

Media Awareness - Hidden Persuaders

Grade Levels - Grades 5 – 8

Content Areas

Media Literacy, Social Studies, Technology, Bible (ethics), could be integrated into any subject

Description

In a world surrounded by media messages, children must navigate through the conflicting messages and sales pitches. Since children don't have clear self identities formed, they are particularly vulnerable to media messages that portray unrealistic and even undesirable qualities as being "cool". This lesson focuses on the hidden persuaders (propaganda techniques) in advertising. In election years, or if I'm teaching a unit on American Presidents, I focus the investigation on political ads. There are many other applications for the lessons of media awareness.

Key Concepts

Media messages affect our thoughts and actions. All of us are affected by advertisements, TV, books, movies, music, photographs, magazines, video games, or other media. Advertisements are trying to sell you something – sometimes a product, sometimes an idea. The advertisers use strategies that are designed to make you want what they're selling. Some of these strategies are honest attempts to persuade; some of them are deceitful. If you learn their tricks, you can have the power to choose more wisely, not just by being tricked (manipulated) into wanting what they're selling.

If tying in with elections, democracy requires an educated and informed electorate (voters) because it is "We the People" who are supposed to determine how our government meets our needs. We need to know the tricks of persuasion that political advertisers use to get our votes.

Persuasion vs. Propaganda – To persuade is "to win over to a belief or to a course of action by argument or earnest request" (This usually is neutral; it could be good or bad) Propaganda is "the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person" (This usually has a negative connotation) (Definitions from merriam-webster.com)

Key Questions

What is being "sold"?

Who is behind this advertisement?

What are the techniques being used to persuade you to "buy"?

What information did they leave out?

As Christians, we are called to be honest and respectful. What techniques of persuasion could be useful for Christians? Which ones are not appropriate? Why?

Standards

There are no National Standards for Media Literacy, per se, though several states have integrated media literacy into their standards. Below is an excerpt from California's standards. There are no Adventist Media Literacy standards currently either.

California State Standards for Media Literacy

(<http://www.medialiteracy.com/documents/CalifStateStandards.pdf>)

Listening & Speaking

1.0 Listening & Speaking Strategies

□ *Analysis and Evaluation of Oral and Media Communications*

- **Grade 4:** Standard 1.10 Evaluate the role of media in focusing attention on events and in forming opinions on issues.
- **Grade 5:** Standard 1.7 Identify, analyze, and critique persuasive techniques (e.g., promises, dares, flattery, glittering generalities); identify logical fallacies used in oral presentations and media messages; Standard 1.8 Analyze media as sources for information, entertainment, persuasion, interpretation of events, and transmission of culture.
- **Grade 6:** Standard 1.9 Identify persuasive and propaganda techniques used in television and identify false and misleading information.
- **Grade 7:** Standard 1.8 Analyze the effect on the viewer of images, text, and sound in electronic journalism; identify the techniques used to achieve the effects in each instance studied.
- **Grade 8:** Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.

California health education standards are phrased in terms of what the student will understand. They do not require media education, but each standard's accompanying list of "tasks and assignments [that] might be used to determine whether the student is meeting the standard" provides sample assignments that draw on media literacy skills, as follows.

California State Health Education Standards

<http://www.medialiteracy.com/documents/CalifStateStandards.pdf>

□ Middle School

□ **Standard 3:** The student will understand and demonstrate knowledge of behaviors that reduce the risk of becoming involved in potentially dangerous situations and know how to react to situations in ways that help to protect his or her health. **Sample assignment:** Students will select examples from media (TV and print) of appropriate and inappropriate responses to potentially dangerous situations.

□ **Standard 7:** The student will understand individual differences in growth and development.

Sample assignment:

Students will collect images of "ideal" bodies from the media and will compare those images with class observations of what reality is.

□ **Standard 9:** The student will know how to identify products, services, and information that may be helpful or harmful to his or her health. Students will be able to identify a variety of consumer influences and analyze how those influences affect decisions; identify reliable sources of nutrition information. **Sample assignment:** Students will find and compare two or more advertisements for the same health-related product, select one, and defend their decision verbally or by cartoon depiction.

National Standards for Social Studies

From Center for Civics Education (<http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=58erica#10>)

V. What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

B. What are the Rights of Citizens?

2 Political Rights

To achieve this standard, students should be able to

- identify political rights, e.g., the right to vote, petition, assembly, freedom of press
- explain the meaning of political rights as distinguished from personal rights, e.g., the right of free speech for political discussion as distinct from the right of free speech to express personal tastes and interests, the right to register to vote as distinct from the right to live where one chooses
- identify major statements of political rights in documents such as the Declaration of Independence, United States Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, state constitutions, and civil rights legislation
- explain the importance to the individual and society of such political rights as
 - freedom of speech, press, assembly, and petition
 - right to vote and to seek public office
- identify and evaluate contemporary issues that involve political rights, e.g., hate speech, fair trial, free press

Learning Outcomes

Be able to identify what the media message wants us to believe or do

Know the tools of persuasion and be able to identify those used in ads

Recognize bias, spin, omitted information, misinformation, and lies

Be empowered to make choices based on our values, not on the advertiser's values

Be able to create a media message that incorporates our Christian values of honesty and respect

Time Required

This can vary depending upon your purpose. I would suggest stretching it over 2 weeks for learning the vocabulary and practicing finding examples of persuasion/propaganda in the media. Since the video clips are short, you could have 15 minute lessons every day or have longer classes if your schedule allows it. You may wish to extend the lesson to include current political advertisements in an election year (make sure you're even-handed and don't betray your own biases).

I typically teach this lesson during the first quarter of the year. Then we can refer back to it throughout the year. There are always media moments during the year that capture kids' attention and create a learning opportunity.

Preparation

It may take hours to collect magazines or TV clips, or you could assign students to bring in advertisements. You could also **use the websites below** for materials, but **be sure to preview** for age-appropriateness.

Equipment Required

Your students need access to a computer or you need to have a projector available for classroom display of the numerous video clips. Alternatively, you could use only print material, but that would limit your investigation substantially.

Learning Experiences/Teaching Strategies

For an election-year focus, bring in sample flyers, posters, or show TV ads from the current or previous elections. If you find your students are hotly opinionated already, you might prefer to use old elections without the emotional connections established. I keep old election materials on hand. **Be sure to preview** any material before using. I use the Living Room Candidate as a resource for old elections. The kids enjoy the old commercials, and they might break out in song after the fourth time you watch “I Like Ike”. (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1952>) Notice that you can click on “transcript” to see all the words.

Discuss why candidates have posters, ads, etc. Establish that advertising is a way for people to get their names (or products) known. Advertisers will use strategies to persuade the public that their candidate (or product) is best.

Let’s examine some of the strategies they use:

Use the handout “Political Advertising Techniques”

http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/lesson-plan/Watching-the-elections_lesson-plan_Mar11.pdf on page 6.

You can use this for any advertising, not just political.

The Media Smarts website (Canada) offers this list of techniques:

Patriotism, Gender, Family, Excitement (Intensity), Star Power (Celebrity), Bandwagon, Put Downs, Facts and Figures, Just Folks, Heart Strings, Sounds Good (use of music), Cartoons and Animals, Weasel Words (Generalities), Integrity, and Fear

At the 5th/6th level, I don’t require the students to know all these terms, but I usually select 6 - 10 to use as vocabulary words for the week. They’ll have a quiz to show they can match the term to the strategy. Remember that other websites may have a different name for the same strategy (i.e.; “weasel words” could be called “glittering generalities”).

In class discussion – “Let’s see if we can find any of these techniques in this ad” (pick one to discuss in class).

Use print ads as well as TV ads to practice looking for these techniques. They should notice that ads usually use more than one of these techniques at a time.

In class discussions ask questions:

Did you enjoy the ad? What made the ad fun?

Were they trying to entertain you or inform you?

What (or who) is being “sold”?

Who is behind this advertisement? How do you know?
What are the techniques being used to persuade you to “buy”?
Were they deliberately misleading?
What information did they leave out?

During discussion, avoid being overly critical. This is a good reminder from <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy-fundamentals/media-literacy-fundamentals>

It's important not to take a negative approach to media education. Teach kids that **critiquing** is not necessarily the same thing as **criticizing** and that we can identify and talk about problematic issues in the media we love without losing our enjoyment of them.

Homework

Depending on the age of your students and class demographics, you may assign students to use the “Political Advertising Analysis” handout as homework (http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/lesson-plan/Watching-the-elections_lesson-plan_Mar11.pdf pages 7 & 8). Students could watch an assigned number of TV ads (political or ads for products) and identify which techniques are used. They are unlikely to see every strategy in a short viewing period, so I assign a limited number. In my class, I need to be sensitive to students who do not have TV’s at home or who aren’t allowed to watch during the school week. I often will send home a letter to parents explaining our study with this assignment. I usually allow 2 or 3 days for it to be completed.

Alternately, the handout can be used in class. You can link or bookmark selected media to your classroom computers for individual study or with a classroom projector look at them in class together.

As you review together the results of their homework assignment, ask the same questions above. Help students to perform analysis – break down the ad into the feelings and facts it conveys. Help them understand that they can enjoy the ad without buying the product.

Value – This activity has children examine what is valuable. How do they value things like toys, video games, clothing, food, sports equipment? (prioritize)
How do they value coolness, color, quality, inexpensiveness, durability? (prioritize)
You could use the lesson “The Anatomy of Cool” (grades 4 – 7) from Media Smarts: <http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/lesson-plan/The-Anatomy-of-Cool-Lesson-Kit.pdf>

Discuss - How can students use their **values** to help them make good choices - choices of what to do, what to say, what to buy? Do the advertisements *help* them make those choices, or should they use other information to make those choices? Where could they find reliable information?

Sample Writing Prompts – Use for a 5-minute “Speed Write” or for a more formal language arts lesson.

- If I had \$50 to spend on myself, what would I buy? How would I choose?
- When does quality matter more than price? Name one product or service where quality is more important than price. Explain why.

- Write a short story called, “The Impulsive Shopper”. Include something about buying habits or choices and the (funny, disastrous, unfortunate) results.

Reinforce Learning

Using a short video or looking at a print ad every day is good reinforcement.

Flackcheck offers funny videos that pretend to be attack ads by George McClellan in his bid against Abraham Lincoln in “Could Lincoln Be Elected Today?” These can be used to reinforce the lessons or to assess learning. Can students find: patriotism, star power, put downs, bandwagon, integrity, fear, etc.? Be sure to **preview** – some are **not appropriate** for pre-teens.

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/>

I use these with 5th or 6th graders; they are hilarious:

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/loser/>

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/consistently-inconsistent/>

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/who-stands-behind-the-woman-behind-the-president/>

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/honestly-abe-2/> (read the Gettysburg Address first so your students get the humor – this is my favorite)

You may find these appropriate, though I’ve never used them in class:

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/lincoln-the-lobbyist-for-special-interests/>

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/mrs-lincoln-is-this-what-were-fighting-for/>

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/can-we-trust-a-melancholic-with-a-second-term/>

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/what-are-lincolns-core-values/>

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/believe-in-the-union/>

<http://www.flackcheck.org/lincoln-campaign/unconstitutional-abe/> (for older students, you would need to explain the suspension of “habeas corpus”).

Assessment

During class discussions, I use a checklist with all the students’ names where I mark contributions to the discussion. This record helps me remember how engaged students are and helps me check for understanding.

The student handout can be turned in as an assignment or can be a jumping-off point for a writing assignment. Suggestions – use the writing prompts above OR Write about one of the ads you saw – answer any 3 of the discussion questions listed above in complete sentences and with full answers.

Or – Create an ad for a product or candidate. Use your Christian values of honesty and respect to promote the product. Think of what other personal values you want to include in your ad.

Other Resources

<http://www.4president.org/> has Presidential ads from 1960 onward

<http://www.factcheck.org> "monitors the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases." The site is funded by the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

<http://www.flackcheck.org> is an excellent resource for examining how political ads can be misleading. Older students might enjoy seeing the "Patterns of Deception" in action. **Be sure to preview.** <http://www.flackcheck.org/patterns-of-deception/>

This page opens with excerpts of deceptive ads. At the bottom there are descriptions of each type of deception: Deceptive Audio, Deceptive Dramatization, Deceptive Framing, Glass House Attacks, Guilt by Association, Hearing What's Not Said, Misappropriating the Credibility of News, Misplaced Referent, Out of Context, Photo shopping, Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc, Restrictive Definition, Seeing What's Not Heard, and Visual Vilification.

<http://mediasmarts.ca/lessonplan> As mentioned above, the Media Smarts website is the most comprehensive I've found, with media literacy standards and curriculum for each province in Canada.

For 8-10th grades, notice "Hate or Debate" <http://mediasmarts.ca/lessonplan/hate-or-debate-lesson>

For a comparison of 2008 American and Canadian elections to other uses of media look at Matthew Johnson's lesson for 8 – 12th graders: <http://mediasmarts.ca/blog/watching-elections>

If you want to connect to consumerism, consider celebrating "Buy Nothing Day" http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/lesson-plan/buy_nothing_day_Nov08.pdf

For grades 5 & 6 "Advertising All Around Us" <http://mediasmarts.ca/lessonplan/advertising-all-around-us-lesson>

<http://www.medialit.org/media-education-foundation-media-literacy-education-and-choice> The Center for Media Literacy is another good source. They have very good foundational information. I appreciate that they include the idea of "Junk Values" – materialism, non-nutritional food, etc.

They also have lesson plans using video clips, mostly intended for 7-12th grades; **preview and be selective:** <http://www.medialit.org/lesson-plans-and-activity-archive>

http://medialiteracyproject.org/sites/default/files/resources/Intro_to_Media_Literacy.pdf

The Media Literacy Project is a site promoting education and advocacy. They have useful bullet points for reasons for teaching media literacy, basic concepts, basic and more comprehensive lists of persuasion techniques. This site has some basic concepts with which I disagree (that all viewpoints and constructions of meaning are equally valid), and lessons that include creating your own ads or counter-ads using the same techniques as deceptive ads, but without addressing the ethics of using deceptive techniques of persuasion. In fact, there is no Christian worldview expressed here, so you'll have to adapt to Christian values.

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/connect/resources/1427/preview/>

This is the PBS media awareness lesson. These pages could be useful for younger students, possibly 4th – 6th grades. They take very little time to do. Maybe use them as independent work in the computer lab:

- Buying Smart page – “Question the Commercial”, “What’s in the Shopping Bag?”
- “The Cost of Cool” has kids compare designer clothes to bargain clothes and discusses the difference in quality vs. the difference in price.
- Your Entertainment page - “Cover Model Secrets” talks about body image and photoshopping, “TV vs. life” is a short quiz showing how TV does not reflect real life.