

ENG 280: First Place

America's Future Consumers: Regulating Advertising/Marketing to Children

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Audience Analysis: (104 words) – An audience that this paper will be written for is first time parents who are not as familiar with the issue of advertising to children, of all social classes, ethnic groups, and genders. It is agreeable that they value that their children's futures are of utmost importance, and with more knowledge on this topic, they can be part of the change needed to limit harmful business tactics to children. A way that I plan on incorporating exigence throughout my paper is by including that resolving issues in marketing and advertising to children now can prevent the next generation of children from experiencing these exploitations.

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The youth of the United States will inevitably be passed the torch of American society one day. To have proactive members of society, it would be most ideal for our children and adolescents to be safeguarded from possible threats that can negatively impact their views of themselves, the world around them, and their well-being. One understated and overlooked threat to our youth is the widespread advertising and marketing throughout the media. As a marketing major intending on going into the field of advertising, I see this issue as being in critical need for change. Noting that the American youth sees more than 40,000 advertisements a year, it is alarming that the United States doesn't have many strictly enforced restrictions for marketing and advertising towards the youth (American Academy of Pediatrics 2563). Do parents want to have their children grow up in an age where the government bats their eyes at practices that intentionally create a consumer culture at such a young age? Or ones that promote unhealthy eating habits or gender typing? With regulating advertising to children, childhood issues in America including child materialism and consumerism, childhood obesity, and early gender typing could be deterred. It is essential that parents, especially first-time parents, familiarize themselves with this issue so that they can help take action to protect their children from being exploited subliminally by these harmful business tactics. Advertising and marketing to our youth should be regulated to limit the negative influence on these impressionable young Americans.

Over time, parents have begun to notice the questionable marketing practices used toward children. A former group, known as Action for Children's Television (ACT), was responsible for bringing attention to various issues in advertising to children to both the public and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). With members, most of whom were parents, of ACT arguing that much of advertising toward children was deceiving, the Children's Television Act

(CTA) was passed by the FCC in 1990. The purpose of the Children's Television Act, according to the FCC, is to promote educational programming for children, with also having limited commercial time per hour of programming (Federal Communications Commission 1). On the other hand, current day regulations are becoming tougher to enact due to the fact that there is a lack of correlating data, so laws regulating certain food and gender specific advertisements have not yet been passed. With the main purpose of marketing and advertising being selling products and services, it is not likely that the arguers of business tactics fueling child consumerism will see regulations in their favor in the near future. This issue is complex, though further understanding of the harmful trends that children have been encountering can show that whether there is a known correlation or not, the time used to explore the effects could instead be put to the test for the sake of this generation of American children.

Materialism and consumerism are normally denoted as being negative, no matter the age of the person. In fact, Sut Jhally argued that social relationships actually make people happy as opposed to material items, though advertising ironically alters this data by depicting happy lives through the use of objects (Jhally 599). Therefore, materialism and consumerism shouldn't be promoted to our impressionable youth. Does the constant nagging of "pester power," children begging for things, have a role with advertising to children? Well, given that the main purpose of advertising is to sell, then it seems to play a role in this common issue parents face in the store almost every day. For example, if a child is seeing other children having fun playing with a certain toy or game on an advertisement, it would make sense that the image connection of fun and that item resonates in the mind of the child and increases their urge for that material object. Though it plays a role in the pocketbook of the parents and the abundant wants of the child,

materialism may also have an effect on the personality of children. For example, if a parent submits to their child's every want and buys them all of the cool stuff that is advertised to them, that child could potentially feel a sense of superiority from the amount of material items compared to their peers whose parents don't constantly fall for pester power and buy their child everything that is advertised to them. Overall, the effects of materialism can be seen as tough to reverse, for in capitalistic culture, the "more the merrier" is a common theme among older Americans when it comes to material things. However, working to put an end to this capitalistic cycle of advertising material items to our youth can help reverse the consumerist greed amongst American society over time.

A common way that materialism is exposed to children is through toy commercials. In a commercial for the plush toy brand *Surprizamals*, it is very noticeable that the company wants children to purchase an abundance of these toys. In the commercial, the narrator sings a catchy theme song and casually throws in the words "you can collect them all!" (*Surprizamals*). In the background, there are hundreds of the stuffed toys and the narrator includes that there is a special rare *Surpizamal* that can be found (*Surprizamals*). Do advertisers really think children will get them all? Of course not. Instead, they fill the minds of the young, interested viewers with a "challenge" to get either all of the toys or the special rare toy. This intensifies the desire of the child that would accept this challenge to want a lot of *Surprizamals*, therefore increasing their material wants. Also, advertisers made sure to include that the actors looked like they were having fun playing with the toys to incite the premise that *Surprizamals* will make child viewers happy too if they have them. Or if they even have all of them.

One of the biggest pushes for regulation in this debate is over the issue of childhood obesity. Childhood obesity has led to soaring rates of childhood diabetes and signs of heart issues. In recent years, childhood obesity has risen dramatically, and definite causes for this are still under debate. However, many argue that advertising has been playing a significant role in influencing the eating decisions of children. A big way that this is done is through the use of trade and licensed characters and promoting health messages, and in a lot of cases, both. In a conducted study analyzed by Jessica Castonguay, it was shown that around 80% of food advertisements that included a licensed character also included a health message (Castonguay et al. 574). Health messages are messages that promote a healthy lifestyle, whether it be including healthy activities or healthy vitamins and minerals. It is important to remember that including health messages doesn't necessarily make the food healthy in any sense. Is selling products really more important than fighting against a pandemic that will drastically affect the futures of our future citizens? Though there are other factors that come into play in causing childhood obesity, ignoring the problem children food advertising causes to this epidemic is ignoring a big part of the well-being of a lot of American children.

Lots of different foods from all over the grocery store are actually specifically marketed towards children, especially foods like cereal, ice cream, and yogurt. *Go-gurt*, a brand of portable yogurt geared towards on-the-go children, is notorious for including licensed characters and health messages on their packages. One specific package shows the popular television characters Spongebob and Patrick smiling on the box, smiling at the child who picks up the box of Go-gurt. If the child were to put this product into the cart, their parents would look to the left and see a box full of positive healthy messages, suggesting that there aren't things like artificial

colors or flavors, and that the product is a good source of calcium and other vitamins; the item is purchased for the child, not knowing that this was a stealthy business tactic (Yoplait Go-gurt). It was not a coincidence that Spongebob and Patrick were on the packaging, but rather it was a selling tool used to catch the eye of the child. Also, just because there may be some good vitamins in the product doesn't mean that it is healthy to eat on a regular basis, so the health messages provided on the box are misleading to those that would buy it for their child because they believed it was a healthy food option. It is not the parents' fault for falling for these misleading tricks because of many parents not knowing the actual intent of the health message; however, learning these tricks can prevent making detrimental food purchases for children. But in the grand scheme of the debate, regulations need to be put into play to either make the products exactly as healthy as they claim to be or take the licensed characters and health messages off of advertisements and marketing campaigns for these unhealthy foods.

Gender stereotypes, argued by some on this side of the debate, are socially constructed. Are girls really genetically wired to want to cook and clean at such a young age? Or are boys genetically wired to want to love cars and fix things? This part of the debate goes further into the nature versus nurture debate, so it currently remains unsolved and heavily divided. It is also true, however, that companies would receive some scrutiny if they did not uphold society's view on gender. But again, our future members of society deserve the chance to represent themselves how they choose to, and the power of advertising can be key in helping to fix this problem they've been supporting all of these years. According to Cordelia Fine, all sides of the gender toy marketing debate agree that toy marketing to children is extremely gendered (Fine 769). A big consequence of gender toy marketing is that it enforces gender roles by following American

society's idealized gender roles. Take, for example, a family who chooses to buy their newborn daughter pink clothes, girly items, and treat her like a princess, how some in society expect. Then when she grows a little older, she sees advertisements showing typical girls nurturing dolls and cooking in small toy kitchens. As a result, she wants to be a part of this group of being a homemaker because it is what she has been exposed to as a child. This isn't the case for all, though it encourages the lifestyle very highly. Though advertising doesn't completely shape a child's gender roles, it definitely has subtle reinforcements of them. Therefore, it is necessary that we push to regulate against gender typing in advertising and marketing to children.

Recently, bigger companies like Barbie and Lego have been moving towards a more neutral approach in their advertisements, possibly due to backlash they've gotten in the past. However, a newer company called *LOL Surprise* heavily encourages gender typing one of their advertisements. It starts by introducing its product, and stating various characteristics that it has. One of the gender specific characteristics of the advertisement is saying that the toy comes with baby dolls included (LOL Surprise). These baby dolls resemble newborn babies and come with bottles too (LOL Surprise). This plays on the idea that females should be nurturers. Then, the advertisement shows that the older dolls can have the ability to cry, which can suggest that women are emotional or sensitive, which may have the connotation of weakness (LOL Surprise). Finally, in the background, it is evident that the young girl actors for the commercial are wearing makeup and flashy earrings (LOL Surprise). This image can also restate beauty standards from society on young girls and make them think that they have to look a certain way. At a young age, our children shouldn't be exposed to these stereotypical standards; they should be able to be kids

and not have to grow up so quickly with these pressures from society that advertisements encourage.

Having said this, these issues are very complex and have many opposing viewpoints. As mentioned earlier, since the intention of advertising is to sell, not much can be done in terms of counteracting materialism except for eliminating all child-directed advertising, which isn't something that is likely to ever happen. On the issue of childhood obesity being promoted in advertising, those on the opposing side argue that there is no hidden meaning behind the advertisements, but rather the food products are simply stating true healthy facts of the product. Recently, there isn't as much backlash on food marketing to children because it is not as prominent as it used to be, for toy advertising is more focused upon nowadays. According to Cordelia Fine, in the gendered toy debate, one large opposing side argues that children have a biological tendency to have certain gender preferences when it comes to things like toys and items (Fine 774). In contrast, some companies have made moves toward countering these issues, simply by choice due to backlash as opposed to being forced to by enforced regulations. This resulted in some big toy companies changing their advertisements to have a more open-minded view of the genders. With these complex issues, reaching a unified solution on regulating advertising and marketing to children may take a while and require more research; however, it is best to keep the interests of the children in mind.

This debate is very complex, though if the well-being of children is at stake, there is no debate. We can't neglect the porousness of children's minds; they are like sponges because they soak up information from everywhere. As Americans and parents, we need to ensure that our future generations don't fall victim to targeted advertising, and through tougher regulation, this

can be achieved. One possible solution is completely ending child advertising; however, this is not a plausible possibility because consumers still need to know what products for children are available. A more reasonable solution to further regulate advertising to children would be having legislation passed that will strictly enforce fines and legal actions against companies who don't follow the regulations. To have this done, we as Americans need to look more at the future of our children as opposed to making money, and band together to push legislation. The great thing about being in America is that we have the power to push for regulation against advertising to children, but unfortunately some aren't thinking about what is in the best interests of our children.

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