|  |
| --- |
| **THE MERCHANTS OF COOL** |

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool>

|  |
| --- |
| **TEXT** |

They spend their days sifting through reams of market research data. They conduct endless surveys and focus groups. They comb the streets, the schools, and the malls, hot on the trail of the "next big thing" that will snare the attention of their prey--a market segment worth an estimated $150 billion a year.

They are the merchants of cool: creators and sellers of popular culture who have made teenagers the hottest consumer demographic in America. But are they simply reflecting teen desires or have they begun to manufacture those desires in a bid to secure this lucrative market? And have they gone too far in their attempts to reach the hearts--and wallets--of America's youth?

FRONTLINE correspondent [Douglas Rushkoff](http://www.rushkoff.com/) examines the tactics, techniques, and cultural ramifications of these marketing moguls in "The Merchants of Cool." Produced by [Barak Goodman and Rachel Dretzin,](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/etc/producers.html) the program talks with top marketers, media executives and cultural/media critics, and explores the symbiotic relationship between the media and today's teens, as each looks to the other for their identity.

Teenagers are the hottest consumer demographic in America. At 33 million strong, they comprise the largest generation of teens America has ever seen--larger, even, than the much-ballyhooed Baby Boom generation. Last year, America's teens spent $100 billion, while influencing their parents' spending to the tune of another $50 billion.

But marketing to teens isn't as easy as it sounds. Marketers have to find a way to seem real: true to the lives and attitudes of teenagers; in short, to become cool themselves. To that end, they [search out the next cool thing](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/etc/hunting.html) and have adopted an almost anthropological approach to studying teens and analyzing their every move as if they were animals in the wild.

Take [MTV](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/tour/index.html#mtv). Long considered to be the arbiter of teen cool, the late 1990s saw MTV's ratings on the wane. To counter the slide, MTV embarked on a major teen research campaign, the hallmark of which was its ["ethnography study"](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/etc/close.html)-- visiting teens' homes to view first hand their lives, interests and ask some quite personal questions.

But what lessons do MTV and other companies draw from this exhaustive and expensive study of teenagers' lives? Does it result in a more nuanced portrait of the American teen? In "The Merchants of Cool," FRONTLINE introduces viewers to the "mook" and the "midriff" -- the stock characters that MTV and others have resorted to in order to hook the teen consumer.

The "midriff"--the character pitched at teenage girls, is the highly-sexualized, world-weary sophisticate that increasingly populates television shows such as [Dawson's Creek](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/tour/tour2.html#wb) and films such as [Cruel Intentions](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/tour/tour3.html#moritz). Even more appealing to marketers is the "midriff's" male counterpart, the "mook." Characterized mainly by his infantile, boorish behavior, the "mook" is a perpetual adolescent: crude, misogynistic--and very, very, angry.

But also very lucrative. To appeal to the "mook," MTV has created programs such as [Spring Break](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/tour/tour3.html#spring) -- a televised version of teen beach debauchery--as well as a weekly program capitalizing on the current wrestling craze.

"What this system does is it closely studies the young, keeps them under constant surveillance to figure out what will push their buttons," says media critic [Mark Crispin Miller](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/interviews/crispinmiller.html). "And it blares it back at them relentlessly and everywhere."

Of course, there is resistance to the commercial machine. FRONTLINE takes viewers to downtown Detroit, where media analyst Rushkoff speaks with teens at a concert by the Detroit-based [Insane Clown Posse](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/tour/tour3.html#icp), purveyors of a genre of music that's become known as "rage rock." When asked to describe what appeals to them about such music, the teens invariably respond that it belongs to them; it hasn't yet been taken and sold back to them at the mall. Full of profanity, violence, and misogyny, rage rock is literally a challenge thrown up to marketers: just try to market this!

But marketers have accepted the challenge: rage rock is now big business. Not only has Insane Clown Posse become mainstream, but much bigger acts like Eminem and Limp Bizkit are breaking sales records and winning industry accolades in the form of Grammy nominations and other mainstream music awards.

In "The Merchants of Cool," correspondent Rushkoff details how MTV and other huge commercial outlets orchestrated the rise of Limp Bizkit--despite the group's objectionable lyrics--and then relentlessly promoted them on-air.

But in doing so, critics ask, is MTV truly reflecting the desires of today's teenagers, or are they stoking a cultural infatuation with music and imagery that glorifies violence and sex as well as antisocial behavior and attitudes?

In today's media-saturated environment, such questions, it seems, are becoming increasingly difficult to answer.

"It's one enclosed feedback loop," Rushkoff says. "Kids' culture and media culture are now one and the same, and it becomes impossible to tell which came first--the anger or the marketing of the anger."

Therein lies the danger of today's teen-driven economy, observers say: As everyone from record promoters to TV executives to movie producers besieges today's teens with pseudo-authentic marketing pitches, teenagers increasingly look to the media to provide them with a ready-made identity predicated on today's version of what's cool. Rather than empowering youngsters, the incessant focus on their wants and desires leaves them adrift in a sea of conflicting marketing messages.

"Kids feel frustrated and lonely today because they are encouraged to feel that way," Miller tells FRONTLINE. "You know, advertising has always sold anxiety and it certainly sells anxiety to the young. It's always telling them that they are not thin enough, they're not pretty enough, they don't have the right friends, or they have no friends...they're losers unless they're cool. But I don't think anybody, deep down, really feels cool enough, ever."

And as more and more teens look to the media to define what they should think and how they should behave, even some cool hunters are no longer sure that their work isn't having a negative impact.

"Even though I work at MTV...I am starting to see the world more like someone who's approaching forty than someone who's twenty," says [Brian Graden](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/interviews/graden.html), the channel's president of programming. "And I can't help but be worried that we are throwing so much at young adults so fast. And that there is no amount of preparation or education or even love that you could give a child to be ready."

**Vocabulary**

**1. Glossary**

misogyny the hatred of women (adj. misogynist(ic))

debauchery behaviour that goes beyond socially-approved limits, exp. in relation to sex and alcohol

to blare to make an unpleasantly loud noise

to stoke to encourage bad ideas or feelings in a lot of people

infatuation a very strong but usually not lasting feeling of love or attraction for someone or something

to glorify to make something seem splendid or excellent, often when it is really not

loop the curved shape made when something long and thin, such as a piece of string, bends until one part of it nearly touches or crosses another part of it

pitch a speech or act which attempts to persuade someone to buy or do something

to predicate on to depend on the existence or truth of

incessant never stopping, esp. in an annoying or unpleasant way

to comprise to have as parts or members, or to be those parts or members

anthropological anthropology: the study of the human race, its culture and society and its physical development

hallmark a typical characteristic or feature of a person or thing

ethnography a scientific description of the culture of a society by someone who has lived in it, or a book containing this

**2. Fill in the correct word**

*profanities - world-weary –purveyor - crude – to pitch at - boorish – perpetual - craze - accolade*

1. I found him rather **boorish** and aggressive. (rude and not considering other people’s feelings)

2. This is his centennial year and he’s been granted the ultimate **accolade** – his face on a set of three postage stamps. (praise and approval)

3. They are the UK **purveyor** of jams and marmalades to Her Majesty the Queen. (business which provides goods or services)

4. Fifteen years in the teaching profession had left him **world-weary** and cynical. (not enthusiastic about anything, often because of too much experience of a particular way of life)

5. The **craze** for health foods has become big business. (activity, object, idea that is extremely popular, usually for a short time)

6. That really was a **crude** remark. (rude and offensive)

7. It was the song’s opening line, a series of **profanities**, that caused the record to be banned on the radio station. (an offensive or obscene word or phrase)

8. That guy can be called a **perpetual** student. (continuing forever in the same way)

9. We decided **to pitch** the film **at** young adults. (make it suitable for and of interest to)

**3. Translate the following words/phrases**

1. to sift through the reams of market research data: **De massa’s onderzoeksdata filteren**

2. a lucrative market: **Een lucratieve markt**

3. to examine the cultural ramifications of the marketing moguls: **De culturele vertakkingen van de marketingmeesters onderzoeken**

4. to snare the attention of their prey: **De aandacht van hun prooi vangen**

5. the symbiotic relationship between the media and today’s teens: **De symbiotische relatie tussen de media en de jeugd van tegenwoordig**

6. the much-ballyhooed Baby Boom generation: **De hype omtrent de Baby Boom generatie**

7. to influence their parents’ spending to the tune of another $50 billion: **Ouders beïnvloeden voor het lieve sommetje van $50 miljard.**

8. MTV was long considered to be the arbiter of teen cool: **MTV stond lang bekend als de trendsetter voor alles wat in is bij jongeren.**

9. MTV’ ratings were on the wane: **MTV’s kijkcijfers gingen achteruit.**

10. to counter the slide: **De daling tegengaan**

11. to embark on a major teen research campaign: **Beginnen aan een grootse tieneronderzoekscampagne**

12. MTV has resorted to stock characters: **MTV is teruggevallen op stereotypische personages**

**Comprehension**

1. The merchants of cool: - Who are they? *“The creators and sellers of popular culture who have made teenagers the hottest consumer demographic in America.”*

- What are their activities? *Combing the streets, the schools, and the malls, hot on the trail of the "next big thing".*

2. What exactly is examined in the video “The Merchants of Cool”? *The strategies, tactics and techniques these marketers use to influence and market teenagers, aswell as its ramifications.*

3. Why is “marketing to teens not as easy as it sounds”? *They “need to be true to the lives and attitudes of teenagers; in short, to become cool themselves.”*

4. What did MTV do in the late 1990s? Why? *They embarked on a major teen research campaign to counter the slide in their ratings, going into the homes of youngsters and asking personal questions concerning their lifestyle.*

5. Explain: MTV tries to appeal to the “midriff” and to the “mook”. *These are stock characters that MTV and others have resorted to in order to hook the teen consumer to their brand.*

6. Explain: “Of course, there is resistance to the commercial machine.” *Some teenager-preferred items are very hard to market. Rage rock is almost a deliberate challenge for marketers to market, as it is riddled with profanity, violence, rage and misogyny.*

7. Explain: “Rage rock is now big business.” *Several “Rage rock” bands such as Insane Clown Posse and Limp Bizkit have become mainstream.*

8. Explain: “Kids’ culture and media culture are one enclosed feedback loop.” *“Kids' culture and media culture are now one and the same, and it becomes impossible to tell which came first--the anger or the marketing of the anger."*

9. Where does the danger of today’s teen-driven economy lie? *The danger that* “*teenagers increasingly look to the media to provide them with a ready-made identity predicated on today's version of what's cool. Rather than empowering youngsters, the incessant focus on their wants and desires leaves them adrift in a sea of conflicting marketing messages.”*

10. Explain: “Advertising has always sold anxiety and it certainly sells anxiety to the young.” *Advertising is always telling youngsters “that they are not thin enough, they're not pretty enough, they don't have the right friends, or they have no friends...they're losers unless they're cool.”*

11. Why are even some cool hunters no longer sure that their work isn’t having a negative impact? *MTV’s president of programming says: " I can't help but be worried that we are throwing so much at young adults so fast. And that there is no amount of preparation or education or even love that you could give a child to be ready."*

|  |
| --- |
| **VIDEO** |

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/view>

****

**Assignment:**

In class you will each be assigned one chapter of the video. Watch this chapter on the website while taking note of the key elements. With the help of your memory aid you should be able to tell the gist of your chapter in class and at the oral exam.

**Chapter 1: Hunting for cool**

*A look at how corporate marketing “culture spies” track the trend-setting teens.*

**Chapter 2: Under-the-radar marketing**

*The media giants try to become cool themselves – to win credibility with media-savvy teens.*

**Chapter 3: The MTV machine**

*MTV’s market research is legendary; they’re “addicted” to researching and understanding their fans.*

**Chapter 4: “The midriff”**

*The media machine’s latest caricature – young teen girls consumed by appearances. And the “midriff” archetype? – Britney Spears*

**Chapter 5: The giant feedback loop**

*Do shows hyping teen sexuality simply reflect the world of teens? Or are teens imitating the image being sold to them?*

**Chapter 6: Teen rebellion: just another product**

*A look at how even the raw fury of Limp Bizkit and rage rock can be bought and sold by the media machine.*

|  |
| --- |
| **DISCUSSION** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | **What are your opinions on the tactics and techniques of the marketing media who are targeting our teenagers? Have they gone too far?**  **1. Dear FRONTLINE,**  I'm a 17 year old high school senior . A few things really caught my ears when I watched Frontline:  1. If MTV interviews kids whom they screen to be normal, then who's really deciding what the norm is? One thing I noticed is that all of the teens on there were obviously good-looking and looked like they were well off financially. Do they only interview teens who are the basic commercial for Calvin Klein?  2. According to WB, "Kids want to see sex and violence because that's what's on TV." Whose fault is that?! Then the media has the audacity to be shocked when things like Columbine happen! Where does the fault REALLY lie? The media, which taught these teens to enjoy violence! I think that the media introduced violence into the teenage population because humans thrive on bad news. Life would be repetitive and boring if there wasn't something to be upset about, so the media is exploiting that for all it's worth.  3. The major female idol these days is Brittany Spears. The major male idols are Eminem and/or Tom Green and/or ICP. Does that mean that we want all our males to be bigoted disgusting wife-beaters and all our females to be look-oriented sluts with bad attitudes? That would definitely give the media more to complain about.  From what I saw, I'm abnormal. I don't care much about looks, and I don't really care about the lives of 'teen idols.' I care more about my intelligence, because, eventually, looks fail everybody. Intelligence lasts almost throughout your life. I care about being successful. I plan on double-majoring in electrical engineering and Japanese when I leave for college in the fall. The only trademark clothes I wear is what you can pick up cheap from Wal-Mart. I don't have the money to buy Tommy Hilfiger, and the most trademark you'll get from me is a cheap Winnie the Pooh shirt. I'm pretty much a feminist and I believe in gay rights.  I hate live-action TV violence. I believe that, if you must have sex and violence on TV, animate it like the Japanese do. My favorite TV shows include any Star Trek, 7 Days, and Gillmore Girls. I really don't watch much TV though.  I'm abnormal, but, hey, I gotta be me. Who else COULD I be? James Frank Dobie once said "Conform and be dull." The teens of America are conforming and becoming clones of one another. Sadly, it's too late to do anything about it. Teens and kids who don't conform feel alienated. Those who do are constantly self-conscious. Do kids even HAVE a childhood anymore? It doesn't seem like it.  Emily Scalzo, Park Forest, IL  **2. Dear FRONTLINE,** As a recovering journalist who once penned a college treatise on the subject at hand entitled "The Great Scene Scam", I found the overall content of the program a breath of fresh air.  However, the tone was entirely too dire for my tastes, taking the stance that youth are to be pitied for their position in today's market culture. I too worry for my young nephew and cousins, and my own future offspring, but also have enough faith in the power of one truth: You still don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.  Bob Dylan has been with the same record label - Columbia - his entire career, and even after the Sony buyout of the company. Even after, much to my chagrin, I saw the Band song "The Weight" which Dylan owns the rights to used in a Diet Coke ad a few years back, I had to temper my disillusionment. In spite of his loyalty to a huge corporation and ill-gotten revenues, I am convinced that never once has anyone told Bob Dylan what to write, sing, or say. The reason? If you do quality work, the market will bend to you. My distaste for Rupert Murdoch does not lessen my enjoyment of The Simpsons.  Richard F. Restaino, Austin, Texas  **3. Dear FRONTLINE,**  The one thing that bothers me is that some people expressed that they think it's all happening because of some sort of "moral breakdown."  But it's not a breakdown in families or among youth, the moral breakdown is in big corporations who have no compunction about trying to sell people things they don't need or want. Until we, the people, reign in these corporations - making corporations illegal would be a great start - we can't fix the problem.  People seem to be responding to this report with a sense of doom; as though there's nothing they can do about the relentless onslaught of targeted marketing aimed at them... But it's only temporary. All it will take will be the number of people who see through it and are fed up by it to reach critical mass, and then start voting with their money and their opinions. No one can make you buy something if you're aware of their methods and you resist them.  Steph Mineart, Indianapolis, Indiana  **4. Dear FRONTLINE,**  The documentary was excellent. ... The statement having to do with whether or not TV shows are portraying teens of today, or if teens of today are portraying TV shows, was an interesting statement. The teens of today are one big group of conformists, so both aspects of the statement are true. We all have a tiny speck of individuality in us, but we all like to be liked and be with the "in crowd."  I thought it was funny that the market researchers claimed they were trying, and succeeding, at understanding the modern teen. We change so much even we don't understand ourselves. But, nice try. Overall though, the documentary was well researched and educational. Thanks.  Julie Mullowney | |
| blank |