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# 19 Socialization and the Power of Advertising

JEAN KILBOURNE

*Can parents just turn off the TV to protect their kids from the negative impact of advertising? No, claims Jean Kilbourne. Because advertising permeates our environment, she claims, “We cannot escape it.” Advertisers customize ads for subscribers of the same magazine, attract children to Web sites with games and prizes, and bombard us with products on billboards, public transportation systems, and the sides of buildings, trucks, and shopping carts. As a result, Kilbourne argues, advertising continues to persuade people of all ages that the way to be happy is to buy, buy, buy.*

If you're like most people, you think that advertising has no influence on you. This is what advertisers want you to believe. But, if that were true, why would companies spend over \$200 billion a year on advertising? Why would they be willing to spend over \$250,000 to produce an average television commercial and another \$250,000 to air it? If they want to broadcast their commercial during the Super Bowl, they will gladly spend over a million dollars to produce it and over one and a half million to air it. After all, they might have the kind of success that Victoria's Secret did during the 1999 Super Bowl. When they paraded bra-and-pantyclad models across TV screens for a mere thirty seconds, 1 million people turned away from the game to log on to the Web site promoted in the ad. No influence? . . .

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Through focus groups and depth interviews, psychological researchers can zero in on very specific target audiences—and their leaders. “Buy this twenty-four-year-old and get all his friends absolutely free,” proclaims an ad for MTV directed to advertisers. MTV presents itself publicly as a place for rebels and nonconformists. Behind the scenes, however, it tells potential advertisers that its viewers are lemmings who will buy whatever they are told to buy.

The MTV ad gives us a somewhat different perspective on the concept of “peer pressure.” Advertisers, especially those who advertise tobacco and alcohol, are forever claiming that advertising doesn't influence anyone, that kids smoke and drink because of peer pressure. Sure, such pressure exists and is an important influence, but a lot of it is created by advertising. Kids who exert peer pressure don't drop into high schools like Martians. They are kids who tend to be leaders, whom other kids follow for good or for bad. And they themselves are mightily influenced

by advertising, sometimes very deliberately, as in the MTV ad. As an ad for *Seventeen* magazine, picturing a group of attractive young people, says, “Hip doesn’t just happen. It starts at the source: *Seventeen*.” In the global village, the “peers” are very much the same, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, culture. In the eyes of the media, the youths of the world are becoming a single, seamless, soulless target audience—often cynically labeled Generation X, or, for the newest wave of teens, Generation Y. “We’re helping a soft drink company reach them, even if their parents can’t,” says [a newspaper ad] featuring a group of young people. The ad continues, “If you think authority figures have a hard time talking to Generation X, you should try being an advertiser,” and goes on to suggest placing ads in the television sections of newspapers. . . .

Home pages on the World Wide Web hawk everything from potato chips to cereal to fast food—to drugs. Alcohol and tobacco companies, chafing under advertising restrictions in other media, have discovered they can find and woo young people without any problem on the Web. Indeed, children are especially vulnerable on the Internet, where advertising manipulates them, invades their privacy, and transforms them into customers without their knowledge. Although there are various initiatives pending, there are as yet no regulations against targeting children online. Marketers attract children to Web sites with games and contests, and then extract from them information that can be used in future sales pitches to the child and the child’s family. They should be aware that this information might be misleading. My daughter recently checked the “less than \$20,000” household income box because she was thinking of her allowance.

Some sites offer prizes to lure children into giving up the email addresses of their friends too. Online advertising targets children as young as four in an attempt to develop “brand loyalty” as early as possible. Companies unrelated to children’s products have Web sites for children, such as Chevron’s site, which features games, toys,

and videos touting the importance of—surprise!—the oil industry. In this way, companies can create an image early on and can also gather marketing data. As one ad says to advertisers, “Beginning this August, Kidstar will be able to reach every kid on the planet. And you can, too.”

The United States is one of the few industrialized nations in the world that thinks that children are legitimate targets for advertisers. Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and the Canadian province of Quebec ban all advertising to children on television and radio, and Sweden and Greece are pushing for an end to all advertising aimed at children throughout the European Union. An effort to pass similar legislation in the United States in the 1970s was squelched by a coalition of food and toy companies, broadcasters, and ad agencies. Children in America appear to have value primarily as new consumers. As an ad for juvenile and infant bedding and home accessories says, “Having children is so rewarding. You get to buy childish stuff and pretend it’s for them.” Our public policy—or lack thereof—on every children’s issue, from education to drugs to teen suicide to child abuse, leaves many to conclude that we are a nation that hates its children.

However, the media care about them. The Turner Cartoon Network tells advertisers, “Today’s kids influence over \$130 billion of their parent’s spending annually. Kids also spend \$8 billion of their own money. That makes these little consumers big business.” Not only are children influencing a lot of spending in the present, they are developing brand loyalty and the beginnings of an addiction to consumption that will serve corporations well in the future. According to Mike Searles, president of Kids ‘R’ Us, “If you own this child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come. Companies are saying, ‘Hey, I want to own the kid younger and younger.’” No wonder Levi Strauss & Co. finds it worthwhile to send a direct mailing to seven- to twelve-year-old girls to learn about them when they are starting to form brand opinions. According to the senior advertising manager, “This is more of a long-term

relationship that we're trying to explore." There may not seem much harm in this until we consider that the tobacco and alcohol industries are also interested in long-term relationships beginning in childhood—and are selling products that can indeed end up “owning” people.

Advertisers are willing to spend a great deal on psychological research that will help them target children more effectively. Nintendo U.S. has a research center which interviews at least fifteen hundred children every week. Kid Connection, a unit of the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, has commissioned what the company calls “psychocultural youth research” studies from cultural anthropologists and clinical psychologists. In a recent study, psychologists interviewed young people between the ages of six and twenty and then analyzed their dreams, drawings, and reactions to symbols. Meanwhile, the anthropologists spent over five hundred hours watching other children use the Internet.

Children are easily influenced. Most little children can't tell the difference between the shows and the commercials (which basically means they are smarter than the rest of us). The toys sold during children's programs are often based on characters in the programs. Recently, the Center for Media Education asked the Federal Trade Commission to examine “kidola,” a television marketing strategy in which toy companies promise to buy blocks of commercial time if a local broadcast station airs programs associated with their toys.

One company has initiated a program for advertisers to distribute samples, coupons, and promotional materials to a network of twenty-two thousand day care centers and 2 million preschool children. The editor-in-chief of *KidStyle*, a kids' fashion magazine that made its debut in 1997, said, “It's not going to be another parenting magazine. This will be a pictorial magazine focusing on products.”

Perhaps most troubling, advertising is increasingly showing up in our schools, where ads are emblazoned on school buses, scoreboards, and book covers, where corporations provide “free” material for teachers, and where many children

are a captive audience for the commercials on Channel One, a marketing program that gives video equipment to desperate schools in exchange for the right to broadcast a “news” program studied with commercials to all students every morning. Channel One is hardly free, however—it is estimated that it costs taxpayers \$1.8 billion in lost classroom time. But it certainly is profitable for the owners who promise advertisers “the largest teen audience around” and “the undivided attention of millions of teenagers for twelve minutes a day.” Another ad for Channel One boasts, “Our relationship with 8.1 million teenagers lasts for six years [rather remarkable considering most of theirs last for . . . like six days].” Imagine the public outcry if a political or religious group offered schools an information package with ten minutes of news and two minutes of political or religious persuasion. Yet we tend to think of commercial persuasion as somehow neutral, although it certainly promotes beliefs and behavior that have significant and sometimes harmful effects on the individual, the family, the society, and the environment.

“Reach him at the office,” says an ad featuring a small boy in a business suit, which continues, “His first day job is kindergarten. Modern can put your sponsored educational materials in the lesson plan.” Advertisers are reaching nearly 8 million public-school students each day.

Cash-strapped and underfunded schools accept this dance with the devil. And they are not alone. As many people become less and less willing to pay taxes to support public schools and other institutions and services, corporations are only too eager to pick up the slack—in exchange for a captive audience, of course. As one good corporate citizen, head of an outdoor advertising agency, suggested, “Perhaps fewer libraries would be closing their doors or reducing their services if they wrapped their buildings in tastefully done outdoor ads.”

According to the Council for Aid to Education, the total amount corporations spend on “educational” programs from kindergarten through

high school has increased from \$5 million in 1965 to about \$500 million today. The Seattle School Board recently voted to aggressively pursue advertising and corporate sponsorship. “There can be a Nike concert series and a Boeing valedictorian,” said the head of the task force. We already have market-driven educational materials in our schools, such as Exxon’s documentary on the beauty of the Alaskan coastline or the McDonald’s Nutrition Chart and a kindergarten curriculum that teaches children to “Learn to Read through Recognizing Corporate Logos.”

No wonder so many people fell for a “news item” in *Adbusters* (a Canadian magazine that critiques advertising and commercialism) about a new program called “Tattoo You Too!”, which pays schools a fee in exchange for students willing to be tattooed with famous corporate logos, such as the Nike “swoosh” and the Guess question mark. Although the item was a spoof, it was believable enough to be picked up by some major media. I guess nothing about advertising seems unbelievable these days.

There are penalties for young people who resist this commercialization. In the spring of 1998 Mike Cameron, a senior at Greenbrier High School in Evans, Georgia, was suspended from school. Why? Did he bring a gun to school? Was he smoking in the boys’ room? Did he assault a teacher? No. He wore a Pepsi shirt on a school-sponsored Coke day, an entire school day dedicated to an attempt to win ten thousand dollars in a national contest run by Coca-Cola.

Coke has several “partnerships” with schools around the country in which the company gives several million dollars to the school in exchange for a longterm contract giving Coke exclusive rights to school vending machines. John Bushey, an area superintendent for thirteen schools in Colorado Springs who signs his correspondence “The Coke Dude,” urged school officials to “get next year’s volume up to 70,000 cases” and suggested letting students buy Coke throughout the day and putting vending machines “where they are accessible all day.” Twenty years ago, teens

drank almost twice as much milk as soda. Today they drink twice as much soda as milk. Some data suggest this contributes to broken bones while they are still teenagers and to osteoporosis in later life. . . .

## ADVERTISING IS OUR ENVIRONMENT

Advertisers like to tell parents that they can always turn off the TV to protect their kids from any of the negative impact of advertising. This is like telling us that we can protect our children from air pollution by making sure they never breathe. Advertising is our *environment*. We swim in it as fish swim in water. We cannot escape it. Unless, of course, we keep our children home from school and blindfold them whenever they are outside of the house. And never let them play with other children. Even then, advertising’s messages are inside our intimate relationships, our homes, our hearts, our heads.

Advertising not only appears on radio and television, in our magazines and newspapers, but also surrounds us on billboards, on the sides of buildings, plastered on our public transportation. Buses now in many cities are transformed into facsimiles of products, so that one boards a bus masquerading as a box of Dunkin’ Donuts (followed, no doubt, by a Slimfast bus). The creators of this atrocity proudly tell us in their ad in *Advertising Age*, “In your face . . . all over the place!” Indeed.

Trucks carry advertising along with products as part of a marketing strategy. “I want every truck we have on the road making folks thirsty for Bud Light,” says an ad in *Advertising Age*, which refers to a truck as a “valuable moving billboard.” Given that almost half of all automobile crashes are alcohol-related, it’s frightening to think of people becoming thirsty for Bud Light while driving their cars. A Spanish company has paid the drivers of seventy-five cars in Madrid to turn their cars into Pall Mall cigarette packages, and hopes to expand its operation throughout

Spain. Imagine cars disguised as bottles of beer zipping along our highways. If we seek to escape all this by taking a plane, we become a captive audience for in-flight promotional videos.

Ads are on the videos we rent, the shopping carts we push through stores, the apples and hot dogs we buy, the online services we use, and the navigational screens of the luxury cars we drive. A new device allows advertisers to print their messages directly onto the sand of a beach. "This is my best idea ever—5,000 imprints of Skippy Peanut Butter jars covering the beach," crowed the inventor. Added the promotion director, "I'm here looking at thousands of families with kids. If they're on the beach thinking of Skippy, that's just what we want." Their next big idea is snow imprinting at ski resorts. In England the legendary white cliffs of Dover now serve as the backdrop for a laser-projected Adidas ad. American consumers have recently joined Europeans in being offered free phone calls if they will also listen to commercials. Conversations are interrupted by brief ads, tailored to match the age and social profiles of the conversants. And beer companies have experimented with messages posted over urinals, such as "Time for more Coors" or "Put used Bud here."

The average American is exposed to at least three thousand ads every day and will spend three years of his or her life watching television commercials. Advertising makes up about 70 percent of our newspapers and 40 percent of our mail. Of course, we don't pay direct attention to very many of these ads, but we are powerfully influenced, mostly on an unconscious level, by the experience of being immersed in an advertising culture, a market-driven culture, in which all our institutions, from political to religious to educational, are increasingly for sale to the highest bidder. According to Rance Crain, editor-in-chief of *Advertising Age*, the major publication of the advertising industry, "Only eight percent of an ad's message is received by the conscious mind; the rest is worked and reworked deep within the recesses of the brain, where a product's positioning

and repositioning takes shape." It is in this sense that advertising is subliminal: not in the sense of hidden messages embedded in ice cubes, but in the sense that we aren't consciously aware of what advertising is doing.

Commercialism has no borders. There is barely any line left between advertising and the rest of the culture. The prestigious Museum of Fine Arts in Boston puts on a huge exhibit of Herb Ritts, fashion photographer, and draws one of the largest crowds in its history. In 1998 the museum's Monet show was the most popular exhibit in the world. Museum officials were especially pleased by results of a survey showing 74 percent of visitors recognized that the show's sponsor was Fleet Financial Group, which shelled out \$1.2 million to underwrite the show.

Bob Dole plays on his defeat in the presidential election in ads for Air France and Viagra, while Ed Koch, former mayor of New York City, peddles Dunkin' Donuts' bagels. Dr. Jane Goodall, doyenne of primatology, appears with her chimpanzees in an ad for Home Box Office, and Sarah Ferguson, the former duchess of York, gets a million dollars for being the official spokeswoman for Weight Watchers (with a bonus if she keeps her weight down). . . .

The unintended effects of advertising are far more important and far more difficult to measure than those effects that are intended. The important question is not "Does this ad sell the product?" but rather "What else does this ad sell?" An ad for Gap khakis featuring a group of acrobatic swing dancers probably sold a lot of pants, which, of course, was the intention of the advertisers. But it also contributed to a rage for swing dancing. This is an innocuous example of advertising's powerful unintended effects. Swing dancing is not binge drinking, after all.

Advertising often sells a great deal more than products. It sells values, images, and concepts of love and sexuality, romance, success, and, perhaps most important, normalcy. To a great extent, it tells us who we are and who we should be. We are increasingly using brand names to

create our identities. James Twitchell argues that the label of our shirt, the make of our car, and our favorite laundry detergent are filling the vacuum once occupied by religion, education, and our family name.

### CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Advertisers maintain that people rely on commercials and ads to make informed decisions about the products and services they buy. Using the material in this chapter, discuss whether you agree or disagree with advertisers' claims that they are providing a service to consumers by educating them about their market choices.
2. What does Kilbourne mean when she says that advertising "sells much more than products"? How, for example, does advertising influence our values and lifestyles? What about children's and adolescents' attitudes about tobacco, alcohol, food, and their self-image?
3. Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and other countries ban all television and radio advertising directed at children. Should the United States pass similar legislation?

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