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Marketing and Advertising: Target Children, the Vulnerable Population

A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

A heavily debated topic throughout the industry of marketing is the idea of advertising on children. More specifically the idea of how ethical it is to make children a demographic for an advertising audience. This topic brings up a great amount of concerns because of the idea that children are a vulnerable population for advertising and are more easily persuaded towards using their products or services. This review of literature analyzes the use of advertisement directed towards children and the effects that they have on them.

The Targeting of Advertising to Children

A Review of Literature

Advertising by definition is “the activity or profession of producing advertisements for commercial products or services.” The idea of advertisements has really been around since there was something to be provided to consumers. It has been spread in many ways ranging from billboards, to television commercials, and to the car radio. Different advertisements are made depending on the product or service that is being provided and the demographic that is being targeted by the provider. There are advertisements that target demographics such as teachers or business owners. However, the topic of discussion will be the advertising that directly targets children. As time progresses as well as the availability of media and technology, there is an increase in the susceptibility of advertising. Advertising to children has been a great focus of study due to the facts that people feel that children are too vulnerable an audience and that the companies are taking advantage of them. This literature review analyzes the use of advertisements towards children and will use that to acknowledge the following questions:

1. How have advertisements towards children evolved over the decades?
2. How does advertising differ between mediums?
3. Do advertisements have an effect on children?

Children are exposed to a great amount of advertisements throughout their lives and there is an ethical dilemma as to why the companies are able to target them as a demographic. With further understanding of what children experience from exposure to the advertisements there will be more of a need to regulate advertising.

How have advertisements towards children evolved over the decades?

Advertising has been present for as long as any business has itself; it is the work to try to bring in more consumers. However, the demographic of children being advertised to have only been around for about a century and grew to be one of the biggest targets by the 1940's. Since this started in the early 20th century, advertisements are not made the same way today. Back in the 1920's one of the biggest forms of media was radio networks and in fact advertising played a big role in their development (Asquith, 2015). With the growing popularity of the radio stations companies learned that they could make children that listened to the radio a marketing demographic.

One of the biggest forms of entertainment in radio was there radio programs and children were no exception to this entertainment. Radio networks developed radio shows for the kids. The shows invoked memberships to clubs and advertised contest offers to their viewers (Asquith, 2015). This would benefit both the advertiser and the children that were experiencing it. The children would want to be a part of something that might include their favorite program character and the companies would tally the responses to see how popular their program was. One of the main ways to enter into these contests were through the box tops which in themselves were a form of advertising.

Today,. if you get a cereal from a name brand company, odds are there is at least one box top somewhere on the container. This goes the same for the first half of the 20th century as well. Box tops were used as the main entry for children to be able to enter into those clubs. In one case, mailing box tops in would induct you into the "Junior Detective Corps" which was affiliated with "Inspector Post," a comic strip from General Foods. Once they were in the club they were even sent a detective badge. Not only would they encourage children to mail in box tops, but also to continue sending them in so they could achieve higher ranks like sergeant and

lieutenant (Asquith, 2015). Now in order to get those box tops children have to keep eating cereal to get more which means that they have to purchase more from the company. This serves the company because they will be generating sales from selling the cereal as well as they see how popular their comic strip is due to the return of box tops.

Today, advertising has taken a huge leap into television and websites. With the advancement of technology, things such as televisions, computers, and smartphones have been easier to get. Advertisements can now reach so many more people. Chances are when you turn on the television, you are going to see an advertisement before you turn it off and this is just as true for the children. There are networks that kids can watch that will advertise their own shows, but it will also allow other companies to advertise between airings of programs. These advertisements are directed towards children and can reach so many more children than the radio's limited network area. Kids can even go onto the website of the networks that they watch and more than likely the child will be exposed to the advertisements on the sides of the website. However, these advertisements can differ between just based on the what medium it is being experienced on.

How does advertising differ between mediums?

The medium that an advertisement is being experienced on completely changes the experience that is received by the viewer. For example, you are not going to experience the same kind of advertisement that you would on a television commercial that you would while browsing the internet. Advertisements have to be tailored based on the medium and what the user is viewing. The advertisements that people are most likely to be familiar with are television commercials.

Commercials take up a good amount of television viewing as they are the filler that is put in between television programs. Children spend a great amount of time watching television so they are exposed to numerous advertisements in that time. These advertisements will include children of their own age involved in different activities. The activities portrayed would include things like being in school, spending time with family, or partaking in recreational activities (Peterson, 1998). So many parts of children's lives are reached by commercials so they are something that children can identify with.

Websites have an entirely different advertising platform. As compared to commercials, advertisements can have a constant presence on websites. Game sites are a very popular area on the internet for children and have a high volume of users every day. For that reason, companies will buy spots on the game sites. These spots can vary from being put on the sides of the screen or covering the game that the player is a part of for a certain amount of time or until they close the advertisement. A study conducted by Mart-Pellón and Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro (2015) found that children found that the amount of advertisements that were on the not properly managed on websites and made for an uncomfortable companion for them. There were many cases the advertisements were just annoyances that were of no interest to the children (Mart-Pellón & Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro, 2015). The advertisements to games even expand to the smartphone platform.

With smartphones today, consumers are given the option to download games to play in their free time. Being that smartphones have become so easy to get hold of, children can get phones. A majority of the games on the phones is free, but in order to afford putting out a game that is free to consumers they have to include advertisements in the games. These advertisements are very frequent and are unavoidable to the consumers. Seeing that one of the biggest uses of

smartphones for children are the games and apps, they are exposed to a great amount of different advertisements. Many of these advertisements consist of other games that you can get on your smartphone. There are options to turn off the advertisements, but the user would have to pay a fee to turn them off and people pay this fee because of the annoyance that are the advertisements.

Some companies are even aware of how much consumers dislike advertisements and have even built their entire services around the idea of not having advertising. These services include Netflix, Hulu, and YouTube, however, these services require you to pay monthly fees in order to continue to use them. These companies make a great amount of money just because consumers are willing to pay to not see any advertisements when they are trying to watch a program. There are even some parents that will only allow their children to watch these streaming services until a certain age so that they would understand advertisements better when they first encounter them.

Do advertisements have an effect on children?

There has been a great amount of studies about whether advertisements have had an effect on children and it is debated that it is unethical. This goes back to children as young as 3-6 years old. A study conducted by Yurtsever (2016) looked into the effects that advertisements had on children in these age groups. This study found what children preferred based on their age and gender, but it also identified what caused children to be drawn to certain advertisements. What was found was that when the characters in the advertisements had personalities that the children preferred, that they would end up becoming more easily accepting of that product (Yurtsever, 2016). When children are more accepting of a product it is more likely that they will want to buy it. With that companies try to make characters in advertisements just so that they can just get the gain the backing of the children.

As children get older they go through advertisements in a much different way. They actually have an effect on children's eating habits. Lioutas and Tzimitra-Kalogianni (2015) performed a study to see how children reacted to food advertisements. What was found was that children's opinion of how tasty food is was directly related to how advertised that product was. Not only would they think that the food was tastier, but they would also think that the food was healthier and more nutritious (Lioutas & Tzimitra-Kalogianni, 2015). This can be compared to the line said in a great amount of commercials for cereal. Near the end of the commercial something along the lines of "the delicious part of a balanced breakfast" will be said about the cereal. When children hear "balanced breakfast" they will think that the cereal was healthy when in fact it is only the "delicious part" of the breakfast.

There are depictions that children receive even go beyond food and into other parts of the children's lives. Peterson (1998) had a study looking at if commercials affected the opinions of activities in pre-teens. The study in particular wanted to look at how commercials affected the children's opinions of scholarly activities. Results from the study showed that more often than not pre-teens were depicted in activities that were not scholarly. With this it can be said that commercials do not help children form positive opinions of scholastic activities (Peterson, 1998). This alone shows that advertisements can affect children and the opinions that they have on different things. School is very important in the development of a child and if they are watching an advertisement the child associates with that belittles schooling their opinion of schooling may diminish. Companies in a way can use this just to make their product look that much better.

There are also the effects caused by the advertisements that children experience while they are on gaming websites. When a user is on a website there is just a constant flow of advertisements whether it be on the side of the screen or over the game. Children will be able to

continue playing the game that they are on, but they will continually be exposed to advertisements at the same time. Marti-Pellón and Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro (2015) conducted a study to see the effect on children while playing games with advertisements. The results of the study showed that children had such a difficult time playing the game that the time that they spent actually playing the game was cut in half due to the advertisements being disruptive or annoying (Marti-Pellón & Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro, 2015). Children just find these sort of advertisements unnecessary and it would seem that they are not properly helping the advertiser get their product out to their marketing demographic.

Through all of this, the question of why children are so susceptible to advertising is brought up. Lapierre (2015) had a study that looked into one idea being the theory of mind.¹ The study looked at children to see how they were able to recognize the persuasion that was present in the advertisement. Lapierre's results found that the development of the theory of mind was an incredibly crucial factor in the understanding of a child's persuasion knowledge. These results were not at all influenced by the age of the child or the child's linguistic abilities (Lapierre, 2015). That being said, it shows that advertisements and the companies are not just taking advantage of children, but they are just taking advantage of children that are not capable of understanding the advertising. However, Lapierre does state that there is not enough study into the theory of mind to truly solidify these findings and there needs to be more research into the topic.

¹ The theory of mind is the development of a child's ability to recognize and understand advertising. They are able to see that advertisements and the persuasion involved in them. The development of the theory of mind is more linked to the child's knowledge base than it is the age of the child.

Conclusion

With all things considered, it could be said that advertising has a large effect on children. There are various ways that a child will be affected by advertising, differing based on age and development. With companies being the source of these advertisements, they have been the fought against for their use of advertising with children as their demographic. As time progresses and more research is conducted for this topic, there may be more regulations that will be implemented on top of the already existing regulations.

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