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# Producing PSAs on consumer culture: youth reception of advertising

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## Abstract

This study is a qualitative analysis of Public Service Announcement (PSA) storyboards produced by 177 fourth and sixth grade students as part of a Media Literacy Education program on advertising and commercial culture. The program curriculum addressed the ubiquity and hidden nature of ads, as well as gender portrayals, violence, and nutritional messages in advertising content. Textual analysis revealed differing patterns in student reception of the varied lesson topics.

**Students called for specific behavioral changes in PSAs for the topics of nutrition and gender, although most were limited to non-media related behaviors such as improving eating habits and encouraging fluidity across roles more traditionally associated with masculinity or with femininity.**

Analysis also suggested responsibility for the problems students identified with advertising were largely based on individual, consumerist perspectives rather than on collective or social, citizen-based terms. **Fourth graders' storyboards especially indicated an apparent mimicry of mainstream commercial productions and practices.** The analysis further explores these fourth and sixth graders' underlying orientations toward the U.S. commercial media system as well as the potential strengths and limitations of a production component in MLE programs to promote outcomes associated with critical media literacy.

Keywords: media literacy; youth; advertising; consumer culture; student media production; storyboard

## **Introduction**

To better understand the reception and interpretation of advertising by youth, the co-authors facilitated a media literacy education (MLE) program in 2015 focused on advertising with 177 students in grades four and six. By calling attention to contemporary critical issues pertaining to advertising and encouraging young people to analyze existing messages as well as create their own, the program's facilitators hoped to open up consideration of a citizen—rather than consumer—audience position. Drawing on data from a larger MLE project, the current paper explores how this group of children and early adolescents makes sense of ever-evolving advertising practices and appeals in order to interrogate their underlying orientations toward the U.S. commercial media system. More specifically, this paper analyzes student-created Public Service Announcement (PSA) storyboards which were the culminating production activity of the MLE program on the topic of advertising and commercial culture.

The analysis centered on the following questions: *What aspects of their experiences with advertising did the children and early adolescents in our sample incorporate or critique in their creations?* and *Who do they think is—or should be— responsible for ethical media messages?* The emergent themes from these PSA storyboards provide an illustrative account of the reception and interpretation of advertising industry practices and content within the present sample. The study thereby explores what role(s) young people see themselves occupying in relation to media and presents an account of what they think are the most salient issues related to advertising today.

## **Literature review**

### ***A MLE approach to media production***

Building upon the definition offered by the Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute's conference in 1992 (Aufderheide, 1993), the Center for Media Literacy (2018) describes how a MLE approach provides "a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms." Their definition also highlights how MLE "builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy." In pursuit of these overarching goals, the current MLE program emphasized critical perspectives to encourage reflection on the social impact of a commercial media system. Alverman and Hagood (2000), for example, suggest MLE be approached as a critical project aimed at "helping students experience the pleasures of popular culture while simultaneously uncovering the codes and practices that work to silence or disempower them as readers, viewers, and learners in general" (p. 194). Through close analysis of advertising texts and lessons on commercial media practices more generally, the MLE program worked to foster an active, inquisitive stance toward media, or a form of "critical autonomy" through which young people can independently evaluate the media they encounter (Masterman, 1985).

The MLE program concluded with a production activity to supplement the media analysis activities. Livingstone (2004) explains the common arguments for incorporating content production activities in MLE are that such activities help students learn about media, acquire skills for future employment, and/or empower students by creating space for self-representation. Other scholars, however, have reported varying levels of success at encouraging critical appraisal of media content and/or of stereotypical portrayals of certain social groups through production activities. Kavoori (2007), for example, found that undergraduates in a media education program were likely to reproduce stereotypical

portrayals of non-dominant cultures in their media productions despite their ability to critique such one-dimensional portrayals in their analysis of media. Ranieri and Fabbro's (2016) study of a MLE program on anti-discrimination and active citizenship in schools throughout seven countries in Europe found the most thoughtful media productions came from students tackling issues that were personally meaningful, allowing them to draw from their individual experiences. Given the potential for emergent technologies and digital media to increase user participation in media production and circulation among children and teens, further exploration into divergent processes and outcomes of MLE are necessary.

Bird's (2003) audience study on mediated portrayals of American Indians offers a compelling suggestion for why people may struggle to imagine new storylines for characters from non-dominant racial and ethnic groups. When adults were asked to create a television show with an American Indian character, White participants struggled to develop fully-realized American Indian characters as "their cultural tool-kit contains only a limited array of possibilities, which have worked together over time and across media to produce a recognizable cultural 'script' about Indians" (p. 117). The production activity in Bird's study thereby exposed how media could have a role in constructing some of the "imaginative tools" that audiences use to understand their world (p. 116). To apply these findings to MLE initiatives, it could be argued that these "tool-kits" or cultural "scripts" are lasting because they have developed over time from various sources and may prove to be too ingrained to be disrupted by a single lesson or short-term curriculum. Indeed, Lewis and Jhally (1998) made a similar argument in writing about the potential for media production assignments to reflect rather than challenge mainstream, dominant, commercial narratives.

*Advertising to children and early adolescents*

The choice of lesson topics for the present analysis was guided by concerns highlighted in the research literature related to youth and advertising. One such issue is the sheer number of commercial messages young people are likely to encounter daily. Critics such as Susan Linn (2004) and Juliet Schor (2004) have written extensively about the ubiquity of commercial messages targeting children and adolescents in the modern media environment. An estimate derived from Nielsen data on television viewing and number of ads contained within determined that 6- to 11-year-olds encountered an average of 24,939 ads per year and 12- to 17-year-olds an average of 31,188 ads per year on television alone (Holt, Ippolito, Desrochers, & Kelley, 2007). Similar figures were reached by Gantz, Schwartz, Angelini and Rideout (2007) using a different technique that included a content analysis of commercials contained within that content. It can safely be concluded that “children see a tremendous volume of advertising messages during their time spent viewing television” (Kunkel & Castonguay, 2012, p. 397), and when one adds Internet and other forms of commercial media exposure, these estimates increase substantially (Cai & Zhao, 2010).

In defiance of existing regulations on advertising, ads for children on television are often incorporated into the content in such a way that they are hard to distinguish as promotional messages (McAllister & Giglio, 2005). Media entities spread promotional messages throughout their various holdings and seamlessly integrate advertising into children’s television in a practice termed “commodity flow” by McAllister and Giglio. A prime example of this strategy in children’s television is the promotion of toys that are tied to programming (e.g., Pokémon cards), a longstanding marketing practice (Pecora, 1998). New media include similar attempts by advertisers to foster seamless movement between entertainment and promotional content using formats such as “advergames” (Dahl, Eagle,

& Baez, 2009) and games that encourage players to buy associated merchandise or make in-game purchases (Grimes, 2015). These emerging advertising practices highlight the pervasiveness of commercial messages in both mass media and new media and the implications of the interactive digital media space for young people's ability to identify commercial content and understand its intent.

**Paramount to an analysis of the mechanisms, means, and tactics by which advertisers reach youth is the neoliberal framework within which their logics operate. Neoliberalism is often identified as emerging in the United States and Britain in the 1970s and is defined by David Harvey (2007) as “a theory of political economic practices which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets and free trade” (p. 145). In line with this logic, advertising becomes a site of “public reeducation” that has a role in “divorcing private concerns from public concerns and increasingly replacing the once prevalent concept of ‘citizen’ with that of ‘consumer’” (Giroux, 2011, p. 12). This paper will explore attitudes, concerns, and interpretations of advertising through a close reading of creative work produced by the current sample of youth participating in a MLE program within the larger context of neoliberalism.**

## **Methods**

This exploration of student-produced PSAs is part of a larger MLE initiative focused on advertising conducted in schools. Two elementary schools in the northeastern United States hosted the program, with participating students from three 6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms (n = 75) at

one predominantly White, rural elementary school and four 4<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms (n = 102) at a different predominantly White, suburban school. Most of the fourth graders were 10 years old (but ranged from 9 to 11) and most of the sixth graders were 12 years old (but ranged from 11 to 13). According to the website USA.com, the first location's residents were 93% White, 3.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 2.1% Asian and the median household income was \$46,480 in 2013 (compared to the median for the state of \$66,768). The second location's residents were 88.4% White, 5.8% Hispanic or Latino, 2.0% Asian, and 1.9% Black or African American, and the median household income was \$49,519 (compared to the same state median). The Kids Count Data Center lists the first elementary school location as having 19% of its students qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program, whereas the second elementary school location is listed as having 68% of its students do so. These schools were chosen due to partnerships between the authors and instructors at the two schools. The MLE program curriculum and research design was approved by the human subjects research review board and school administrators and consent for participation was obtained from parents and caregivers.

The program was facilitated by undergraduates in a service-learning course and five graduate students under the supervision of a professor with expertise in the subject. It consisted of four 1-hour sessions during which students were introduced to key concepts through the use of PowerPoint slides and encouraged to discuss their interpretations of media examples analyzed in class and to answer open-ended discussion questions to voice their own experiences and opinions. In keeping with the basic principles of MLE (Center for Media Literacy, 2018), the lessons were designed to prompt discussion about the values and messages present as well as absent in the media, who produced the content and for

what purpose, and how audience members might respond to the message. On the first day, students were introduced to the concept of media literacy, the ubiquity of advertising (where ads and branded messages appear and how many are likely to be encountered by young people), and the nutritional claims present in ads. On the second day, gender stereotyping in advertisements was discussed. On the third day, students explored advertising that included aggression or that promoted violent media such as films and video games. On the fourth and final day, the focus was on video game advertisements, and students analyzed a print ad from a video game magazine for its treatment of gender, violence, and other content. The MLE program strove to be interactive, discussion based, and student centered, although we acknowledge that the selection of advertising as a subject of discussion and critique does impose an agenda from the researchers.

As a culminating production activity, the students created a PSA storyboard which addressed some aspect of the lessons from the MLE program. Students were given a worksheet to plan their PSA which included the following prompts: (a.) Who is your target audience, and why did you choose to target your PSA toward that group of people? (b.) How will you appeal to your target audience in your PSA? How will your PSA grab their attention? How will it inform and persuade them? (c.) Will you include music? If so, what kind and why? (d.) What kind of tone will you use (for example: funny, sad, or serious)? Why? (e.) Who will appear in your ad? Will you use celebrities or ordinary people? Why? On the reverse of this sheet the students were provided with boxes to draw and annotate their PSA scenes. The instructions read, "Then, storyboard the PSA, which involves drawing the pictures that will be the visuals for your PSA and writing out the words. Fill in the boxes with your visuals, and write the words on the lines. (You don't have to use all the

boxes, or you can add more!).” After explaining the purpose of a PSA and viewing examples, the students were randomly assigned to consider one of five topics in their PSA. Each storyboard sheet included one assigned topic at the top that aligned with the main topics of discussion in the program, worded as follows:

- (1) Number of ads in our culture
- (2) Ways that ads are hidden
- (3) Violence in ads and commercials
- (4) Nutritional value of ads targeted to kids
- (5) Gender stereotypes in ads and commercials.

**Topics were assigned randomly to ensure each of the major topics addressed in the MLE program were addressed in the storyboard assignments. As this is an annual MLE program, lessons about student reception of the program topics help to inform the program for the subsequent year.** Twenty-five students completed a PSA about the prevalence of advertising, 16 about the ways advertisements are “hidden” in entertainment content, 17 about violence in advertising, 31 about nutritional messages in ads targeted to kids, and 19 about gender stereotypes in ads or commercials. The PSA storyboards were assigned as homework and were not graded by the classroom teacher and therefore not all participating students completed the assignment. Storyboards that were on unrelated topics, were illegible, or were incomplete were removed. In total, we received 58 complete and on-topic storyboards from participating fourth grade students and 50 from sixth grade students. Those storyboards comprise the data source for the current analysis.

**Two researchers conducted a thematic textual analysis on the content of the storyboards using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Initially,**

and in line with Glaser's (1965) overview of the constant comparative method of analysis, the two researchers independently coded the storyboards to identify emergent themes or "categories" and compared them with "previous incidents coded in the same category" (p. 439). Analysis thus began at the level of the individual storyboard with the researchers coding anything noteworthy in either the drawings or text to develop coding categories. Analysis of each storyboard could thereby introduce new categories or revise the properties associated with an existing category. This initial coding was guided by the research questions which asked how the students incorporated or critiqued existing advertising practices and how they articulated who should be responsible for ethical media messages. The researchers then compared and discussed their findings with each other before further refining the coding categories by comparing incidents coded in the same category (e.g. "call to action") among storyboards on the same topic (e.g. violence in ads). The properties of each category were further explored and refined through comparisons between storyboards created by students in different grades. The dominant themes and patterns between groups are presented below using pseudonyms.

### **Analysis**

To understand the young people's reception of advertising as well as the role(s) they imagine for themselves in relation to media, the analysis considered whether they identified a problem, *and* put forth a call to action or potential solution in their storyboards. While not required by the activity instructions, analyzing the calls to action (or lack thereof) addressed the second research question which asked who the students believe to be responsible for the influence of media messages. In other words, if they called for change in practices or

representations, whom did they choose to address? Moreover, the move from description and analysis to a specific call to action offered insights into a related concern for critical media literacy practice, “critical apathy” (Teurlings, 2010). Teurlings (2010) argues media literacy may result in “critical apathy” among “the savvy viewer” who “analyses and understands – often endlessly so – but sees no way in which things could be different” (p. 368).

Broadly speaking, two overarching themes emerged in the analysis of the students’ storyboards. For the topics they presumably had more personal or prior experience with outside of mediated interactions (i.e., gender stereotypes and nutrition), students were likely to articulate potential concerns and actionable solutions. Alternatively, for the media-related topics (i.e., hidden advertisements and the ubiquity of ads), students used an individual consumer-based framework to mention the ways in which ads were personally annoying, and they were far less likely to cite a specific solution. Storyboards related to advertisements for violent media occupied a liminal space between these broad themes as some students articulated carefully considered problems with violent media but many simply suggested that media violence itself must be “stopped.” In what follows, we first review the differences observed between the fourth and sixth grade students’ responses to the storyboard creation assignment and then continue by presenting the dominant sub-themes that emerged within these overarching categories, using relevant exemplars from the students’ work.

### *Differing media milieus*

The sixth graders were more likely than the fourth graders to use celebrities or figures from popular culture in their productions. They included messages from political figures like

President Obama and musical artists such as Beyoncé. Meanwhile, the fourth graders were more likely to incorporate commercial brands or products in their productions than the sixth graders. While the fourth graders mentioned some media-related brands like Comcast and Apple, they predominantly discussed food-related examples such as McDonald's and Subway.

The older students also appeared to have more experience with the PSA media genre. For example, sixth grader Daniel's PSA against violence used techniques similar to PSAs commonly seen on television. He begins with a "title slide" that reads "An American Government Public Service Announcement" and ends with a slide that reads "Say No To Violence" and includes the hashtag, "#saynotoviolence." On the other hand, many of the fourth graders re-created advertisements for products or scenes of violence rather than informative or persuasive calls to action typical of the PSA genre. For example, fourth grader Brad used his storyboard to create an advertisement for a car and even included "fast talk" at the end to mimic the legal disclaimers heard at the end of some ads (See Figure 1).

[Figure 1 near here]

### ***Actionable media messages***

Both fourth and sixth graders who created PSAs about gender stereotypes or nutrition were likely to identify problems with messages the media convey about gender stereotypes and nutrition *and* identify a solution or include some sort of call to action in their PSA. Sixth grader Tyler, in his storyboard related to nutritional messages in ads directed at kids, used an informative appeal to convey how eating too much can make you overweight, but also went beyond this message to encourage viewers to take action in their own lives by telling the audience to eat at home rather than at fast food restaurants and to "say no to bad food."

In comparison, Jen's (6th grade) storyboard shows a teacher giving detailed information about how advertisements are usually for fast foods and sweets, but ends with a slide reading, "Thank you so much! Thank you for watching!" Unlike Tyler, Jen did not identify an actionable solution. Students across grade levels were more likely to create storyboards like Tyler's which call upon the audience to make a specific behavioral change when they were assigned the topics of either nutritional messages or gender stereotypes in advertisements.

For the gender and nutrition in advertising topics, students were often able to articulate an individual behavioral change to address the problem presented rather than a more systemic change to the content. For example, in her storyboard about gender stereotypes, Sarah (4th grade) drew a picture of a girl who is told by another girl that basketball is not for girls which Sarah labeled in the opening slide as "social aggression" (a term raised, defined, and investigated in sample media content in the MLE program). The girl is sad she cannot play basketball until she sees a basketball and cannot resist playing, then she meets another girl who is "impressed" that she is playing basketball and they become friends, demonstrating the prosocial effects of resisting gender stereotyping. The message on the last slide reads, "No thing is just a boy thing," attributing responsibility for combating gender stereotypes to individual behavioral change (See Figure 2).

[Figure 2 near here]

Students writing about gender and nutrition were also less likely to make a connection to media than with any other category for both grades, despite the clear labeling on the assignment to write about nutritional messages in advertisements directed at kids or gender stereotypes in ads or commercials. Emily (4th grade), for example, was assigned to

make a PSA about nutrition, but instead of discussing the types of messages the media communicate about nutrition or the effects these messages can have on audiences, she drew a rabbit eating a carrot with the message “Even rabbits make healthy choices! So you should too!” Nutrition seemed to elicit narratives about eating and choosing healthy foods, messages which students are likely to hear frequently and perhaps those sources overpowered the MLE program message about claims about nutrition in advertising.

Strong cultural narratives about gender stereotypes and nutrition outside of advertising or media were also apparent in students’ analysis of what types of effects these issues might have. For gender stereotypes, both the fourth and sixth graders overwhelmingly exhibited interpersonal themes, representing these issues as between individuals rather than as connected to the media. For example, Chris (6th grade), drew a boy and a girl having a competition to see who can throw the farthest. The boy wins the first round, but in the second round the “girl throws as hard as she can” and gets a higher total score, thus portraying gender stereotypes as an interpersonal issue where girls just need to demonstrate that they can compete with boys.

### ***Individual concerns and educational solutions***

The topics for which students produced storyboards that directly related to advertising were ubiquity of ads and hidden ads. Most students in both grades suggested they were not pleased by the amount of advertising surrounding them and the storyboards they created overwhelmingly focused on individual reasons for their negative appraisal of ads. In particular, they highlighted the “annoyance” of ads and that they can lead to wasteful spending. While a few students suggested actions viewers could take, most actions involved ignoring or avoiding ads. In general, instead of offering specific social implications or

actionable solutions, students tended to use the storyboards in these two topics to create awareness about the prevalence of ads.

Students predominantly used individual frameworks when articulating why hidden ads and the number of ads they encounter are problematic. For example, students often highlighted personal “annoyance” with advertisements. David (6th grade), began his storyboard by asking the audience, “Are you sick of ads?” Other students highlighted the persuasive techniques in ads and warned their audience against buying things they do not need. Aria (6th grade), described how a celebrity featured in an ad for a car can be persuasive in the text under her drawings: “Lady wanting to get a car because Kim [Kardashian] may have one of the same brand.” Similarly, Kyle (4th grade), warns us “Don’t wast [sic] money” in the corner of his storyboard which depicted someone going “bankrupt” and not having shoes because he spent too much on new Nikes that do not fit anymore.

Most frequently, students merely informed the public about advertising rather than including a specific call to action when writing about the ubiquity and/or hidden nature of ads. Oliver (6th grade) discussed branded clothing in his storyboard. He wrote, “There are many ads in our lives./ Most of them are us./ To companies we are their walking billboards.” His call to action is not clear, however. Other students similarly brought attention to less explicit forms of advertising in their storyboards. For example, Gabby (4th grade) informed her audience about television shows with product placement by drawing a girl pointing out a hidden product on the TV to her mother. She captioned this scene, “So many people don’t recognize it but its [sic] there.”

A question-based format was very popular when storyboarding about the number of

ads and hidden ads. For example, Leslie (6th grade), asked her audience a series of questions: “How many ads do you see per day?... Where can you find ads?...” (See Figure 3). In many ways, these storyboards echoed some of the questions asked during the MLE program lessons which suggests some students adopted the instructional approach that they saw demonstrated in the MLE program itself.

[Figure 3 near here]

While a few students offered specific actions to confront the amount of advertising, they mostly suggested avoidance. David’s (6th grade) solution for audiences that are “sick” of ads was to “ignore it” and “turn it down.” Kelsey’s (4th grade) solution to ads that “drive some people crazy” was to regulate personal consumption of television by only watching for a certain amount of time. Predominantly, however, students used their storyboard to “teach” or raise awareness about the prevalence of advertising. While most students directed informational appeals at general viewers, some students specifically targeted parents. Lisa (6th grade) specifically advocated for parents to teach their children about ads. Her storyboard included references to the ubiquity of ads, unrealistic beauty standards, and the normalization of violence (See Figure 4). She concludes with a “Parent explain [sic] how to think critically [sic] about the ads their [sic] seeing” and a child’s eyes being cleared of the ads that had clouded them.

[Figure 4 near here]

### ***Social concerns and vague solutions***

Students included various reasons for why violence in media could be problematic in the storyboards they created. Some of their reasons were related to the MLE program discussions of “high-risk” portrayals of violence (Smith et al., 1998) while other reasons

appeared to be drawn from preexisting knowledge. Greg (6th grade) provided his rationale for creating a storyboard against violence in advertising which referenced the “high-risk” portrayal of violence shown to have no consequences: “violence in adds [sic] may also lead to violence in real life. Doesn’t the world have enough violence already, and putting it in adds [sic] show youth that violence is ok and trere [sic] are not consequences.” Other students discussed the prevalence of gun violence in the country and addiction to violent video games, two topics that were not brought up in class discussions. In the lesson plan, aggression in multiple forms was emphasized over violent behavior, so these students made much more stark connections between media use and physical harm. For instance, Samantha (4th grade) suggested “it would be better if kids didn’t see it...If you take some off kids stop being violent.”

The most clearly and consistently articulated call to action was related to violence in advertising. Most students included the same message: Stop it. While clear in its appraisal of media violence, this simple message did not always specify actionable steps. Colin (6th grade) ended his storyboard with, “Stop violence in ads and video games” while Beth (6th grade) told her audience to, “Join the movement to ban violent video games.” The message to stop, ban, or “say no to violence” thereby showed concern about violent media but indicated a sense that this was something larger than individual actions could address.

## **Discussion**

Young people’s opinions about, attitudes toward, and critiques of advertising and the commercial media system that produces it are complex, variable, and multi-faceted. MLE provides a space for the exploration of these relationships as well as, perhaps, an intervention, as analysis and evaluation of media texts and media practices often encourage

students to question and problematize their common sense understandings of and interactions with media. In the current analysis, two groups of students from two different school and town settings were presented with a creative media production exercise as a culminating experience following a MLE program that featured information sharing, dialogue, and media analysis, evaluation, and critique on the topic of advertising and commercial culture. What is present as well as what is absent from the storyboards the fourth and sixth grade students created reveal a great deal about their reception of the MLE program itself, their overarching orientations toward advertising and media, and their views of the topics raised.

The two research questions that organized the present investigation were: *What aspects of their experiences with advertising did the children and early adolescents in our sample incorporate or critique in their creations?* and *Who do they think is—or should be—responsible for ethical media messages?* The simple response to the first question is that many of the sixth graders incorporated their knowledge of and experiences with celebrities into the storyboards they created whereas the fourth graders frequently brought in their experiences with brands. They deemphasized their media and advertising experiences with gender stereotypes or non-nutritional food content in the creation of their storyboards in favor of drawing from face-to-face social interactions and making direct appeals to simply “eat healthy” or “don’t stereotype,” largely without including a critique of ways that advertising or media messages might have a role in those social attitudes and behaviors. For the second question, we found that participating MLE students largely took a consumerist stance emphasizing individual responsibility to avoid personally “annoying” ads, with the onus placed predominantly on individuals (viewers, kids, parents) rather than with the

corporations and industries involved in the creation and distribution of commercial messages.

Our data also allowed us to ask how these responses might differ depending upon the randomly assigned topic given to students to address in their PSAs. We found specific interpersonal and behavioral changes called for in PSAs for the topics of nutrition and gender, although most were limited to non-media related behaviors such as the consumption of particular (healthy) food and the interpersonal relations that promote fluidity across roles more traditionally associated with masculinity or with femininity. Given the presence of gender stereotyping in commercials and web pages directed at children (Johnson & Young, 2002; Malik & Wojdyski, 2014) and prior evidence that girls, especially, tend to be critical of media depictions of gender (Chan, Leung Ng., & Williams, 2012), it is surprising that the current MLE students largely sidestepped the analysis of media and gender in favor of face-to-face “real world” social interactions in their storyboard content. Likewise, given the preponderance of advertising messages directed at children within popular television programming and in other media sources featuring foods with low nutritional value (Palmer & Carpenter, 2006; Powell et al., 2011; Stitt & Kunkel, 2008), it is surprising, as well, that such observations were largely absent from the storyboards created. Both of these longstanding critiques of the content delivered to young audiences through advertising were central parts of the MLE program the current sample of students participated in and yet were, for the most part, omitted from their storyboards. Similarly, for the topic of violence in advertising—a concern among scholars and critics (Blackford et al., 2011; Gulas, McKeage, & Weinberger, 2010; Scharrer, 2004; Scharrer et al., 2006) and raised and discussed in the MLE program—we saw a general, unambiguous

critique of violence and a direct but rather vague and undetailed call for its end in participating students' storyboards.

Ranieri and Fabbro (2016) have shown in their multi-national sample that resonance between media education critiques of media and young people's own lived experiences tends to be potent. We have speculated that an explanation for the omission of media critiques in the storyboards produced by the current sample, however, is that the lived experiences of the young participants were more salient sources of information for them to use in the creation of their PSAs on the topic of gender as well as of nutrition, whereas for the topics exclusive to a media angle (like number and hidden nature of ads), there was a greater tendency to draw directly from the MLE program lessons themselves. For the topic of violence, perhaps students thought it would be more impactful to focus their PSAs on an uncomplicated, direct call for an end to violence in media generally rather than drawing from the MLE lesson topics on the ways in which violence is presented in commercials, given the much more tenuous connection for the latter with real-world violence.

By offering a media production exercise as a pedagogical tool to provide an entry point for learning about media, as well as a tool of cultural politics to enable students to express and empower themselves (Livingstone, 2004), the analysis demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of such a component within the current context. First, we do see some indication of an apparent acceptance and mimicry of mainstream commercial productions and practices in the storyboards created by the young participants, especially in the prominence of the brand names included in the creations of the fourth graders, in particular. Such an outcome is reminiscent of the observations of Bird (2003) and Lewis and Jhally (1998) who identified a tendency for those presented with a scripting or other

production opportunity to draw from the message system or “cultural tool kit” that they know best, which, **for many youth in the U.S.A.**, is the mainstream commercial media system.

**Social life has many sites of learning for young people including formal institutions like schooling and informal learning in familial and peer groups. It can be difficult for a short MLE program to encourage different audience positions from what these sites promote. In the U.S.A., the neoliberal context infuses all of these sites with a “public pedagogy of market fundamentalism” which emphasizes a consumerist identity (Giroux, 2011, p. 11).** Indeed, audiences young and old are immersed in a cultural environment in which the number of commercial messages encountered each day is enormous and growing (Gantz et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2007; Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004) and in which newer media forms allow for not only additional exposures but novel ways to embed ads that blur the ability to identify commercial content and its persuasive intent (Dahl et al., 2009; Cai & Zhao, 2010; Grimes, 2015; Kunkel & Castonguay, 2012). Given that across assigned storyboard topics and age/grade levels, so few of the participating MLE students provided challenges to the commercial message system in their assignments, we can tentatively conclude that it is difficult to encourage a position outside of the dominant consumer role due to immersion in the commercial system.

There is evidence in the students’ storyboards, nonetheless, of having met outcomes associated with the defining features of media literacy: developing “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms” and “understanding of the role of media in society” (Center for Media Literacy, 2018). Students displayed “access” and “create” skills by learning the common features of a PSA and in coming up with creative

ways to capture attention, inform, and persuade an audience through their scripts and storyboards. Participating sixth graders, especially, revealed an understanding of the features and formats frequently appearing in the PSA media form in their productions, including the use of celebrity endorsement, jingles, catch phrases, attribution to governmental agencies, and taglines. The storyboards also reflected expression of “analyze” skills in the critical reading of the number of commercial messages and their embedded placement in non-commercial content, in particular, as well as in understandings of how to advocate for more flexible gender roles, health and well-being, and non-violence.

The evidence for the presence of the “evaluate” skills in the storyboards, considered here to be an inclusion of value positions or judgments in addition to or alongside analysis, was also present but tended to be limited, once again, to an individualistic view of responsibility. For the topics of the ubiquity of ads and the possibility of embedding ads and brands in non-commercial media content, participating students largely took an approach that emphasized awareness and education in their PSAs but stopped short of calling for either individual or collective, civic action. In comparison to the sixth graders, fourth graders more often were just informative or told a story without a call to action. In general, responsibility for rectifying the problems identified in the PSAs was almost exclusively attributed to viewers or parents, rather than to media companies, the government, or other entities, thereby suggesting that although the call to action component of the PSA was achieved by participating MLE students it was almost entirely considered on individual, consumerist terms rather than on collective or social, citizen-based terms.

Such themes can be considered an indication of the consequences of a neoliberal shift in education and other social spheres, in which students reflect a market-driven,

consumerist sensibility, written about by Chomsky (2011) and others. The data drawn in the current study from the media production projects of a group of fourth and sixth graders show the possibilities as well as the limits of MLE as a creative, hands-on component in the context of the changing nature of public education in the United States and elsewhere given the prevailing logic of a consumerist framework.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

**As most of the examples analyzed during the program were narrative in format (e.g. television commercials) we chose PSAs so students could create their own narratives. Though the program included a lesson on PSAs, this genre was likely unfamiliar to some of the students. That could explain why some students did not include a call to action. Future MLE programs could benefit from dedicating more time to exploring the conventions of the media genre used in the production component. We also acknowledge that assigning topics to students rather than allowing them to choose them might have constrained the ability of participating children and early adolescents to self-select topics of stronger personal interest. While this study offered insights into the media experiences of a particular group of young people in the United States, more research is needed to explore the potentials and limits of MLE programs on advertising literacy for youth within varying media contexts globally. Future studies could allow students of MLE to select topics for a creative assignment that resonate with their personal experiences, priorities, and concerns at the same time that they lead the dialogue away from the individual and more toward a collective sense of citizenship in the digital age.**

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