

# Ethical Analysis and Recommended Action in Response to the Dangers Associated With Youth Consumerism

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Research shows that a culture of consumerism and materialism has a dramatic and negative impact on children's physical and psychological health. Psychologists have a duty to act to reverse this trend. Information on why and how to act is the key. This article explores the use of psychology to improve the effectiveness of advertising to youth and details the harm suffered by children as a result of some of this advertising. A discussion of ethical considerations related to specific guiding principles and ethical standards of the 2002 American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code frames why action is imperative. Actions for psychologists to take in applying the 2002 APA Ethics Code are suggested herein.

Keywords: consumerism, ethics, youth, advertising

## THE USE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ADVERTISING TO YOUTH

### Awareness of a Problem

The founding mission of the American Psychological Association (APA) states that the organization is to “work to mitigate the causes of human suffering,” seek to “improve the condition of both the individual and society,” and “help the public in developing informed judgments” (Commercial Alert, 1999). In addition to

this mission, APA continues to uphold ethical principles in the 2002 APA Ethics Code, which encourage “beneficence” and “nonmaleficence,” acting with fidelity and responsibility as well as integrity, recognizing and working for justice, and respecting people’s rights and dignity (Fisher, 2003). In addition, there are specific codes of behavior to which APA members are bound or they will be subject to corrective or punitive action. In 1999 a group of psychologists expressed their concern to the APA that “the use of psychology to exploit and influence children for commercial purposes” (Commercial Alert, 1999) was inherently unethical. By not attending to the issue, they indicated that the APA was in violation of its own code of ethics. The purpose of this article is to explore the nature of these allegations, to briefly describe current APA actions and limitations thereof, and to apply the APA Ethics Code to these allegations, focusing on areas for future individual and collective action.

### The Relationship Between Psychology and Marketing to Children

The letter to the APA alleged that psychologists violate ethical principles when working with companies that market to children, as well as when they do not protest this type of marketing even when not directly involved. The questions arise of how psychologists are involved and why their behavior is unethical. At first glance it is clear that there is an entire field of psychology devoted to researching and directing consumer behavior. Division 23 of the APA is the Society for Consumer Psychology, whose members are psychologists “working in the fields of profit and nonprofit marketing, advertising, communications, consumer behavior, and related areas” (APA, 2004). A brief review of research by Consumer Psychologists reveals such titles as “Age Difference in Product Categorization” (John & Sujana, 1990), “All I Want for Christmas: An Analysis of Children’s Brand Requests to Santa Claus” (Otnes, Kim, & Kim, 1994), and “Children’s Emergent Preferences for Soft Drinks: Stimulus-Equivalence and Transfer” (Smeets & Leiden, 2003), among hundreds of others. In their research exploring the meaning of brand names to children, Achenreiner and John (2003) found that “by the time children reach 12 years of age, they use brand names as an important conceptual cue in consumer judgments” (p. 205). The *Journal of Economic Psychology* and the *Journal of Consumer Research*, in addition to several other journals not dedicated solely to the issue of consumerism, are replete with articles related to the field. Some of the research is being used to curb children’s brand consciousness, but much of it is being used to help corporations understand children, “tweens,” and teens as consumers, using psychological principles to target them directly (Achenreiner & John, 2003; Schor, 2004). However, corporations are not simply gathering the data on their own and using it in their

marketing efforts; they are hiring psychologists who specifically use their information and skills to target children and teens directly.

Researchers with backgrounds in anthropology, archaeology, sociology, and communications are developing ever more intrusive strategies to influence childhood consumerism, but research conducted by psychologists is often even more intrusive (Schor, 2004). One of the earliest examples of psychologists using their knowledge and skills to help corporate America is that of James Watson, who, after being fired from John Hopkins University in 1925, worked for the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson (Allen, 2000). Watson advocated using human emotional weaknesses to encourage people to purchase the products of such companies as Johnson & Johnson. This pattern of using emotions to influence consumerism has expanded to include research on how to exploit children's emotions to increase consumption. Corporate clients are encouraged to use psychological findings on children's underlying needs, cognitive abilities, changing attitudes, and relationships with parents to sell their products (Youth Marketing Services, 2004).

Psychologists also garner information from the field of neuropsychology to develop neuromarketing strategies that are designed to help advertisers reach the triune brain (the emotional midbrain and the instinctive reactive centers) in such a way as to make it "virtually impossible for critical thinking and effective reasoning to occur while watching an ad" (Schor, 2004, p. 111). In addition, neuropsychologists and doctors use magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to determine which parts of the brain react to different types of advertising. For example, one study looked at the "neural correlates of behavioral preference for culturally familiar drinks." In other words, this study looked at how the brain perceived Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola as distinct from each other and what their brains showed on MRI scans of the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. Researchers first assessed behavioral preferences and then looked at the MRI scans of the participants to determine the influence of labels versus taste in subjects' preferences (McClure et al., 2004). The MRI research is touted as being so accurate that it "can answer any questions marketers have and ... can answer them more efficiently" (Lovel, 2002).

Other examples abound (Schor, 2004). Psychologists are using their expertise to help companies market to children and view children as targets for expanding cradle-to-grave loyalty and consumerism. The data over the past 25 years have shown, and continue to show, that enhancing consumerism in children, tweens, and teens causes harm.

### THE IMPACT OF MARKETING AND CONSUMERISM ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Childhood obesity has skyrocketed in the last 10 years; kids are smoking, drinking alcohol, and taking illegal drugs at alarming rates, and they are suffering from

emotional and mental health problems at a higher rate than in the past (Schor, 2004). The findings show that children are worse off today, physically and emotionally, than they were 10 or 20 years ago. The link between espousing materialistic values and the previously stated problems has been supported in psychological research on adults and children. The 1997 Child Development Supplement found a connection between increased materialism and anxiousness, fearfulness, unhappiness, sadness, depression, and being withdrawn (Schor, 2004). In Boston, a study of 300 tweens in urban centers and one suburban area further supported these findings (Schor, 2004). One piece of evidence from the data is that “high levels of consumer involvement reduce children’s self-esteem in the areas of peer and family relationships” (Schor, 2004, p. 173). It was also found that “higher levels of consumer involvement result in worse relationships with parents” (Schor, 2004, p. 170) and are associated with greater depression and anxiety. It is interesting to note that findings have also shown that “being depressed or anxious or having low self-esteem does not cause higher levels of consumer involvement” (Schor, 2004, p. 168). The relationship is that consumerism comes first and the suffering follows. In its most extreme, the general material culture created through advertising has led children to define themselves through material possessions, as opposed to ethical purpose and community. Because of a lack of caring or concern for others (Shapiro, 2005), extreme violence becomes possible.

The APA Task Force on Advertising and Children (TFAC; Kunkel et al., 2004) found that the effects of advertising may “contribute to outcomes such as misperceptions about proper nutritional habits or parent–child conflict should a child’s purchase-influence attempt be rejected by the parent” (p. 9). For example, pressure to purchase such items as name brand clothes and trading cards, as well as other name brand items, frequently causes conflict and stress between parents and children. The APA TFAC report reviewed dozens of studies that have provided strong evidence that children under 8 years of age do not possess the necessary level of cognitive development to understand the persuasive nature of advertising, and as a result suffer from information that causes them to make unhealthy choices about their bodies and relationships. The impact of the consumption agenda of advertisers (Unnikrishnan & Bajpai, 1996), general materialistic attitudes, and the notion that “you are what you buy” have individual, as well as social, implications affecting children’s psychological and physical health, especially when considering the cumulative effect of advertising over time. Studies reviewed by the task force found an increase in violent attitudes and behaviors, as well as a greater likelihood to smoke and use illegal drugs and alcohol, all related to greater consumer behavior and a sense of materialism. Research on teens has revealed marketers’ conscious efforts to open up and exploit emotional vulnerabilities, causing individual suffering and creating family conflicts (Kanner & Kasser, 2000). Kanner and Gomes (1995) found that advertisements make children feel deeply inadequate unless they buy certain products or services. These findings are similar to studies

conducted on the impact of consumerism and materialism on adults, and predict that future research will continue to find more specific ways in which consumerism and materialism harm children (DeAngelis, 2004).

## APPLYING THE 2002 APA ETHICS CODE

### Current APA Actions and Recommendations

The APA's TFAC, in its February 2004 report, made recommendations to the APA Council of Representatives "to help counter the potential harmful effects of advertising on children, particularly children ages 8 and younger who lack the cognitive ability to recognize advertising's persuasive intent" (Dittmann, 2004, p. 58). The APA's Council of Representatives accepted 13 recommendations that commit the organization to take specific steps to address problems of advertising aimed at children. The general areas covered in the recommendations are those of public policy, psychological research, applied psychology, industry practices, media literacy, and advertising and schools (Wilcox et al., 2004). Included in these recommendations is that the APA "undertake efforts to help psychologists weigh the potential ethical challenges involved in professional efforts to more effectively advertise to children, particularly those children who are too young to comprehend the persuasive intent of television commercials" (Wilcox et al., 2004, p. 6).

### Analyzing the Ethical Issues as Related to the General Principles

Because of antitrust laws, the APA, as a general body, cannot have ethical standards that restrict the ability of its members to use their skills to earn a living. So the question arises as to how APA members can use the Ethics Code as a guide to take individual and collective action. The APA Ethics Code's General Principles and Ethical Standards are the starting point from which this work must begin. Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence states that psychologists must "strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm" (Fisher, 2003, p. 250). Competing interests emerge from this very first general principle. Psychologists work for both companies and community and service organizations seeking to combat the harm done by these companies. Corporations are harmed if they do not earn profits and children are harmed, as explained, by the strategies these corporations use if they are to be profitable. The current efforts of the APA reflect the need to resolve this conflict in a responsible fashion, yet avoid or minimize harm. Psychologists need to work together to design plans of action that help all psychologists do the greatest good and avoid the greatest harm. This principle also guides psychologists to be "alert to and guard against personal financial, social, organiza-

tional, or political factors that might lead to misuse of their influence” (Fisher, 2003, p. 250). Psychologists will need to define *misuse*, especially as they discern who may be most harmed by the misuse of their work by others.

Principle B has multiple layers that relate to this issue. Principle B states that “establishing trust with clients (and) . . . consulting with others to the extent needed to best serve the interests of those with whom they work” (Fisher, 2003, p. 250) are essential ethical behaviors. Psychologists who think that assisting corporations in their efforts to market to children is unethical behavior believe that their colleagues are involved in conflicts of interest that lead to exploitation or harm, and therefore believe their colleagues are not in compliance with APA Ethical Standards. Consumer psychologists and others who help business disagree, however, and thus there is a need to reach some form of consensus and/or more specific guidelines on this issue. If all parties keep in mind the concepts, from Principle A, of “beneficence” and “nonmaleficence,” for all people, they will have a framework that enables them to balance their duties to their clients as well as to individuals within society.

Principle C states that “psychologists seek to promote accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in the science” (Fisher, 2003, p. 250). However, deceptive research practices have been used in this area. In one example, researchers placed hidden cameras on children, who then went shopping in stores while researchers visually tracked them as they moved through the stores. The researchers used children because store managers often do not allow researchers in their stores (Schor, 2004). Neuromarketing research has a strong potential for deception, as the public is not aware that marketers are using strategies to impact their decision making functions, and psychologists are not only involved, but are at the forefront of such research (Lovel, 2002). The possibilities of harmful effects on children and adults, as well as the development by the public of mistrust toward psychologists, are large and need to be addressed (Kanner & Kasser, 2000).

Principle D states that “psychologists recognize that fairness and justice entitle all persons to access to and benefit from the contributions of psychology and to equal quality and processes, procedures, and services being conducted by psychologists” (Fisher, 2003, p. 250). The fact that companies have the ability to spend more than \$12 billion per year on advertising messages aimed at the youth market (Willenz, 2004) gives them an unfair advantage over the average parent trying to oppose their heavily researched and ever present efforts. The inability of children 8 years old and younger to understand the persuasive nature of advertising creates another unfair advantage in favor of advertisers (Kunkel et al., 2004). Consumers do not necessarily have access to the skill and expertise of psychologists, nor do they have the money to procure such services on their own. Discrepancy in resources makes it imperative that psychologists work to empower parents through education and legislation.

Principle E states that “psychologists respect the dignity and worth of all people, and the right of individuals to privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination. Psychologists are aware that special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair autonomous decision making” (Fisher, 2003, p. 251). Advertisers spend billions to study the most specific and minute ways in which to influence youth decision making and purchases, and it can be argued that, because of these strategies, it is impossible for children to have autonomy as consumers. According to the research, as stated, children under 8 years of age are especially vulnerable. The members of the APA should take action to protect their rights and welfare. Ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status are also listed as important factors to consider when ascertaining whether dignity, privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination are present. Studies show that low-income children, especially ethnic minorities, in non-academically oriented families, are at greater risk of suffering from the effects of marketing. The negative effects are most heavily noted in food advertising that leads to higher levels of obesity in children in this category (Kunkel et al., 2004; Schor, 2004).

### Analyzing the Issues as Related to the Ethical Standards

It is critical to relate the specific ethical standards in the 2002 APA Ethics Code to the issue of psychologists’ actions and youth consumerism. Standard 1.01 states that “if psychologists learn of misuse or misrepresentation of their work, they must take reasonable steps to correct or minimize the misuse or misrepresentation” (Fisher, 2003, p. 251). According to this standard, if psychologists, especially consumer and developmental psychologists, see that their work is being used unethically to advertise to children, they are required to act. For example, if companies and marketing firms are using deception and do not inform the public of the psychological principles behind their research and final product marketing, this could be construed as unethical behavior putting children at risk.

Standard 1.02 states that psychologists should try to follow their code of ethics if laws hold them to a lesser standard, but ultimately they must follow the law. The standard does not mention whether or not psychologists have a responsibility to change unfair laws. The key law in this case is national legislation that controls the powers of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). In 1978, when corporate leaders learned that the FTC wanted to ban advertising to children, they lobbied Congress and in 1980 successfully urged legislators to change the laws in the corporations’ favor by denying the FTC such powers (Allen, 2000; Schor, 2004).

This issue of unfair advertising to children is related directly to Standard 3.01. This standard prohibits psychologists from engaging in “unfair discrimination based on age ... race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, or any basis pro-

scribed by law” (Fisher, 2003, p. 252). The very fact that children 8 years of age and under cannot determine the persuasive nature of advertising has been labeled as an unfair practice by the APA TFAC (Kunkel et al., 2004). These children are at greater risk because, as stated, they have not developed the level of cognitive ability to defend themselves. Race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status also put children at greater risk of being influenced by advertising when living in nonacademically oriented homes (Schor, 2004).

Avoiding harm is the focus of Standard 3.04. Psychologists whose efforts help business might argue that they are doing good for their clients, and that if they did not do the work, others in professions without ethical guidelines would use the same information and cause even greater harm (Clay, 2000). Psychologists writing the Commercial Alert letter (1999) and working on APA’s TFAC (Kunkel et al., 2004) believe that psychologists are currently causing great harm to children, and that if something does not change, the severity of that harm will, in fact, increase. The question is how to balance views as they relate to Standard 3.04 and to determine how individual and group action can work to assure that doing good balances the needs of the client with the needs of the greater community and individual children.

The vast quantity of research with large groups for the purposes of collecting data for marketing, as well as with individuals in their homes, raises the question of whether or not psychologists are following Standards 3.10 and 8.02, which deal with informed consent. Schor (2004) specifically mentioned a few psychologists who do take care to follow this standard, but she noted that other psychologists might not be so vigilant. Schor worried especially about psychologists not currently connected with academic institutions, as well as researchers from other disciplines, using children to conduct research for them. Some psychologists could protect themselves with Standard 8.05, which allows them to dispense with informed consent for research under special circumstances, including gathering data in educational settings. Some researchers collect data at schools, as allowed in the standard, but then use the information to guide marketing efforts (Schor, 2004).

Problems in regard to deception were mentioned in the previous paragraphs. Consumers do not always know when they are being observed by psychologists or their assistants as they gather data (Schor, 2004). Standard 8.07 states that deception may be used only when psychologists have “determined that the use of deceptive techniques is justified by the study’s significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and that effective nondeceptive alternative procedures are not feasible” (Fisher, 2003, p. 258). Consumer psychologists might argue that their work does have applied value and that the subjects do not suffer any distress. The missing link, however, is establishing the degree of harm the application of data from these deceptive methods has on consumers as a whole, because the deception can continue beyond the research.



## ENGAGING IN ETHICAL ACTION

More research and continued discussion of the ethical issues of advertising to children are needed. As the members of the APA's TFAC concluded,

Advertisers know that their efforts influence audiences, and they put their money on the line in support of this assumption with the placement of every commercial message they buy. APA's TFAC appreciates the role of advertising in our society and the contributions psychological research makes to effective marketing . . . . Given the significant role played by advertiser-supported media in the lives of the nation's children, it is time to move forward with new policies that will better protect the interests of children and new research that will address the vast array of unanswered questions in the important topic area of Youth Consumerism. The stakes are too high to ignore these issues or their impact on the nation's youth. (Wilcox et al., 2004, p. 9)

Psychologists may be reticent to act because of various factors such as (a) feeling uncomfortable or not believing in the importance of focusing on variables outside of the individual person; (b) being directly involved in establishing a culture of consumerism (e.g., working with companies to help them market products); and (c) not knowing or not wishing to know how to get involved with social policy and social criticism (Kasser & Kanner, 2004). Because the stakes are high, regardless of how psychologists are connected to the problem, they need to consider how they can make a difference. The following are several examples of ways to be actively engaged.

### Action in Individual Practice

First and foremost, psychologists must stay informed. They should know what the research says about the relationship between a consumerist society and emotional disturbance (DeAngelis, 2004; Kanner & Gomes, 1995; Kanner & Kasser, 2000). Being sensitive to how the symptoms of consumerism are manifest in individual clients and then being willing to address this issue in treatment is an important second step (Kanner & Kasser, 2000). Psychologists need to feel comfortable in considering the possible role that consumerism is playing on their client's feelings, including low self-esteem, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, family conflicts, and more. Incorporating these elements into case conceptualization could provide new tools and effective strategies to help individual clients and their families.

### Dissemination of Information on Psychological Practices Related to Marketing

By keeping the public informed, consumer psychologists, and other psychologists working to help companies advertise to children need to help the public retain, and

possibly regain, trust in the profession and counterbalance the negative impact of advertising strategies used with children. Honestly communicating what types of research are being conducted builds trust and removes the perception of deception. Being forthright and taking concrete steps to inform people of how psychological research is being used to market to children empowers parents and enables them to teach their children how not to fall victim to the commercial culture in which they might find themselves. Psychologists need to be proactive in this area. Disseminating information that can reach people in all walks of life is essential. Finding creative ways to reach out to the community through schools, public forums, and foreign language newspapers, for example, will go a long way to help the public trust psychologists as professionals, on the one hand, and to be wiser consumers able to protect their children, on the other.

### Action in Schools

Schools have long been linked to advertising and the media (Spring, 2003), and using schools as a venue through which to effect change is a natural step. For those psychologists working in schools, ideas for involvement might include working with consumer education, technology, and media literacy teachers on the development of curriculum that teaches children how to recognize the efforts by companies to get them to buy their products. Working to reduce the amount of advertising in schools would be another way to take action in accordance with APA's ethical principles and standards. Establishing educational programs for families to help them learn about the negative impact of materialism on their children and the methods used to create a consumerist drive in their children could also prove beneficial. School psychologists should know their communities and should be able to create and tailor programs that would meet each community's specific needs.

The workload of school psychologists is great, however, and private practitioners, as well as university and research institutions, could take the lead in collaborating with school psychologists to help them create and conduct such programs. Universities, community colleges, and other research institutions are a natural source of ideas, energy, and information, and could be the leaders in the field to plan such collaborative efforts. Connections between the schools and higher education are already in place. Using them to address the impact of marketing and consumerism on children's mental and physical health could lead to positive change.

### Legislative Action

The work of the APA's TFAC sets the stage for psychologists to begin to embark on changing laws and governmental policies that deal with advertising to children. Sharing their findings with policymakers could be a next step and would help legis-

lators enact laws designed to protect children from deceptive advertising strategies. Several psychologists are revisiting the possibilities of changing FTC regulations by arguing that, based on current research findings, advertising to children under 8 years of age is inherently unfair. They are taking individual action, in accordance with ethical principles, to effect change.

### Counteradvertising

Psychologists might also apply their skills to develop ads that counter the messages of materialism. They could develop public service ads that focus on alternative sources of self-esteem and peer acceptance, such as community service and participation in sports. Educational and social psychologists could reach out to the members of the community who are trying to effect change by developing a socio-oriented versus a self-oriented media message to children (Easterling, Miller, & Weinberger, 1995).

## CONCLUSION

APA members must refer to the APA's founding mission and "work to mitigate the causes of human suffering" and "help the public in developing informed judgments" by teaching parents, educators, youth development professionals, and the general public about the potential damage caused by consumerism (Commercial Alert, 1999, ¶ 1. Further, they can help shape policy to reduce that damage. Psychologists must also work to "improve the condition of both the individual and society," according to APA's mission, making further research into the effects of advertising on children, as well as adults, essential. If increased rates of varied forms of mental and physical illness continue to be linked to consumerism and materialism, psychologists have an ethical duty to take action on a broader social scale, not only with their clients. The charge is an important yet a difficult one to manage, but current APA efforts are encouraging, and at least the work has begun.

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