

Influence of Media on Society

Media messages are more than sources of entertainment. They have become a part of our culture, shaping it and influencing our lives in many ways. Use the following strategies to help you think about the ways media messages influence you.

HERE'S HOW

Strategy 1: Understand that media messages reflect our values and concerns. TV shows, movies, and ads convey what is important to people in society, such as wealth, beauty, healthy lifestyles, success, and status symbols. Ask yourself:

- What values and lifestyles are portrayed, or being “sold,” in this show, movie, or ad? What kinds of behaviors are depicted in a positive light? In a negative light?
- Given the kinds of messages I’m seeing, what can I infer about what is important to people?

Strategy 2: Be aware that media messages often shape our understanding of the world. On TV shows and in movies, everyone is beautiful, no one goes to class, and problems often have simple solutions. On the news, crime stories lead, prompting viewers to believe that the world is becoming more dangerous. The things we see in the media can affect our perceptions of the world, even though those perceptions may not be accurate.

Ask yourself:

- What characters are featured in the movies and shows I watch? What qualities do they have? Are they based on any stereotypes or idealized images?
- How do these characters and media messages make me feel about myself and my life?
- What kinds of stories are frequently featured in the news? What picture of the world do I get from these portrayals?

Strategy 3: Recognize that media messages affect politics and public opinion. In an election year, we are bombarded with messages that can potentially affect the way we vote or think. Politicians market themselves on TV and on the Internet, and news coverage might report on a candidate’s flaws, family members, or current scandals.

Ask yourself:

- What types of political ads am I seeing on TV and on the Internet? How are they affecting my impressions of a candidate?
- What does news coverage of a candidate focus on? How does the coverage change the way I think about a candidate?

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Directions: Which media issue is most important to you? Choose one of the following issues. Research the topic, looking for statistics, information, and expert opinions that will help you understand it. Then use what you've learned to take a stand on the issue. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper that voices your opinion. Be sure to use your research, as well as magazine ads, TV commercials, or recent newscasts, to support your opinion.

1. Issue 1: Body Image and the Portrayal of Women in Advertising

In TV commercials and other advertisements, the average height of American women is 5-foot-9 and 110 pounds. In reality, the average height and weight of American women is 5-foot-4 and 142 pounds. Critics believe that these idealized media images have a negative effect on many women's self-esteem. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

2. Issue 2: Violence on TV and in the News

By the time you are 18, you will have seen thousands of acts of violence on TV shows and in the news. The news often leads with crime stories, possibly prompting many to believe that the world is more violent than it really is. Some critics think that exposure to violence on TV and in the news makes people fearful and may lead young people to behave more aggressively. Does violence cause people to be fearful? Does it lead to acts of aggression?

3. Issue 3: The Political Process

Political ads have had a significant impact on voters' decisions. In particular, negative ads are very powerful and effective because they paint an unpleasant picture of a candidate's opponent, using shocking facts and unpleasant visuals and sounds. Negative ads don't discuss a candidate's stance on issues or beliefs; they simply try to make voters dislike the candidate's opponent. How has TV and the Internet affected the political process? Should negative ads be banned?