

Does media literacy work?

An empirical study of learning how to analyze advertisements.

In an increasing number of secondary classrooms, print and TV ads are used by teachers as texts to be formally analyzed and studied. Educational practices like this are commonly identified as *media literacy*, which is defined as an expanded conceptualization of literacy that includes print, audio, visual, and electronic messages from contemporary culture (Kress, 2002). In using advertising texts in the classroom, teachers emphasize the skills of analyzing and evaluating ads to identify the message purpose, target audience, point of view and persuasive techniques used. Often, there is a focus on the social, political, economic, and historical contexts in which media messages reflect and shape culture (Buckingham, 2003).

Occasionally, as part of media literacy education, students also learn about the pre-production, production, and post-production processes involved in the creation of advertising messages (Young, 1990; Singer, Zuckerman & Singer, 1980). While it may be common for students enrolled in media production or marketing electives to learn about advertising production processes, it is far less common for students to gain this information in the context of their high-school English coursework. Potter (1998) points out the importance of knowledge structures in building critical analysis skills when it comes to analyzing advertising, but empirical research has not yet examined the impact of increased knowledge of advertising production processes, as it may affect critical thinking skills in responding to advertising messages.

However, there is only limited evidence that shows that learning about advertising and discussions about advertising in school can reduce children's vulnerability to advertising appeals and increase their ability to produce counter-arguments in response to advertising. For example, Christenson (1982) developed a three-minute video about advertising and showed it to children ages six to 12, finding that children who viewed the video were more aware of commercials and expressed less trust in commercials in general. Roberts, Christenson, Gibson, Mooser and Goldberg (1980) evaluated short films that were made to show children how television ads use various techniques to persuade. They found that heavy-viewing children who were initially most susceptible to commercials were most influenced by the films.

While older children and teens may have more knowledge about advertising, they also may not necessarily employ critical thinking skills in response to advertising, or have more skepticism about advertising in general. Boush, Friestad and Rose (1994) measured middle school students' knowledge of advertiser tactics and effects and their skepticism of advertising. Tactics included the use of celebrities, music, humor, cartoons, product comparisons, product demonstrations, and depictions of target audience. They found increased knowledge about advertiser tactics over a nine-month period, but no increase in advertising skepticism. They note:

Improving students' understanding of the way advertising works may have more potential for creating discerning consumers than has changing students' general attitudes. Exhortations to 'not believe everything you see on TV' are, therefore, less likely to produce changes in the processing of advertising claims than is a more careful analysis of advertisements that lays bare the persuasive device. (p. 172)

In evaluating the literature on advertising and children, Young (1990) criticizes the validity of research that has used superficial measures of children's skepticism, including responses to attitude statements using Likert-type scales. Even young children are aware of the social desirability of attitudes opposing advertising, he claims. Instead, Young argues that knowledge about the tactics used by advertisers to persuade, and skills like being able to understand the purpose and function of a media message, are key components needed to acquire critical thinking skills about advertising.