

## To Be Cool - An Introduction to the YA Hotline

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What makes one cool? It would be nice to think that someone's personality, athletic ability or intelligence was a contributing factor. And indeed, all of these things *do* influence whether or not one is cool. For teens, however, cool is not defined by these attributes alone. For the typical teen, clothes worn are a barometer of cool far superior to intelligence level or sense of humour.

As Murray Milner, Jr. writes in his book *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids*, "teenagers



often seek to maintain or enhance their status by the acquisition of fashionable status symbols" (Milner 157). Of course, marketers wouldn't care what teens wanted if most teens hadn't the money to buy their products, but it happens that there has never been a time of greater teen spending. Noted teen researcher Peter Zollo reports that in 1998, American teens spent \$94 billion of their own money, about 50% more than three years earlier (Milner 158). As teen spending is clearly increasing, it only makes sense that marketing efforts aimed at teens are increasing with it. Teens are concerned with being cool, thus each marketer needs to position his or her product as the cool choice.

Clothes are the most obvious indicator of whether one is fashionable, and a walk past a group of high school or junior high students confirms this. One is blitzed by logos advertising American Eagle, FuBu, Nike, and a host of other brands. In a 1998 study by Simpson, Douglas and Schimmel, the researchers found that 46%

of females 15-18, and 39% of males, almost always considered brand name when buying clothes. For the more impressionable tween group (ages 12-14), the numbers were 66% for males and 60% for females. Teens and tweens are in a developmental stage where they are “naturally insecure and searching for a personal identity” (Kersting 61). Marketers know this, and are able to prey on the insecurities of teens to develop brand loyalties. Marketing goes a long way toward explaining the iPod’s popularity in a sea of similar products, and toward

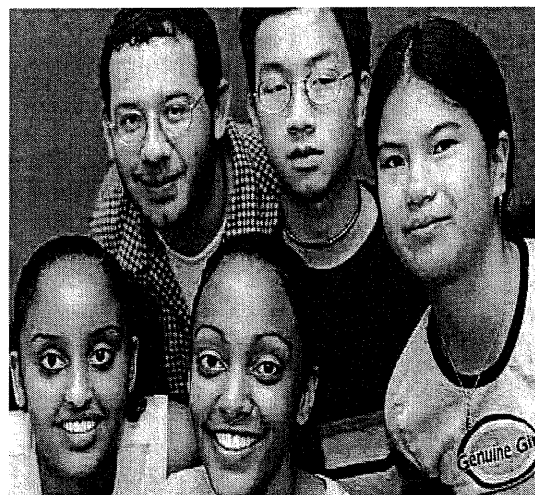
explaining why Samsung wanted its cellphones to replace Nokia’s in the movie *The Matrix*. The point is that these products are being successfully positioned as cool. “Without these running shoes,” say advertisers, “you won’t be popular.”



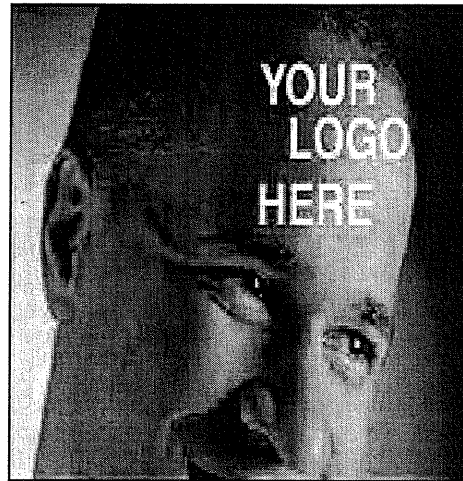
The world of teen consumerism, though, is far more complicated than teens needing the right clothes. In this issue of the YA Hotline, we’ll introduce you to a range of issues that surface when thinking about teenagers and consumption.

“In much the same way that the British Empire tried to take over Africa and profit from its wealth, corporations look at [teens] like this massive empire they are colonizing. And their weapons are films, music, books, CDs, Internet access, clothing, amusement parks, sports teams.”

-Robert McChesney



Marketers are becoming ever more aggressive, sending out “cool-hunters,” preying on insecurities and invading public schools. Some teens have taken it upon themselves to combat the corporatization of their lives, and here we’ll discuss their strategies. However, not all teens are so savvy about marketing, and media literacy intervention can help with this. Also discussed in the Hotline are approaches that the library can take to educate teens about the messages they are bombarded with daily. As long as marketers are reaching out to teens, we should be, too.



### Works Cited

Kersting, Karen. “Driving teen egos—and buying—through ‘branding!’” *Monitor On Psychology* June 2004. 03 April 2004 <<http://www.apa.org/monitor/jun04/driving.html>>.

Milner Jr., Murray. *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

According to tracking firm Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU), teens spent about \$169 billion in 2004, down slightly from \$175 billion the year before, but still healthy given a tough climate for retailers nationwide.

Source: Parija Bhatnagar, “More cheese for the ‘mall rats’”