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Media Blitz: Children and the Effects of Television Advertising

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HONORS THESIS

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Watching television is nearly a universal phenomenon for the youth of modern America and other first-world countries. With the viewing of television comes the blitz of commercial advertising. Each year, children are exposed to approximately 20,000 commercial messages, or three hours a week of television advertising (Adler, Lesser, Meringoff, Robertson, Rossiter, and Ward, 1980).

Society has two broad types of responsibility toward its youth. First are the precautions set in place to shield children from predatory exploitation by adults. For instance, child labor laws were enacted to prevent abuses of children in the work place. Second, society has recognized its most valuable resource is children and provides special services under the broad category of education. Constructive use of these services facilitate children's mental, emotional, and physical growth and maturation (Melody, 1973).

Exposure to adult society is an almost constant occurrence and children often witness many of its exploitative processes. Should children be protected from its every sordid detail? Definitely not. Some exposure to the characteristics of adult exploitation is necessary to further their growth and understanding. Too much exposure, however, may fuel the fire of economic hardship when children try to keep up with the Joneses.

Within the past half century, television has become the most dominant and far-reaching medium for advertising. Television advertising has become such a lucrative business that advertising agencies specialize in researching ways to increase their profit margin through television marketing strategies. The most advantageous method has been to create specialized target markets and aim advertisements at these specialized audiences (Melody, 1973).

Advertisers purchase blocks of time from local television stations and national networks to broadcast messages to specific audiences. Through researching the viewing habits of various audiences, advertising agencies have discovered multiple profit centers. "For many products sheer numbers of viewers are relatively less significant than the constitution of the audiences" (Melody, 1973). The commercials are aimed at specific groups in order to deliver the right message to the right audience at the right time.

The right time for children, it seems, is not after school when the largest number of child viewers are available. This time period is devoted to the more profitable market of housewives and seniors. The most lucrative profit center for children is on weekend mornings. Once reserved for moral programming to please mothers, Saturday mornings are now a profit haven for toy manufacturers adopting year-round sponsorship schedules. In addition to toys, breakfast and snack food advertisers have discovered their target market is reached much more effectively and inexpensively on Saturday mornings, rather than prime time. Prime time is too valuable a resource to waste on children's programming (Melody, 1973).

With the modern American emphasis on independence and autonomy, today's kids pack an amazing economic punch (McNeal, 1992). Advertisers are targeting kids in their commercials because they spend lots of money — what market researchers call "disposable income," which treats money as something to get rid of rapidly (Fox, 1996). Many children receive an allowance, part or all of which can go toward personal purchases. Of all demographic groups, however, children are the most difficult consumers to understand. The structure of television advertising is constantly changing to keep up with the ever-present demands of its smallest consumers. Competition for the consumer dollar is fierce, and advertisers continually

look for ways to entice young buyers into spending their hard-earned allowances.

As specialized as the children's television market already is, advertisers continue to break the market apart into smaller, more specific target audiences. An entire industry of youth-marketing agencies has been created for children's advertising, drawing from the exploitative practices of adult marketing strategies. As long as a profit margin exists, specialization and cultivation of demographic markets will continue to evolve.

Advertisers depend on the immediate emotional response and the vulnerability of children to first impressions. Youth-marketing agencies have discovered through research into children's responses that advertisements need to be bright, loud, action-oriented, and united as closely as possible with the entertainment to reduce the likelihood of losing the child's attention at a commercial break (Melody, 1973). In order for advertisers to keep the child viewer's attention, advertisements are designed to merge with the program. For example, an animated program will have animated commercials attached. Children lack adults' perceptual discriminatory power. Often they are unable to differentiate between the program and the advertisement.

One of the biggest culprits is the Walt Disney Company (henceforth referred to as "Disney"). With the use of television, Disney identified an opportunity for mass publicity for its theme park. In 1953, Walt Disney, Disney's founder, signed a seven-year contract with ABC-TV "to produce a weekly one-hour television program to be called *Disneyland*, 'on which he would be free to promote liberally not only his amusement park but his films' " (Melody, 1973). The experience of Disney's rapid rise to the top of the Nielsen ratings, while winning both a Peabody and an Emmy Award,

changed the perception of the children's television market to one of enormous profit for everyone involved in production and advertising.

Disney's most pervasive method of advertising has been the use of merchandising tie-ins. With a stroll through the children's section of any department store, shoppers notice rounders devoted entirely to clothing and accessories depicting Disney's latest animated feature film. Buyers are sometimes able to predict how big a hit the film would be by the amount of movie-related clothing in the stores and on children. For instance, the Disney film Pocahontas struck little girls' romantic fancies much more readily than The Hunchback of Notre Dame, as evidenced by the plethora of shoes, shirts, skirts, school supplies, hair barrettes, and Halloween costumes that overflowed store shelves. Movie-related merchandise often continues to sell years after big-screen and video releases, not only because of Disney's propensity to re-release its films each generation, but because children have incorporated the Disney characters into imaginative play. Children literally want to be Nala or Simba (from the film The Lion King, 1994), and are more than eager to act out scenes with Belle and the Beast (from the film Beauty and the Beast, 1991). To do this effectively, they must have the toys and outfits related to those characters.

Herein lies the crux of the problem. Often parents are unaware of what their children want in the way of toys and clothing unless the kids ask. Asking for something desired is what kids do best.

One of the earliest types of consumer behavior involves children's attempts to influence parental purchases. Most often the attempts are centered around that which will ultimately be consumed by the children themselves (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella, 1977). A 1997 study by Ward, Wackman, and Wartella illustrates the relatively minor differences in

purchase requests made by children in kindergarten, third grade, and sixth grade.

Children who participated in the study were queried about three different product categories: (1) food products such as cereal, snack foods, and candy; (2) nonfood grocery products such as shampoo, over-the-counter drugs, and household cleaners; (3) child-related products such as games, toys, clothing, and music. Request frequency was measured by giving children a list of products and asking them to choose one of four responses: often — once a week or more; sometimes — once a month or more; not too often — less than once a month; or never.

Virtually no differences are found among children at the three grade levels . . . Furthermore, requests for food products are uniformly high, with over 90 percent of all children reporting medium or high frequency of requests for these products.

In contrast, the frequency of children's requests for nonfood grocery-related products is relatively low; more than four-fifths of the children in each grade report low or very low frequency in requesting these products (Ward et al, 1977).

Only one outstanding age-related difference in purchase requests was found in the study. Within the category of child-related products, about one-fifth of the third- and sixth-grade children reported a high frequency of purchase requests, versus only 14 percent of kindergartners. These findings are not a surprise, considering requests for clothing and music should increase as children advance toward middle school and high school. Much of the increase in demand is due to clothing and music being seen as status symbols.

The style of a purchase request (how a child asks a parent to buy something) is thoroughly enmeshed not only in personality, but in socialization. When a child watches the successful purchase request attempts

of another, he or she will try it him- or herself. Rather than just asking, the child employs both an appeal — the reason for asking — and style — a way of asking. Through trial and error, the socialization of marketing, and watching other children, the child uses his or her most effective appeal combined with the most effective style. Typically the appeals fall into six categories:

- Educational — "You want me to learn don't you?"
 - Health — "Don't you want me to be healthy?"
 - Time — "It'll save you lots of time."
 - Economy — "It'll save you lots of money."
 - Happiness — "Don't you want me to be happy?"
 - Security — "You don't want me to get hurt do you?"
- (McNeal, 1992).

These appeals are often taken directly from the advertisements themselves. They are emotional appeals provided within the ad, such as "It's both fun and educational!"

As with the appeal, the style of request is mainly the result of parental reinforcement. Some of the more popular and effective styles are these:

- *Pleading* — "puleeeze," "c'mon," and the repetition of "mother, mother, mother," accompanied by tugging on the shirt sleeve.
- *Persistent* — repeating the request over and over at both opportune and inopportune times, usually in direct contact with the product.
- *Forceful* — related to the following demonstrative style, this style uses forceful language, such as "You can't stop me from having it," and "I'll ask Dad if you don't buy it for me."
- *Demonstrative* — This style is the height of acting. For younger children it means going stiff, holding of breath, temper tantrums, and "the dead-weight drag." Older children often refuse to leave the store, or if they do, give the parent the "silent treatment." Tears are often very effective.
- *Sugar-coated* — "I'll love you forever if you buy me one." This style is often used in collaboration with the pleading style.
- *Threatening* — This style centers around negative results that will occur if the purchase is not made: "I'll hate you forever if you don't buy it," and "I'm gonna run away if you don't get me one!"
- *Pity* — Last, there is the negative consequence for the child rather than the parent if the purchase is not made: "Everyone has one except me," and "You never buy me anything" (McNeal, 1992).

These appeals and styles may be used in combinations, but children tend to stick to the most effective of each for specific merchandise and for their own parents. Children, especially younger children, are highly successful naggers (Melody, 1973). They are quite adept at knowing their parents' threshold for anger and how far they can be pushed. The response of the parent is partially linked to the style and appeal, as well as to the surrounding environment.

Parental responses to purchase requests fall into four broad categories: (1) make the purchase — about half the time, parents honor requests; (2) substitute another purchase — parents might feel a certain product is inferior or inappropriate and substitute accordingly, which may mean less satisfaction for the child and a lost sale for the original product; (3) postpone the purchase — parents often postpone the purchase for economic reasons, and it is also easier to postpone when not in direct contact with the object of desire; and (4) ignore or refuse the request — parents may have restrictions on the type or timing of requests, and when these are violated the result is either to ignore or to refuse the request (McNeal, 1992).

Finally, there is the outcome of the parental response. If the parent decides to buy the desired object, he or she has honored the child's request and the child is satisfied. However, half the time parents do not buy what their children request. The outcome for the child, whether the parent substituted or postponed the purchase, or ignored the request, are the same — no product. As many parents have experienced, the outcome can easily produce conflicts that take a variety of forms, including in-store tantrums, screaming, crying, and even physical violence. Parents may pay a high price in anger, humiliation, and frustration. Even so, young children are still unable to effectively negotiate with parents for their desires, since they have

few resources and skills with which to do so. Knowing that the outcome may be a tantrum, parents still frequently deny requests, while at the same time giving a rationale for the denial.

The appeal-response-outcome process is a constant, yet dynamic, cycle that I witnessed in action on a daily basis while working at a public television broadcasting retail store.

Most of the time I played the devil's advocate, making outrageous sales pitches to tired mothers, kids looking for Father's Day presents, and grandmothers bent on spoiling their grandchildren. My job was to sell anything possible, the more expensive the better, to anyone who walked into the store, especially things that the kids were whining for. After all, what is retail for, if not for satisfying the needs of the masses?

Many of the products sold in the store were toys and games easily found in any toy store were commonly advertised on television and in magazines. By standing back and observing the sometimes calm and often ear-splitting interactions within the appeal-response-outcome cycle, I came to view three general categories of influence used by companies advertising their toys and games.

First, advertisers seek to influence parents' thinking; they, in turn, will influence their children's thinking. This model assumes that when children are making purchase requests, they are essentially parroting the teachings of their parents in what is deemed appropriate. This model is more common in the clothing industry, such as targeting parents with back-to-school advertising.

Second, parents and children are influenced simultaneously. This model infers that, while children have an abundant amount of influence on purchase decisions, parents must be convinced of the merits of the product

before they buy it. The best example of simultaneous influence in advertising is in breakfast cereals. Targeting children, a cereal is "sweet and crunchy." At the same time, parents are told that the cereal has "100% of eleven vitamins and minerals." Based on the profitable sales of the Post, General Mills, and Kellogg's companies, this advertising strategy is highly effective (McNeal, 1992).

Ultimately, there is the model which influences children; they will then influence their parents. This is the most pervasive method of advertising, and is commonly exercised by the producers of the two product categories most children make their purchases from — toys and sweets. Nevertheless, this model of influence does not rely simply on television advertising. A variety of marketing strategies is employed, from colorful billboards advertising the latest Nintendo game to countrywide tours in shopping malls of Disney's latest film or Oscar Meyer model searches.

One method of advertising that conveniently ties in with each model of influence is product demonstration. One of my most enjoyable duties as a retail employee was standing at the store entrance and attempting to draw in customers with my obvious enjoyment of the newest Koosh toy or by singing songs from Elmopalooza. More often than not, that tactic worked admirably.

As a teacher, I have the dubious pleasure of watching my students come to school bedecked in Barney paraphernalia or rambling on about watching Power Rangers. Parents are sometimes baffled by their children requesting certain character merchandise, even with strenuous attempts to keep the television program off limits. More than once I have had parents approach me with consternation, wondering how their children could possibly know about the Rugrats when they worked so hard to keep it out of

the house. This is yet another model of influence: influencing children, who, in turn, influence other children.

Advertising agencies capitalize on their knowledge of human psychology to target their ads to specific populations. But what are the effects when an advertising campaign is aimed at children? They are essentially the same as when targeted to any other audience (McNeal, 1992). The ad yields attitudes and behaviors toward the product and anything related to it, such as the brand and the seller. These attitudes drive later behavior toward the products — both likes and dislikes.

There is little doubt that television advertising motivates children to make purchase requests of their parents. Thankfully, parents can temper some of the advertising influence in three ways: by providing a model for consumer behavior, by directly interacting with children in both parent- and child-initiated shopping situations, and by giving children independent opportunities for exposure to the marketplace. Each child must learn how to create an economically viable future for him-or herself. Taking the opportunities to teach children about good consumer behavior is essential for their continued growth within this capitalistic, financially autonomous society.

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