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The Negative Affects That Yield the Social Responsibility of The McDonald's
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The Negative Affects That Yield the Social Responsibility of The McDonald's Corporation in Advertising to Young Consumers

The advertising industry is the controlling force of today's American society. Advertisers control the flow of the economy, alter the moods and feelings of consumers, and determine what people buy and wear. According to Susan Linn (2004), "Advertising has become an unhealthy part of the American society due to the affect that it has on younger consumers" (p. 46). There are ethic and moral issues with advertising to children, yielding a strong social concern, but the problem is that researchers and others are unaware of exactly what constitutes the issue at hand. "The United States' Department of Health has published statistics that have many people re-evaluating the role of advertising on the lives of our youth" (McGregor, 2000, p. 127). This study will use the McDonald's Corporation to investigate whether or not newer health laws and regulations have impacted the advertising strategies of fast food companies, and to determine if they have been effectively working to decrease the number of obese children in America.

"The prevalence of obesity and its comorbidities has dramatically increased in recent decades. As the long-term adverse consequences of childhood obesity are substantial and well documented, there is a need for prevention and early intervention to reduce the currently high incidence levels. However, few strategies have proved to be successful. Both nutrition and physical activity are important for the growth, development and emotional wellbeing of young children and for the establishment of healthy lifestyles that prevent childhood overweight and obesity" (Gracia-Marco, 2011, p. 472).

Health Concerns Yielding Social Responsibility

Juliet Strachan (2008) explains “The balance of what is targeted at children in terms of food is heavily weighted to ‘low food value’ products” (p. 14). In a 2005 article on the social responsibility of advertising to children, C. Preston explains how health regulators are looking for more intense regulatory practices to revolutionize advertising in America because marketers are being targeted as a cause for the increase of childhood obesity in the country.

“One of the uses of advertising by children is to learn the tools of social interaction that will facilitate self-expression and social conformity, both for themselves and their family, and also to find out about the social significance of brands, (Bocker 1986, Cullingford 1984, Belk, Meyer and Driscoll (1984).

Children do not have an interest in advertising because of its role in their economic socialisation. There are simple pragmatic reasons for interest. They use it to find out what brands mean, (and sometimes, when an explanation is necessary, what they do, or what they are for). It is very natural to learn of the meaning of things, and the things that most of us come into contact with all the time tend to be things that we buy or have bought for us” (Preston, 2005, p. 62).

The principles of good advertisement oftentimes go against moral values and ideals taught within the home. In *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*, Susan Linn (2005) discusses the near \$15 billion market that child advertising has established as marketers “claim their stakes” on children, putting their health, creativity, education, and values at a high risk (p. 15). She feels that younger people

are more targeted than any other demographics, including race, gender, socioeconomic standing, religious background, educational affiliation, etc. It is understood that children are more susceptible to marketing messages. While many argue that we need to be concerned with the idea that advertising is creating long lasting negative effects amongst the youth in our country, others feel that the issue is that we fail to teach children how to affectively understand subliminal and hidden communications. According to News Source Plus, “there are almost four unhealthy commercials for every one healthy food commercial” (p. 1). Suzanne Edmond (2006) explains “The premise that is often portrayed by the press is that the industry is putting profit ahead of consumers’ health, although other research shows that advertising to children has only had a 2% quantifiable impact on childhood obesity rates” (p. 8).

“In 2003 the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP, formally asked Ofcom to review the television advertising code on food and soft drinks. Following this, the White Paper on *Choosing Health*, published by the Department of Health later in 2003, challenged the advertising and broadcast industries to change the nature and balance of food and soft drinks’ advertising to children. It tasked Ofcom, as the independent regulator with a statutory responsibility for the regulation of broadcast advertising, to ‘tighten’ the rules on broadcast advertising and the pro- motion of food and soft drinks, as well as securing their effective implementation by broadcasters. It also prompted broadcasters and advertisers to participate in healthy living promotions” (p. 8).

Due to the belief that adolescents cannot fully understand the selling intent of commercials or the words and phrases used within them, conservatives are taking stands

against large fast food companies, hoping to eliminate their marketing practices that statistically lead to adolescent obesity. “The Supreme Court has interpreted the First Amendment to permit government restrictions on advertising that is actually or inherently misleading” (Graff, Kunkel, Mermin, 2012, p. 394). Health officials and children advocates are finding that companies have been self-regulating for many years, and the statistics show that the nutritional value in food advertisements directed at children remain at an all time low, and are continuing to increase the childhood obesity epidemic that is sweeping the nation.

Understanding the Target Market

Generation Y (Gen Y), those born between the years 1977 and 1994, has been targeted as the control group for marketing as well as the leading force of the American economy. They have been a vast target market for many years. Gen Y members are viewed in some cases as lazy, money hungry, and materialistic. Generation Y affiliates are also characterized by a strong sense of independence and autonomy, and their senses of assertiveness and self-reliance. “They are known for being emotionally and intellectually expressive, innovative, curious, and technologically savvy” (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh, 2012, 125). Marketers easily appeal to this generational cohort by constantly adapting to the different and ever-changing tastes of the members, and by merging music and fashion into their ads. Unfortunately, the members of Generation Z (Gen Z) are mostly influenced by the generation before them. These individuals are those born between the years 1994 and 2012. Generation Y is composed of Gen Z’s older siblings, cousins, school mates in some cases, and even parents in other cases. Both

generations are still easily influenced, lack wisdom, and have plenty of time to make impacts on the world.

The McDonald's corporation has worked for many years to advertise directly to the members of these two generations, through the use of "Happy Meals," television and internet advertisements, radio commercials, charity events, etc. The idea amongst many consumers is that the McDonald's Corporation and its character identity, Ronald McDonald, are positive influences on the American society. They represent happy by supplying satisfactory and economically sustainable meals to consumers.

Changing McDonald's

Actors are portraying Ronald McDonald in public settings. Because he is a clown, critics have used crude jokes that are opposite of what corporation scripters are feeding consumers, to sway individuals away from the company's food. One actor dressed as Ronald McDonald and entered a McDonald's chain restaurant stating that the fat and toxins in the food were "free of charge," and when employees denied him a burger, the Ronald imposter informed customers that the employees did not want to poison him. Another actor dressed as a fat Ronald on Halloween and passed out business cards that read "1 in 3" and went on to explain that this is the number of children born after 2000 that will suffer from diabetes during their lifetime (Thomson, Shouse, 2010, p. 269). The paper takes on Ronald McDonald as an opportunity to theorize the dialogical performance possibilities of detourning the fast food marketing spectacle through live performance.

Due to public displays such as these, this specific corporation has been urged by more health conscious consumers to inform customers of their dietary intake, and to offer healthier food options in their campaigns targeted at children.

To start this process, the corporation selected 20 international locations to revamp their brand. They are working on adding healthier options such as raw vegetables, salads, and grilled chicken, to their menu, and cutting back on the sugars and fats that are in pre-existing items such as their burgers. McDonald's has vowed to only offer water, milk and fruit juice with their "Happy Meals," but that doesn't mean that soda beverages are not available upon request. McDonald's Co. has also begun to supply menu boards that explain the nutritional value of their options to their consumers. According to Sarah Vizard's 2013 article, "Unfortunately, the 20 markets that have been selected to adapt these health conscious modifications will not all make the necessary transformations before the year 2020" (p. 5). The Melbourne (2006) states that The Federal Health Minister, Tony Abbott denounced Coca-Cola as a company that is contributing to childhood obesity as well (p. 1). It is suggested that the multinational company follow the example that the McDonald's Corporation has set by incorporating healthy food items into their products. In his attack on the soft drink company, the minister failed to acknowledge that fact that the front labels on Coca-Cola bottles show the health facts and nutritional value of each beverage, and provide warnings about consumption.

Marketing Tactics

Television advertising has always been extremely popular, but the realm of advertising to children has increased in past years, adding the use of the Internet and

different types of social media, including but not limited to Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and Instagram. The McDonald's Corporation has strategically cut down on their television advertisements that they admittedly directed at children. Anna Chalmers (2006) states "They say they [McDonald's Co.] are reducing their advertising to kids, but they are increasing their brand advertising" (p. 1). The company claims that they did so in an attempt to become more socially responsible, but they claim to still have to work as a corporation. Overall, their motive is maximum profit. Although "McDonald's commercials aired forty percent less during children's programming hours" (p. 1), according to Chalmers, they increased their presence on other platforms such as the Internet. The newer McDonald's website was made to be interactive as it includes games and links, and it is more appealing to younger children. The brains of young consumers are molded by ads.

Every child receives a different experience during interacting with marketing, but overall, they are still choosing McDonald's food over other foods. The issue in our country is that we are being trained to seek high fat, high salt foods in our diets. "The rapid rise in consumption of ultra-processed food and drink products, especially since the 1980s, is the main dietary cause of the concurrent rapid rise in obesity and related diseases throughout the world" (Ozersky, 2010, p.1).

As conveyed by New Scientist (2007), Dina Borzekowski at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland, and her colleagues did a study on 63 children, aged 3 to 5 years old. They asked the children to sample two meals, each from McDonald's, consisting of a chicken nugget, a quarter of a hamburger, French fries, two baby carrots and a small cup of milk. While one was packaged in its original

packaging, one was presented as generic. The results showed that even kids as young as three years old are trained to prefer branded foods. These children even claimed that they tasted a difference amongst the meals. 76 percent of the children favored the branded fries while only 13 percent favored the unmarked ones. The positive result in this study is that children favored the branded carrots as well, suggesting that there could be great hope in using fast food chains like McDonald's to entice children to eat healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables.

“Children and young people are vital, valid, valued members of our society, and marketing is a part of societal life. We therefore have a responsibility to teach children and young people how to consume marketing and how to discriminate between its messages. If society falsely incubates and insulates kids today from marketing messages – especially in such crucially important areas as food and nutrition – then they will be ill- equipped to make sense of the mêlée of marketing communications later in life” (Strachan, 2008, p. 13).

Children must learn what is good and bad in relation to their bodies. By making it mandatory for advertisers to market two sides to each of their ads, youth will begin to understand. While marketers work to brand their companies, they need to highlight positive values.

Strachan (2008) goes on to state that “At extremely young ages this is of course true; however, our research clearly shows that from as young as six, children can start to discriminate and do actively think and care about which food is good for them. They are starting to form a good understanding of food types and which are necessary for a healthy diet. If, at this stage, food advertising messages that are in tune with this embryonic

learning can be conveyed, then this can and will help children to discriminate more effectively” (p. 14).

Parental Perspectives

An important idea to consider, relative to the use of marketing to children, is that adolescents learn from what they see. They are more subject to retain information that they see or to elicit behaviors that they are surrounded by than they are subject to listen to what they are told. Preston (2005) explains

“Pestering for advertised products is more immediately connected to peer influence than advertising, (Goldstein 1994, Ross 1984), which rather provides a repertoire of potential demand within which peer pressured pestering operates. Importantly, peers operate as both negative and positive reinforcers of advertising messages, (Stoneman and Brody, 1983), and are thus arbiters of acceptability.

None the less, children demand advertised products with sustained regularity. For example, around half of toy purchases and a third of food and beverage purchases have been reported by parents as ‘nagging driven’ (Morales 2000)” (p. 64).

During a personal interview with Professor Shontae Taylor (2013), a professor within the Department of Marketing at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, she posed the question of

“When targeting and marketing to youth, is it the company’s responsibility or the parent’s responsibility [to protect the kids]... Parents are saying that they can only

do but so much. [Companies] should be ethical enough to say that [kids] are not a viable target market.”

Taylor’s insight was significant not only because she is a marketing professor who understands the realm of advertisement in today’s society, but because she is a mother of two, young children, who can identify with being affected by the media consumption of her kids.

Some people argue that it is definitely the parents’ responsibility to teach their kids fair health practices. Many have agreed that it is easier to say “no” to a child than we make it seem. Although parents can sensor what shows their children watch, it is hard to sensor what commercials play during the breaks. Children should not have access to mature television channels, but regardless of a parent’s effort to block channels and sites within the home, the child is undeniably still open to such media through no fault of their guardian. A parent can tell a child “no” in so many cases before the adolescent forms a rebellious mannerism, like those apparent in the American culture. “While parents struggle to set limits at home, marketing executives work day and night to undermine their efforts with irresistible messages” (Linn, 2004, p. 32).

Kids believe that their parents are supposed to buy them what they want because they know that they cannot afford things by themselves. That is what marketers play on. Advertisers understand that the child is the influencer and information gatherer in the Consumer Decision Making Process discussed by Professor Vahwere Kavota during a class lecture. The process is defined by Hawkins and Mothersbaugh (2012) in *Marketing Regulation and Consumer Behavior* (p. 695).

Families make purchase decisions that are inherently emotional and affect the relationships between the family members. It starts with communication directly targeted at either the children or parents, and they work together to make the final decision on what to buy, based on information gathered and the need for a good or service. The initiator states the need for a product, while another person acts as the influencer and influences the alternatives evaluated, the criteria considered and the final choice. The ultimate decision purchases the product. Parents and children value different characteristics, making joint decisions better in the final purchase. These roles are determined by the attributes each family member has to offer. These attributes are made up of the degree of involvement each member has in the product area of concern and personal characteristics of the family member. Advertisers are aware that the parent is going to cater to the child's wants and needs, and they manipulate the children to affect the purchase decision of the guardian.

“Parents feel they are being pressurized by advertisers through the medium of their children, and they very often experience this as an assault upon their finances and patience. The question of who actually is being targeted here is difficult to answer as children are financially speaking, part of the medium reaching parents, the financiers”(Preston, 2005, p. 64).

The McDonald's marketing material that is geared towards younger consumers include the use of the “Happy Meal,” and promote the free toy in every meal. Maureen Morrison (2010) states that the “Happy Meal” makes up only about ten percent of sales revenue for the McDonald's Corporation in the United States (p.1). Although this does not seem like a significant amount, this ten percent is a tenth of McDonalds' \$30.9

billion, more than what food restaurants such as Panera Bread and IHOP sell in a year. While not a significant staple in sales, the “Happy Meal” is part of the American way. It has been on the menu since 1979 and is what drives families to McDonald’s verses other fast food chains. The “Happy Meal” encourages children to want to eat at that establishment, driving up sales through the more expensive parent meals. It may seem minimal, but just because the “Happy Meal” lacks in sales does not mean that it is lacking in unhealthy toxins that are leading to obesity amongst adolescents. McDonald’s cut back on advertising the meals by about \$20 million in 2010, but that’s nothing compared to the \$873.3 million they spent on advertising in general.

According to the Anna Chalmers (2006), McDonald’s children’s advertisements did not include its “Kid’s Choice,” options (p. 1). Those healthier option ads were geared towards mothers to convey that they were making a conscious effort to decrease their aggressive food marketing towards youth to better protect children from obesity.

Taking Stands

In attempts to decrease the manipulation tactic, individual states have placed bans on specific advertising practices. For example, some states are in the process of banning the use of cartoon characters in advertisements directed at youth, along with the selling of toys with meals. Nominee for the Federal Labor Party feels that “children will have enormous waistlines if we keep marketing unhealthy foods to them with characters that they know and love” (Newspaper Source Plus, n.d, p. 1). It does not matter who or what character it is. These characters are creating positive ideas about negative consumer consumption. In a letter to the McDonald’s Corporation, 550 nutritionists and other

health professionals condemned the company and signed the letter, urging that McDonald's should place a ban on Ronald McDonald, and put an end to the "Happy Meal" (McDonnell, 2011, p. 1).

Peter J. McDonnell, an ophthalmologist, states in the *Ophthalmology Times*, that "his fondest memories as a father were taking his children to the zoo and stopping at McDonald's on their way home" (p. 1). He does not feel that Ronald McDonald and the company marketing should be targeted by critics because the clown is not as dangerous a character as a chain smoking camel that represents cigarette companies, or even Cookie Monster, a character that blatantly encourages children to consume sweets in large quantities.

San Francisco has begun eliminating toys from Happy Meals in McDonald's restaurants, and many people are not pleased. According to the city, "any meal that passes a certain deemed threshold of unhealthy characteristics will not include a free toy for children to play with" (Ozersky, 2010, p. 2). Although some agree that it makes sense in a way, to lure kids away from the meals by taking some of the necessary happy out of the small, individually boxed, meals, even health food advocates argue that it is not the happy meal that is creating obesity.

Other large corporations are taking conscious stands against McDonald's due to the image that is associated with the fast food chain. The Walt Disney Corporation has tried to distance itself from enticing children with unhealthy food by ending a ten-year partnership with McDonald's (Nation's Restaurant News, 2006, p. 1). At the same time, the McDonald's Corporation signed a two-year marketing contract with Dream Works Animations SKG. This contract will allow the corporation more liberties in choosing

movies to advertise within, but without the long-term allegiance to one company. This leaves negative ideas about Dream Works as a company, but will increase the Walt Disney's brand in the eyes of very conservative and conscious consumers. After comparing the 2006 and 2007 annual reports for the Walt Disney Corporation, it is clear that the advertisement and marketing pieces of the media network sectors did much better financially, without their attachment and association to the McDonald's brand. In 2006, the media networks sector of Walt Disney Corporation collected approximately \$14,100,000, but without affiliation with McDonald's, increased revenue to \$15,046,000 in 2007. The company collected approximately 946 million more dollars in revenue without McDonald's as a partner. In the 2007 letter to shareholders and cast members of the company, from President and Chief Executive Officer, Robert A. Iger, found within the Walt Disney Company 2007 Annual Report, he states

“I'm delighted to share with you that fiscal 2007 was another outstanding year for your Company, enlivened by significant creative and financial achievements to make all of us proud. Disney's strong performance — across business divisions and around the world — is a tribute to the men and women of The Walt Disney Company and the great experiences they deliver to consumers. Their passion to excel is admirable, and their commitment to quality is as consistent as it is remarkable. In 2007, we advanced our strategic priorities, strengthening our financial results, growing the value of our brands, enhancing our ability to meet critical challenges and building a solid foundation for future growth” (p. 2).

In general, the McDonald's Corporation has taken small steps to counter the childhood obesity rates in the United States. Although the company has begun to work

with health officials to eliminate unhealthy practices, they have not yet solved the problem. The McDonald's Corporation has attempted to cooperate with the ideas and moral beliefs of consumers and advocates, but has not done much on their own accord to provide relief to the issues revolving around marketing to children. Overall, research shows that McDonald's has not been effectively working to decrease the number of obese children in America.

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