

True Cost of Cool

Grades 6-12

Lesson Summary

Students analyze media messages that promote consumerism, and learn about environmental costs of our consumption.

Overview

In this lesson, students will:

- Explore the impact advertisements have in promoting consumerism
- Learn about hidden environmental costs in things we buy
- Analyze advertisements in popular teen magazines
- (Optional) Watch video about mass consumerism, its impact on nature, and how teens can make informed consumer choices that help protect the environment

Time 

1 or 2 hours (1 hour Activity 1; 1 hour Optional Activity 2)

Background

Compare life during pioneer times with our current urban life in the United States. One huge difference is the amount of stuff we have today, and how we get it. Rather than making things, we buy them. In the past 500 years, United States society has changed from one in which people had to grow their food, build their homes and make their clothing, to one in which we most often buy all those things, and much, much more! But buying stuff is only half of the equation. For every thing we buy, someone is at the other end of the transaction, selling it. There is enormous profit to be made in selling us essential items, like food and clothing, and in selling us items we don't really need at all, like fancy cell phones and energy drinks.

Advertisements aim to sell us things we do and do not need. Ads drive our consumer culture, consistently turning “wants” into “needs.” Ads also encourage us to spend money on things without paying attention to (let alone truly even knowing!) all the consequences of buying these things. Ads disguise the varied, and often disturbing, impacts that all our material goods have on the natural world— how they were manufactured, transported, and packaged, and even the impact they have on our health (like using plastic water bottles that contain harmful chemicals). When you see an ad for the newest cell phone, you'd never guess that its circuit board contains coltan—a metal that has to be mined from the Congo rainforest, severely threatening the endangered lowland gorilla.

This “untold story” of our stuff is exactly the point of advertising—to show us one side of the story, and one side only. Ads try to



Vocabulary

- Consumerism
- Advertising
- Hidden Cost

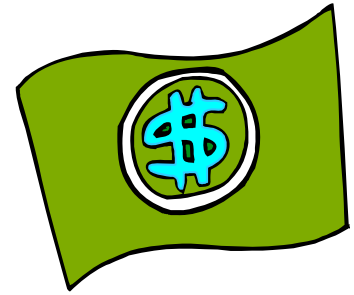
Materials

- 8 magazines
- chalkboard and chalk
- TV and VCR
- *The Cost of Cool* video (TRT: 26 min)

Preparation

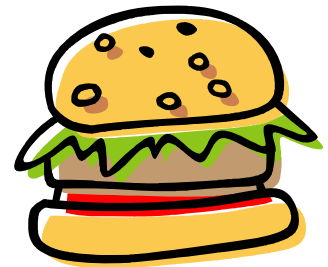
- Gather youth-focused magazines—like music or pop culture magazines (or ask your students to bring in their favorite ones): 1/4 as many as the number of students in your class, or 8 for a class of 32.
- (Optional) Borrow *The Cost of Cool* from SFE. Call 415-355-3713.
- (Optional) Preview video to formulate your own discussion questions.

convince us of the benefits their product will provide: how we'll feel and how we'll look. Many people would make different decisions about what to buy if they fully understood the negative impacts those consumer goods had on nature. By becoming "media literate", or able to decode advertisements, we can better understand why we're drawn to certain products, and consider the varied costs of buying those products. Since teenagers represent billions of dollars in annual sales to global marketers, teaching youth media literacy empowers teens to be aware of how they're being targeted, and how to make better decisions about what, or what not, to buy.



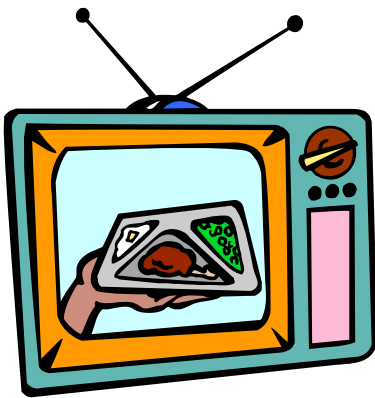
Pre-Activity Questions

1. Gather your class together and ask: What do you usually spend most of your money on? (*i.e. food, gas, bus fare, clothing etc.*) List student answers on the board.
2. Do think you could go for a whole day without spending any money?
3. We currently live in a consumer culture. What does it mean to be a "consumer culture"? (*A culture in which people buy most of their things and services, and a culture in which consumption of non-necessary material goods is highly promoted, expected and accepted.*)
4. How is this different than life during pioneer times? (*During pioneer days, people spent most of their time fulfilling essential needs by making things from scratch rather than buying them. From sunrise to sunset, people of all ages grew and prepared food, made and washed clothing, built homes and barns, and tended to their farm animals. People had less "stuff" because making stuff took a lot of time and effort, and access to a variety of raw materials was very limited. For example, rather than buying clothing at a store, or having access to exotic fabrics like silk, pioneers raised animals to provide wool. They spun the wool into yarn, wove the yarn into cloth, and then sewed the cloth into clothes. Because this was such a lengthy and labor-intense process, most early pioneers did not have many clothes.*)
5. Where do all the things we use originally come from? (*Natural resources that come from nature*) Please give an example. (*Soda cans are made from aluminum which is found in bauxite, a mineral that exists underground in the rainforest.*)
6. Is there anything we use that doesn't come from something originally found in nature? (*Take answers. The answer ultimately, is no.*)
7. How do you think our growing demand for things affects nature? (*Each thing we buy has its own lifecycle- from resource extraction, to manufacturing, transporting, use, and disposal. There are environmental costs in each of these steps, like the destruction of the rainforest to extract minerals, polluting byproducts made during an item's manufacturing, the oil needed to transport it, or the landfill used to dispose of it. The more things we buy, the more environmental costs we incur.*)



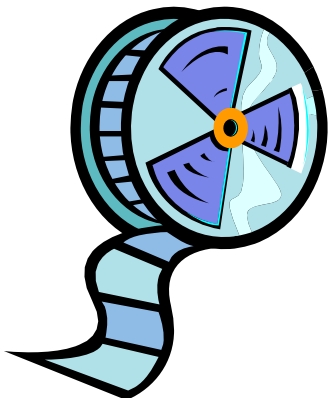


8. Point to list on board. Are there things on this list that we don't need for survival?
9. In general, we do buy more things than we really need each day. What are some examples of this? (*Owning 50 pairs of shoes or jackets, upgrading a cell phone yearly, TV's for each room in a home*)
10. Why do we feel compelled to buy things we don't really need? (*Fun, peer pressure/fitting in, commercials and ads, culture of consuming, hope that we'll get some need or "deficiency" satisfied*)
11. What goes into your decision to buy things? (*Cost, desire, need, convenience, cool factor*)
12. Do you think commercials and advertisements make us feel we need things when we really don't? (*Yes*) Can someone give a personal example of this?



Activity 1: Ad Appeal

1. Split students into groups of 4.
2. Tell them they will now analyze advertisements to learn more about how teens are being targeted as consumers.
3. Give each group 1 magazine. Direct student groups to choose one appealing magazine ad and discuss what they find appealing about the product and ad. Give students 15 minutes to do so.
4. Call one group at a time to the front of the class and have the group show their ad to the class, briefly explaining what they found appealing about it. List products being sold on the board.
5. After all groups share their ads, guide students in a vote on which thing they'd like to buy. Record the number of votes for each item on the board.
6. Ask: Why would you want to buy that item? Does it meet a need?
7. Ask students if they can guess any environmental impacts those items might have. If watching *The Cost of Cool* take a couple answers. If not watching video, take more answers.
8. Ask: Can someone give an example of a time you decided not to buy something—what influenced you? What are some other reasons we might choose not to buy something? (*Cost, environmental harm, didn't need it, didn't want to support the company*)

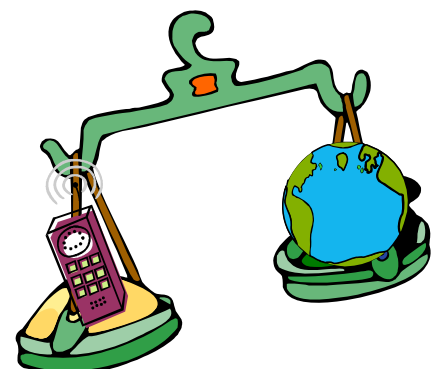
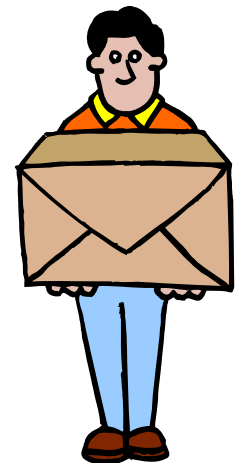
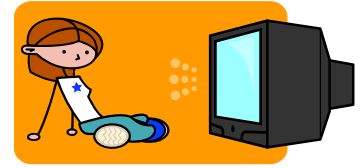


Optional Activity 2: *The Cost of Cool*

1. Explain to the class that they are going to watch a video that discusses how teenagers are programmed by the media and peer pressure to buy stuff they don't really need, and the environmental cost of that consumption. They are going to look at everyday items, from t-shirts to sneakers, and track

the effect of manufacturing these items on the world's resources.

2. Watch *The Cost of Cool* (26 minutes).
3. After watching, ask students: How does advertising or consumerism affect the environment and nature? (*Everything we buy and/or use comes from something originally found in nature. Some products are made through the use of non-renewable natural resources, like oil. Once those resources are used up, we have no more of them and the ecosystems that rely on them will suffer. Even if a resource is renewable, extracting those resources can damage or completely destroy an ecosystem, such as logging old growth trees in an ancient forest.*)
4. What does it mean to be a “hidden cost”? A “hidden environmental cost”? (A *hidden cost is an effect, usually harmful, that creating or consuming a product has on society. A hidden environmental cost is a negative effect a product has on the environment, or on nature.*)
5. What is one hidden environmental cost of t-shirts? (*The pesticides used to grow non-organic cotton damage the earth’s topsoil and can pollute groundwater below.*)
6. What are some environmental hidden costs of the items voted on in Activity 1? (*To answer this question, consider whether it is a need or a “want”; where the product is made and how far it would have to travel to reach you; what natural resources go into making it—and if any natural habitat is destroyed as a result of this resource extraction; how much packaging it comes in; whether the product is reusable or disposable; and whether it can be composted or recycled, or if it has to be sent to the landfill.*)
7. Knowing these hidden environmental costs, is there anyone who would now make a different purchasing choice? Record this change in votes on the board.
8. Explain to students that through the laws of supply and demand, they can affect what is manufactured by what they choose to buy. If we reduce the amount of stuff we buy (demand) and try to buy items that are more eco-friendly and have a lower ecological impact, then we can help shift the market (supply) in positive ways. Also tell students it is not required that we neglect our wants, it is simply important for us to evaluate our wants within a bigger picture, so we are aware of the consequences of our choices and the possible impact they will have.



Extensions

- Teach *Targeting Teens*. Visit SFEnvironmentKids.org and click on “Teachers Lounge” to download the lesson plan.
- Teach *I Want It! I Need It!*. To download, follow directions above.
- Watch “The Story of Stuff” (20 minutes) online at: www.TheStoryofStuff.com, or to borrow the DVD from SF Environment, call 415-355-3713