

Early Policy Briefing

Changing advertising

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Abstract

Studies of the effects of advertising on adults conclude that it manipulates values, desires, relationships, choices and behaviour in ways that hinder happiness. We focus on the negative effects of advertising on children, which are even greater. Advertising pressure on kids soared over the past few decades. The reason for this dizzying increase is that advertising directed at children is particularly effective at promoting sales. Mounting marketing targeting children produced an epidemic of materialism among them. Since the 1970s, studies have invariably recorded a relationship between exposure to advertising and materialism among children. As with adults, materialism hinders the happiness and relationships of kids. Children more inclined to materialism are less happy according to many measures of wellbeing and they have worse relationships, including with their parents. To spread its messages, the advertising industry exploits the revolution in how children pass their time. The unprecedented amount of time spent by children looking at screens offers extraordinary opportunities to capture their attention with entertainment on the internet, largely financed by commercial interests. On internet children find the company that our cities no longer offer them. We finally propose advertising regulations, aimed at easing the advertising pressure on young people and its negative effects.

Changing Advertising

Advertising is bad. Every study of the effects of advertising on adults concludes that it manipulates values, desires, relationships, choices and behaviour in ways that hinder happiness. The negative effects of advertising on children are even greater. This chapter concentrates on the effects on children and how to limit them.

1 An Epidemic of Materialism Among Children

The epicentre of the problem is the United States. In recent decades, American society has witnessed an epidemic of materialism that has particularly affected children. Three quarters of American children want to become rich. This is the highest percentage in the world, together with India. Two thirds want one thing above all: a future with lots of money (Schor, 2004). A steep rise in materialism began in the 1980s, when the anti-consumer attitudes of young Americans of the 1970s were overturned (Easterlin & Crimmins 1991, Twenge & Kasser 2013).

The phenomenon was not exclusively American. Even in Europe, the family members best informed on the latest commercial products and with the strongest urge to consume are often children. Their social life revolves increasingly around purchases that define who is worthy of friends and admiration.

2 Advertising and Materialism Among Children

The main reason for the increase in materialism among children is the incredible rise in advertising that targets children. The principal evolution in marketing in the last 40 years made children and adolescents the main targets of advertising. In the US advertising aimed at children took off in the 1990s. By the early 2000s it had already reached 15 billion dollars, 150 times what was spent in 1983 (Schor, 2004). The reason for this dizzying increase is that advertising directed at children is particularly effective at promoting sales. Robinson et al. (2001) conducted an experiment on children in the third and fourth years of primary school. For 6 months, the time they watched television was reduced. Their requests for toys decreased by 70% with respect to the control group.

Advertising is especially effective on children, because it is easy to make them dissatisfied with what they have. The aim of advertising is always to make people unsatisfied. A century ago at the dawn of advertising, a top manager of General Motors, Charles Kettering, said that the mission of business was the "organised creation of dissatisfaction" (through advertising). Creating dissatisfaction is easier with children than with adults, as explained by Nancy Shalek, a famous American expert in advertising for children. She claims that the key to advertising is to "make people feel that without a certain product they are losers. This is easier to do with kids because they are more emotionally vulnerable" (quoted in Schor, 2004).

All this marketing is extremely expensive, but an excellent investment because it has successfully generated an epidemic of materialism among children. Since the 1970s, studies have invariably recorded a relationship between exposure to advertising and materialism among children (Goldberg

& Gorn 1978, Pollay, 1986, Greenberg and Brand 1993, Buijzen and Valkenburg 2003, Schor 2004, Nairn et al. 2007).

The digital era has made it easier for the advertising industry to target children. The unprecedented amount of time spent by children looking at screens offers extraordinary opportunities to capture their attention with entertainment on the internet, largely financed by commercial interests (Buckleitner, 2008). Online environments are stimulating (colours, music, amusement) and children interact with a brand for hours instead of for the few seconds a TV ad plays for. With the new media, the border between advertising and content is much vaguer than on TV. For example, in "advergames" the commercial message is incorporated in a lively colourful online game that captures players for long periods. This is why firms are increasingly shifting their advertising budget online.

To spread its messages, the advertising industry exploits the revolution in how children pass their time. In the early 2000s, children's use of time had already made the transition to the new model. Time passed on screens had increased dramatically at the expense of time spent playing and being with others (Schor, 2004). "Children and adolescents now pass more time on internet than at any other activity except sleeping" (Strasburger et al., 2010, p. 757). For the first time in history, children spend their free time principally at home in front of a screen instead of with people. On internet children find the company that our cities no longer offer them.

3 The Effects of Materialism on Young People

Various methods have been developed to measure child materialism (Nairn, 2014). Chaplin and John (2007) ask children to make a collage with pictures of things that make them happy. The children can choose from pictures of brands, sports, friends, families. A predominant choice of pictures of brands points to greater materialism. Another measure of child materialism is the Consumer Involvement Scale that measures children's sensitivity to commercial novelties with questions such as: is it important to you to dress fashionably?

Child consumer studies produce similar results to those of adults. Children more inclined to materialism are less happy according to many measures of wellbeing, such as their parents' assessment (Goldberg et al., 2003), satisfaction and dissatisfaction with life (Ahuvia & Wong 2002, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003), self-esteem (Nairn et al., 2007, Chaplin & John 2007) and standard measures of anxiety, depression and psychosomatic symptoms (Schor, 2004; Kasser, 2005).

Child materialism is also strongly linked to family conflict (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2003, Nairn et al., 2007). Children more inclined to consume have less self-esteem and less esteem for their parents, with whom they bicker more often. The probability of attitudes like "my parents are not cool" or "my parents don't understand what kids these days need" is strongly correlated with materialism (Schor, 2004; Nairn et al., 2007).

A special aspect of these family conflicts concerns the so-called pester power: children pester their parents to buy them advertised products (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Nairn, 2014; Flouri, 2004). Children who are more exposed to advertising are more likely to pester their parents. In turn, children who pester their parents are more often dissatisfied and disappointed when their parents refuse to buy the products requested (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). Pester power is a frequent source of family conflict. One third of children in Great Britain claim that if they want their parents

to buy them something, they keep asking until the parents give in. More than half claim to have done this. Only 15% claim never to have pestered their parents (Bailey, 2011).

4 Regulation

Advertising is designed to sell products. It manipulates children's values, desires, relationships, wellbeing and behaviour for commercial ends. It works in the same way for adults, though its effects are less extreme. Indeed, Europeans are less at the mercy of consumer values than Americans because they are exposed to less advertising pressure. In Europe per capita spending on advertising is a quarter of what it is in the US (Mulgan 2014).

Advertising is dangerous. What can we do about it? Exactly what we do about other dangerous goods like alcohol, tobacco, gambling, pornography, arms and drugs: regulate it, imposing limits, rules, taxes and even absolute bans.

There is nothing new about regulating advertising, especially advertising that targets children. In 1874, the English parliament approved a law to protect children against the guile of merchants and money lenders (James, 1965, p. 8). The world is full of examples of regulations to protect children and adults. Sweden banned television advertising to children under 12 years of age in 1990, and was followed by Norway. Greece bans advertising toys for children between 7am and 10pm. New Zealand bans advertising of junk food and many European countries have banned advertising of cigarettes. France bans advertising on state television. Austria and Flanders (Belgium) ban ads targeting children before, during and after television programmes for children. Countries like Australia, Canada and the UK have powerful advertising regulation authorities (Lisosky 2001, Caron and Hwang 2014). The British Advertising Standards Authority announced enactment of new regulations banning ads that promote gender stereotypes or denigrate those who do not conform to them, or that portray women as sex objects or promote unhealthy body images.¹

Besides such measures, we could levy taxes on advertising, or at least the most dangerous ads, to reduce their number.

In addition to doing things like this, advertising, or at least its more dangerous forms, could be heavily taxed. There are advertisers who support a heavy taxation of advertising, such as those inspiring the magazine Adbusters (<https://www.adbusters.org/>), founded by critical advertisers who aspire to use the formidable power of communication to awaken consciences and not to put them to sleep. These advertisers plan flashy forms of "subvertising", that is, subversive advertising aimed at warning people about the damages of consumerism. The picture below is an example.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/18/world/europe/britain-ads-gender-stereotypes.html>



5 Counter-arguments

The world advertising industry has long agreed on a series of arguments to counter accusations levelled at it in many countries (Schor 2004). Firstly, the industry stresses that the choice of products is a form of independence for children. The argument reveals that for advertisers, child independence just means freedom to buy. This argument is a non-starter since the independence that children are lacking is not freedom to buy. Freedom to buy is actually the only form of independence allowed for children. The industry also underlines that the sales generated by advertising drive economic growth. But growth promoted by the purchases of people who are hoodwinked into buying things they do not need does not improve their quality of life. This is not the type of growth we need.

A more interesting counter-argument is that parents can always protect their children from advertising. They can say no to purchases or turn off the television. The reason why children are malnourished, aggressive and materialistic is therefore that parents do not educate them. This argument is stronger because it makes parents feel guilty, but it clashes with the previous argument. If parents could prevent ads from increasing consumption, advertising would no longer promote growth. They are saying that the economic virtues of advertising depend on parental failure.

Even more importantly, this argument assumes that it makes sense for the media to fabricate desires, while parents try to repress them. The solution of getting parents to police children's desires means that family conflict has to solve the problems caused by advertising. It is as if someone dug holes in the road and blamed people for not repairing them. Of course the point is not whether or not parents are conscientious. Whatever responsibility parents may bear for their children's materialism, what benefit does society gain from the existence of an oversized advertising sector that promotes values that worsen lives and fuels family conflicts?

The advertising industry's arguments are contorted, specious and contradictory, and do not offer any answer to this question, because there is no answer. While companies rake in profits from pervasive materialism, children pay the price.

In conclusion, many forms of advertising are a genuine form of brainwashing that encourages children to view possibilities solely through the lens of material possessions. Combined with schools, advertising has taken up the task of training people to think that the only things they can do are done with money.

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