Reflection On The Merchants of Cool: Opinion Essay

After viewing The Merchant of Cool, my knowledge on this matter had been renewed, and I was once again reminded of the despicable measures and actions corporations are willing to take so they can gain control. However, in a close examination of their tactics, I cannot say I am surprised. With the way society functions, especially countries that view capitalism as completely sacred, their methods seem, in regards to consumerism, almost next to normal.

The documentary film “The Merchants of Cool” focuses and questions the media’s many icons that have overtaken modern youth culture. In fact, whether they were liked or not, the youths who grew up before the 2000s knows a great amount about popular culture. And yet, however deplorable it is, corporations who controls the popular cultural media have taken advantage of their desperate pursuit of “cool”. Even more disgusting is the fact that all major companies see teens not as people with real individual lives, problems, and struggles, but as moving talking dollar bills and as potential consumers and marketers of their products.

The mere notion that a company can nonchalantly insert a “plant” in youth circles in order to influence them from within without their knowledge is more than terrifying. This unorthodox tactic has turned a whole generation of youth doubtful and suspicious even among peer groups. Albeit legal, the methods employed by these cooperation dances on the line of ethical practices.

When being presented with the evidence and reasoning from the documentary, I began to question how much of my youthful days were manipulated for their own gain, and how much I am still under their control. If a person’s whole childhood is solely constructed with outside artificial influence, is it even possible to break free from this magnitude of control? Since the renaissance of modern day technology, every aspect of life involves some form of this new invention. After all, convenience and efficiency is valued in all human history. Social media and pop culture is so readily available to everyone, especially teens, it is inevitable that it will be ingrained within their lives. Teens, in pursuit of their personal identity, had placed a great amount of reliance upon pop culture to define themselves for them. Suppose a parent were to take away a teen’s phone or computer. The teen would panic, or even throw a fit over such a simple piece of metal and plastic. Their identity, communication, and ideals all rest with social media. They don’t exist without these stuff.

The proof we need to verify the truth presented in the film “The Merchants of Cool” can simply be answered by turning on the television, or walking in a shopping mall, after keeping the ideas from the documentary in mind, one can watch MTV and other popular culture media with renewed perspective. The excessive crassness is subtly and nonchalantly presented, yet so infinitely intrinsic. Such questionable contents are used so many times that modern youth would sneer at the notion that these kinds of questionable contents are wrong to begin with. But for those not propagandized into this subtly forced vulgarity, such as parents and the older generations, this is nothing but pornography. Children, especially young girls are “taught” by the media to become this picture perfect image of “misbehaving” women exploring their sexuality. The fact that media corporations would go as low as to sexualize young children just for the sake of earning money is beyond the realms of evil.

Furthermore, the message of this film varies greatly depending on the audience. To modern day teenagers, the message will most likely be lost within their indoctrinated perspectives. And yet, to the older audiences, they will very likely relate to the message since these kinds of unethical practices are plain to see for those who are newly exposed to pop culture.

Looking at the interview “The New Time Religion of Advertising”, the ideas of Sut Jhally are quite enlightening. Often, modern day society as the connotation that it is fairly separated from religion. Outside of pop culture, that can arguably be the case. However, it is clear to see that pop culture, in this day and age, is the most powerful and dominant religion the world had ever seen before.

Although it exists in the new age, pop culture shares many similar mechanics with older religions. In old religion, if a person were to question or reject the core beliefs, they would be labeled as a heretic and be outcasted. In pop cultural media, a person is automatically outcasted should they not be daily updated on the newest trends, and he will be cast out of any groups with pursuit of “cool”. In old religion, there are saints and priests that are regarded with the highest respect since they are holy interpreters of God's words. In pop cultural media, celebrities and big brands are the trendsetters that all must respect and follow. In old religion, there are cathedrals and churches that one must visit on a regular basis. In pop cultural media, in order to stay “trendy”, one must visit the shopping mall on a consistent routine. The devotion exhibited by believers and teens toward God and “cool” are frighteningly similar. And since there is a pattern, there will be people to study those patterns. And if this pattern can be studied, it can be taken advantage of.

In the article “Cons of Advertising to Teenagers” by Elle Smith (2019), she wrote: “Teenagers are searching for their own identity; they're in a stage when they're naturally insecure and vulnerable to advertisers who take advantage of their self-doubts. The main message teens hear is 'You're not cool without this product,' which might be endorsed by a big star or have a prestigious label. Teens desperately want to relate to their peers, and they are taught that material possessions are what's important, according to Dr. Tim Kasser, a psychologist. This process of defining self-worth with 'stuff' distorts teens' organic ability to develop their own identities.”1 Most teens experience a dilemma on whether to fit in or to stand out. Majority of the time, rather than leaning on either extreme ends, teens will attempt to pursue the absolute middle ground where they can try to have the best of both sides. They want to become popular and unique within their own friend groups, and yet not so unique that they deviate from the “cool” and be cast out of their inner circle. It didn’t take long for corporations to learn this newly invented cultural phenomenon and to profit from it.

And now, applying today’s ground-breaking technology along with the skeleton structure of target-specific advertising, and the most powerful propaganda-style of advertisement is born. According to Elizabeth S. Moore (2004), she said: “As the media landscape children face has diversified, the lines between advertising and entertainment have become increasingly blurred. This is true across media. For example, television commercials have become increasingly focused on entertainment and image creation, and are often tied to enticing website games and activities through brand characters. Children’s magazines also often include puzzles, games, comics, or editorials that are sponsored by advertisers. Promotional tie-ins or placements in movies further muddy the distinction between advertising and entertainment designed for children. Toys, apparel and food provide tangible reinforcements. More generally, commercially sponsored web sites containing games, contests and promotions designed for children pervade

the Internet.”2 This point is also reinforced by SuganthaLakshmi and Saravanakumar (2012) in their research. They wrote: “Games like Farmville and Mafia Wars hosted on Facebook are immensely successful, creating an ideal opportunity for retailers to do something they know well: marry entertainment and merchandising. Last summer 7-Eleven partnered with game-maker Zynga to extend social games into the physical world. Items such as slurpees and Big Gulps were branded with Farmville, Mafia Wars and YoVille designs that had redemption codes for in-game rewards. Meanwhile, teen-fashion retailer Wet Seal has been developing its own Facebook game, Chic Boutique. The retailer is hoping customers will compete with each other online to design outfits compiled from items in its catalog, increasing awareness of Wet Seal's offerings and driving sales.”3 Although these kinds of actions are despicable in respect to ethics, it is brilliant in respect to money-making. There are no audience more innocent and gullible than young children. Flashy bright colours, cute cartoon characters and funny noises can instantly take control of a child’s attention, and if those previously listed elements are visually integrated within advertisements, children will inevitably be attracted towards it. It is not unknown that the most effective way to change society is to start with the core, which is the young ones. Before such advancement of technology, advertisers had to guess and chase after what teens consider “cool”. But now, they can assert what they want to sell directly into the minds of the children. Less guessing and following, and more leading and controlling.

When it comes to the ability to recognise the effects and strategies of advertisements, those who are raised outside of the technological renaissance have an overwhelming advantage compared to those who are born in it. As for the oncoming new generations, it would be near impossible to separate them from the influence of social media, or the endless pursuit of “cool”.

Fortunately for myself, I can discern the ways in which pop culture can shape my thinking, and I can remove myself from those influences should I choose to. However, the fact that these manipulative methods are allowed to be used towards the most vulnerable age simply makes me sick. Companies use advertising to specifically target children and young teens due to their lack of experience or knowledge.

Ever since I’ve come to acknowledge these strategies of marketing, I have been avoiding advertisements to the absolute best of my abilities. Even though I know it is utterly impossible to escape them in this day and age, it is still important for oneself to not be drowned out by outside influences.

The difficulty for free thinking and critical thinking significantly multiples with the herd mentality that is greatly encouraged in pop culture. It won’t take long until social media and advertisers turn the future generation into obedient mindless perfect little consumers that will buy products that they don’t need. It is no surprise that these kinds of unethical practices are allowed to continue. In a capitalist society, money is the bottom line while ethics and morality can be thrown to the wind. Don’t misunderstand me, capitalism is the best form of social structure there is, but being the best of the worst isn’t saying much. Literally all it requires for the upper corporations to stay at the summit of power is to pretend they have morality.

Society is currently heading down a path that cannot be reversed or slowed down. The whole advancement of marketing can be summarized to human greed controlling human ignorance. Those who still holds a free and rational mind can only watch from the side lines, with little ways to save this dying world.