*Journal of Media Literacy Education,* 11(3), 91-97, 2019
DOI: 10.23860/JMLE-2019-11-3-9
ISSN: 2167-8715

# *Commercials as social studies curriculum: Bridging content & media literacy*

Shanedra D. Nowell

*Oklahoma State University*



**Voices from the Field - Peer-reviewed article**

**Citation:** Nowell, S. D. (2019). Commercials as social studies curriculum: Bridging content & media literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, *11*(3), 91-97. Doi: 10.23860/JMLE-2019-11-3-9

**Corresponding Author**:
Shanedra D. Nowell
shanedra.nowell@okstate.edu



**Received:** September 8, 2018
**Accepted:** July 1, 2019
**Published:** November 30, 2019

**Data Availability Statement**: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

**Editorial Board**

## ABSTRACT

This essay explores ways television commercials can teach both media literacy skills and social studies content knowledge. Because of their brevity and concise messages, commercials offer teachers a wide assortment of engaging, content focused lesson topics that can be used to introduce new ideas, as writing or discussion prompts to further explore concepts, or as creative media projects to assess the content and media literacy knowledge. I examine different approaches to integrate commercials into social studies classes and include resources to guide students through deconstructing commercials, understanding advertisers' creative techniques and appeals, and creating their own commercials.

**Keywords:** *media literacy, advertisements, media analysis, social studies education.*

After a long day, it's nice to come home, collapse on the couch, and watch television. Although streaming services and my DVR allow me to zoom through commercials, I enjoy the humorous 30-second dramas and being lulled into believing that the purveyed products can make our world a better place. By folding my experience as a secondary social studies teacher and teacher educator in combination with my advertising and marketing background, I find teachable moments within many advertisements. Commercials allow brief, targeted media literacy lessons, which connect with many social studies concepts. Research rests on using advertisements as teaching tools in art (Tavin, 2002), English language arts (Hobbs, 2004a; 2004b), and science (Belova, Chang Rundgren, & Eilks, 2015; McSharry, 2002). Yet, the few that incorporate social studies mainly focus on teaching with political ads (Martinson, 2009; Mason, 2015). In my social studies classroom, I use commercials to introduce or review historical events, in the form of bell-ringers and writing prompts, or as a way to assess students' knowledge. Above all, using commercials allows teachers to integrate media literacy into their lessons without letting media take over their classes. In my time as a secondary history and geography teacher, I introduced media literacy skills to my students early in the school year and reviewed them often within my lesson activities, such as those ones, which I will describe here. These activities include teaching students the anatomy of print-based and television advertisements, analyzing ads using the *Key Questions to Ask when Analyzing Media Messages* (NAMLE, 2013), as well as helping students to identify both advertising appeals and message strategies, which are used by advertisers to persuade consumers. I will also share my ideas for employing student-created advertisements to assess content knowledge.

**Commercials as a Media Literacy Tool**

An average person living in the United States views between 4,000 and 10,000 advertisements per day (Simpson, 2017). Teaching young people to interpret and evaluate advertising messages may allow them to become active, not just passive consumers of media. Hobbs (2004b) found that analyzing advertisements improved adolescents' critical thinking skills. My students sometimes complained that I "ruined" media viewing for them because the media literacy skills I taught them stripped away their naiveté as young consumers. Since the emergence of Channel One in 1990, educators questioned the effect of bringing commercials into the classroom (Bachen, 1998; Blokhuis, 2008; Domine, 2009). The now defunct news channel forced students to watch two minutes of advertisements for popular products everyday as a part of their packaged curriculum (Domine, 2009). The rise of Channel One prompted calls for more media literacy education for both teachers and students in order to disrupt the commercial news program's media messages (Austin, Chen, Pinkleton, & Johnson, 2006). Although television commercials and other advertisements may promote consumerism and capitalism, I choose to discuss them with students solely for educational purposes. Whether it is a political ad[1] where a local candidate vows to stop "brain drain" (a geography vocabulary that refers to educated or skilled people leaving an area for economic opportunities elsewhere) or a Super Bowl commercial that mimes Martin Luther King Jr.'s words on humanity and service to sell trucks, advertisements offer many opportunities to connect social studies content with media literacy lessons (Meixler, 2018).

**Teaching the Anatomy of an Advertisement**

Before tackling television commercials, I typically start students off with a basic understanding of advertising and its essential parts. Sheehan (2014) reminds that, "At its most basic level, advertising presents information to help consumers make decisions regarding the purchase of products and services" (p. 5). In my Geography courses, I choose travel advertisements to help students identify the headline, art, copy, and fine print (see *Figure 1*). While the purpose of an eye-catching headline and creative graphics are easy to recognize and comprehend, often students have never paid close attention to the copy or fine print. Copy in ads typically lists product claims, benefits, and appeals, while fine print spells out or further explains these claims. Once students have a basic understanding of the elements of advertising, I show a 30-second Ireland tourism[2] television spot to see if they can identify the parallel elements. Once students understand the basic anatomy of advertisements, they are ready to look beyond the surface and dive deeper into advertising messages and methods.

[1] Link https://youtu.be/4edsZs1M4zM

[2] Link https://youtu.be/_wx67mOjEZM


Figure 1. *Anatomy of an Advertise derived from Ireland: The land of eternal youth.*[3]

Central to teaching with advertisements, especially television commercials, media literacy educators should always emphasize that most advertisements were created to make money by prompting consumers to purchase a product, or in the very least, to raise awareness of the product or service. This is where the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) key questions for media analysis are essential (2013). These questions provide teachers and students with a foundational understanding of media literacy and a common starting point for media analysis with advertisements. Whenever I utilize an advertisement as a teaching tool, I provide students with a copy of these questions (see *Table 1*).

Table 1. *Key Questions to Ask when Analyzing Media Messages* (NAMLE, 2013)

| | **Media Analysis Questions** | **Media Literacy Concepts** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Who created the media messages and why? | Audience & Authorship |
| 2. | What is the message; and what ideas or values are implied? | Messages & Meanings |
| 3. | Who is the target audience? | Audience & Authorship |
| 4. | How might a different audience/person interpret the message? | Audience & Authorship; Messages & Meanings |
| 5. | What creative techniques are used; and how do they communicate the message? | Messages & Meanings |
| 6. | Is the message credible? Is it real? Is it fact or opinion? | Representations & Reality |

[3] Retrieved from https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library/3530714149/in/album-72157618058787787/

For example, key question #3 (see *Table 1*) asks, "Who is the target audience?" I approach this audience analysis task by showing advertisements aimed at groups to which my high school students do not belong. This often helps students identify the audience, as well as how non-targeted groups may perceive media messages differently (see *Table 1*, key question #4). For example, teenagers may ignore retirement planning or anti-ageing beauty ads simply because those products hold no meaning for them. In economics and human geography, retirement age is relevant when we study dependency ratio, or the percentage of a nation's population—young and old—dependent on those of working age. As an illustration of this concept, I have students compare two retirement company ads, E*Trade's *This is Getting Old*[4] and Prudential's *Walkways Experiment*[5]. High school students may prefer the E*Trade's commercial because of its humor and music (Pasquarelli, 2018), but the Prudential's ad offers a tangible illustration of the gap between the working age and old age that younger students may find hard to grasp. Although teens were not its direct target audience, this commercial was created for the 2018 Super Bowl, an event with a broad audience of 100 million viewers (Otterson, 2018; Richards, 2018). According to *USA Today*, the E*Trade commercial ranked in the top ten of Super Bowl ads and appealed more to young people under 21, than those ages 21-30, although it played best with retirement age viewers (*Ad meter: This is getting old*, 2018). From my point of view, this ad does double duty teaching a challenging concept alongside media literacy skills.

**Identifying Persuasion & Appeals in Advertising**

Key question #5 (see *Table 1*) asks, "What creative techniques are used and how do they communicate the message?" (NAMLE, 2013). With this question, I teach my secondary students to recognize how companies persuade consumers to buy products. Clow and Baack (2005) describe an advertising appeal as "the general tone and nature of the commercial or message" (p. 5). An advertising appeal triggers an emotional need or desire in a consumer, which the product or service can fulfill (Wells, Burnett, & Moriarty, 2006, p. 340). We tend to group advertising appeals in two main groups: emotional and rational (Wells et al., 2006). Emotional appeals use messages that play to consumers' social and psychological needs and insecurities, such as love, acceptance, fear, happiness, rejection, safety, sex, pride, and nostalgia. While targeting these same desires, rational advertising appeals employ messages that speak to consumers' practical reasoning skills, thoughts, and beliefs (Clow & Baack, 2005; Wells et al., 2006). Clow and Baack (2005) contend that television ads are perfect for emotional appeals, while print ads are more suited for rational appeals. Advertising messages may employ rational appeals after the target audience has already developed an emotional bond with the product (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2004).

Car companies frequently create television commercials that illustrate this point. Japanese car brand Subaru frequently uses both rational and emotional appeals in their television ads. In their 2018 advertisement titled *Rewind*[6], audiences trace an accident survivor from the hospital, back in time where his Subaru Impreza prevented his life-changing accident from happening. In each scene, viewers feel the heightened emotion, fear, and bewilderment of the onscreen actors as they ask, "What if this didn't have to happen?" This question and the mini-drama that plays out onscreen, makes this commercial a good fit for a history class to analyze in order to apply the same kind of thinking to historical events. While everyone knows you cannot change the past, social studies teachers encourage students to analyze historical events in order to identify the crossroads and decisions that lead to present situations, similar to what is seen in the commercial. From the simple piano music, the frozen in mid-action camera shots, and the company's "Love" slogan, the commercial's rational-emotional combination appeal elicits a range of feelings including fear, security, and loyalty.

**Understanding Message Strategies**

Key question #2 (see *Table 1*) asks, "What is the message and what ideas or values are implied?" O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2004) found that the most effective advertisements use emotional appeals tied to the language and values of the product's target audience (p. 53). A good example of this can be seen in advertisements for the detergent brand leader Dawn. Practical products often use emotional stories to appeal to buyers, as well as to promote their good deeds. In my geography courses, I cover environmental disasters,

[4] Link https://youtu.be/d56-22bpyh0
[5] Link https://youtu.be/1QZw6_NsipM
[6] Link https://youtu.be/-bPU6a0_DCU

such as oil spills, floods, and hurricanes, etc. Having students analyze the message and purpose of advertisements created in response to these disasters can open their eyes to the appeals and techniques often used. As part of its 2018 *Dawn Helps Save Wildlife* campaign, television ads used simulated images of oil-soaked animals miraculously cleansed by the detergent. Since the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, Dawn has touted its ability to remove crude oil from the animals affected by the disaster (Shogren, 2010). In the *Dawn Cleans More than Dishes*[7], the images of sudsy animals on screen are accompanied by a soft female voice singing an acoustic version of the classic tune *Lean on Me*. After the tagline, which reads, "Dawn helps bring wildlife back to life" appears, they show images of animals released back into their natural habitats. All parts of the ad's message strategy work together to gain an emotional response from the viewer and illustrate how the emotions of the words, music, and images converge with the rational utility of the detergent in an attempt to persuade audiences with the help of the targeted appeals, which communicate both emotional and cultural values.

In answering the questions for media analysis with this ad, students should question how the ad leverages environmental disasters to persuade buyers as they analyze the ad's messages and values. In my classes, students often raised more questions, wondering how a petroleum product like Dawn is better for the animals and the environment than the oil it supposedly cleans. As it was not disclosed in the ad, my students questioned how much time and money the brand actually donates to wildlife organizations?

**Using Ads as Social Studies Teaching and Assessment Tools**

Television commercials and other advertisements can assess students' social studies content knowledge. I have used commercials tease historical characters and events, such as Geico's ads featuring Paul Revere[8] with a cell phone and Christopher Columbus[9] with speedboats. While these commercials are mostly humorous, I often use them as writing prompts to foster creative thinking and writing. One of the more challenging skills my World History students needed to master was writing an essay explaining how civilizations and cultures changed over time. Often, I introduce this task with a series of three computer commercials (a 1950's Univac[10] computer ad, the epic Macintosh 1984[11] ad, and a current Apple ad featuring the newest iPad or MacBook) challenging students to think and write about what has changed and stayed the same with computers over time.

**Movie Trailers as Mini-Lessons**

Social studies teachers can become notorious for showing in class full-length feature films, which dramatize historical content. While using film to bring historical content to life is a common practice among social studies teachers, I pair media viewing choices with developing media literacy skills (Nowell, 2017; Russell, 2012). In our current climate of accountability and high stakes testing, taking three to five days to show a movie is rarely practical. I found that showing movie trailers often fulfills the same purpose in my classroom. For example, in World History, I spend several days teaching lessons on the 16th century European monarchs, their quests for world empires, and domestic struggles for religious control. Queen Elizabeth I of England and King Phillip II of Spain were central characters in this drama as their nations' navies battled for control of the high seas in 1588. As a review of the tensions, which led to this conflict, I show my high school students the less than 3-minute trailer[12] for the 2007 film *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. The film trailer offers a platform to question the historical content of this film, such as the characters and the conflicts portrayed: Queen Elizabeth I vs. King Phillip II, Catholicism vs. Protestantism, and Empire vs. Isolation. The full film is entertaining, with its epic sea battle and palace intrigue, but is overwrought with historical inaccuracies (Ford, 2009).

Using the key questions, we also analyze the *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* trailer for the ploys that marketers use to capture audiences' attention. As we analyze the "creative techniques" and the ad's message and values, students notice an array of things, such as the introduction of water as a character in the opening shot, the frequent fades to black throughout, the increasing crescendo of the music, and the legitimacy added to the cast with the Academy Award label before each of the actor's names. With the brief movie trailer and our discussions of the historical characters, events,

[7] Link https://youtu.be/FLoSjIknSoU
[8] Link https://youtu.be/DSF7_hMrx-o
[9] Link https://youtu.be/Nf6G22Myoe4
[10] Link https://youtu.be/3PIDUFy3QK4
[11] Link https://youtu.be/RSyy2-Z2m-U
[12] Link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wNboYbgYjo

and media analysis questions, in less than 15 minutes of class time, students scaffold the knowledge as we move on to the decline of the Spanish global empire and the rise of their cultural Golden Age.

### Student-Created Commercials as Assessments

Teachers should also consider projects that encourage students to demonstrate their media literacy skills by creating commercials, encouraging students to sell us on their content knowledge and understanding. During my media literacy-focused World History unit on WWI and WWII, students created advertisements for early 20th century inventions, such as the toaster and band-aids. Creating commercials in the classroom offers many new challenges for both teachers and students. More advanced, but also more time consuming than media analysis, media production requires both video creation skills and technical knowledge. Teachers need to be prepared to teach script writing, storyboarding, as well as the smartphone or computer editing software or applications needed to complete the project. Students may be versed in uploading personal videos to YouTube or Instagram, but they often resist the structured nature of this project, with the required storyboarding, planning shots, and portraying a selected emotional or rational appeal. Storyboarding, or planning out the visuals, angles, music, narration, effects, and transitions, which will appear onscreen, aid students' understanding of the media construction, target audience, benefits, appeals, and the creative choices, which advertisers make to lure consumers. These activities also make it a great tool for teachers to assess development of media literacy skills in students.

As the final project in my media literacy focused WWI/WWII unit, students can choose to create a print-based or a video advertisement for an early 20th century invention. These student-created ads must include a headline/tagline, copy/script, art/drama, product benefits, and an identifiable advertising appeal. Through my teaching practices, I found that print-based ads are an easy project for a single student to complete, while small groups work best on planning and producing 30 to 90 second-long videos. I also noticed that my students had fun showing off their historical and media literacy knowledge.

I utilize both peer assessments and teacher-created rubrics to evaluate the end products, to assess social studies content knowledge, media production elements, and creativity.

## CONCLUSION

Commercials offer media literacy educators a unique opportunity to connect classroom content with essential media literacy skills. A versatile tool for teaching, reviewing, writing, or assessment, commercials can engage learners with pop culture, content area knowledge, and media production. Teaching students the anatomy of both: print-based and television ads allows them to comprehend the creative ways in which advertisers gain consumers' attention and emotions. Knowing these basic tenets of advertising strengthens students' ability to deconstruct media messages and to better understand the role of advertisements in our consumer culture. Beyond developing media literacy skills, using commercials as curriculum to teach and assess learners' content knowledge allows teachers to assist their students with making connections between their classrooms and the real world, as well as apply their media knowledge to create commercials of their own for class projects. Utilizing commercials for educational purposes in the classroom helps teachers to bridge their students' content knowledge and media literacy skills in order to develop more media savvy 21st century citizens and consumers.

## REFERENCES


Ad meter: This is getting old. (2018, July 23). *USA Today*. Retrieved from http://admeter.usatoday.com/commercials/this-is-getting-old/

Austin, E. W., Chen, Y., Pinkleton, B. E., & Johnson, J. Q. (2006). Benefits and costs of Channel One in a middle school setting and the role of media-literacy training. *Pediatrics*, *117*(3), e423-e433.

Bachen, C. M. (1998). Channel One and the education of American youths. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *557*(1), 132-147.

Belova, N., Chang Rundgren, S. N., & Eilks, I. (2015). Advertising and science education: A multi-perspective review of the literature. *Studies in Science Education*, *51*(2), 169-200.

Blokhuis, J. C. (2008). Channel One: When private interests and the public interest collide. *American Educational Research Journal*, *45*(2), 343-363.

Clow, K.E. & Baack, D. (2005). *Concise encyclopedia of advertising*. Philadelphia, PA: Haworth Press.

Domine, V. (2009). A social history of media, technology and schooling. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, *1*(1), 4.

Ford, E. (2009). *Royal portraits in Hollywood: Filming the lives of queens*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Hobbs, R. (2004a). Analyzing advertising in the English language arts classroom: A quasi-experimental study. *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education*, *4*(2), 1-14.

Hobbs, R. (2004b). Does media literacy work? An empirical study of learning how to analyze advertisements. *Advertising & Society Review*, *5*(4).

Martinson, D. L. (2009). Political advertising: A roadblock in teaching social studies students the importance of truthful political communication to a democratic society. *The Social Studies*, *100*(2), 75-78.

Mason, L. E. (2015). Media literacy: Analyzing political commercials. *Social Studies Research & Practice*, *10*(2) 73-83.

McSharry, G. (2002). Television programming and advertisements: Help or hindrance to effective science education?. *International Journal of Science Education*, *24*(5), 487-497.

Meixler, E. (2018, February 5). Dodge's super bowl ad using Martin Luther King's voice is not going down well. *Time*. Retrieved from https://time.com/5132811/martin-luther-king-dodge-ram-super-bowl-commercial/

National Association for Media Literacy Education. (2013). *Key questions to ask when analyzing media messages*. Retrieved from https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B8j2T8jHrlgCZ2Zta2hvWkF0dG8

Nowell, S. (2017). Viewing the world wars through media literacy. In W. B. Russell & S. Waters (Eds.), *Cinematic social studies: A resource for teaching and learning social studies with film* (pp. 157-181). Charlotte: NC: Information Age.

Otterson, J. (2018, February 5). TV ratings: super bowl LII slips 7% from 2017 to 103.4 million viewers. *Variety*. Retrieved from https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/super-bowl-lii-ratings-1202687239/

O'Shaughnessy, J. & O'Shaughnessy, N.J. (2004). *Persuasion in advertising*. Routledge.

Pasquarelli, A. (2018, January 29). E*Trade returns to super bowl after five-year hiatus. *Ad Age*. Retrieved from http://adage.com/article/special-report-super-bowl/E*Trade-returns-super-bowl-year-hiatus/312115/

Richards, K. (2018, February 8). These retirement-ready folks think it's time to quit their day jobs in E*Trade's super bowl ad. *Ad Week*. Retrieved from https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/these-retirement-ready-folks-think-its-time-to-quit-their-day-jobs-in-etrades-super-bowl-ad/

Russell III, W. B. (2012). The art of teaching social studies with film. *The Clearing House: a Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *85*(4), 157-164.

Sheehan, K.B. (2013). *Controversies in contemporary advertising*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Shogren, E. (2010, June 22). "Why Dawn is the bird cleaner of choice in oil spills." *NPR News*. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=127999735

Simpson, J. (2017, August 25). Finding brand success in the digital world. *Forbes*. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/08/25/finding-brand-success-in-the-digital-world/#74d75ebc626e

Tavin, K. (2002). Engaging advertisements: Looking for meaning in and through art education. *Visual Arts Research* 28(2), 38-47.

Wells, W., Burnett, J., & Moriarty, S. (2006). *Advertising: Principles and practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.