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30. Advertaising and Children: for and against

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Introduction: The socialization of children into market behavior and their indoctrination into the values of consumption are vital to the continuity of a capitalist

society like the United States. This article focuses on the period of childhood when new consumers are coming of age, the ways marketers shape their buying behavior, the images and values that ads associate with childhood, and the controversies and ethical questions that emerge from marketing to children. It examines these issues from the various perspectives of the advertising industry, government regulators, parents, and activists.

Resources and methods: The market for children's products and food is enormous. Parents on the one hand have a hard time raising children the way they want to, while on the other hand, kids are being increasingly influenced by commercialism that often goes against what parents are trying to do. Even in industrialized societies, where governments and campaigners fight for better child advertising standards and regulations, or improved food quality, industry fights back preferring self-regulation (which rarely happens, or is intentionally weak), and arguing that it is individual choices and parents that are the issue.

Several studies on children and advertising (termed consumer socialization research) have examined children's ability to discern deception in advertising. When asked whether commercials always tell the truth, older children tend to be skeptical. The findings are startling: 88% of third graders and 97% of six graders believe that advertising does not always tell the truth. By contrast, only half of kindergartners believe that advertising never or only sometimes tells the truth. The overall results of the research show that skepticism about advertising develops early in childhood and increases as children get older.

There are at least two other areas of psychological research that are relevant to understanding children's comprehension of advertisements. Piagetian developmental psychology provides an understanding of a series of cognitive phases through which children develop. These theories conclude that children prior to 11 years of age lack adult-like reasoning that allows them to understand the role of commercial messages as not simply informative but also persuasive and to distinguish clearly commercials from programming materials.

Results: Information-processing theory, another area of psychological investigations, provides findings that children under age 11 or so have not fully developed their abilities to acquire, encode, organize, and retrieve information. This means in practice that they do not have adult-like abilities to use the information in commercial messages, but deal with it in more piecemeal fashion. The bottom line in all this research is that children are different from adults because they think differently, take in and assess information differently, and behave differently. They are not, as the historian Ariès found, simply the "little adults" of society from other centuries of Western history.

Despite all their positive contributions to social assistance efforts, these ads treat children themselves as commodities. A child can be adopted for a certain price. The donor can request a male or female child—much as an ordinary consumer can choose the model, style, or color of a product. And the specific benefits to the "donor/consumer" are spelled out: feeling good, getting the child's picture and regular letters, and so on.

Children's reactions to advertisement can be very different from grown-ups. If adults see a product advertised and don't find it when they go shopping they forget about it. As children develop the ability to recognize and understand ads and their purpose they start making demands. If these demands are not fulfilled they might start screaming or throwing themselves to the floor. It is difficult to explain to young children the reasons why they cannot have everything which - according to advertising - is 'for them'.

Research by advertising agencies has confirmed that children's personal preferences can be targeted and changed by TV advertising. Family dynamics are thus influenced by advertisements that create demands and provide children with arguments why they should want a particular thing; this can make life extremely difficult for parents who for financial or moral reasons refuse to comply.

Conclusions: Advertising to children is one of the thorniest and most controversial areas of contemporary advertising. Children are both young consumers and the next generation of adult consumers in training. However, convincing research argues that children process information and behave differently from adults in the marketplace. Current advertising practice restricts certain ways of addressing and marketing to children, but some advocacy and parent groups question whether current restrictions are sufficient. As marketing communications move beyond television and print media and become more interactive, questions about children and their involvement will remain.

References

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