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Unethical Advertising in America's Schools

By the time the average American has reached the age of twenty-one, he or she will have been exposed to an estimated one to two million advertising messages (Smith 607). Further dismaying is the fact that many of these advertisements are appearing in America's schools, using unethical means to convey their messages. Using schools as an outlet for advertising is wrong; it takes advantage of students and a school's need for financial assistance. Such practices are leading to an increasingly materialistic behavior among schoolchildren and a greater focus on consumerism. Usually disguised under philanthropic motives, advertisers have entered schools not to help with the process of education but to brand students as loyal customers.

It is said that advertising is "a powerful force whereby the advertiser creates a demand for a given article in the minds of a great many people" (Ohmahn 109). But before we can look at how advertising is affecting our youth, we must understand some of the key concepts advertisers use today in schools. One of the new waves of advertising strategies is that of place-based advertising. Place-based advertising basically consists of anything viewed outside of the home. Ranging from locations such as airports, movie theaters, amusement parks, billboards, and many other forms of business, place-based ads allow for advertisers to target their ads to the specific demographics of the place the message is being delivered. Place-based advertising can come in the form of television, posters, kiosks, and various print media. However, it differs from similar forms of home-based media, such as television and radio, in that the channel simply cannot be changed or turned off completely. While it has been around since the origins of advertising, place-based advertising has only begun to surge in popularity since the early nineties.

Placed-based media has also begun to find its ways into America's schools. One of the leaders of advertising's march into the education of America's youth is Christopher Whittle, who pioneered the educational news program Channel One. The program offers schools around fifty thousand dollars worth of media equipment. However, that comes at a price. Schools must also watch the Channel One programming, a twelve-minute news broadcast laden with commercials for products such as M&M's, Pepsi, Nike's, and Gatorade. About 12,000 schools around the country currently watch Channel One Broadcasts (Shelby). In addition, rather than provide substantial hard news, such as world and national events, Channel One tends to focus on soft news presented in a flashy MTV style. Channels One's placement directly into schools coupled with its mandatory viewing allows advertisers to directly seek out their target market, young kids. At a time where kids are trying to be "hip," to fit in, advertisers are being granted access to these children as a captive audience.

Channel One has received harsh criticism and even boycotts for its excuse of using a news program and monetary incentives to force advertising into the classroom. Critics have been further dismayed at the fact that many of Channel One's news stories focus primarily on technology innovations in products, such as shoes, and other products advertised during the broadcast. Channel One proclaims that it provides breaking news and issues that effect the world, but how can a headline reporting, "Perfume: Sweet Scent or Deadly Weapon?" provide any great educational benefit for students? Critics also have found problems with the layout of the program; a typical news story is only eighteen seconds long while a commercial is generally thirty seconds long. Channel One's strategy is one of grabbing attention, and has been a success for the companies trying to take advantage of Channel One's viewers. Eye candy riddles

Channel One's programming, further captivating viewers in an environment demanding formal news and education.

One of the founding strategies for advertisers looking to take advantage of young children, especially in school, lies in a metaphor frequently used to compare advertisers and school children as "hunter and prey." Under this metaphor, students are reduced to the animals hunted with schools being their typical hiding grounds, while advertisers are the hunters. Scholastic Teen Network, which releases a publication to schools laden with advertisements, epitomizes the old hunting metaphor. In a statement seeking advertisers for its publication, Scholastic Teen Network in 1992 wrote, "Mousse season opens today. So does makeup season. And lip gloss season. And almost every beauty category you can name. In fact, when school opens kids go to town, on almost everything from mousse to makeup to more. And you can be there too. Right where they live. Inside the classroom. In the pages of Scholastic Teen Network Magazines" (McAlister 76). Such rash statements as these further demonstrate the advertiser's view of school kids as prey that can now be more easily reached due to strategic marketing, much as a gun company would advocate a better weapon to hunt animals.

When companies, such as Scholastic Teen Network, market to kids in such a fashion it can be argued also that such an approach adds to the materialistic needs of such individuals. Teenagers are especially prone to buying products that they feel will make them more cool or be able to fit in better. Many school kids increasingly feel as if they need to buy certain makeup or mousse to be able to fit in. Many feel as if material items, such as the clothes they wear, are what will make them popular. Advertisers know this, and they have found a new way to reach their audience in the environment where their products will matter the most, in school.

Since consumerism is such an important aspect of school, marketers have looked to expand on those ideals by portraying schools as being the true home of students, as it is not as easy to advertise to them where they really live. Advertisers have also stressed that before a child can effectively go to school they must be prepared, not with books, pencils, and calculators, but rather with the trendiest styles and hairspray. Advertisers have thrown out the belief that schools are a place to obtain an education, and they have turned them into access sites for the youth market where children can demonstrate their dependability on consumerism.

Another one of advertising's exploits among schools is to grab the attention of potential customers at an age where they are easily convinced and to establish a base of loyal customers. Children in school, especially younger children, are often predisposed to believe what they hear in the classroom. If a teacher tells them something, then it must be so. Therefore, advertisers are able to capitalize on the age of their audience by making them believe that they need what is being advertised. One such company, Modern, places many advertisements in schools that appeal to younger age groups such as kindergartners and first graders. One Modern campaign to attract advertisers highlighted a five-year-old boy in a business suit with a caption that read, "Reach him at the office. His first day job is kindergarten. Modern can put your sponsored educational materials in his lesson plan" (McAlister 77). Companies such as these hope to subtly put their ads into a child's lesson hoping that a child will perceive a need for that product and become a loyal customer at an early age.

Businesses claim that advertising in school helps to bring needed supplies and monetary aid to schools, but they do so in exchange from customer loyalty and revenue from students that attend schools where they advertise. Besides, there are plenty of other opportunities for a school to raise funds. There are always a wide variety of items schools can sell, such as baked goods, t-

shirts, plants, and more. Schools could have weekly sales of coffee and doughnuts. Special events such as walk-a-thons, raffles, and silent auctions have also proved successful for schools. Relying on advertisers for funds is just an easy way out. Although most traditional fund raising tactics usually require a little more active involvement, it is not worth handing over the loyalty of the students that are more easily swayed by advertising for the pure sake of convenience.

Advertisers have needed to look for more and more ways to promote their products as competition had increased. Advertising has spread everywhere and companies are under pressure to perform. Such pressures have led them to look for new ways to attract attention to products and generate sales. However, many forms of advertisements in schools are unethical. Younger children and teenagers are more easily persuaded and advertisers have realized this hoping to take advantage of that and the general need of school systems for monetary help. Helping schools in exchange for advertising and customer loyalty is not philanthropic, it is a crime and it is unethical.

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