

**The Negative Impact of Advertising on Human Growth & Development**

Juliana Levin

Sacred Heart University

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Professor Brian Stiltner & Professor Sandra Young

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## Introduction

Advertisers have controlled your thoughts and feelings since you were a child. The advertising industry has come up with many strategies that aim to attract the consumer from an early age in order to gain their loyalty for a lifetime. Advertisements are all around us and follow us everywhere we go, sometimes without us even knowing. The industry pulls you in at a young age, a time when your brain is more susceptible to their influence and willing to behave the way they intend for you to. Most people have noticed that cereal advertisements often contain things like bright colors and cartoon characters. Why do cereal companies focus so much more on children as the consumer rather than adults? This paper will explore these strategies and the negative effects they might have on growth and development in the world of media. As someone pursuing a career in the advertising industry, I believe that it is important to talk about the negative aspects of this field in order to learn from them and keep the ethical implications in mind as I enter the workplace.

Advertisements affect us in many ways, some that have a lasting impact psychologically beginning at childhood. The industry attempts to manipulate several aspects of a child's life while their brain is not developed enough for them to think for themselves. This ranges from things like food to more emotional exploitation involving self-esteem and body image. Ads are an aspect of the media that can have a major impact on growth and development all the way from childhood into teen years and beyond. Advertisements can have negative effects on human growth and development, such as harm to self-esteem/body image as well as negative and lasting psychological implications. While this is true for both males and females, advertisements specifically have a negative effect on young women at a time when they are vulnerable and trying to find their sense of self. The industry causes them to constantly compare themselves to

what the media tells them they should look like, what they should buy, and how they should think. Feelings of negative self-esteem from comparison can lead to a lasting impact on the identity of women and how they see themselves in a world full of judgment.

Therefore, the future of the advertising industry should be regulated at home through families having open discussions with their children about what they are going to experience when they start using different forms of media, inevitably being exposed to advertisements without parental guidance. Another call for action regarding this issue is the need for the school systems to implement programs to educate developing individuals, especially young women, on how to be responsible and informed consumers of media when it comes to advertising.

### **The Power of the Industry**

The Advertising Industry has a long history in America when it comes to spending large amounts of money to make even larger amounts of money off of the public. While there are often many goals or desires of a certain advertisement or campaign, the one universal goal that advertisers seek to achieve is to persuade people to do what they want them to. They achieve this by finding areas where people are vulnerable, capitalizing on these aspects of life to manipulate people into believing that they have a need for what is being sold to them. There have been many cases over the years of false advertising, situations where the truth uncovered just how much control the industry aims to have on consumers. This control stems from their manipulation of people into thinking that their product or service is going to solve some issue they have. Many makeup and skincare companies practice this in an attempt to make money by claiming to provide a remedy to the insecurities of women. An example of this is a 2009 advertisement for Olay featuring a model looking wrinkle-free and much younger than she actually is, all due to

using their Definity eye cream (Weinmann & Bhasin 4). The scandal came about when it was discovered that the photos of the model were retouched to make her look like she was not aging (something that should be considered normal.) This is just one example of many advertisements that prove that the industry will do whatever they can to uncover your vulnerability and make money off of it. This is by persuading you that you need what they are offering to fix something about your life.

One of the biggest scandals of the advertising industry that reflects the extent of their power is the Fyre Festival of 2017. The CEO of Fyre Media, Billy McFarland, advertised a “luxury music festival” in the Bahamas with some of the most well-known social media influencers. Fyre promised private jets, gourmet food, and luxury villas. Tickets for the festival were priced as high as \$250,000, and they were able to sell out due to over 400 influencers promoting the festival on Instagram and reaching 300 million people within 24 hours (Sun). However, the festival ended up becoming one of the biggest advertising disasters in history, so much that Netflix even made a documentary about it. People arrived at the island expecting to have a luxurious experience and were left stranded and forced to spend the night in tents eating cheese sandwiches (Sun). The island was bare, with nothing that would even resemble the worth of a \$250,000 ticket. Ultimately, Fyre Media used influencers to advertise the festival and these false promises to those who were willing to pay for the experience they thought they were getting. They succeeded at making people believe that this festival was going to make them feel luxurious and fulfilled because they saw some of the most well-known influencers promoting it on social media and were manipulated. It was one of the biggest advertising scandals involving the power of social media and influencer advertising, as it reflects the attempt of the company to take control of the consumer and create a false reality for their own benefit.

## Childhood

Advertisers tend to target children because of how impressionable they are when their brains are still developing. They absorb everything that they see and hear to a different extent than adults, and advertisers capitalize on their vulnerability. They also target children in hopes that they will turn them into lifelong and loyal customers. This happens more often than we think, and there are many instances where we are all grown up and still supporting brands and companies that stole our attention when we were kids. This may involve buying only a certain brand of bread as an adult, because it was the bread your mom bought when you were a kid. I am certainly guilty of this, as everytime I enter a grocery store as a twenty-year old I am only scanning the aisle for Martin's bread. Martin's bread has turned me into a lifelong customer by getting me to associate their bread with my childhood and my mom making me my school lunches everyday with only Martin's. This happens with so many different products that you are exposed to as a child. Subconsciously, you soaked up the advertising of this brand and associated it with your childhood and good memories, handing yourself over as a lifelong customer. On a larger scale, a brand takes its advertising to an all-time extreme is Disney. Disney advertisements and campaigns may look like they are targeted toward children, but they are also targeting adults and causing them to remember what it was like to be a kid through feelings of nostalgia that cause them to return again and again. This is how brands like Disney gain lifelong loyalty beginning at childhood, and reveals the effectiveness at ad campaigns aimed at a younger audience. This is also a good example of how advertisements can lead to brands shaping one's identity from a young age. Because advertisements are everywhere we go, even as children, it is inevitable that we are going to absorb them and integrate them into our sense of self.

Now that we have laid the foundation for childhood and advertising in a broader sense, we can segway into the ways that this can have a negative effect on growth and development, altering the way we see ourselves and our identity. The deception involved in advertising directed specifically towards children can lead to several areas of concern when it comes to proper development and altered comprehension of the ads. According to Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, children are more susceptible to messages from all sources because they lack the operational skills to test principles (Barry 12). Piaget's theory suggests that children move through four stages of mental development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. Evidence supports the fact that during these stages, children are not capable of discerning what is deception versus reality when it comes to the advertising they are exposed to. This deception leads to negative effects such as relying on nonsense without product information. Advertisements catered to children do a great job of distracting the child from the product itself, but instead provoking an emotion from them that signals a response of need or desire. This leads the child's emotions to be manipulated by the advertiser, creating a lasting effect on how the individual reacts to deception and how impressionable they become throughout their developmental years.

Comparative advertising is another major problem area within the industry because of how it impacts the way that a child learns about trust and handles comparison of two things persuading you in different directions. Brands advertising products or services to children will often feature a competitive aspect, trying to outdo their competitors for the favor of the child. This forces children to compare two advertisements and attempt to discern the brand that they want to support from another. Advertisers will go to great lengths to capture the attention of children, and in comparative advertising for something like a toy, brands will try to compete with

one another through brighter colors, more captivating music, and anything they can to provoke a child's desire. This type of advertising can lead to children developing issues of trust when it comes to what certain products or services claim to offer them. It prevents them from being able to compare two things accurately and logically, teaching them to choose a product or brand based on how it is presented to them versus basing their choice on the item itself and its uses for them. This is something that has lasting negative implications on cognitive development regarding the way children grow up being able to make choices and use logic to support them. An article in the *Journal of Advertising* provides a framework for companies to ascertain deception in children's advertising through a series of steps designed to identify whether a campaign should be continued or discontinued based on how it follows the framework. The first three steps include a pre-examination of the campaign by an interdisciplinary panel, a sample selection of relevant and representative children, and determining the understanding level of children through intelligence, cognitive ability, and demographics (Barry 15). The framework then measures the child's responses based on attention, attitude, and beliefs, before determining whether deception really exists and the impact it has on the individuals. Based on this framework and the data uncovered from going through these steps, ideally advertisers would then make an executive decision of whether to cut the campaign because of identified deception or move forward with it. However, while this framework could possibly regulate these negative effects on children in this situation, the industry just does not care enough to implement it. The discussion of this framework for deception in advertising is provided to demonstrate that while there is something that could be done, there is not. Thus, children are negatively affected by advertisements regarding their growth and developmental process.

## **Adolescence & Social Media Advertising**

As individuals approach the start of their teen years, growth and development towards adulthood is crucial. This is why advertisers can so easily infiltrate our minds with negative thoughts about ourselves and our bodies in order to tear us down and make us spend our money to fix what we feel is wrong with us. At this point we are extremely vulnerable and susceptible to outside influences telling us what we should be doing and thinking. At this stage in life, individuals are just beginning to truly find themselves, and the world around them contributes greatly to forming their identity and the way they compare themselves to people they see in advertisements. “According to Erikson (1968), the primary developmental task of adolescence is the struggle to formulate an identity that is independent of parents, a struggle that typically lasts until late adolescence or early adulthood” (Pechmann et al. 209). These struggles are present in everyone’s lives during this time, and advertising directed at adolescents only muddles the waters further when it comes to forming an identity. Advertisements have a negative effect on growth and development during adolescence by causing individuals to believe that what they see on social media is what they should imitate.

Social media advertising, specifically on Instagram, is the main form of advertisements that adolescents and teenagers are exposed to on a daily basis. One of the vessels of these advertisements is through social media influencers. Influencers are celebrities, models, or any individual that has a large following and well-known presence on social media. People often enjoy following these influencers because they look up to them and believe what they are saying because of how many followers they have. However, there are several underlying effects of advertising when it is coming from social media. First, one of the main goals of influencers, and something that their job depends on, is building strong and lasting relationships with their

followers (Belanche et al. 2). Their job is to earn the trust of their audience in order to successfully get their followers to support the brands and services that they work with. Once this relationship is built, it leaves vulnerable teens at the disposal of these influencers who did not have their best interests in mind, but instead are going to convince them that they need whatever they are selling and that they can trust them. Because teenagers look up to their favorite influencers, they are going to believe them when they tell them they need to purchase a certain product in order to look like them, dress like them, and be more popular like them. The negative effects of this arise when individuals are influenced to believe that there is something about themselves that they need to change, resulting in low self-esteem. For example, influencers will often advertise very expensive products such as clothing, skincare or haircare that many people cannot afford. They create a need for this product by expressing to their audience that they cannot live without and that they need to buy this product to have good skin or hair just like them. This leads to low self-esteem in adolescents that are made to think that they have to alter their appearance or their lifestyle to gain approval on social media.

Another layer of negative effects of advertising during adolescence comes from negative peer pressure and susceptibility to risky behavior, which is at an all time high during this time. “Tercyak and colleagues' (2002) findings indicate that adolescents with negative affect disorders may be more persuaded by cigarette advertisements. In this study, adolescents with clinical symptoms of depression and evidence of cigarette ad receptivity (e.g., a favorite cigarette advertisement) were more likely to have smoked at least once (71%) than nondepressed youths with evidence of cigarette ad receptivity (50%)”. (Pechmann et al. 208). Ultimately, advertisers tend to target adolescents when it comes to risk behaviors because they are the most vulnerable to outside pressures influencing them to do things they would not normally do. Especially in

recent years, e-cigarettes are increasingly popular among teenagers who are manipulated into believing that they are better for you than normal cigarettes. The e-cigarette brand JUUL advertises to teenagers who want to fit in with their peers who “vape.” Despite the various health risks and concerns, the advertisements display various flavors of vape to appeal to a younger audience and show happy teenagers using the product. Aside from the obvious detrimental physical implications of this advertising, individuals can develop mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and can become addicted to substances because they were manipulated by ads claiming that they are not bad for you. Advertisers influence teenagers into believing they must engage in risky behaviors because they are "cool," resulting in long-term negative consequences such as addiction, sadness, anxiety, and low self-esteem and confidence.

### **Young Women & Gender Roles**

Advertising, without a doubt, can have a negative impact on body image in both teenage girls and males. Body image is a particular area of vulnerability that the advertising industry chooses to target women, specifically younger women, over men. Advertisers aim to define the standard of beauty for young women by selecting models to symbolize what they expect young women to aspire to look like. In truth, they are attempting to wear down their confidence in order to sell things designed to restore it. Another aspect of advertising that targets young women is how gender roles are communicated to them, as well as the negative repercussions of early identification of these roles on personal growth. “Survey research suggests that adolescents with low (versus high) self-esteem are more trusting of advertising in general” (Pechmann et al. 210). Advertisements commonly exploit women’s insecurities, thus they feel the need to purchase a specific item or service in order to compensate.

The Journal of Linguistics and Applied Languages published a study in 2011 on the advertisement manipulation of young women. They came to the conclusion that commercial persuasion of adolescent females frequently included manipulation to generate artificial needs and the necessity for the advertiser to help them achieve something (Alcantud Díaz 36). Tampax, Covergirl, and Macy's were among the brands studied, and they were found to trigger emotional and psychological manipulation by implying to young women that they must identify with the advertisement and alter something in their lives in order to attain a desired goal. In the end, advertisers' manipulation causes issues with body image, low self-esteem, and confidence in women who are in various phases of development and are being convinced to identify with women presented in advertisements in order to reach a goal. Something else to consider is the different ways that models are presented in these advertisements. Three ways to classify how advertisers manipulate women into thinking that there is a standard of femininity to follow is by emphasizing what the model's body looks like (passive framing), emphasizing what the model is able to do with her body (active framing), and emphasizing the model's personality (subject framing) (De Lenne et al. 255). When one component of every ad targeting young women is highlighted, they are led to believe that something is missing in their own body or lifestyle, necessitating the purchase of the promoted product or service to fulfill this desire. Furthermore, advertisements directed at young women have a negative impact on their growth and development by capitalizing on women's most common insecurities in order to manipulate them in areas such as body image and self-confidence.

There's also a case to be made for how the advertising industry impacts young women's perceptions of gender roles in society. A common theme used by advertisers is that women are presented as objects intended to attract the attention of males. One example is an advertisement

for Nivea for Men, where a woman is in the shower with the man and the caption reads “Girl Not Included.” When marketers advertise male products, they generate images of women who are subordinate to dominating male figures, and this ad employs women as persuasion objects for male consumers. Young women have a distorted sense of self when it comes to gender roles and how they see themselves as members of society and in male/female interactions as a result of this. There are a variety of external factors that contribute to the creation of these gender norms, but my focus is on how their prevalence in advertising harms young women. In many advertisements, men are shown as the breadwinners while females represent the homemakers; as well as males being used to sell hi-tech and sports products while women are seen advertising home and body products (Chan et al). Through advertising gender roles, young women are exposed to how society regards them at an early age, and this has a negative impact on their perceptions of themselves and what they believe they are capable of. The representation of these old gender stereotypes in advertising has a negative impact on adolescent females' growth and development because it makes them feel limited in their talents and forces them to spend their lives striving to prove themselves.

### **Recent Improvement**

Of course, It is unfair to say that all brands have malicious intentions of harming the confidence and self-esteem of their audience. In the past few years, several brands have stepped up to the plate and broke free from the traditional standards of capitalizing on people’s insecurities in their advertisements. It is 2022, and being open about mental health and vulnerabilities is more widely accepted than it has been in years past, and advertisers seem to be more aware of this. It is essential to understand that in today’s climate, they will receive much

more support for being inclusive and empowering than if they were to continue tearing people down and being deceiving and manipulative. One example of a brand that has recognized this shift is Dove. This brand has launched a number of campaigns aimed at boosting women's self-esteem and redefining society's definition of beauty. One of these campaigns is titled "The Dove Self-Esteem Project." "Our mission is to ensure that the next generation grows up enjoying a positive relationship with the way they look – helping young people raise their self-esteem and realize their full potential" (Dove). In this campaign, they provide resources for both parents and teachers filled with guidance on how to talk about body confidence with children and adolescents, in order to foster a positive mind-body relationship. This Dove campaign is just one example of recent advancements in the advertising industry, and we can look forward to the future of advertising to see what messaging truly resonates with audiences. When young women think of Dove, they will recall this campaign and associate the brand with positivity and confidence. This is the type of advertising that distinguishes brands from their competitors and promotes a positive rather than a negative impact on growth and development.

Although this is unquestionably a step forward, it does not eliminate the negative intent and effects of advertising that has become the norm in today's society. There is no doubt that Dove's efforts to raise awareness about women's health and inclusivity are beneficial. However, in order to see long-term improvement, other businesses must follow suit and grasp the importance of this shift in the way advertisements are crafted for messaging. Ideally, other companies will understand that societal interests have shifted. People are more interested in supporting a brand that they can relate to and that will enable them to be the best version of themselves, rather than changing to fit in. Today's normal is becoming a much more inclusive and nurturing environment for all body types and cultures. If advertising companies were smart,

they would understand that money can be made by appealing to the sensitivity and emotional aspect of the target audience through advocating this new type of messaging.

## **Regulation**

As a woman pursuing a career in the field of advertising, it is important to establish a call for regulation within the home and the classroom in order to limit these negative effects throughout one's development. It is extremely important for parents to have conversations with their children at an early age about what they are going to see in advertisements, ideally at a time when they are able to understand what they are seeing on television. "Children from households where advertising is explained to them by their parents may be less susceptible to deception than those who are not" (Barry, 1980, p. 14). Because we are exposed to advertising so early, making children aware of possible deception and manipulation is crucial to their interactions with advertising throughout their life. It is also important for parents to have conversations with their children about advertising and its effects at the time when they first get a cell phone and are beginning to use social media. Explaining to them that they do not need to copy what they see on the internet from "role models" is crucial in preventing low self-esteem in their children's lives at a time when they are being sold products to change themselves. Another call to action is for mothers to educate their daughters on the idea that models that they see advertising products on social media platforms, such as Instagram, are not the only standard of beauty. Everybody is beautiful in their own way, and laying the foundation for a healthy relationship with body positivity and body image coming from a mother is something that can have a lasting impact on a young woman's life. Another sector that should be regulated when it comes to advertising is education. The advertising industry is not studied in depth in schools, and I feel that if students

were educated and informed of what they would encounter when entering the world of media, they would be less vulnerable to negative influence and manipulation. Implementing programs and taking steps to educate students from elementary school through high school would be successful at making people aware of the goals, techniques, and harmful consequences of advertising that they may encounter throughout their lives.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the manipulative tactics of the advertising industry can result in negative effects on individuals throughout growth and development, with a specific focus on targeting young women. Beginning in childhood, the advertising industry attempts to capture attention by deceiving vulnerable minds, which has a negative impact on cognitive development. When advertising towards adolescents, the industry utilizes social media to cause teenagers to believe that they have a need for something that is being sold to them in order to fit in or enhance their life in some way. This feeling inflicted upon by advertisers creates lasting issues of self-esteem, as well as peer pressure during a time when teenagers are most susceptible to influence. Heavily impacted are young women, who face constant intimidation by advertisers into purchasing their products or services that are marketed as something that they need to change about themselves or their lifestyle. This type of advertising deteriorates young women's body image, self-esteem, and overall confidence in themselves. There is an urgent call for change within the advertising industry, to develop inclusive and positive messaging that does not harm growth and development in individuals. There is also a call for parents and educators to provide resources for young people to teach them about advertisements and what to look out for when it comes to manipulation.

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