

# Is MTV the Source of All Evil? Media and College Students

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I-pods. X-Box 360. The BlackBerry. So many of us own at least one of these items, but why? Why are these items the object of our every desire? The larger and often unanswered question—what makes them cool? For that matter, what makes anything cool? The regrettable answer is: the media.

The media has discovered a vast money making industry proving more and more profitable as time goes on: targeting and selling products to teenagers. However, through a little research, it is easy to see why this group is such a huge target.

Our generation of teenagers is comprised of thirty-two million young persons, the largest group of teens ever — even succeeding the baby boomers' generation. Besides our substantial size, technology has improved so greatly that there are increasingly more and more ways for the media to reach us. It is estimated that college students watch nearly ten hours of television, and listen to more than ten hours of radio each week. More than 76 percent access the Internet at least once a day. On top of that, many students are doing at least two of these tasks at once— we watch television or listen to the radio while we are online as well. To us it is natural; to the media it is profitable.

Teenagers and college students are extremely marketable for a number of reasons. Studies show that brand loyalties begin to form as young as the age of ten, and are fixed for many products by the age of fifteen. For this reason brand advertisement is targeted greatly to younger teens. However, the products teenagers and college students want are ever changing. Though trends change, teens' spending money is only increasing. In 2001, teenagers spent 100 billion dollars and influenced their parents to spend 50 billion dollars more for them. With so much money to be expended, and brand loyalty to be created, teens are an obvious market target. However, college students of the twenty-first century are being pursued by companies more

than ever before. St. Lawrence University Assistant Professor of Sociology, Abye Assefa, an expert on the media, asserts that college students today are sophisticated, potential power brokers, immediate consumers, and have more readily available money than ever before. Undergraduates alone have approximately 1.5 billion dollars in discretionary spending power after they have paid for tuition, room and board, and books. Today's college students also carry credit cards.

Media is focused on producing "cool," whatever "cool" may be. We see advertisements whether obvious or not in every form of entertainment from television, to radio, to the internet, to film. Yet, media is not informative today, blurring the lines between news and tabloids, rendering us as uncritical and stupid. A typical American teenager will process 3,000 or more discrete advertisements per day and at least ten million by age eighteen. The television show "Frontline" examines market influences on teenagers in its fifty-three minute program entitled "The Merchants of Cool." "Frontline" correspondent, Douglas Rushkoff, says, "For today's teens, a walk in the street may as

and needs in order to create products suitable to their interests. However, this is not the case. Companies do market research, not consumer research, and aim to understand us as consumers rather than as people. Companies go "cool hunting" (as it is referred to) through everything from focus groups of teenagers, to using websites such as look-look.com. Look-look.com is an online source for companies. It researches underground teen trends and subcultures and then posts its findings on its website. This source is such a powerful medium that businesses must pay 20,000 dollars for a subscription. It is a race to discover a new trend, bring it to life before anyone else, and then eventually kill it. In this lies the very paradox of marketing to teens— as soon as "cool" is discovered, it is not "cool" anymore and the trend dies out making room for another. However, with a 150 billion dollar industry, all of the information these companies collect is beyond valuable. MTV in particular holds the key to understanding teenage consumerism.

Often referred to as the "MTV Machine," MTV is absolutely addicted to researching young people. It has been quite successful as its annual profit exceeds one billion dollars and is now known as a "youth marketing empire." Robert McChesney, a communications professor at the University of Illinois (and who is featured in "The Merchants of Cool") contends, "Everything at MTV is a commercial, that's all MTV is. Sometimes it's an explicit advertisement paid for by a company to sell a product. Sometimes it's going to be a video for a music company there to sell music. Sometimes it's going to be the set that's filled with trendy clothes and stuff there to sell a look that will include products on that set. Sometimes it will be a show about an upcoming movie paid for by the studio, though you don't know it, to hype a movie that's coming out from Hollywood. But everything's an infomercial. There is no non-commercial part of MTV."

Take the popular MTV show, "Total Request Live" (better known as TRL). This show alone defines "cool" as it shapes our music, our

clothing, what movies to see, and even some of our political perspectives. Alone, "TRL" can make or break a new band, a celebrity, a film, or a clothing trend. These ideal teens whose images are shown everywhere are defined and divided by the media into two specific groups, the "mooks" and the "mid-riffs."

We all know that guy, the obnoxious, in your face, out of hand, thinks he's "all that" guy. Yet, I'm certain each of us can only name a few of these described "mooks." However, the media portrays all teenager males as being "mooks"

ing addicted to at least a few.

The question at hand is: Does the media mirror the true images of teens and college students today, or, are we mirroring the images the media creates of us? The answer is not clear as, largely, we are stuck in a feedback loop. The media creates images of us, and we, in turn, become depictions of those images back towards them. However, the majority of college students are nothing like those depicted in the media. Assefa claims that college students of the twenty-first century are more responsible individuals than ever before. We take out massive amounts of loans each year in order to pay for our education, literally borrowing on our futures. Therefore, we are stuck in a continuous state of contradiction between who we really are, and who the media portrays us to be. We constantly work towards becoming who the media defines as "cool," investing in products, clothes, films, and even the music of "cool." Yet, even those who rebel against the norm eventually become all the same. Such rebellion is prepackaged by the media as a product and sold back to this defiant subculture.

In fact, teens and college students are being tremendously controlled by media forces. A frightening example is the Viacom Corporation. Viacom is the second largest media conglomerate after AOL Time Warner. Its assets include: television networks such as CBS, UPN, MTV, Nickelodeon, Nick at Nite, TV Land, CMT, and VH1 (among many others); Paramount Pictures; Blockbuster Video; seven major publishing companies including The Free Press, Touchstone, and Pocket Books; Infinity Broadcasting (which owns and operates over 180 radio stations); five major websites; the Star Trek Franchise; multiple theme parks; and Infinity Outdoor/TDI Worldwide (the largest outdoor advertising group in the United States). Viacom, one single corporation, owns major companies in television, radio, film, publishing, and the internet— thus gaining advertising rights in every entertainment medium, every possible way to reach teenagers. Media corporations infantilize teenagers and college students because they know that our consumerism and brand association will only intensify as we become adults. With corporations controlling so much, do we even have a fighting chance to find our own voices? Assefa argues, that unfortunately college students are absolutely "suffocated by the forces of the market." We have no power to rebel against these huge corporations which control our images because even our rebellion comes back to us as a product. Therefore we are stuck in a seemingly endless cycle. Though I generally prefer optimism, in this case the odds against our generation seem overwhelming.

## "The Media teaches girls to flaunt their sexuality"

or trying to find his image as a "mook." These are the guys on the television show "Jackass," or Bam from his hit show "Viva la Bam." These are the guys who are seen as cool even through their crudeness. Still, these guys are not a representation of the majority of teen males. To the same extent the girls of the media, "The Midriffs" as they are referred to, are totally enthralled with sex. These teen girls are prematurely adult, absolutely consumed with appearance and body image. Britney Spears (in her earlier days) was the epitome of the "midriff" with her scandalous song lyrics and revealing outfits at the ripe age of sixteen and seventeen. Through the media, girls are taught that their bodies are their best assets and to flaunt their sexuality even if they don't understand it. This powerful message is what has helped to lead to so many destroyed lives due to things such as eating disorders.

We are constantly barraged with images of the "normal" teen. MTV's annual spring break special shows college students during their supposedly most wild and irresponsible moments. College students, participating in the special, act just in the manner the media predicts, taking on their "mook" and "midriff" identifications. Assefa stresses that MTV "reinforces highly sexed and bummish images of college students today." The guys are vulgar while girls shed their clothing as if they were on fire. Reality television depicts the same teen image of constant repugnant behavior, nudity, and tons of sex. Many college students alike detest so-called reality shows, yet a lot of us admit to be-

## "MTV's annual profit exceeds one billion dollars"

well be a stroll through the mall. Anywhere they rest their eyes they'll be exposed to a marketing message." These marketing messages are not for any old advertisements, for any old products. Companies spend enormous amounts of money and time researching what is "cool" and what will become "cool."

Many companies claim that they research their consumers' wants

## SLU's Most Popular Destinations

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St. Lawrence's Study Abroad program will be sending at least 148 students to foreign countries for the fall semester of 2007.

The study abroad program has had a stable trend of sending anywhere between 150 to 200 students each semester to study abroad over the past few years; according to Assis Malaquias, the Associate Dean for International and Intercultural Studies here at St. Lawrence.

The most popular destination for students next fall is the program in London, which will include 25 of the total students.

This is followed by the program in Kenya, which 21 students will be taking part of.

According to Assis, the London and Kenya programs have consistently been the most popular destination of St. Lawrence students; however, there have always been spikes in the amount of interest for each program.

Kenya has been the most popular choice because the students gain wisdom and "gain a whole different perspective of the world" while they are there, said Assis.

"The students stop taking for granted things they took for granted before they went abroad." Another perspective they gain according to Assis is that they begin to understand why not everybody likes the United States.

There are two things that make the St. Lawrence study abroad program unique, said Assis.

The first unique characteristic of the program is that St. Lawrence provides a system to support to the students while they are away from their home.

Assis said that going abroad is "a challenging experience because you leave your comfort area." According to him, the support system that is put in place by the school allows students to face the challenges of living in a new country without feeling completely abandoned.

According to Assis, this support system allows the second unique characteristic to take place. He said that this support system allows the students to focus on their education plan instead of worrying about outside problems.

The students "get comfortable even though they're not in the comfort zone of the St. Lawrence campus," said Assis.

According to Assis, when the students come back from their program, they are completely different. "The students are different inside.

They are able to see things that they couldn't even begin to imagine here on campus," said Assis. "They understand themselves, the school, the country, and the world better."

One of the best attributes of the program, according to Assis, is the students. He said that they are the ones who make it special.

According to him, the education they receive is something very unique and life changing. "That education cannot be replicated in a classroom," said Assis.

**Chi Omega would like to thank the St. Lawrence and Canton communities for donating money to the Make a Wish Foundation on Saturday. We were able to raise over \$600 to give to this organization. If you missed the fundraiser and would still like to contribute, please contact Kirstie Donahue at kjdona04@stlawn.edu. Thank you for your support!**