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Colonizing Teens

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Gladwell, Malcolm, ["Annals of Style: The Cool Hunt."](#) *The New Yorker*, March 17, 1997.

Ann J. Simonton

In *Frontline's* recent exposé *Merchants of Cool*, (PBS, 2/27/01) we meet Mook and Midriff, the marketing world's teen couple of the year. Mook is characterized by his infantile, boorish behavior, a perpetual adolescent: crude, misogynistic, and very, very angry. Midriff is a "premature adult" who sees herself as a sexual object and is proud of it. Her high priestess is Britney Spears, and her mantra is "Your body is your best asset." Together Mook and Midriff represent \$150 billion dollars in potential sales. The 33 million teens in the US today are the largest generation of teens America has ever seen.



"Create a Member Profile Animation" from MTV.com

David Rushkoff, the producer of *Merchants of Cool*, names five companies — Viacom, AOL, Time Warner, Disney, Vivendi Universal, and Newscorp — who essentially control the minds and hearts of American teenagers through relentless market research and "cool hunting." Cool hunters feed what Rushkoff terms the "giant feedback loop" by studying teenage specimens, sometimes in their natural habitats, then transforming the research into a consumable product.

"We go out and we rifle through their closets," explains Todd Cunningham, director of market research for MTV. "We go through their music collections. We go to nightclubs with them. We shut the door in their bedrooms and talk to them about issues that they feel are really important to them."

MTV's research "was not about understanding John [a teen interviewed] as a person, but as a consumer," Rushkoff says. Marketers have to find a way to seem real; true to the lives and attitudes of teenagers; in short, to become cool themselves.

"We weren't even selling the product," concedes Sprite's marketer Rob Stone of the soft drink's recent foray into the world of hip-hop. "We were selling the fact that [Sprite] understood the culture."

"You know, advertising has always sold anxiety and it certainly sells anxiety to the young," Mark Crispin-Miller tells *Frontline*. "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."

"And marketers have neatly turned the tables so that they no longer chase cool, they actually manufacture it themselves. Nobody can really understand kids except the corporate sponsor," Miller adds. "That huge authority has emerged as the superhero of consumer culture. That's the coolest entity of all."

According to Rushkoff, "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." These greedy merchants are happy purveyors to the lowest common denominator.

"Teen rebellion itself is just another product," Rushkoff says. Insane

Clown Posse, a "rage rock" rap group in clown makeup easily repels the "un-cool" parental, teacher, and authority figures. Their willingness to use extreme profanity, violence, and misogyny has won them a major music label and a spot on Championship wrestling TV. MTV and other huge commercial outlets orchestrated the rise of Limp Bizkit, Eminem, and others despite, or more likely because of, their objectionable lyrics — and then they promote them relentlessly on-air. Does the media prominence of these rock groups reflect the desires of today's teenagers? Or are the media conglomerates stoking a teen infatuation with music and imagery that glorifies sexual violence as well as antisocial behavior and attitudes?

Cosmetic sparkles, lipstick, perfume, platform shoes, hip-hugging pants, thong bathing suits, and even padded bras are currently being marketed to seven-year-old girls (*Time*, 2/2/01). Young boys are watching pimps and ho-trains on WWF; these boys like Eminem, have seen *South Park*, and may have caught a glimpse of MTV's stunt-comedy show *Jackass*. Kids aren't encouraged to be friends; they are first genders, then competitors and/or sex objects.

The star of *Jackass* is turned upside down in a full portable toilet and swallows a goldfish only to puke it out in a bowl. This show captures over two million young viewers a week. Of another popular show, James Poniewozik writes, "[The theme of Comedy Central's *The Man Show*] — 'Quit your job and light a fart/Yank your favorite private part' — gives the show a pitiable, twilight-of-the-empire feeling: The patriarchy ain't what it used to be, kid, so shut up, scratch yourself, and check out the jugs on this girl." (*Time*, 2/2/01)

These excessively masculine/feminine role models are sadly portrayed as both natural and sexy. The culture eroticizes the inequality that is implicit in them. As feminist Sheila Jeffreys writes, 'Femininity is created to enable men to erect the sexuality of dominance and get pleasure out of it. The creation of femininity by individuals, and most particularly by the beauty/fashion and porn industries(which are just different faces of the same thing), maintains and fuels the society of male violence. A rape victim does not cause violence by wearing some outfit — but the femininity foisted upon women helps maintain the problem.'

TV perpetuates the problem with "babes" bouncing on trampolines and "babes" performing center-ring antics alongside steroid-drenched, slam-happy wrestlers. Since males are the targeted demographic, testosterone-friendly fare is all the rage. *The Man Show* is complete with "juggy" girls; Fox's *The X Show* offers etiquette about strip dancing; and now NBC and UPN offer *XFL*, where strippers in hot tubs are juxtaposed with bloodied football players.

Teens are an extraordinarily vulnerable group whose members have the right to create their identities away from such exploitive marketing. We who are adult need to be vigilant in our work to teach media literacy. We need to point the finger at the handful of media moguls who are shoving their brands of pseudo-cool down our collective throats. We need more programs like *The Merchants of Cool* to help demonize this increasingly twisted industry.

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