

TEEN INTERVIEW: RESPONSE TO "MERCHANTS"

Teenagers are not generally viewers of FRONTLINE reports. And that's why we wanted to make an effort to get their views about this one, "The Merchants of Cool." Because it's about them--how they're the target "demo" for the media marketers of popular culture today. So here are the reactions of just one small group of teens after watching this FRONTLINE documentary. There were about a dozen who viewed it, all high school juniors and seniors at Milton Academy, an independent school in the Boston area. We hope their views might elicit more comments from their peers about this FRONTLINE report, which we will post in our "Join the Discussion" area of this site.

QUESTION: So what did you think?"

Tor: I got interested in it. I just got kind of annoyed at the fact that it was showing so much of what it was talking about. It felt like I was watching commercials.

Willis: There weren't enough kids in it. We heard all these media executives and whatever, but there was only a real response from the teenagers at the beginning.

Laura: I really do feel I was being studied like some kind of specimen. And that I didn't have any voice as a teenager. That was kind of weird. Was what the media executives were saying about teenagers true to your experience?

Laura: I think it was accurate, but it wasn't me telling them. It was them telling me.

Brian: They were talking about the rebelliousness--but it's not rebelling at all. They're capitalizing on the fact that people want to be rebellious, and they're talking about how teachers are nerds and authority figures are laughable. I mean, they're basically saying, "Everybody sucks except for us." They're basically telling us what to like and what we should like. They're trying to make money, obviously, and it's not about trying to make anybody happy. It's not a business in that it's trying to help people; it's a business in that it's making money.

Adia: Is pop culture trying to help people?

Laura: No. It's trying to make money. That's the problem, we're a moneymaking culture.

Tor: It at least pretends that it's trying to help people. Like it offers a solution if you just dumb yourself down enough to accept it.

Willis: Another related topic is that now that things like Napster and Gnutella

and these computer programs...that's kind of the new wave of rebellion. Just to completely rip off electronic media--download your own songs for free. I think it will be interesting to see if these media giants are going to be able to out-run it in the next decade or two.

Adia: I completely agree. The Internet is too big to control.

Willis: I think what the Internet has done is to diversify the opportunities we have to find something we like. If you look at who complained about Napster and those kinds of programs, it was the big labels. Whereas you see a lot of smaller [artists and labels] supporting programs like Napster, because they can really get their stuff out [to the public]. It allows me to download a band from ex-patriot Americans in Hong Kong or something. I can do whatever I want to, as long as the people are willing to put it out there. And it's the small artists who are doing that.

Tor: With things like Napster, you can't tell people, "This is what you should be listening to." You can't push it.

QUESTION: What do you think of the Eminem-Grammy controversy?

Davis: I didn't even watch it. I think the whole Eminem thing is BS. It really is like the [Insane Clown Posse]: "I'm rebelling, I'm taking it to the next level," just like media has been doing. They started out with the sex years ago and it just keeps escalating. Like the [FRONTLINE program] said, the media's looking at the teenage generation, taking that image, and I think they're notching it up a step. They're making it that much more risqué, and then they're selling it back. And you have Eminem with these absurd lyrics, and it's impossible to believe that any of that is really true. You don't think Eminem's lyrics are actually coming from him?

Davis: I doubt it. I think that's an example of someone who's trying to market the next level. No one else is doing that, so he's ahead of the game.

Dan: One of the [media] executives was talking about how they are trying to take things to the next level. The person who made "Cruel Intentions" wants to do something that nobody else has done. And in that sense, that is sort of the way to go. People want to see new things. But [when you] do that, it's just going to escalate. Sexual activity on TV is just getting more explicit. Vocabulary that's allowed on the radio is getting more and more explicit.

QUESTION: But do you feel you're getting fed more explicit stuff by the media? Or do you feel that you, as a generation, are asking for the more explicit material?

Adia: It's both. And society as a whole, because of this downward spiral in teenagers, is kind of going downward. Let's take sex and violence, which is what you see everywhere. I am inevitably polluted with it all the time. But once I turn 18, I'm not just going to forget about it. It's still going to be there. And I'm going to take that pollution (that's what I'll call it for now) and I'm just

going to take that with me for the rest of my life. And that's just going to affect everything from then on. I think it's a downward spiral not just for the teenagers and the media, but for US culture.

Brian: I think one of the main problems is that with all of this constant influx of information and also collapse of morals, it ends up creating apathy. I don't think people are as happy as they would be if they were able to do things of their own--as opposed to being told what to do and having, in a lot of ways, no minds of their own because they have no way of expressing themselves. Everything is forced onto them.

Willis: Tuning it out is a way of expressing yourself. I've pretty much stopped watching MTV. I live in the dorm. Sometimes it's going to be playing. Then I don't really have a choice. But mainly I watch what I'm interested in which is basketball.

Brian: I don't think, in a lot of ways, you can escape it. It's very hard to escape all the advertising.

Dan: I don't really understand how advertising can have that much effect on the population. When I'm listening to the radio, I'll listen to a song I like and as soon as that song goes off and an ad comes on, I change the channel, trying to find something else. [Ads] don't make me buy something. It seems like it's more just about name recognition. And we talked about this in our film class. It doesn't sell me a product, but it sells me the name. And whether I go out and buy that, at least I feel like it's my own choice still.

QUESTION: Do you ever think that maybe it's not your choice? That you're just being programmed in some way?

Dan: I honestly don't. One example is, I wear Nike shoes. Yes, it is a big huge name brand and there's tons of advertising on it. And I've gone out and I've worn Reeboks or whatever. And honestly, the one pair of Reeboks I ever had fell apart in a month. So to me, I found something that I like, that's comfortable, and that stays in one piece, and so that's why I buy Nike.

QUESTION: Why don't you buy some no-name?

Sara: You can't even get a no-name brand.

Adia: That's what was so depressing about the documentary. It really is like a spiral. And it seems as though right now we're way too far into it to get out of it. Nike has way more money than beginning shoe companies could have. For example, Converse. I love Converse. But then it sold out. It sold out to the same company that has New Balance and Skechers. The film mentioned the five conglomerates. They're so big, they're so huge, that you really stand no chance going against them.

Davis: I have a question--for anyone--which is: I do disagree with the AOL Time-Warner--the big five. But is it wrong for Time Warner, or is it wrong for