’ authenticity, demonstrates just how effective this technique is. Because Channel One also airs public service ads, this blurring seems more than coincidental.

At another school, I talked to 29 students about this Pepsi ad. Of this group, only 12 thought it was a real commercial. Six students thought it was both a news item and a commercial, while four thought it was purely news. Seven students didn’t know how to define it. In fact, when my student teacher saw this ad, *she* couldn’t decide if it was a commercial or a news item—and she is a very bright, 50-year-old former editor. One 9th grader, though, tried to sort it all out for us when he pronounced, “It’s not really a commercial—it’s just a commercial *sponsored* by Pepsi.”

Most of the nearly 150 students I’ve talked to about this ad tell me that they could easily be friends with the kids in the commercial because they look and dress and act the same way. When I asked, “From whose point of view is this commercial told—who is telling this story?” Brad replied that “it’s not a story.” He and others in his group

mentioned no director constructing the message and calling the shots. Indeed, out of 150 students, only 5 said the commercial had been fashioned by the Pepsi Corporation; its marketing firm; or producers, directors, and editors.

Like Brad, most of the students said the commercial’s point of view was expressed only by the kids who appeared in it. Moreover, the vast majority felt Pepsi was more concerned with “doing good” than with selling soft drinks:

Me: Do any of you see this commercial as trying to sell Pepsi?

Ellen: Since that commercial reaches people, it kind of makes them think that Pepsi is a good cause

Chad: (Interrupting) And they care.

Ellen: And they care about people, so they want people to support Pepsi so that they can support the commercials.

It’s the Real Thing

Fusing documentary and commercial styles is only one way Channel One ads infiltrate kids’ language and thinking. While talking with several of his classmates one day, Nathan, a 9th grader, described Cinnaburst chewing gum: “It’s that gum that has these little red dots and...” Lisa, who sat across the table, interjected “No, those are *flavor crystals*.” Nathan paused, nodded, and muttered, “Oh yeah, *flavor crystals*....” before continuing. When Lisa gently corrected her classmate, two other students silently nodded in agreement. After all, it was the exact phrase used in the gum commercial.

Of the eight students in this group, not one saw any distinction between the real thing they were talking about—the gum—and the catchy description they had so quickly and naturally affixed to it. Not one recognized that the hollow term “flavor

crystals” simply makes the product seem better than it is.

Ad Infinitum

Channel One also uses the ancient rhetorical technique of repetition to sell products. Watching the same commercial hundreds of times is an experience that most of us have never had, nor would we want to. But it’s routine in the schools tuned in to Channel One. A few years ago, the “Be like Mike” ads, featuring National Basketball Association superstar Michael Jordan, played over and over again for months.

In addition to their repetition on the air, ads are, in a sense, rerun every time students mimic parts of them or randomly sing the catchy jingles. Many students told me about a recent football game where home team students in the bleachers chanted in unison, “Got to be, got to be—Domino’s!” This scene echoes a Domino’s Pizza ad on Channel One, in which football fans chant the exact same line.

Students also commonly report that they talk about commercials outside of school. Beth, a 9th grader, often telephones her friends and tells them which channel to tune in to whenever a particularly good commercial airs.

At the end of one small-group session, I asked students, “Is there anything else about commercials that we haven’t talked about?” “Yes!” they enthused, “We need *new* commercials!” I was startled by this answer until I realized how logical it was in the context of operant conditioning. Many young people who watch so many commercials, every day for nine months, with some repeated endlessly, develop a craving for *new* commercials.

Instant Replays

Commercials are replayed in more subtle ways as well. When I asked Alex to evaluate a shampoo commer-

cial that contained the line, "Gimme a break," he sang those words, but to a tune used to advertise another product, Kit Kat candy bars. Another

student, named Jason Smith, signed his name in a yearbook as Shaq Smith, invoking the commercial starring pro basketball phenom Shaquille O'Neal.

After working with these kids for two years, nothing should surprise me, but things still do. A 9th grader named Susie, for example, dreamed about a McDonald's commercial. In both the dream and the ad, French fries starred! Considering how deeply commercials appear to penetrate students' psyches, it's little wonder that they pervade their language and thinking.

If such commercials strike deep, they can also strike fast. One day I joined students in watching a 30-second ad featuring San Antonio Spurs basketball star David Robinson. The students told me the ad was brand new—they'd never seen it before.

Later that day, most of these students reported that this commercial had three parts, which they remembered in the correct sequence: Robinson goes to college and earns his master's degree, Robinson becomes a naval officer, and Robinson twice goes to the Olympics before becoming a professional basketball player. I could remember none of these things, not even immediately after watching the commercial.

Classic Propaganda

The techniques employed in Channel One commercials—repetition, testimonials, bandwagon appeals, transfers of one quality to another, and highly synthesized music and imagery—are classic propaganda techniques.

We've long known that such propaganda is most effective in closed environments, where outside stimuli can't interfere with the intended message.

A child's psyche is not a commodity to be sold. Yet, we offer up large numbers of children to the highest bidders for advertising time

And a classroom full of captive students is the perfect controlled environment: no outside distractions to offset the flood of commercials starring "kids just like us."

Advertisers, of course, don't call this propaganda. Instead, they talk of "brand and product loyalties through classroom-centered, peer-powered lifestyle patterning." Techno-market-speak for propaganda.

Whatever they're called, however, Channel One ads work. Which is why they cost *twice*—yes, twice—as much as those on prime-time network news. The hundreds of commercials aired bring in more than \$100 million annually.

Monica, a high school senior, demonstrates what advertisers get for their money as she recalls with delight the special effects that prompted her to buy a pair of designer athletic shoes:

I bought some Fila tennis shoes 'cause I seen 'em on a commercial. I mean, they had this basketball player, but I don't know who he was ... he was jumping. Anyway, the shoes have like, little flaps on the sides of 'em, like little wings. They're Velcro ... anyway, they come off, and they started flying (giggles). They flew off of the building, so I had to have them shoes!

Evan, a diminutive 9th grader, also buys items he sees for the first time on Channel One. He enlisted the help of his grandmother to save up \$160 to buy Michael Jordan Nike basketball shoes. When I asked why, he drawled matter-of-factly, "Saw 'em on a c'mersh'l." Never mind that Evan's family can't afford them. Never mind that Evan doesn't play basketball. Never mind that some kids are beaten

and murdered for such shoes.

Why do we accept this corporate feeding on our young? Mainly because our own notions of propaganda are based, ironically, on obsolete media images: gray POW camps with grimacing North Korean guards; the torture by rats of Winston Smith in 1984, and Angela Lansbury's dark, darting eyes in *The Manchurian Candidate*. These old images of subversiveness never surface when we enter the bright hallways of public schools and are jostled by the scrubbed kids from small towns.

Mass publications don't necessarily enlighten the public. For example, a 1994 *Newsweek* article praised Channel One, assuring us in a bold-face, capitalized subhead that "NEWS + ADS = LEARNING."

One thing is certain: kids have not changed. Most are as open-hearted as Twain's portrayal of Huck Finn 100 years ago. Still in their formative years, these students are open to images and language that help to create their sense of self—their most valuable and fragile possession.

A child's psyche is not a commodity to be sold. Yet, we offer up large numbers of children to the highest bidders for advertising time. Until we ban TV commercials from schools, these parasitic practices will continue unabated. ■

Roy F. Fox is Associate Professor of English Education and Director, Missouri Writing Project, University of Missouri-Columbia, Curriculum & Instruction Department, 225 Townsend Hall, Columbia, MO 65211. e-mail: cirff@mizzou1.missouri.edu.