

Fall 9-27-2012

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Recommended Citation

Wiley, Alixe A., "Social Learning Theory in the Frontline documentary “The Merchants of Cool”" (2012). *Faculty Curated Undergraduate Works*. Paper 5.
http://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/undergrad_works/5

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CM101: Paper No. 1

September 27, 2012

Social Learning Theory in the Frontline documentary “The Merchants of Cool”

In the Frontline documentary *The Merchants of Cool*, the relationship between major media conglomerates and their hedonistic teenage customers is examined through exploring the different tactics industries use to discover and market the next “cool” thing. Industries maintain what the documentary refers to as a “feedback loop” with their customers, which is a cyclic, supply-and-demand relationship that blurs the line between fiction and reality. It has become impossible to tell which side is imitating the other: who do the products and trends that define popular youth culture belong to? What's more, are the sexual and aggressive hormone-fueled behaviors on television and in music intrinsic in adolescents or are they artificial ideas? If these behaviors are indeed manufactured, then how and why they are learned and practiced almost religiously by the majority of today's youth? I aim to examine if Social Learning Theory has any connection with the youth's desire to replicate what they see in the media.

One of the segments focuses on how market research has led to the creation of fictional archetypes that appeal to specific audiences. Viacom, the owner of the MTV network, created the “Mook” and the “Midriff” archetypes for teenage boys and girls respectively. While the former aims to entertain through vulgarity and hypermasculinity, the other promotes “feminine power” through flaunted sexuality and meticulous attention to the physical appearance. These

archetypes are reproduced across all outlets of media owned by Viacom (as well as other companies) and continue to be eaten up by young adult consumers. The documentary highlights popular sports like wrestling and the commercial success of pop stars as examples. While these fictional personas and celebrities don't necessarily reveal anything about the identity of teenagers, they reflect their needs as customers. TV makers believe that concepts like violence and sex are things that teens are confronted with in advertising and in the real world, therefore they desire to see it portrayed in their media as well. Although makers claim that they try to show negative consequences behind them, many would argue that violence and sex that is glamorized in the media enables teens to engage in these behaviors. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, there is a four step process that explains how an individual's environmental influences their behavior: attention, retention, motor-reproduction, and motivation.

Perhaps the most important step is the first, which involves the focused attention of the consumer on the behavior being performed in the media content. Teens are attracted to whatever is considered "cool" or relevant. Usually, this is a specific attitude or personality reflected in a famous or respect individual or product. In the documentary, 13 year-old girl Barbara takes an interest in pop idol Britney Spears. She has listened to the lyrics of her music, watched her dance during award shows, and taken in her physical appearance and mannerisms. In all probability, Barbara doesn't completely comprehend Britney's suggestive and sexually charged performances, as well as her classic "nymphet" appeal. She doesn't have to; her only concern is "looking good" and "being noticed". Barbara moves on to the second step by repeatedly watching her live model in order to remember and analyze her every move. After doing so, she begins to practice and reproduce everything about Britney: her makeup, talents, and marketable

personality. She is shown mimicking her when she's filmed dancing in front of cameras at the talent scouting after party. Barbara reaches the fourth step when she explains to IMTA agents that her motivation is to become a famous model or actor. She tries to sell herself in the hopes that her incentive will be signing with an agency. Even if she's not successful, she preserves hope because she received positive reinforcement in the form of praise, therefore being led to believe that her chances are high and that her behavior should be repeated and perfected.

Another instance of Social Learning Theory illustrated in the documentary is during the look at the ICP subculture. This group is distinguished from young Britney Spears fans because they apparently attempt to contrast mainstream culture and assume a unique identity that is strictly theirs (this is disregarding the fact that the ICP is now on a fairly mainstream record label). Teens that are part of the juggalo crowd observe, retain and imitate the way their idols look and act with the use of clownish face paint, Hatchetgear clothing, and hand gestures that have symbolic meaning. Besides appearances, juggalos seem to chant ICP lyrics like a mantra and go to concerts to release inner aggression and rebellious behavior. Their form of motivation is not to be successful, but to unite with fellow juggalos and feel like they are a part of something original and exclusive. Even after gaining commercial success, the ICP still has its fans because the band remains controversial and for the most part preserves its ideals concerning the rejection of conventional society.

Whether it's a mainstream media sensation or the philosophy of an underground subculture, members of America's youth undergo the processes within Social Learning Theory to learn the behaviors necessary to assimilate into (or totally reject) teenage culture. As long as industries continue studying and recycling ever-changing teenage trends, they will maintain a strong influence on teen's actions and decide where they fall in society.