

# [Me against the media](https://assignbuster.com/me-against-the-media/)

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I stroll into my Critical Media Studies classroom, drinking an icy bottle of Pepsi and wearing a Nike baseball cap. A few of my students glance up from their cell phones and iPods long enough to notice me. “ Um, nice hat,” someone comments. “ Thank you,” I say. “ Today’s class is proudly sponsored by Nike, a strong advocate ofeducation. When it comes to education, Nike says, ‘ Just do it! ’. ” I take a swig of my Pepsi. “ Can you guess who else is sponsoring our class today? The few students who have actually done the reading chuckle because they know that today’s class is about the pervasiveness of consumerism in popularcultureand in the schools. Over the years, I’ve resorted to lots of gimmicks like these in my quest to teach students about consumerism. I try to make my students more aware of how the media naturalize consumerism through advertisements, product placement, and especially through advertiser-friendly programming. You might be surprised to hear that I find this to be the single most difficult topic to teach.

I teach about many controversial media issues — ownership, violence, race and gender representation — and students contemplate these topics enthusiastically. But when it comes to consumerism, it’s a brick wall. Five minutes into any such discussion, I brace myself for the inevitable chorus of, “ Oh, come on. It’s just a bunch of ads. ” Corporations and advertising executives should rejoice, as this reticence of young people to think critically about the role of consumerism ismoneyin their pockets.

Advertisers have always coveted the 18-34 year old group—the legions of the so-called “ Age of Acquisition” who have few established brand loyalties and lots of pocket change. Today’s Generation Y youth, born roughly between 1977 and 1997, are especially desirable because they are the children of Baby Boomers, and therefore represent a population explosion. Run the term “ Generation Y” through a search engine, and you’ll find dozens of sites with information about how companies can take advantage of this marketing gold mine.

Multinational corporations are deeply invested in the collective consumer choices of my students. When my students fail to show concern, these corporations become all the more powerful. So why is it that Generation Y is so uncritical of consumerism? I offer you this report from the trenches, from my college classroom in Fort Collins, Colorado, with my insight into how students view consumerism and why lack concern. I also discuss how I have addressed these attitudes. My hope is that media activists of all stripes can draw upon my experience.

To demonstrate to my students how media content itself naturalizes consumerism, I used to show my students a clip from the movie Father of the Bride. In this clip, the father is horrified that his daughter wants him to spend about $130, 000 on her wedding. He would prefer to have a simple wedding reception at the local Steak Pit, but the wholefamilyrejects this idea. Even the adolescent son understands this is “ unacceptable”; he comments, “ I don’t think you want the word ‘ pit’ on a wedding invitation. When he complains that his first car cost less than the wedding cake, the wedding coordinators bursts into laughter and says, “ Welcome to the ‘ 90s. ” After the daughter agrees to downsize the wedding, her father discovers her, asleep, reading a magazine article with tips on how to throw a budget wedding. Suddenly ashamed of himself, he agrees to fund the extravagant wedding. Dad learns his lesson, so to speak. Consumerism-fueled expectations may be outrageous, but they are necessary, andfailureto adhere to these expectations is silly, miserly, and downright unloving.

I quit showing this clip. It didn’t work. Oh, they got the point, that media content often promotes the agenda of advertisers. Unfortunately, the clip would inevitably lead to a version of the following discussion. A female student raises her hand shyly and says, “ I understand why this is bad, but I want a big wedding. ” A dozen ponytailed heads nod in harmony. “ I mean, not as big as the one in the movie,” someone responds, “ but you know, the flowers, the cake, the dress, the ring, all that stuff. I’ve daydreamed about my wedding since I was a little girl. ” Me too,” the first student says, and frowns. “ Does that make me a bad person? ” Therein lies the trouble. Thedreams, thememories, the rites of passage of Generation Y — all of these are intertwined intricately with consumerism. By placing wedding consumption under scrutiny, this student feels like she is being attacked personally, because her sentimental dream of a wedding is linked so closely to products. To this Generation Y student, the suggestion there is something wrong with consumerism is akin to the suggestion that there is something wrong with her.

While all of us in the post-war Western world have grown up with the association betweenhappinessand consumption, this association is all the more powerful with Generation Y. They have grown up with unlimited advertising and limited models of social consciousness or activism. Let’s look at the experiences of my students, a fairly typical U. S. American sample of Generation Y. Their happiestchildhoodmemories are thoroughly linked to consumption. They were born in the 1980s under the Reagan administration, when two important trends in children’s television occurred.

Reagan, ever the media deregulator, relaxed requirements for educational programming at the same time as he relaxed restrictions on adverting to children. This helped bring forth a new marketing strategy—which Tom Engelhardt has called the “ Shortcake Strategy” — in which children’s television shows were created for the exclusive purpose of marketing large collections of children’s toys. The prized childhood memories of Generation Y are filled with these shows and toys: Strawberry Shortcake, He-Man, the Care Bears.

Discussing the politics of this kind of marketing with students is even harder than discussing wedding excess. A student once wrote in myteacherevaluation, “ Great class, but please don’t go hating on Strawberry Shortcake. ” And then there was high school. This is the first generation that came of age in the era of rampant advertising in the schools, as well as Channel One, the news program piped into schools complete with advertisements. As a Generation Xer who graduated from high school in 1988, I recall very few ads in school. A relatively short time later, the hallways, lunchrooms, and sports facilities f cash-strapped schools frequently are sponsored by corporations. When I ask students if this happened in their schools, they supply never-ending examples: stadiums dotted by Nike swooshes, lunchrooms filled with Pizza Hut and Chic Fil-A, a back-to-school party sponsored by Outback Steakhouse, even book covers sponsored by corporations. Then, of course, there’s the prom. Eschewed by some of my Gen X counterparts, the prom is back and bigger than ever, teaching future brides and grooms important lessons about gowns, limos, and flowers.

Oh, and ask a Generation Y member which mall he or she grew up in, and you may well get an answer. In addition, many young people don’t take consumerism seriously because they feel that as individuals, it does not affect them. As media activists like Jean Kilbourne have argued, this illusion that advertising affects “ everybody else but me” is nothing new, but I think this is even more the case with Generation Y. I find that young people have a hard time understanding media effects in any way other than their own experience.

Students claim violence in the media doesn’t matter because they grew up playing Doom and they didn’t turn out violent. Or they claim that unrealistic images of women in the media do matter because they know a lot of girls witheating disorders. Young people don’t seem to have a language for understanding that the media doesn’t just affect us on an individual level — the media impact society politically, economically, and ideologically. A student might dismiss ads in his high school by saying they did not affect him.

But nonetheless, the proliferation of ads in high schools have affected U. S. American culture as a whole — and that’s what young people do not seem to understand. Again, this individualistic way of looking at media effects isn’t entirely new, especially in an individualistic culture like the United States, where social scientists for years have been obsessed with trying to draw links between individual behavior and the media. But Generation Y is a particularly individualistic cohort. The Me Generation is back.

Just like in the 1970s, young people are frightened and disgusted with current events and have retreated away from politics, with their iPods, Playstations, and all the other isolatingtechnologythe consumer market can offer. But the 1970s were different because the 1960s didn’t die overnight. Me Generation or not, the language of activism was still spoken in the 1970s, and in fact many young people were involved in movements such as Women’s Liberation. To what activist language has Generation Y been exposed? It’s three years into their own Vietnam, and Generation Y isn’t exactly flooding the streets with protestors.

Often students tell me that they find politics to be boring and irrelevant to their own experiences. In other words, it’s pretty hard to engage a group of young people in a discussion of the political implications of consumerism when they are not engaged in politics much at all. Consumerism is a personal choice, and most of my students cannot see beyond that. They shop at Wal-Mart because it’s cheap, and buy coffee at Starbucks because they like the mochas. Sweatshops? Globalization? It’s not so much that young people don’t care about these things (though many don’t).

Rather, they haven’t been taught to think of consumerism as something that extends beyond their own enjoyable trip to the mall, or that their personal consumer decisions are political. To me, perhaps the most frustrating argument students make about consumerism is that it shouldn’t be a societal concern because “ it’s the parents’responsibility. ” Parents are responsible for refusing to buy their kids $200 basketball shoes, for making sure they eat a healthy lunch in the cafeteria, and for instilling values that, according to my students, will somehow make their children immune to the effects of advertisements.

This argument disturbs me in part because very few of my students are parents, and in part because they seem to show no compassion for kids who have parents unwilling or unable to be this active in their kids’ development. But most of all, this disturbs me because it places corporations off the hook for the effects they have on society. It doesn’t matter how or to whom a company markets their products; it only matters how parents raise their children. Once again, consumerism becomes the business of individual families, not society. So, what can media activists do?

I think the first step is to find ways to appeal to members of this generation on the level of the individual. Young people might not care about plight of a Nike worker in Vietnam or a Wal-Mart worker in Houston. They may, however, be concerned with how credit card companies lure in college students, or how college bookstores jack up prices needlessly, or how car insurance companies charge young people exorbitant amounts. When I ask students to give examples of how corporations have screwed them over personally, the room fills up with raised hands.

This is a good way to show young people that although consumerism has brought them happiness in their lives, it has also brought them problems. A second activist strategy of reaching Generation Y is to find examples of popular culture that promote consumption. Generation Y is all about popular culture. I’ve found that my students are amenable to discussions about how advertisers and media producers consciously create media content that “ trains” young people to be consumers. Young people need to know that corporations see them as a market to manipulate, and often will respond to this argument, because who wants to be manipulated?

The trick is to find popular culture texts they relate to that have a strong pro-consumerism bent. No, don’t show them Father of the Bride, but one thing I have shown with more success to my students is the “ Pottery Barn” episode of Friends. In this episode, Rachel lies to her roommate Phoebe and tells her their new furniture is antique. Actually, it came from Pottery Barn, but Phoebe hates commercial furniture. Rachel is caught in her lie at when the two walk by Pottery Barn and see most of the furniture in the display window.

But then Phoebe sees a lamp in the window and decides she must buy it. Phoebe learns her lesson. Commercial furniture is good. Another good source of pro-consumerism media is reality television, a favorite of students and chock filled with product placement. A third strategy is simply to get young people to talk to their parents about their experiences growing up and how people “ back in the day” felt about corporate power and consumerism. These are the children of Baby Boomers, after all, so even if they haven’t been around activism, their parents have.

One of my favorite assignments is one in which I have studentsinterviewolder family members about popular culture and their past experiences. Students love this assignment. So, there’s hope. When I wear my Nike hat to class, some of the students get it, and inevitably, a student stops by my office at the end of the semester and announces she has stopped going to Starbucks. But this is no easy task, and activists would be well advised to work on the issue of Generation Y and consumerism. The advertisers are certainly paying attention to Generation Y, and so should we.