

# Stay tuned: the exploitation of children in television advertisements

[Media](#), [Television](#)



## Stay Tuned: The Exploitation Of Children In Television Advertisements

Across America in the homes of the rich, the not-so-rich, and in poverty-stricken homes and tenements, as well as in schools and businesses, sits advertisers' mass marketing tool, the television, usurping freedoms from children and their parents and changing American culture. Virtually an entire nation has surrendered itself wholesale to a medium for selling. Advertisers, within the constraints of the law, use their thirty-second commercials to target America's youth to be the decision-makers, convincing their parents to buy the advertised toys, foods, drinks, clothes, and other products. Inherent in this targeting, especially of the very young, are the advertisers; fostering the youth's loyalty to brands, creating among the children a loss of individuality and self-sufficiency, denying them the ability to explore and create but instead often encouraging poor health habits. The children demanding advertiser's products are influencing economic hardships in many families today. These children, targeted by advertisers, are so vulnerable to trickery, are so mentally and emotionally unable to understand reality because they lack the cognitive reasoning skills needed to be skeptical of advertisements. Children spend thousands of hours captivated by various advertising tactics and do not understand their subtleties. Though

advertisers

in America's free enterprise system are regulated because of societal pressures,

they also are protected in their rights under freedom of expression to unfairly

target America's youth in order to sell to their parents, regardless of the very

young's inability to recognize the art of persuasion.

In the free enterprise system, the advertiser's role is to persuade consumers to buy their products/services. They are given a product/service and

are required to use their best creative effort to make this product desirable to the intended audience (Krugman 37). Because of this calculated and what many deem as manipulative way of enticing the target audience, the advertising

industry is charged with several ethical breaches, which focus on a lack of societal responsibility (Treise 59). Child Advocacy groups and concerned parents, among others, question the ethicality of advertising claims and appeals that are directed towards vulnerable groups in particular, children (Bush 31).

The fundamental criticism is that children are an unfair market. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulates the advertising industry to ensure consumers' protection from false or misleading information. The question

many

assert is should the government be allowed to monitor what is legitimate

simply

because some do not approve (Hernandez 34). This question requires value judgments that can only be answered through constructing public policy

(Kunkel

58). Most people in society recognize that television advertising directed towards children is excessive, manipulative and takes unfair advantage of children (Kunkel 60).

In a recent survey from the researcher, it was documented that 80% of adults with children wanted governmental regulation to protect children from

television advertising (See Appendix 1). Research in the social science fields such as psychology and communication documents how the child interprets a given

television advertisement. Findings indicate for one, the majority of children up to age five " experience difficulty distinguishing perceptually between programs and commercials" (Kunkel 62). It is noted that children at this young age tend to treat all television content as a unidimensional type of message. For instance, child viewers do not begin to discriminate between fantasy or reality dimensions of television content at the most basic levels until grade school. Advertisers compound this issue by using perceptual similarities in program content and commercial content which adds to the difficulty children already have in distinguishing between the two variables.

Secondly, the study substantiates that, " A substantial proportion of children, particularly those below age eight, express little or no comprehension of the persuasive intent of commercials" (Kunkel 63). This is a crucial argument in regards to the legality of unfair advertising. Children eight and younger are an unfair market, for they do not understand the intent of the advertisement. For the child to recognize and appreciate the persuasive intent of television advertising, he/she would be able to identify the following characteristics: " the source of the advertisement has perspectives and interests other than those of the receiver, the source intends to persuade, persuasive messages are biased, and biased messages demand different interpretive strategies than unbiased messages" (Kunkel 64). Thirdly, research has found " younger children who are unaware of the persuasive intent of television advertising tend to express greater belief in commercials and a higher frequency of purchase requests" (Kunkel 64). Children are an unfair market in this regard because they simply do not understand the commercial claim may be exaggerated and biased. The child often does not understand that when he/she gets the product , it may not be as spectacular as it was made out to be in the advertisement (Kunkel 64).

Popular studies give evidence that children are often mesmerized by television (Signorielli 34). Children fixate upon television and become hypnotized by watching. The attention level of young viewers is elevated in the presence of children, eye contact, puppets, and rapid pacing (Van Eura 23).

Television advertisements target younger audiences by using colorful images and rapid movement often in the form of animation (Brady). The advertisements primarily directed towards the children's market are for toys and foods (Pediatrics 295). Studies show that children see the images on television as a window of the world, these images affect their thoughts and ideas (Pingree 253).

Therefore, advertisers are manipulating children by predominantly showing advertisements that encourage materialism and eating.

Research findings on how children interpret television commercials are not the only indicator of what constitutes a fair market. Public opinion, along with the observations of other regarded professionals, observe the exploitation of the children's market. According to Cynthia Schiebe, assistant professor of psychology at Ithaca College and director of The Center for Research on the Effects of Television, has the following to say in relation to children as an unfair market:

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" The point is not that advertising is wrong, but it often plays unfair... Children can't distinguish the persuasive intent of commercials. There is enormous evidence that young children have various difficulties in understanding the nature of commercials. They give more credibility to the person speaking than they should, especially if it's someone like Cap'n Crunch or Ronald McDonald, or someone who is a role model."

Ms. Schiebe, through her work as a psychologist and a researcher, asserts that

adults have the capabilities to detect persuasive strategies where children do

not have the same capabilities. Peggy Charren, leader for 25 years of Action for Children's Television (ACT), believes that advertising takes advantage of impressionable youngsters. Charren states, " Children are the only unpaid sales

force in the history of America. Advertisers don't expect kids to buy the product. The kids are being used to sell the product to the parent."

According to James U. McNeal, a Texas A&M University Marketing professor , states, " What distinguishes children from other viewers is not so much what advertiser's show them, but how they interpret it. Children are literalists, which makes them more vulnerable to advertising's message. For them seeing is believing" (Guber).

Though questions of ethicality are denounced extensively, advertising to children persist on the forefront of American culture. Advertisers continue to focus on the children's market because children have become a tremendous source

of revenue and an increasingly important commodity for the advertising and marketing industry. In 1993 alone, children between the ages of four and 12 in the United States had a disposable income of 17 billion dollars. Not only do children have their own money to spend, but children with two working parents influence their parents to spend annually 155 billion dollars (Collins 4).

Advertisers do not only see children in terms of immediate discretionary income that is available to spend, but perhaps even more valuable to the marketer is the brand loyalty potential. The advertiser's mission is to convince the child to want a particular brand, to then have a preference and liking for the brand and therefore to purchase the product again and again which then implies a brand loyalty has been established (Sissors).

Advertisers do not only employ this brand loyalty tactic in commercials aimed at the child, but they also implicitly target other campaigns to meet the appeals of children. For example, children surveyed had a particular fondness for the Michelin tire campaign which features babies. Though these children will not be buying tires for awhile, the implication that brand loyalty has been established seems great (Wujtas 50). Research has confirmed that children



establish brand loyalty as early as the age of two years old. An older audience has an awareness of close to 1500 brand names where as a young child has little preconceived preferences. (Guber) With a combination of money to spend and an open mind for the potential to create a brand loyal consumer at an early age, children are an irresistible market to American businesses.

With such tremendous potentiality for revenues and brand loyalty, advertisers target the children's market with vengeance. Advertisers annually spend close to 471 million dollars on advertising to children. While the rest of the advertising industry is suffering from a three year decline, the amount of money spent on children's advertising continues to increase despite heated controversy over the ethicality of targeting a vulnerable and unfair market (Wartella 461). Contemporary advertisers flood the marketplace in practically every outlet daily with their claims and appeals. Advertisements can be found virtually everywhere. Common media vehicles used for the children's market are, television commercials with an increase during children's programs,

especially

Saturday morning programming, on videotapes, in children's magazines, in malls, and even in the classroom through television- educational programming

(Collins 4). One television outlet that has received a considerable amount of negative publicity is Channel One. This is a program where marketers enter the classroom setting by embedding advertisements aimed at children into segments of a 12 minute newscast that is shown daily in more than 12, 000 schools across the country. The appeal to advertisers is to guarantee reaching

the intended target audience (Wartella 451). The result to children is exploitation which is basically sponsored by the school system via television advertisers.

Many other vehicles are used in the targeting of the children's market, however, television advertising is perceived as the most effective source in reaching children. The increase of cable options and the amount of time children spend watching the television allows the advertiser to make his exposure and frequency appeals more readily than ever before. Next to sleeping, children spend the majority of their free time watching television (Lazar 67).

By the time a young child graduates from high school, he/she will have seen an estimated 350, 000 commercials (Carlsson-Paige 68). For the average child, the

television set is on in the home for an average of seven hours per day. In a one week time frame the average preschool-aged child (ages two through five) watches 28 hours of television. The average school-aged child (ages six to 11) watches 24 hours of television (Kotz 1296). With such an advent of exposure time the young child is repetitively exposed to the advertisers persuasive dialogue.

Children are drawn to the mystique and excitement the television set offers. Due to demographic shifts in the American family it is unlikely that parents will give up the television's entertaining baby-sitting function. In the last two decades, the number of working women with young children and the number of single parent families has sharply risen. In addition statistics recorded in 1990 report, reflect that nearly three-fourths of both parents in married-couple families with children work on a full or part-time basis.

Therefore, with the current increase of pressures from home, work, and single parenthood the child becomes attached to the television and all it has to offer, which to a large extent is a selling medium (Lazar 68). The lack of social policy which supports families and regulates children's television leaves the child vulnerable and exploited from the marketplace.

The venues advertisers use to market products to children have widened with increasing technology, marketing ploys and an increase of child oriented products/services. Beginning in the middle of the 1970's, the children's television market grew through the addition of independent television channels and cable networks. The early 1980's introduced a successful marketing device known as the program-length commercial which capitalized on taking advantage of an unaware audience (Wartella 449). The program-length commercial is a television show where the main character is modeled after a toy product. The entire program is built around demonstrating to children how to play with a product then encouraging them to buy it. This strategy is extremely successful for many in the toy industry who usually are the ones funding the marketing and production. Mattel who was the first to pioneer the program-length commercial in the early eighties doubled their sales for their He-Man action figure shortly after implementation of the advertisement (Carlsson-Paige 69). This implies that such advertising manipulates children through a character they admire and encourages the child to want this product by extending the exposure so that the child will demand the product. The proliferation of new products aimed for children increases the number of television commercials

as

well. Common categories are videotapes, 900 number information services,

a

wider range of food products, including children's TV dinners and other foods

that can be prepared by children, an expanded line of clothing and apparel,

and

an increase of travel advertisements, such as Disneyland, which are aimed

explicitly for children to influence their parents vacation choices (Wartella

449).

Children have dominant influence on purchases and consumption rates in

American families for several changing sociological reasons. Children are

influencing more purchases because families today are having only one

child,

hence the increase of one parent families forces the child to do a great

extent of his/her own shopping. More women are delaying childbearing,

therefore, when she decides to have a child generally there is more money

open

to spend than when she was younger. And in 70% of U. S. households both

parents

work, requiring children to become more self-reliant than earlier generations

(Wartella 451).

Besides being an ethical issue, exploiting children creates adverse effects. A study conducted by the American Dietetic Association reveals that advertisers primarily promote high fat and/or high sugar foods and drinks to children. The foods being advertised are not consistent with dietary recommendations. With the extended periods of time contemporary American children spend watching television, concern has risen on the implications this has on health attitudes and behaviors of children. By broadcasting the antithesis of a healthful diet, it may be a significant contributor to obesity in children. Obesity is the result of an energy imbalance that is created when the diet contains mostly high fat and sugar (Kotz 1298).

The American Dietetic Association conducted their study by viewing 52.5 hours of television during children's programming. In that time 997 commercials were for a product and a mere 68 were public service announcements.

More than half (56.5%) were advertisements for foods while only 10 of the 68 public service announcements were nutrition related. On the average of the 19 commercials advertisements per hour 11 were for food. This means a child views a commercial for food every five minutes (Kotz 1297).

This may be an acceptable practice if the foods advertised were nutritious, however, predominantly the foods were inconsistent with what constitutes a healthful diet. Of the 564 food advertisements, 43.6% were for foods in the fats, oils and sweets group. 37.5% were for foods in the breads, cereals, rice and pasta food group, however, 23% of those ads were for high sugar cereals. In this particular study there was not a single advertisement for fruits or vegetables (Kotz 1297).

This skewed portrayal of a healthful diet has detrimental consequences not only as a short term effect but the overall effect will stay with the child throughout his/her life. In the United States nine out of 10 adults are at an increased risk of diet related chronic disease. The American Dietetic Association recommends a diet high in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes and to keep fat intake to a minimal, a diet many Americans are lacking perhaps due to advertising's neglect. Because dietary patterns of children mirror those of adults, children too are lacking a healthful diet. Evidence indicates that the atherosclerotic process begins in early childhood and that preventing or slowing this process could extend years of healthful living for many Americans (Kotz 1296).

Although it is difficult to distinguish the effect television has on behavioral effects of children, studies show that the amount of time a child

spends watching television directly correlates with the request , purchase, and consumption of foods advertised on television. Heavy marketing of high fat and/or sugar foods and not advertising foods with nutritional value is exploitation; the child does not have the knowledge of what is healthful and is not able to understand that commercials are designed to sell products (Kotz 1299). This view is accepted by The American Academy of Pediatrics as well.

Their position is stated as the following:

Parents rather than children should determine what children should eat. Children are unprepared to make appropriate food choices and do not understand the relationship of food choices to health maintenance and disease prevention.... Because young children can not understand the relationship between food choices and chronic nutritional diseases, advertising food products to children promotes profit rather than health (Kotz 1300).

Profit seems to be the main motivation in the advertising world. The second effect advertisers promote in young children is materialism coupled often with a loss of self-sufficiency in their ability to make the best with what they have. Due to advertisers influential power on children and the advent of the program-length commercial, children think they have to have certain



toys

just in order to play. In the past, children created their own accessories, props and so forth in acting out their play. Today, advertisers convince children they must have a manufactured accessory and prop to play.

Basically,

the advertiser is taking control of the situation and therefore undermining the

child's basic sense of self-sufficiency (Carlsson-Paige 69).

Not only do advertisers dictate how children should play, but they are also creating an environment where children consistently demand more. Toy manufacturers produce lines of toys which are correlated with cartoons or other

children's programming. This type of strategy is successful in making the child want it more. The toys being sold in this way have only one specific function so the child has to get other components to play effectively. The advertiser is getting the child to think in terms of quantity (Carlsson-Paige 69). This creates profit for the advertising industry and creates a materialistic view of the world for the child.

Concern of the implications of television has received attention for more than 30 years. Through the pressures of children's advocacy groups, the

television market has received some regulation, though minimal. Many critics

argue it is not enough and the government must intervene to stop the

exploitation of children through television advertising. Current and past regulations imply that the profitability of the market place is regarded more highly than the welfare of children (Kunkel 57).

The controversy heated up in the late 1960's when children were considered their own market because of the vast array of commercials directed explicitly to the children's market. Advertisers used direct hard-sell approaches in attempts to persuade the children's market to want the product/service. The advertisers focused their approach on exaggerated claims and showed these commercials often. The public took notice of the repetitiveness and appeals being used and voiced their concern to the Federal Communications Commission (Kunkel 59).

In 1970, pressures from a child advocacy group, Action for Children's television (ACT) presented ample evidence to the FCC on television advertising exploitation of children. According to findings conducted by the Surgeon Generals Report, advertising is exploiting children because, one, children the age of five can not distinguish program content from commercial content and , two, children eight and under do not have the cognitive skills to identify

persuasion (Lazar 69). Therefore children are an unfair market and the public expects protection on a government level.

ACT petitioned the FCC to ban all advertisements directed towards children eight and under. Despite receiving more than 100,000 letters in support of ACT's petition, the FCC did not comply with the request. It took the FCC four years to come up with some restrictions. The restrictions included: advertiser's must limit advertisement time to 9.5 minutes per hour on weekends when viewing is highest and 12 minutes during the week (Lazar 70).

The FCC believed reducing frequency would offer the child some sort of protection from exploitation. In order to protect the child five and under who cannot distinguish program content from advertisers, the FCC required all stations to comply with the separation principle. This policy was applied in three different areas: One new requirement was that all television programs adopt a separation device referred to as a Bumper. This device signals to the child a commercial is about to be broadcast. For instance, an announcer might say, "And now a word from our sponsor" (Kankel 62). Critics claim that advertisers have circumvented the rules and they minimize the warnings. For example when speaking disclaimers such as the one mentioned before, the

voice

over is spoken rapidly and is not understood fully by the child viewer (Pediatrics 295). The second area of regulation prohibited host selling.

Host selling is when a character from the program promoted products either directly or adjacent to their show. For example a Barbie Doll commercial could

not be seen during a Barbie Doll television show. And thirdly, program-length commercials were prohibited at this time (Kankel 62).

In the early 1980's during the time of the Reagan administration, the advertising industry basically deregulated itself. Mattel and other toy companies reinstated the program-length commercial. In 1984, ACT responded to

the proliferation of program length commercials by filing a complaint to the FCC. However, according to the FCC, " marketplace forces can better determine

commercial levels than our own rules" (Lazar 70). Kunkel and Roberts had the

following conclusion to make: " When forced to choose at an extreme level, society(at least in the form of its representative government) valued the protection of private enterprise, commercial speech, and some degree of the

concept of caveat emptor more than it valued the protection of children in their interaction with these institutions" (67).

The government needs to intervene with some form of regulated guidelines because a child can not be regarded in the same sense as an adult audience.

Children are vulnerable to persuasion and should not be forced to succumb to materialism so early in life.

There have been others concerned with this position and freedom of expression in the free enterprise system has allowed television to become the mass marketing tool. Advertisers seem unconcerned about ethical obligations.

So it has to be individual families to shield their children from exploitation.

Cynthia Scheibe, psychology professor, and Peggy Charren, founder of ACT, has the following recommendations to lessen the degree of exploitation of children. The amount of television watched should be limited in order to decrease its negative effects. Adults should impress upon youngsters that having more toys or clothes won't always bring satisfaction. As a parent, one should watch the advertisements with the child and ask the child such questions

as " What is it they're trying to sell?" The parent should also take the child to the store to see if the desired products are really as exciting in real life as they appear to be on television. The parent should point out to the child that the objects surrounding the product are unrealistically big meaning the

toy is probably smaller than it appears. And lastly, get the child to make up his or her own commercial and try to sell a product to another child to see how difficult it is to sell a product fairly in 30 seconds (Collins 5).

Although these suggestions are useful they still are not a remedy for the problem advertisers create. It is society's responsibility to push for regulation that will protect America's children from advertisers' exploitation.

The first amendment gives all citizens responsibility along with freedom: the responsibility to protect their vulnerable youth, the responsibility to limit their excesses, which with the pervasion of advertising has become next to impossible, and the responsibility to insulate children from a world of adults who employ unfair tactics just to sell. It is the duty of adults to teach sound ethics to children rather than to breach all ethical considerations for the purpose of selling, thus brainwashing our children through commercials and

making them feel incomplete, inferior, and inadequate if they do not purchase

various advertised products. It is citizens' responsibility to nurture children to become self-sufficient, creative, healthy adults who have not a distorted propensity for materialism. The welfare of America's children is the welfare of her future.

## Appendix I

Survey of parents with children between the ages of one and eight years old.

The

following questions were answered by the 10 parents who participated in the survey:

1. Do you think children's advertising is manipulative?

80% Agreed

10% Disagreed

10% No opinion

2. Has your child ever asked you to purchase a product they saw advertised?

90% answered Yes

0% answered No

10% did not remember

3. Did the purchased advertised product live up to your child's expectations?

50% answered Yes

40% answered No

10% do not remember

4. Do you think the government should regulate children's advertising?

80% answered Yes

10% answered No

10% had no opinion

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