

Media Literacy: A Primer and Practical Strategies for Ad “Deconstruction”

Purpose of This Assignment

The goal of this assignment is to (a) provide you, the reader, with a general understanding of the concept, media literacy; and (b) to give you the chance to practice the reflective analysis of commercial advertisements. Finally, we hope to increase your enthusiasm or motivation to learn more about the topic.

Media Literacy: A Definition

“The process of understanding and using the mass media in an assertive and non-passive way. This includes an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the media, the techniques used by them and the impact of these techniques.” (Boles, D. 2008)

The rapid advancement of technology – and the new medias that are evolving – provide fertile ground for those who look to design and implement new “cross-media” strategies, aimed at influencing our emotions, motivations, and our behavior (primarily defined as purchasing habits). Media literacy aims to provide students / citizens with the knowledge and skills to critically reflect on these new media productions and be able to understand (or “deconstruct”) the strategies used to move us, to manipulate our appetites, and to persuade us to buy this or do that.

A Brief History

The concept of media literacy has a long history and is currently evolving in countries around the world. Capitalist, socialist, east and west; “activists” and academics are all keenly aware of the power of media to shape and guide our culture.

“Media literacy was originally established as an educational tool to protect people from what many perceived to be mass media's ill effects. The earliest country known to use this inoculative paradigm was Great Britain in the 1930s. In the 1960s, there was a paradigm shift in the field of media literacy to emphasize working within popular culture rather than trying to convince people that popular culture was primarily destructive. This was known as the popular arts paradigm. In the 1980s, there came recognition that the ideological power of the media was tied to the naturalization of the image. Constructed messages were being passed off as natural ones. The focus of media literacy also shifted to the consumption of images and representations, also known as the representational paradigm. In the United Kingdom and Australia media literacy is often a stand alone credit course, as well as part of the English curricula.” (from Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_literacy#History)

A more detailed but compatible analysis of the subtleties and complexities of this evolution of the concept, media literacy, can be found in a chapter, “A Rationale for Media Education,” in the book, *Media Literacy in the Information Age* (Kubey, R. 1997). For our purposes, it is important to note that media literacy today is taught with various purposes in mind. Inoculation from the effects of media being a primary reason, and a more academic purpose of providing students with a conceptual structure to help in the (reflective) deconstruction of representations or the “demystification” of media is the other.

Why does it matter?

Media – images, sounds, videos, graphics, simulations, “edutainment” games – all are created with an audience in mind. **Each is intended to effect change or stimulate one of three primary attributes or dimensions of our psyche: emotions, motivations, behaviors.** Billions of dollars are being spent on research in the advertising and marketing disciplines.

Take a look at the images to the right. What does Santa have to do with Coke? Next, pretty women like men who drink vodka? Finally, tough guys smoke Marlboro cigarettes?



The rapid advancement of technology – and the new medias that are evolving – provide fertile ground for those who look to design and implement new “cross-media” strategies, aimed at influencing our emotions, motivations, and our behavior (primarily defined as purchasing habits). Media literacy aims to provide students and all citizens with the knowledge and skills to critically reflect on these new media productions and be able to understand (or “deconstruct”) the strategies used to move us, to manipulate our appetites, and to persuade us to buy this or do that – emotions, motivations, behaviors.

The purpose of this module is to supply you with a set of questions to ask and answer about any media message you encounter and ask you to critique a few direct to consumer television advertisements, using the questions we provide as your guide. In addition, you can practice “deconstructing” several ads, using several cinematic techniques we will supply you as your guide. We do not expect that you will be entirely “media literate” at the end of this module. We do hope that you might adopt a critical stance towards media. That is, that you understand the powerful influences – covert, overt, conscious, and unconscious – that media exert. Hopefully, you will have a better sense of the subtle and powerful mechanisms at work as you consume media in your daily lives.

Media Literacy in Broader Conceptual Frameworks

Media literacy consists of a conceptual foundation and skill set that can be applied throughout the curriculum and across disciplines. This skill set supports an individual’s ability to be self-directed and autonomous; increasing one’s sense of and ability to display personal agency. These skills are identified as important within the “positive psychology” movement (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi 2000), and education (see Barrell , J, 2000; Brookfield, s., 1993; Lowry, C., 1989). In addition, many health professions recognize the need for the individual to gain skills that enhance personal agency and responsibility for values, emotions, and behaviors promoting better health. For example, a principle element of new strategies for patients with chronic illnesses (e.g., diabetes) is promoting successful self-management skills (Fisher, E.B. et al 2005; Chodosh, 2005). The direct impact of media literacy instructional interventions to promote healthy attitudes and behaviors is an area of intense research activity (see Bergsma, L J., and Carney, M. E., 2008).

Within the health care sector, media influence individuals of all ages to purchase or consume a wide-variety of products and substances. Many researchers have attempted to mediate the effects of advertisements in several age groups and a range of issues via media literacy training. See for example, college-age women and eating disorders (Coughlin and Kalondner, 2006), adolescents and smoking (Gonzales et al, 2004), and young girls and body image (Fuller et al, 2004).

Practical Guides for Practicing Media Literacy

Macro Level Analysis – The Five Key Questions, core concepts

The following table presents the key attributes of media messages. A central strategy of media literacy is to critique media products (e.g., commercials, print ads, storefronts, radio ads, etc.) along the five central dimensions defined below. As part of your assignment, you will have the option of viewing the ad at least once; create a brief critique of the ad, answering each of the five key questions (for consumers) below.

Table 1:
A summary of CML (Consumer’s) Key Questions, Core Concepts, and Producer’s Key Questions

| <p style="text-align: center;">CML’s Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS) © 2002–2007 Center for Media Literacy www.medialit.org</p> | | | | |
|--|-------------------|---|--|---|
| # | Key Words | Deconstruction: CML’s 5 Key Questions (Consumer) | CML’s 5 Core Concepts | Construction: CML’s 5 Key Questions (Producer) |
| 1 | Authorship | Who created this message? | All media messages are constructed. | What am I authoring? |
| 2 | Format | What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? | Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules. | Does my message reflect understanding in format, creativity and technology? |
| 3 | Audience | How might different people understand this message differently? | Different people experience the same media message differently. | Is my message engaging and compelling for my target audience? |
| 4 | Content | What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message? | Media have embedded values and points of view. | Have I clearly and consistently framed values, lifestyles and points of view in my content? |
| 5 | Purpose | Why is this message being sent? | Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power. | Have I communicated my purpose effectively? |

Micro-Level Analysis – Cinematic Techniques

The following tables illustrate how specific cinematic techniques can be interpreted as promoting one or more emotions, motivations, or behaviors. The table contains a very small subset of the variety of techniques available to those creating media. Again, this should give you a taste for what is possible. Many resources are available at the end of this document, should you want to delve further into this fascinating and important realm relating to our daily consumption of media.

A second aspect of your assignment will be to annotate your DTC ads using at least five of the elements contained in the table, below. Include the emotion, motivation or behavior each element is attempting to provoke. There are many ways to view the ads and each of us will have a distinct way of categorizing what we see. The key is (a) an accurate match with film technique and the specific portion of the film demonstrating the technique, and (b) a considered description of what effect(s) the producers were trying to elicit from viewers along the lines of emotions, motivations, or behaviors.

| Table 2: Common cinematic techniques intended to affect emotions, motivations, and/or behaviors in video advertisements | |
|--|--|
| Cinematic Technique | Goal |
| Close-up | Intimacy and focus either on actors or on our relationship with actor. |
| Long shot with pan | Establishing context with the shot providing continuity and a sense of co-presence. |
| Changing Frame Using Zoom-in or Zoom-out | Visual interest and invitation; drawing in from a general to a specific focus. |
| Juxtaposing text or other graphic visuals / simulations with close-up or medium close shots | Promoting clarity or emphasis related to key message of the ad. |
| Music and Background sounds | Strong influence on emotions. Stirring, inspiring, settling, etc. |
| Clothing | The most powerful means to establish status, and/or setting (e.g., home, work, play) and socio-economic status. |
| Closing Shot | The final shot provides the “carry out” message. Is it a directive? A question? Why? What does it intend for you to feel, want, or do? |

References

- Barrell, John (1995). Critical Issue: Working Toward Student Self-Direction and Personal Efficacy as Educational Goals. North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved from web April, 2007 - <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr200.htm>
- Bergsma, L. J., Carney, M. E. (2008). Effectiveness of health-promoting media literacy education: a systematic review; *Health Education Research*, 23(3):522-542
- Boles, D. (2008). The Language of Media Literacy: A Glossary of Terms. Retrieved from web 7/21/2008 - http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teaching_backgrounders/media_literacy/glossary_media_literacy.cfm
- Brookfield, S. (1993) Self-Directed Learning, Political Clarity and the Critical Practice of Adult Education *Adult Education Quarterly*, Volume 43, No. 4.
- The Center for the Advancement of Health (2002). Essential Elements of Self-Management Interventions [Monograph]. Washington, DC.; Retrieved via the web May, 2007 http://www.cfah.org/pdfs/Essential_Elements_Report.pdf
- Chodosh, J., MD, MSHS et al (2005). Meta-Analysis: Chronic Disease Self-Management Programs for Older Adults. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. 143 (6). 427-438 (plus appendices). Retrieved via web 6/1/07 - <http://www.annals.org/cgi/reprint/143/6/427.pdf>
- Coughlin JW, Kalodner C. (2006). Media literacy as a prevention intervention for college women at low- or high-risk for eating disorders. *Body Image*; 3: 35–43.
- Fisher E.B., Brownson C.A, O'Toole M.L., Shetty G, Anwuri V.V. and Glasgow R.E. (2005). Ecological Approaches to Self-Management: The Case of Diabetes. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(9), pp. 1523-1535
- Fuller HA, Damico AM, Rodgers S. (2004). Impact of a health and media literacy curriculum on 4th-grade girls: a qualitative study. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*; 19: 66–78.
- Gonzales R, Glik D, Davoudi M et al. (2004). Media literacy and public health: integrating theory, research, and practice for tobacco control. *American Behavioral Scientist*; 48: 189–201.
- Lowry, Cheryl Meredith (1989). Supporting and Facilitating Self-Directed Learning. *ERIC Digest No. 93*.
- Seligman, M.E.P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14.