TEEN INTERVIEW: RESPONSE TO “MERCHANTS”

Teenagers are not generally viewers of FRONTLINE reports. And that's why we wanted to make an effort to get their views about this one, "The Merchants of Cool." Because it's about them--how they're the target "demo" for the media marketers of popular culture today. So here are the reactions of just one small group of teens after watching this FRONTLINE documentary. There were about a dozen who viewed it, all high school juniors and seniors at Milton Academy, an independent school in the Boston area. We hope their views might elicit more comments from their peers about this FRONTLINE report, which we will post in our "Join the Discussion" area of this site.

QUESTION: So what did you think?

Tor: I got interested in it. I just got kind of annoyed at the fact that it was showing so much of what it was talking about. It felt like I was watching commercials.

Willis: There weren't enough kids in it. We heard all these media executives and whatever, but there was only a real response from the teenagers at the beginning.

Laura: I really do feel I was being studied like some kind of specimen. And that I didn't have any voice as a teenager. That was kind of weird. Was what the media executives were saying about teenagers true to your experience?

Laura: I think it was accurate, but it wasn't me telling them. It was them telling me.

Brian: They were talking about the rebelliousness--but it's not rebelling at all. They're capitalizing on the fact that people want to be rebellious, and they're talking about how teachers are nerds and authority figures are laughable. I mean, they're basically saying, "Everybody sucks except for us." They're basically telling us what to like and what we should like. They're trying to make money, obviously, and it's not about trying to make anybody happy. It's not a business in that it's trying to help people; it's a business in that it's making money.

Adia: Is pop culture trying to help people?

Laura: No. It's trying to make money. That's the problem, we're a moneymaking culture.

Tor: It at least pretends that it's trying to help people. Like it offers a solution if you just dumb yourself down enough to accept it.

Willis: Another related topic is that now that things like Napster and Gnutella and these computer programs...that's kind of the new wave of rebellion. Just to completely rip off electronic media--download your own songs for free. I think it will be interesting to see if these media giants are going to be able to out-run it in the next decade or two.
Adia: I completely agree. The Internet is too big to control.

Willis: I think what the Internet has done is to diversify the opportunities we have to find something we like. If you look at who complained about Napster and those kinds of programs, it was the big labels. Whereas you see a lot of smaller [artists and labels] supporting programs like Napster, because they can really get their stuff out [to the public]. It allows me to download a band from ex-patriot Americans in Hong Kong or something. I can do whatever I want to, as long as the people are willing to put it out there. And it's the small artists who are doing that.

Tor: With things like Napster, you can't tell people, "This is what you should be listening to." You can't push it.

QUESTION: What do you think of the Eminem-Grammy controversy?

Davis: I didn't even watch it. I think the whole Eminem thing is BS. It really is like the [Insane Clown Posse]: "I'm rebelling, I'm taking it to the next level," just like media has been doing. They started out with the sex years ago and it just keeps escalating. Like the [FRONTLINE program] said, the media's looking at the teenage generation, taking that image, and I think they're notching it up a step. They're making it that much more risqué, and then they're selling it back. And you have Eminem with these absurd lyrics, and it's impossible to believe that any of that is really true. You don't think Eminem's lyrics are actually coming from him?

Davis: I doubt it. I think that's an example of someone who's trying to market the next level. No one else is doing that, so he's ahead of the game.

Dan: One of the [media] executives was talking about how they are trying to take things to the next level. The person who made "Cruel Intentions" wants to do something that nobody else has done. And in that sense, that is sort of the way to go. People want to see new things. But [when you] do that, it's just going to escalate. Sexual activity on TV is just getting more explicit. Vocabulary that's allowed on the radio is getting more and more explicit.

QUESTION: But do you feel you're getting fed more explicit stuff by the media? Or do you feel that you, as a generation, are asking for the more explicit material?

Adia: It's both. And society as a whole, because of this downward spiral in teenagers, is kind of going downward. Let's take sex and violence, which is what you see everywhere. I am inevitably polluted with it all the time. But once I turn 18, I'm not just going to forget about it. It's still going to be there. And I'm going to take that pollution (that's what I'll call it for now) and I'm just going to take that with me for the rest of my life. And that's just going to affect everything from then on. I think it's a downward spiral not just for the teenagers and the media, but for US culture.

Brian: I think one of the main problems is that with all of this constant influx of information and also collapse of morals, it ends up creating apathy. I don't think people are as happy as they would be if they were able to do things of their own--as opposed to being told what to
do and having, in a lot of ways, no minds of their own because they have no way of expressing themselves. Everything is forced onto them.

Willis: Tuning it out is a way of expressing yourself. I've pretty much stopped watching MTV. I live in the dorm. Sometimes it's going to be playing. Then I don't really have a choice. But mainly I watch what I'm interested in which is basketball.

Brian: I don't think, in a lot of ways, you can escape it. It's very hard to escape all the advertising.

Dan: I don't really understand how advertising can have that much effect on the population. When I'm listening to the radio, I'll listen to a song I like and as soon as that song goes off and an ad comes on, I change the channel, trying to find something else. [Ads] don't make me buy something. It seems like it's more just about name recognition. And we talked about this in our film class. It doesn't sell me a product, but it sells me the name. And whether I go out and buy that, at least I feel like it's my own choice still.

QUESTION: Do you ever think that maybe it's not your choice? That you're just being programmed in some way?

Dan: I honestly don't. One example is, I wear Nike shoes. Yes, it is a big huge name brand and there's tons of advertising on it. And I've gone out and I've worn Reeboks or whatever. And honestly, the one pair of Reeboks I ever had fell apart in a month. So to me, I found something that I like, that's comfortable, and that stays in one piece, and so that's why I buy Nike.

QUESTION: Why don't you buy some no-name?

Sara: You can't even get a no-name brand.

Adia: That's what was so depressing about the documentary. It really is like a spiral. And it seems as though right now we're way too far into it to get out of it. Nike has way more money than beginning shoe companies could have. For example, Converse. I love Converse. But then it sold out. It sold out to the same company that has New Balance and Skechers. The film mentioned the five conglomerates. They're so big, they're so huge, that you really stand no chance going against them.

Davis: I have a question--for anyone--which is: I do disagree with the AOL Time-Warner--the big five. But is it wrong for Time Warner, or is it wrong for Viacom to own MTV and to own all of this--is it wrong to buy smaller companies out in a capitalistic society?

Adia: No, but it's disgusting. [laughter]

Brian: I think it is wrong. I think that it depends on what their motive is. And their motive is not to help anyone. It's to make money for themselves. And they talk about, "We give money to charity." They want you to know they give money to charity. It's all about making money for themselves.

Jonathan: What's wrong with that?
Willis: Well, for better or for worse, that's capitalism. And that's the system we have. If we want to switch to socialism, then let's become politically active and do that.

Laura: There was one comment in the documentary that it's a really limited pool, like our political system--only a certain number of people could run for president because they're rich white males. And I think that we can't ever say that we're buying what we want, when the choices are so limited.

Dan: I agree with you that our selection is really limited. But at the same time, I think that if I found that I hated Nikes, I would switch to another brand. And I think that if you want to, you can search and you can find variety.

Laura: What worries me is that in the future there will be no companies out there who have earned that position of prominence. Like they showed that band that they just promoted and promoted and they wouldn't necessarily have become famous if they hadn't been promoted. And if all the companies are like that, then there could be a time when none of them are good and it will be impossible to find something else. That's what worries me.

Adia: And when you look at the progression of that, that means that when we grow up and want to start a company--let's say I want to start a band, or let's say you want to make shoes when you get older--that means that you're going to be eaten up by a conglomerate, basically. And you're going to have to be a part of that culture. Because that's really what it's leading to. There's really no way out.

Brian: I don't know what the answer is. One of my teachers said--and I hope that in some way she's right--she believes this is a regular cycle. It's a moral collapse that happens. And it happens in societies every once in a while. And eventually it will burn out. People will get tired of having no morals. Tired of being told what to do, and things will change.

Tor: I think already it's becoming more and more popular, just as an example, for parents to raise their kids without TV. I personally was raised in a house without TV. I read all the time.

Laura: Me, too.

Tor: I still have approximately no connection with the media. I don't have time for TV, don't have time for the radio, really. I don't have time for the newspaper. I have time to notice things like as I'm walking around. I think, people are realizing that things like TV (just as an example) are becoming faulty, and that people are rebelling against that just by blocking it out.

Adia: I don't think people are realizing that. One of the first statistics that they said [in the documentary] is that 75% of American teens have a TV in their room. And boy that's kind of scary. I mean, if 75% have that, then clearly we're totally in the minority.

Dan: I know that I come from a fairly wealthy, well-off family. And the idea of having a TV in my room, to my parents and to me, is kind of ridiculous. I don't know many of my friends who have a TV in their room. And that number seems really, really high to me.
Adia: We may not watch it, but I'm convinced we're the minority. Because everyone else does.

Davis: I think all this talk of how we're the minority has brought the idea in my head that it's interesting, as we're sitting here seeing this FRONLINE thing, we obviously share a lot of these ideas about how we hate the big five and all this marketing. I think it would be interesting to hear what your "Abercrombie kids" or your "American Eagle kids" would think about all this after they saw it, and they saw that a lot of what they do is marketed and planned. And also I wonder why none of those kids are here.

Sara: I'm wearing an American Eagle shirt and Skechers, and I am a media addict. I watch probably way more TV than all of you guys put together. I read Entertainment Weekly. [laughter] I am not the Abercrombie representative here, but I don't feel like the problem is that there's a breakdown of morals, or that the culture is evil, or that there's some kind of encroachment. I feel the problem is that we're not represented in our culture. We don't create it and it's not born of anything of us. It's born of what they're trying to give to us, which is really what worries me.

Jonathan: In reference to creating, I think the FRONLINE documentary pointed out that it is created at the level of the independent, forward-minded kids. But where it goes astray is when media companies pick it up and they try to market it. That's when it turns into something big and something possibly even evil. And perhaps I think the Internet is one outlet of independent-minded people. I mean, it's an opportunity for anybody to be as big as one of those big five.

QUESTION: What about the gender images and the stereotypes being marketed? Any thoughts on the boy "mook" idea or the girl sexpot idea as sketched in the FRONLINE film? Did that ring true to you?

Davis: I think that the mook stuff and all that does ring true. I could name a few kids in my class that are mooks, or are whatever the other term was. It does ring true. There are kids who respond to [that sort of thing], who are really "in your face" and who are assholes. Some kids respond to that activity. And obviously MTV's caught onto it, and it's too bad. Personally I think the people like Tom Green and shows like Jackass are responsible for some of the moral decline we're seeing, because they're putting it on MTV, one of the most popular TV stations, and it's kind of a cliche but they're giving people these idols or role models.

Tor: One thing that gets to me about Tom Green is that he is talented; he's just talented at being a tool. [laughter] It really gets to me. If he wasn't on TV, would he be doing the exact same things? What would he be doing if he wasn't on TV? Doesn't that scare you?

Willis: He would be arrested a lot more often because he wouldn't be in the protection of MTV on an MTV spring break cruise.

Tor: The media has been telling us that money will make us happy. Everyone's trying to get to be happy, and the media is telling us, "If you just have enough money, you can buy it." And so people who buy into that are looking for money, to the exclusion of just about anything else--which is where Tom Green comes in. Tom Green is a great way for them to
get little boys to watch that show, to watch their advertising, for them to influence the minds of little boys, then to make more money off the kids.

Willis: I want to say on another note, we keep speaking about "us" and "them" and "we" and "they." And you know, we're becoming the trend setters here. You realize that our little debate here is being recorded and it's going to go on a website. And that website will be advertised on TV to a national audience. And we in turn will be posting the ideas that our peers and those younger than us can feed off of. [laughter] Isn't it strange how we've been rebelling against it, and we [are still part of it]?