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Darren Crovitz

Scrutinizing the Cybersell: Teen-Targeted Web Sites as Texts

Darren Crovitz explains that the explosive growth of Web-based content and communication in recent years compels us to teach students how to examine the “rhetorical nature and ethical dimensions of the online world.” He demonstrates successful approaches to accomplish this goal through his analysis of the selling techniques of two Web sites targeted to a teen audience and his description of a project in which team members devise ways to teach students to consider the language and design elements of a selected site.

Over the last decade, analyzing and assessing online information has become a regular part of many English classes. We now expect students to become familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of Internet research, including how to evaluate the credibility of Web sites and the information they contain. As online environments become more sophisticated, however, we might consider expanding students’ critical-thinking opportunities beyond the concerns of traditional research. While media literacy has been a part of our field for several decades, the explosion in Web-based content and communication in the last few years combined with youth culture’s embrace of these developments make it vital that we consider the academic potential of these new texts.

Take a moment to consider the thousands of products marketed to young people—the wide spectrum of snack foods, soft drinks, candy, toys, games, clothes, and gadgets competing for their money and attention. Now consider that many of these products have a slick Web site devoted to grabbing and holding a kid’s attention and associating that product or brand with what’s cool. Corporations are no longer limited to the old-media advertising strategies of print, radio, and TV. Digital advances in image, sound, video, animation, and design now allow companies to embed their product pitch within an interactive cyberreality, allowing a particular target consumer—suburban teenage boys, for instance—to be represented, defined, and influenced.

It may be tempting to shake our heads at this latest development in consumer culture while also considering it beyond the scope of an English class. Because these sites specifically target students, however, they are a rich opportunity to help young people learn about rhetorical analysis and the need to weigh messages that are immediately relevant to their lives. In doing so, we address a primary need of multimodal literacy (“to understand how [such] works make meaning, how they are based on conventions, and how they are created for and respond to specific communities or audiences”) while centering our practice in real examples of language and image use in their world (“NCTE,” par. 16). While classroom analysis of how advertising works to manipulate an audience is nothing new, viewed within the broader field of media and digital literacy these skills take on increased importance. “If our children are to be able to navigate their lives through this multi-media culture,” explain Elizabeth Thoman and Tessa Jolls in “Literacy for the 21st Century: An Overview and Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education,” they will need more than the conventional skills of reading and writing print texts: “they need to be fluent in ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ the language of images and sounds” as well (6).

But how do we introduce students to “reading” and “writing” multimodal texts in critical ways? In investigating this question with both pre-service and experienced English teachers at Kennebec State University, I have used product Web sites

as a means of linking traditional concepts of persuasion (e.g., the Aristotelian appeals) to the realm of new media. As a way into this topic, we look closely at a number of Web sites aimed at selling to young people, two of which are described in detail in this article. Our first task as a class becomes an assessment of how these sites use multimodal strategies

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to define a target audience and convey a particular message. That is, we want to ask how these Web sites seek to define young audiences—in terms of appearance, hobbies and interests, and lifestyle—while positioning a product as integral to their world. From these conversations and the activities that spring from them, we next consider how

we might design assignments that ask teenage students to systematically analyze such texts to evaluate their various explicit and implicit statements.

Please note: These sites feature advanced graphics, sound effects, online game areas, and embedded video, so they require a fairly up-to-date computer system with speakers to experience them fully.

Example One: SlimJim.com

In the last few years, the ConAgra Foods Corporation has made a significant effort to market its Slim Jim meat snacks to adolescent males. Part of this media push has been an interactive Web presence in which Slim Jims are presented as part of a hypermasculine philosophy characterized by the concept of “snap moments” (derived from the shouted catchphrase “Snap into a Slim Jim!”) during which boys overcome fear to accomplish “extreme feats” (“Snap!”). Past Slim Jim spokespersons have included professional wrestler Randy “The Macho Man” Savage and the Fairy Snapmother, a “tattooed punk rocker with wings” who uses a tough-love approach to help boys become men. Television ads featuring the latter character are purposely designed with an edgy humor in the style of MTV’s *Jackass*, a program renowned for its controversial and often-dangerous stunts.

Slim Jim’s emphasis on rough humor and its focus on teenage boys as a target audience are also reflected in its high-end interactive Web site. As a

class we start with the assumption that the site is a “text” that can be “read” for meaning, and we begin the discussion with a set of questions derived from the fields of visual and media literacy:

- > What specific choices were made in designing this page, and for what effect?
- > What do choices in sound, graphics, colors, layout, and design convey?
- > What choices are evident in the actual language used on the page?
- > What do these elements remind us of? What possible associations can be made?
- > Who is the target audience for this page? How do we know?
- > What is not on the page, and why?

The discussion is based on the assumption that *nothing is an accident* in this text, that all design elements have a purpose and so communicate some kind of meaning. (Given that the site is clearly a sophisticated effort likely constructed at considerable cost, this is not much of a stretch.) Students have had in-depth discussions about the connotations of the site’s colors (predominantly red, black, and yellow) along with the omnipresent “whip/crack” sound effects and the comedic use of a meat snack as a weapon. The site is heavy on parody and includes a video timeline of “great moments in Snap history” and a record of the first Snap moment:

According to historians, the first human Snap occurred when cavemen decided to club their fears away, and hunt wooly mammoths and mastodons and stuff. As today’s civilization has moved past such practices, we’ve had to find other ways to Snap through. Like by hucking ourselves off of large mountain peaks, or jumping the Great Wall of China. At Slim Jim, we are proud to stand behind those who attempt to Snap in such endeavors. Even if they fail miserably in the process. (“About Us,” par. 1)

In its tone and style, this mock history adopts a satirical pose, locating Slim Jim in the world of extreme sports and teen lingo. Or rather, it *attempts* to accomplish these things, as students have pointed out. Cross-marketing with Mountain Dew and the Dew Action Tour, which features sports such as BMX biking and skateboarding, purposely

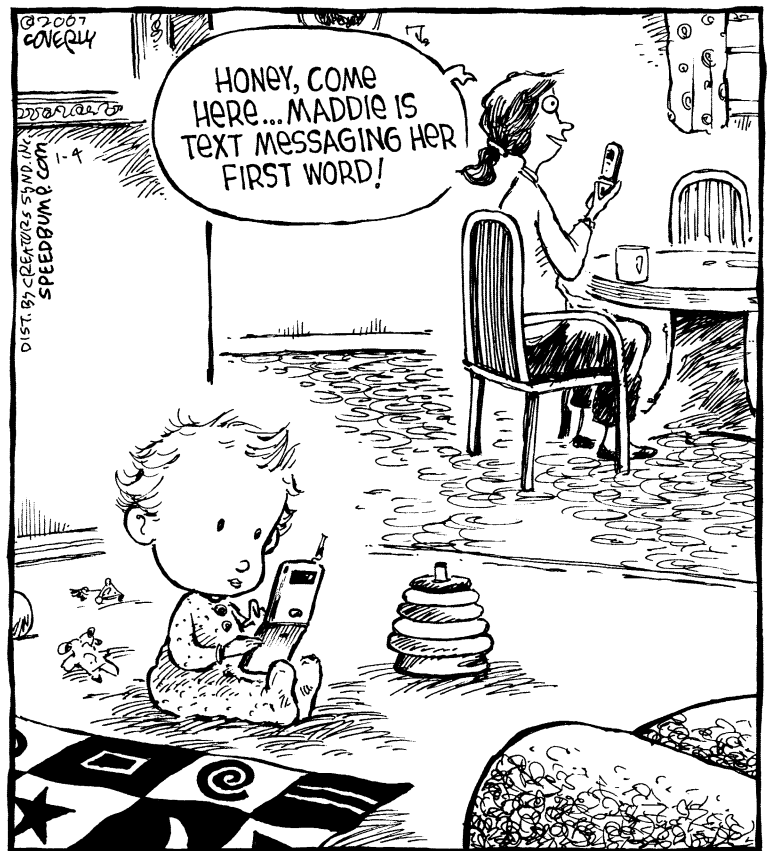
associates Slim Jims with an “edgy,” alternative youth crowd. Likewise, the tongue-in-cheek idiom represented above can be viewed as a corporate co-opting of cultural language, an attempt to gain credibility with the target audience that can easily backfire. (One of the more humorous examples of this misappropriation occurred in a recent McDonald’s Internet banner ad, in which a young man gazes at a hamburger with a thought caption that reads, “I’d hit it.” Most students are well aware of the sexual connotations—apparently lost on McDonald’s executives—of this streetwise phrase.)

Most of the actual text on the Slim Jim site uses slacker slang in an attempt to forge a relationship with teenage boys. Students are quick to critique language that pretends this kind of peer-to-peer legitimacy, and their insight often reveals a subtle understanding of contextual linguistic expectations that textual analysis and discussion help to articulate. That young people are usually skeptical of adults who attempt to use “hip” language gives students leverage in critiquing the messages of dominant cultural forces, from the corporate to the political world. In sifting the genuine from the artificial in such passages—passages written by well-paid professional copy writers mimicking cool—students begin exploring the relationship between language and power.

In terms of parody and style, the Slim Jim Web site has potential as an engaging classroom text. The latest ad campaign deals with hunting the “snapalope,” a small deerlike creature made from Slim Jim sticks; it features an extensive, interactive faux Web site (the “Snapalope Hunting Association of America” [SHAA] at <http://www.shaa.com>) devoted to this activity. Students could examine how the features on this site play on genre expectations for such organizational texts, from the multi-part “S.H.A.A. Hunting Guide” and the “message from our president” to the group’s fake logo. Though intentionally ironic, the SHAA site is part of a larger Internet hoax phenomenon that itself offers much potential for analysis. One of the highlights of the hoax-site genre is probably POP! The First Male Human Pregnancy (<http://www.malepregnancy.com>), a sharply produced site that uses corporate and

scientific imagery, rhetoric, and design to create an overwhelming impression of legitimacy. Similarly, the Dihydrogen Monoxide Research Division (<http://www.dhmo.org>) adopts the look and language of a public-health page while serving as “an unbiased data clearinghouse” about this purportedly dangerous chemical compound. Such sham sites can range from the harmless to the purposely provocative to the criminal, but all rely on adopting the language, structure, and appearance of certain genres to create a patina of credibility. When we consider the prevalence of Web and email fraud—much of which depends on convincing a victim that he or she is actually visiting a safe and familiar site rather than a bogus one—the ability to discern and evaluate such textual deception becomes even more crucial.

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Speed Bump ©2007 Dave Coverly. All rights reserved.

From another perspective, the Slim Jim Web site raises questions of gender identity and cultural roles that students might consider. Slim Jim is doing more than selling snacks in a funny way; it's also reinforcing a narrow definition of manhood characterized by stereotypes and silly, if not risky, behavior. Asking teenage students to examine these relevant messages—all of which have the ultimate intention of pushing a product beyond any other purpose—can help them “see” how aspects of their identities are depicted and employed for ulterior purposes. Again, underlying questions of ethical

In our class discussions, we try to keep in mind that what we're looking at is an artificial construction rather than a real scene of teen life: The people dancing on screen are actors, chosen for a particular reason. The same goes for their clothing, their dancing style, and the music they are listening to.

language use will arise. Students might consider and evaluate the use of slang on the site, not to mention Slim Jim's distorted version of history, particularly in light of the corporate world's perennial critique of public schooling as inadequate. Does a corporation bear any responsibility for modeling correct language use and safe behavior in advertising its products? When students begin to consider the use and effect of these representations, they are

modeling the responsible thinking of mature adults, educated consumers, and ethical citizens.

Example Two: Doritos.com

Frito-Lay's Doritos Web site is a great example of a multimodal, multilayered, persuasive text aimed at young people. As with the Slim Jim site, the site features high-end graphics, sound, and video layered over more traditional text-and-image messaging. The version we used in class has been changed (see the end of this section), but the following description illustrates the company's approach to marketing to teens and the direction of our class discussions.

Visitors are greeted immediately by simultaneous sound, image, and motion as the Doritos logo—a vaguely triangular shape formed by a flame pattern reminiscent of an EKG heartbeat—materializes suddenly from a dark red background. Stylized Doritos bags whip across the screen along with navigation

links that snap into place. Elements of the page are in constant movement, inviting interactivity. The style is techno-frenetic; mousing over items on the screen produces a highlighted visual effect and an electrical fusion sound. Students have discussed the peculiar visual sensibility at work on the Doritos site—a post-apocalyptic, urban, grungy-yet-slick style—and the constant jittery motion that seems an echo of the quick-cut camera work of MTV programming. This comparison often leads to a discussion about the presumed short attention spans of teenagers and how the site plays on and possibly reinforces this stereotype.

Throughout the Doritos Web site, Frito-Lay explicitly targets a teenage market. Clicking on any of the flavored Doritos bags on the main page will take viewers to a different page featuring embedded video and images of young people engaged in various kinds of leisure activities. For instance, “Nacho Cheese” flavor takes us to a scene of three teens dancing to a hip-hop tune emitted from a boom box, which in turn receives its pulsing energy from a bag of Doritos.

The representation presented here—of how cool teens look, what they wear, and what they like—is ripe for analysis. In our class discussions, we try to keep in mind that what we're looking at is an artificial construction rather than a real scene of teen life: The people dancing on screen are actors, chosen for a particular reason. The same goes for their clothing, their dancing style, and the music they are listening to. Frito-Lay is attempting to define its target audience with a specific, visual example while simultaneously locating its product as central to this vision. Once we are able to see this scene as only one *interpretation* of teen life, it becomes easier to imagine the choices that lie behind this scene, and to begin pondering “why.” As a teacher I play the role of questioner, prompting students to first speculate on the decisions that lie behind what they are seeing and then to explain their speculation in relation to the overall goals of the Web site.

Through this process, students gain a handhold for critiquing texts by articulating assumptions and intent, often with intriguing results. My classes have considered the implications of gender and ethnicity in this evoked scene, with its focus on a blonde girl, obviously Anglo, dancing in an urban

style before a background audience of an African American male and a dark-haired girl. Similarly, the text on the page (“Rock your mouth with the high-decibel nacho cheese flavor that started a snacking revolution”) draws on counter-culture connotations in musical and social history in service of a product pitch. This can easily lead to a discussion not only of how this makes for effective ad copy but also how such language choices reverberate outward and affect the way we think about broader cultural concepts. For instance, Jean Kilbourne has suggested that advertising’s use of the term *revolution* to sell various products has cheapened the notion of real social change (*Killing*).

The other Doritos flavors on the site have similar depictions of young people immersed in cool activities . . . or at least “cool” as defined by the Frito-Lay marketing department. As they get the hang of reading these pages, students inevitably note the ethnic assumptions at work in some of these representations. For instance, on the interactive page for “Spicy Nacho” flavor, a Latina teen “tags” a wall with the Doritos logo before tossing the spray can to the viewer; the can replaces our mouse pointer and suddenly we can add our graffiti to the page. Other pages on the site depict a low-rider Cadillac against a rap beat; a female African American DJ operating a couple of turntables; a grungy Anglo male rocking out on air guitar; and a Hispanic teen juggling a soccer ball. All of these scenes attempt to connect with a young target audience and in turn can be evaluated as multilayered texts seeking to define what cool looks like. Many other aspects of this sophisticated site can be examined through a rhetorical lens. In a section titled “Join,” visitors are invited to become members of “Club Doritos,” which “gets you access to awesome sweepstakes, great offers and more!” Current members of the club can click a link to “Manage your profile,” a phrase that echoes the language of online networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook that are immensely popular with teenagers.

Class discussions only scratch the surface of how image, video, color, sound, and text are used on the Doritos site to convey meaning—or, alternately, to obscure it. For instance, that nutritional information on such sites is often deemphasized or not included at all raises larger questions for students about what obligations, if any, a company has

to use language and images ethically. Do snack food companies have a responsibility to inform their customers, many of them children, about the nutritional value of their products? If so, what counts as sufficient information, and how accessible should it be? If an ingredient list is buried behind many pages of graphics, video, and games, is its presence somehow compromised? How do we balance a company’s right to sell a product with the public’s right to make healthy decisions? These are the kinds of questions with which informed citizens and consumers must grapple, hidden within the everyday texts of students’ lives.

It is easy to imagine a variety of potential lessons based on such texts, which on the surface seem familiar and obvious but which often yield more profound meanings on closer inspection. Students might analyze individual sections of sites that feature teen representations and then write letters to the company that challenge, modify, or add to their depiction of teenage life.

As they get the hang of reading these pages, students inevitably note the ethnic assumptions at work in some of these representations.

One of my classes imagined students engaging in peer instruction, creating lessons using a particular site as a text. As site “experts,” each group would be responsible for designing an interesting class activity with specific tasks, questions, and goals, asking their classmates to draw conclusions.

Any prolonged discussion of teen-targeted Web texts also needs to account for their transience. As the cutting edge of cool renders today’s fad into tomorrow’s dead style, so these sites are constantly evolving in an attempt to remain relevant. In fact, the Doritos site described above was completely revamped in February of 2007 to feature the latest techno-trends: YouTube-style user-generated publishing and customer-personalized marketing. The site now includes five Doritos TV advertisements aired during this year’s Super Bowl—all of them customer-created contest-winning videos—while allowing users to “register and vote” for which new Doritos flavors should be retained. Rather than considering the ephemeral nature of such texts a reason to avoid them as objects of study, teachers and students might instead treat this quality as a rhetorical element essential to the genre, one that can in turn be interrogated. Why did Doritos change its site?

What new trends are they attempting to embrace? How has their target audience evolved based on design changes? Screenshots of interesting sites are easily created (by pressing the Ctrl and Prnt Scrn buttons on a PC keyboard), allowing teachers to save permanent copies of Web site pages so that comparative analysis can take place.

Team Projects

Following our discussion of these particular sites, I ask student teams to research product sites focused on selling to teens and choose one on which to focus. Like the examples above, the site they decide on should make use of advanced multimedia and have potential for in-depth analysis. Rhetorically speaking, not all product Web sites are created equal; some are more interesting than others. By way of contrast, the current Tootsie Roll Web site (<http://www.tootsie.com>) is a good example of a basic product Web site without the rhetorical bells and whistles.

Once teams have decided on a prospective site, I ask them to build a project around this multilayered text that will draw in students and get them to think critically about how language, image, film, and other design elements are used, and why. Teams must come up with a way to introduce other students to a vocabulary of textual analysis and then create concrete tasks that ask students to apply their understanding to specific parts of the Web site. Then they must design a way for students to articulate their understanding of the design choices at work—including an assessment of how the target audience is represented and why—in service of a larger goal: developing the ability to critique multimodal arguments and evaluate both their message and the means by which it is delivered.

After a few weeks of planning and design, each team is charged with taking the rest of the class through these lessons—we do what their future students might do—and afterwards we add our recommendations, insights, and suggestions to the project plan as a class. Collectively we are able to bring a surprising amount of insight to the texts under study, helping each other consider further how to move students to think wider and deeper. This past year, teams created extensive project lesson plans that led students to explore a wide variety

of tactics at work on youth-oriented sites. Investigating the site for Fanta soda (<http://www.fanta.com>) led to discussions about the implications of the Spice Girls-ish “Fantanas,” their online profiles, and their potential appeal to both young girls and boys; the use of “send-an-email-to-mom” and shopping list features; and the tropical associations at work on the site. Another team helped us to analyze the cartoonlike world and interactive gaming on the Fruit Roll-Ups Web site (<http://www.fruitontheloose.com>). The use of such “advergames” has become increasingly popular on Web sites aimed at selling food products to children as companies look to “involve children more deeply and for longer periods” than with TV advertising (Quaid, par. 3). Other groups asked us to analyze the brand cross-marketing and personalized product appeal employed by M&Ms (<http://www.mms.com> and <http://www.becomeanmm.com/>) and the class-excluding vision of an idealized world and its hyper-sexualized young inhabitants presented on the Abercrombie Kids site (<http://www.abercrombiekids.com/kids/index.html>). Exploring these sites—and many others like them—we were continually struck by their rhetorical sophistication and their potential as real texts for engaging students and encouraging critical thinking.

Final Thoughts

In the last several years, I have asked students in my undergraduate and graduate English education courses to create substantial “digital projects” on a topic of their choice: students can make digital films, design wiki sites, and (if they are currently teachers) create a blog to bring an immediate online dimension to the classes they are teaching. These projects can be challenging and time-intensive, and yet students are almost universally positive when reflecting on the assignment’s worth. Current teachers are especially enthusiastic. “My students love blogging and they’re working on their own Web sites,” goes a typical comment, “and now they want to make iMovies, and I really feel like I can help them.”

I mention this assignment to point out what many teachers have experienced already: We are fast moving into an era of using and creating multimodal texts that requires students to think in complex ways

about creating and organizing elements of language, image, sound, and interactivity. Many teenagers are already far beyond their teachers in practical digital skills, be it Web design, programming, or online networking. Certainly there is much we can learn from students; indeed, many English teachers may feel themselves hopelessly inadequate around anything tech-related, without a vocabulary much less a skill set. Yet in terms of helping students understand the rhetorical nature and ethical dimensions of the online world they inhabit now and in the future, English teachers have a grounding in the discipline that makes them well-suited as mentors. We know that texts work to create specific effects on a particular audience, and we can help students measure and weigh the ramifications of this fact even as they are creating texts of their own.

On average, young people now spend about three hours each day on the Internet, as much time as they do watching television (Davis). And just as TV can be watched from a noncritical, passive perspective, so too can teens surf the Web—or build Web sites—without analyzing or evaluating the information they encounter, treating at face value that which has been constructed for an intended effect. Since “[m]ost media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power,” it becomes essential that students gain practice in critiquing such texts (Thoman and Jolls 15). We want them to have the capacity to deal proactively and thoughtfully with

all manner of online branding, selling, and messaging, rather than simply reacting. Teaching the rhetorical use of language, symbolism, and imagery has traditionally been an important part of our discipline, and as technology creates new forms of multimodal texts that demand new literacies from our students, English teachers are uniquely positioned to address these needs.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Crovitz uses product Web sites to help students become more-informed consumers by critiquing various attributes of the sites. In “Comic Makeovers: Examining Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Media,” students explore representations of race, class, ethnicity, and gender by analyzing comics over a two-week period. They then re-envision them with a “comic character makeover.” This activity leads to greater awareness of stereotypes in the media and urges students to form more realistic visions of these images as they perform their makeovers. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=207