

**REPORT OF THE
APA TASK FORCE ON
ADVERTISING AND CHILDREN**

Section: Psychological Implications of Commercialism in Schools

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As advertising to children has expanded with the diffusion of cable television, the Internet, and other new vehicles of communication, so its presence has mushroomed in classrooms and other school venues over the past few decades. This report addresses advertising and commercialism in schools, with specific attention to their implications for psychologists. As the report titled "Psychological Issues in the Increasing Commercialization of Childhood" demonstrates, the growing commercialization of childhood raises strong concerns about potential negative impacts on the social development and well-being of children and adolescents.

Why Psychologists Should Care About Advertising in Schools

Commercialism in schools raises particular concerns because of the extent to which it has increased in the last 10 years and the vulnerabilities of children in a compulsory educational system. Many of the concerns about commercialism in schools are similar to those expressed about the commercialism of childhood in general. As they do in the outside world, commercial pressures in schools may create desires for products that children do not need or cannot afford and/or that are psychologically or physically harmful to them. These effects, in turn, may cause conflict within families and may lead to discontent and diminished self-esteem, especially among economically

disadvantaged youth. These commercial forces may also increase materialistic attitudes to a degree that is psychologically unhealthy.

Psychologists should be especially concerned with in-school commercialism because there are reasons to believe that the effects should be stronger in the school context. First, students at school are a "captive audience," required by law to attend school (and with some practices, required by teachers to pay attention to advertising). The first step in any effect of advertising is exposure. In an environment cluttered with advertising, it is a great advantage for an advertiser to appear in a location where attendance is mandatory and where there are fewer commercials competing for attention. And because children go to school every day, advertising in schools usually entails repeated exposure, which research shows is more effective than a single viewing (e.g., Borzekowski & Robinson, 2001).

A second reason why effects might be stronger in the school context is that whatever occurs at school might be perceived as having the implied endorsement of school officials. Psychological research shows that expertise and prestige increase the persuasive power of a message's source (see Hass, 1981). The prestige and expertise of school personnel may very well become associated with commercial items that are provided or promoted on school grounds. For example, a free sample of deodorant given by the school nurse or gym teacher as part of education about puberty might well have a stronger impact on students' attitudes about that brand, about deodorants in general, or about the issue of perspiration and body odor than would the same sample handed out at a mall. Similarly, an advertisement for a soft drink or fast food that is seen on school grounds might convey the message that such products are more appropriate or less unhealthy than would the same ad seen on television at home. Indeed if products that parents discourage children from consuming are advertised on school grounds, perhaps parents' criticisms of the products become less credible.

Beyond the effects of specific commercial messages, the sheer magnitude and pervasiveness of commercial forces within the school may contribute to a sense of the overwhelming importance of material acquisitions and values.

Types of Advertising and Commercialism in Schools

According to a report of the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO Report, 2000), in-school advertising has both direct and indirect dimensions. Direct advertising seeks to gain the student's purchasing dollar through a diverse range of in-school ad venues (e.g., television, Internet, radio, billboards, posters, book covers, school buses, and kiosks). Indirect advertising seeks to convey a positive, favorable corporate image to students which, in a later context, may translate into purchasing preference and loyalty for the brands of that corporation. Two other GAO categories—product sales and marketing research—are also common school-based commercial activities.

Direct Advertising

Channel One, a 12-minute news program including 2 minutes of advertisements, is the most far-reaching example of direct advertising in the classroom during school time. Schools that receive Channel One contractually agree to carry the program and its ads in 80% of all classrooms on 90% of all school days (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2000, pp. 20, 26). According to a Channel One official, roughly 38% of all middle and high schools in the United States currently are connected to the Channel One system, and another 1,000 schools are expected to join the existing 12,000 in the next several years (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2000, p. 27). Another example of media-based advertising is Star Broadcasting, which provides Top-50 rock or country music and advertisements to schools' hallways and lunchrooms. Star Broadcasting claims contracts with 400 schools nationwide (Consumers Union, 1995, p. 25). There are many other companies that provide direct advertising in schools (Consumers Union, 1995, pp. 24-26).

Indirect Advertising

Indirect advertising encompasses a range of activities. One of the most controversial forms of indirect advertising is corporate-sponsored educational materials (SEMS), which are materials donated by corporations to supplement the curriculum. These materials often relate to a given product within the sponsoring corporation (e.g., a food company with a unit on fruits and vegetables; an insurance company with a safety unit) or to an issue in which the sponsoring industry (e.g., an oil company distributing a curriculum on the environment) has a vested interest in the subject matter. Consumers Union (CU), in an evaluation of 77 SEMS, found nearly 80% to be either biased or topically incomplete (1995, p. 12). Other common forms of indirect advertising include corporate-sponsored contests or incentives (e.g., providing coupons for free pizza for reading a specified number of books), the inclusion of brand-name products as examples in textbooks, the provision of corporate-sponsored teacher training, or the donation of hardware for computer labs, cars for driver education classes, or free samples of candy, snack food, or personal hygiene products.

Product Sales

A wide range of products are marketed to and by students to gain revenue for schools or school systems. Among the most controversial of these practices are the exclusionary "pouring contracts" for soft drinks such as Coke or Pepsi. Most of these contracts are negotiated on a district-wide basis and offer the district a specified dollar figure for signing a multiyear contract, with additional monies tied to success in meeting specified sales quotas. The Center for Commercial-Free Public Education indicates that by the beginning of 2000, 150 school systems in 29 states had entered exclusive "pouring rights" agreements with cola companies. This figure is triple the number of contract agreements 1 year earlier (Kanner, 2000). Multimillion-dollar contracts have become commonplace. Despite Coca-Cola's announcement, in response to parent criticism, that it would ask

local bottlers to stop signing exclusive contracts with secondary schools, Coke's largest bottler, Coca-Cola Enterprises, Inc., had signed 20 of these exclusive contracts by mid-2001 (McKay, 2001). Other contract arrangements are made with fast food companies (e.g., McDonald's, Taco Bell) to sell food on the school grounds or in the cafeteria.

Market Research

Market research pertains to all the avenues through which corporations and advertising firms use the schools to track students' consumer tastes, preferences, and lifestyle patterns. These typically occur through questionnaires, Internet-based surveys, and the tracking of student Internet use. A school might become the venue for a comparative-cola taste test, or students may participate in focus groups that are held either in the school or online. The benefit for participating schools can be either thousands of dollars or computer equipment provided by research firms in exchange for the privilege of conducting market research in the school setting. Prevalence figures for these practices nationwide are not currently available. This lack of available data is due, in part, to the wide variety of ways in which market research is conducted and the absence of any centralized data source for documenting it. To compound the data availability issue, in some venues (e.g., hits on a given Web site and/or response to a few online questions) students are not aware that they are participating in market research. According to the National School Boards Association, more than 1,000 schools have been market research venues for Education Market Resources, a firm creating child-based Internet panels. In the data gathering for the GAO Report (2000, p. 31), none of the school officials interviewed considered schools an appropriate venue for market research, nor were these officials aware of any marketing research practices being conducted within their schools. Moreover, student participation in market research evokes psychologists' concern for the protection of human subjects.

General Social Concerns

The issue of advertising and commercialism in schools draws a broad range of advocates and critics. With the tax revenue base not keeping pace with inflation, and the general public's resistance to tax increases, schools have become strapped for funding. This scarcity of funds drives many school administrators to explore corporate avenues toward funding. For corporations, this equation provides an opportunity to reach their intended student-consumer group in a single setting and time frame rather than in several, scattered media contexts.

Proponents point out that advertising and commercialism already are so prevalent in children's lives that the school context is simply a natural and harmless extension of this presence. Moreover, they argue, students then have the opportunity to become more media literate about advertising, and consequently, it becomes a part of their socializing education (Consumers Union, 1995, p. 31).

Advocates of sponsored educational materials (SEMS) argue that they bring a timely and attractive set of curriculum units to schools and teachers who otherwise could not afford them. In the words of one Stamford, Connecticut, middle school teacher, "If it's free (and good) it's for me! Great, glossy, up to date, motivating materials...are a heck of a lot better than the [dated] textbooks that many teachers are refurbishing to pass out each September" (Consumers Union, 1995, p. 31). On the other side of this issue, many national organizations have been critical of in-school advertising and commercialism practices. Consumer groups such as Consumers Union (CU), the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education (CACE), and the Center for Commercial-Free Public Education (CCFPE) take the position that in-school advertising challenges and undercuts the basic principles and values of public education. They see it as inappropriate for schools to advocate either explicitly or implicitly a materialistic value system, unhealthy nutrition and consumption lifestyles, corporately biased classroom materials, and general interactive patterns that serve to undermine individual students' feelings of self-worth and a broader sense of interpersonal and community caring. Advertising and selling to a captive audience of students is seen as unethical by these groups. Schools are perceived as settings in which parents and students should be assured that learning, critical thinking, and the skills necessary to shape them will be centrally focused and valued.

Professional groups such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the National Education Association (NEA), the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) also have been critical of in-school advertising. The AAP has expressed strong concerns about the potential of in-school advertising to develop and perpetuate unhealthy nutritional patterns with long-range implications for illness and disease (e.g., Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis)(Center for Science in the Public Interest, 1998; Mullen, 1983; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; Wyshak, 1994). Both the NEA and PTA strongly oppose required viewing or classroom use of commercial materials. ASCD is generally opposed to all advertising/commercialism practices in schools (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2000, pp. 37, 39).

At the statewide level, groups such as the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) have been more muted, saying only that corporate-school partnerships should not commercialize instructional time (Consumers Union, 1995, p. 34). A sprinkling of states themselves have taken legislative action in a spectrum that ranges from prohibiting school-based commercial activities (NY) to prohibiting SEMS (CA). While 18 states legislatively address direct advertising, only two have laws addressing indirect advertising, and none of the states addresses market research. Level of authority also varies widely among the states. For example, California and New York laws prohibit or restrict many types of commercial activities from the state level, while many states legislatively defer decision-making authority to the local level (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2000, p. 11).

Two of the most comprehensive recent initiatives, born of public concern and criticism, have been Consumers Union's 1995 publication entitled "Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at School" and the U.S. General Accounting Office Report of September 2000 entitled "Public Education: Commercial Activities in School." CU took an in-depth look at the entire range of in-school advertising/marketing practices and their growth trends. The GAO Report stemmed from a request by Senator Christopher J. Dodd (D-CT) and Representative George Miller (D-CA) asking that in-school commercialism activities and their extensiveness be investigated, and laws, regulations, and policies be identified.

Critics also believe that the psychological effects of advertising in the broader societal context (cited in our other report) carry over and—given the tacit school/teacher endorsement—may be more concentrated and compelling in the school context. These critics make the case that "happiness and fun" product appeals (Atkin & Heald, 1977; Barcus, 1980; Kunkel & Gantz, 1992), saturated-fat/heavily sugared product commercials (Gussow, 1976) and their psychological impacts and health-related effects are not barred from reaching inside the schoolhouse. In the broader context, concern has been expressed that the notion that personal worth is based on the acquisition of consumer products carries negative psychological impact (Baran, Mok, Land, & Kang, 1989; Beutel & Marini, 1995).

Some observers also charge that advertising effects and materialism emphases lead to major and sometimes deadly consequences in schools serving children from low-income families and children of color. First, critics note that schools in economically depressed areas are more likely than their middle- or upper-class counterparts to welcome cola contracts or other commercial incentives as a source of funding (Fege & Hagelshaw, 2000). Comparatively, these youth have more health problems (e.g., obesity) that stem, in part, from the fact that colas and other junk foods are readily accessible in and near their schools (Johnston, 2001; Sawicky & Molnar, 1998). They also argue that the target marketing of expensive clothing items to minorities (including in-school advertising) intensifies within-school pressures to acquire the latest fashion items and that a student's path to obtaining them may lead to burglary, drug dealing, assault, or homicide (Garbarino, 1995; Holloman, LaPoint, Alleyne, Palmer, & Sanders-Phillips, 1996; Pan, 1995; Telander, 1995). While the target marketing of expensive dress items occurs among all youth, they argue that there are unique target marketing issues relating to ethnic minority group youth, such as the use of cultural expression and minority group models and celebrities (Holloman, LaPoint, Alleyne, Palmer, & Sanders-Phillips, 1996). Further, they argue that low-income families often lack the community-based resources that could help inform, prepare, and protect them as they are targeted by advertisers and marketers. This situation has resulted in some schools, with student and family participation, implementing dress codes and uniforms to reduce and prevent dress-related challenges often based on in-school observations and reports (Holloman et al., 1996). In summary, they argue that the limitation of

resources in economically strapped schools has served to further exacerbate the problems economically disadvantaged and minority youth face (Fege & Hagelshaw, 2000).

The Psychological Impact of In-School Advertising

Surprisingly little quantitative research has been published on the psychological impact of commercialism specifically when it occurs in schools. However, the advertising on Channel One has been studied both in a content analysis and in a "natural" experiment. Wulfemeyer and Mueller (1992) analyzed the content of 99 commercials appearing in five randomly selected Channel One programs over a 5-week period. They reported that 86% of the ads were for products, and 14% were public service announcements. The products advertised dealt almost exclusively with clothing, food, and physical attractiveness concerns. (In descending order of frequency, the advertised items were jeans, candy, shampoo, makeup, gum, razor blades, breath mints, acne cream, deodorant, athletic shoes, corn chips, catsup, movies, and cough drops). The researchers' analysis reported that the dominant themes and values in the commercials were having fun, being popular, and being attractive. Greenberg and Brand (1993; also Brand & Greenberg, 1994) compared the attitudes of children in two high schools that received Channel One to those of students in two high schools that did not (the control group), but that were matched with the Channel One schools on several factors, including income, racial composition, and standardized test scores. Students' attitudes were assessed regarding five products that were heavily advertised on the channel during the 4 weeks preceding the assessment. These products were Fritos BBQ Chips, Skittles, M&M's, Gatorade, and Nike Air Jordan sneakers.

The results revealed that students in Channel One schools reported significantly more favorable attitudes toward these products than did the students in the control group. In addition, when asked to name the brand of product they would purchase in each of eight product categories, Channel One students named significantly more brands that had been advertised on Channel One than did control students. Finally, students' materialistic attitudes were measured in their level of agreement with a five-item scale, including such statements as "Most people who have a lot of money are happier than most people who have only a little money." Channel One students scored significantly higher than control students on this scale. The results may be considered largely correlational because students were not randomly assigned to conditions. However, they suggest that even though students are exposed to much advertising outside school, advertising in school seems to have a further effect on attitudes toward the advertised products and may influence overall materialistic attitudes as well.

Conclusion

Commercialism in schools has become increasingly prevalent. As this report documents, the commercialism trend is growing and becoming more diverse. Also growing is the breadth of public, professional, and organizational concern. In the midst of this growing concern, psychology as a discipline faces the challenge of selecting the avenues through which it can most meaningfully contribute. Two logical avenues include its role as a research-based behavioral science and its expertise in areas pertaining to child development and the creation of educational curricula.

Although very little quantitative research has been published on the impact of advertising in schools, the research on the impact of Channel One, together with other research on the impact of advertising on youth outside of schools, raises serious concerns about potential harms to students when commercialism invades the schoolhouse. Although future research is needed to explore the extent to which different school-based commercial practices have their impact, there is no logical basis to suppose that effects observed outside of the school would not generalize to school settings. For this reason, it is important for psychologists to be engaged in this issue by expanding our research base and by advocating school-commercialism policies and practices that are in the best interests of the health and well-being of children and adolescents.

Valuable research might answer the following questions:

What is the impact of "pouring contracts" on students' attitudes toward sugared soft drinks, on their nutritional habits, and on their dental health? To what degree are these effects due to the simple availability of these products during the school day? To what extent are they a function of the implied or explicit endorsement by the school of the drinking of such beverages?

To what extent are children's attitudes toward relevant public policy issues (e.g., global warming, the environment, et al.) different in classes in which learning occurs through sponsored educational materials vs. through traditional sources? To what degree does the presence of brand-name items in textbooks affect students' attitudes toward the products and desires to purchase them? What is the impact of incidental exposure to advertising placed on school grounds and on school equipment? Are desires for specific products stimulated? Are attitudes regarding the importance of material goods changed as a function of exposure? Are disadvantaged and minority youth more vulnerable to the impact of such advertising, and, if so, does such vulnerability contribute to interpersonal hostilities or criminal theft? Do advertisements on school property change students' attitudes toward learning? Do advertisements embedded in computer software interfere with or distract from student learning?

These are but a few of the many questions to be researched and empirically examined within the school environment. The need to know is both critical and timely.

Equally critical is the need to explore the models of noncommercial corporate partnerships that have been established within some school settings. Notable examples of such partnerships

include corporations providing employee time and incentive to tutor and mentor students in schools, opportunities for students to shadow professionals in their desired vocational field, grant and scholarship awards to schools, and wings or labs that are provided with noncommercial attribution.

The Edible Schoolyard and The Algebra Project serve as model curriculum partnership initiatives effectively serving basic educational goals. Restaurant owner and chef Alice Waters launched The Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, California's Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School to teach "transformative values of nourishment, community, and stewardship of the land." The students participate in the entire food production cycle, from planting through cultivating to harvesting.

Civil rights leader Robert Moses spearheaded The Algebra Project to develop science/mathematics abilities among middle school students. This experiential-based project now reaches 40,000 students in 22 underserved urban and rural schools across the country. A national evaluation by the MacArthur and Lilly foundations reported the notable success of this project in improving mathematics skills and incorporating innovative teaching methods. The project is supported by more than 50 corporate sponsors, none of whom requests any advertising or marketing in return (Center for Commercial-Free Public Education, no date [post 1998], p. 9). Both The Edible Schoolyard and The Algebra Project are exemplary models upon which to build future corporate partnerships.

In both the research and the educational/curriculum realm, psychologists have a major contribution to make to our schools and to our children. We need to support and conduct research that explores the impact of current practices on the health and well-being of youth. Moreover, we need to employ our psychological expertise to help our schools implement responsible corporate/school partnerships and minimize commercial practices that undermine children's emotional and physical health. Finally, psychological research should be employed to help develop effective media/advertising literacy curricula that promote both healthful consumption lifestyles and well-developed potentials for critical thinking.

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