

Reining in the Commercialization of Childhood

Josh Golin and Melissa Campbell

In 2012, *The Lorax*, an animated big-budget version of Dr. Seuss's classic cautionary tale about overconsumption and greed, arrived in theaters. Accompanying its release was a slew of brand-licensed cross-promotions targeted directly to kids. Children were encouraged to visit stores like Pottery Barn Kids, Target, and Whole Foods for Lorax-themed promotions, to eat Truffula Chip Pancakes at the breakfast chain IHOP, to pack their lunches with Lorax YoKids Yogurt, and to urge their parents to buy Hewlett-Packard printers.¹

The most troubling brand partnership was with car manufacturer Mazda. Commercials on children's television called the Mazda CX-5 the only sport utility vehicle with the "Truffula Seal of Approval." At sponsored assemblies at schools across the United States, a Lorax handed out hugs while Mazda sales representatives told children that the CX-5 was "the kind of car the Lorax would drive"—and urged them to go home and ask their parents to test drive one. For each test drive, Mazda donated a meager \$25 to the school's library.²

Years later, *The Lorax's* cross-promotions remain notable because the disconnect is so striking: A beloved Dr. Seuss character designed to warn children against overconsumption and consumerism was being used to get kids to buy, buy, buy. But *The Lorax* is a drop in a vast sea of media properties designed to sell kids not just on products and brands, but on values. And Mazda is just one of countless companies selling products to children in schools, encouraging them to nag their parents, and teaching them to associate school spirit with brand loyalty.

Over the past thirty years, childhood has been transformed by the media

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and marketing industries. Marketers spend billions targeting children each year, creating a commercialized childhood that is unhealthy, unsustainable, and leaves kids woefully unprepared for a future that will require new kinds of behaviors, skills, and values. For these reasons, ending the commercialization of childhood should be a high priority not only for parents and educators, but for anyone concerned about the future of our planet. To do so will require strong regulation of the media and marketing industries, establishing schools as commercial-free zones, and helping children spend less time with screens and more time in creative play.

Commercial Culture as Education

Education doesn't just happen in schools. All systems—familial, economic, social—have their own knowledges, which they both produce and teach to their participants. Capitalism and consumer culture are no exception; as children and as adults, we are routinely taught that success can be measured through consumption, and that the brands and products we buy reveal some truth about who we are as people. This education begins at birth: branded products for newborns, from diapers to blankets, are designed to encourage babies to form attachments to corporate mascots and logos, ensuring that they will be requesting brands by the time they can speak.³

Capitalism requires constant growth, which requires finding and developing new markets—and it turns out that children are an excellent market. They have unprecedented amounts of spending money, influence their parents to make purchases big and small, and, most importantly, are uniquely vulnerable to advertising messages. Very young children cannot distinguish between commercials and programming, and until the age of about eight, children do not understand advertising's persuasive intent. Even older children sometimes fail to recognize product placement and online advertising: in a 2015 study, only one-third of British twelve- to fifteen-year-olds successfully identified which search results on Google were paid ads.⁴

Because kids are such a lucrative market, there has been a concerted effort over the past three decades to target them with advertising. In 2008, companies spent \$17 billion advertising to children, a startling increase from the \$216 million (adjusted for inflation) that they spent in 1983. For companies, if not for children, families, and the Earth, these efforts have paid off. It is estimated that children under twelve influence about \$1.2 trillion worth of purchases in the United States each year.⁵

The dramatic increase in marketing aimed at children has been facilitated by a huge increase in media made for children. (Or perhaps more accurately, the realization that marketing to children is profitable has led companies to create more kids' media.) And kids are tuning in: screen time often begins in infancy, despite public health warnings to avoid screen media until age two. On any given day, 64 percent of babies and toddlers spend time with screens, averaging just over two hours per day. Conservative estimates find that preschoolers spend an average of 2 hours a day with screens, and some research puts that number as high as 4.6 hours. Kids ages eight to eighteen spend more time with screen media than they do in classrooms or with parents.⁶

Screens are far and away the number-one way that marketers reach children. On television, kids see about sixty-eight commercials per day, not counting product placements. On YouTube, one of the three most popular websites for kids, brands create long-form ads disguised as programming, and children are paid to sell products to other children in the form of “unboxing” videos and other influencer advertising. More than half of apps used by children contain advertising, and almost 100 percent of mobile games played by kids serve them ads.⁷

As digital video recorders (DVRs), streaming services, and adblockers allow some children to avoid ads, marketers have developed new ways to sell things to kids. Product placement is increasingly prevalent in kids' video games and online programming. Brand licensing has become an essential part of the children's media economy, and nearly every popular show has toy lines and other licensing agreements, where characters appear on food packaging, apparel, toothbrushes, bedding, and more. And digital platforms let marketers quickly launch toy lines by creating short, inexpensive videos instead of costly, time-intensive television shows or movies.⁸

Online and mobile media are designed to track children and serve them



Screen power: three youngsters in front of a television display in a shop in Löwental, Germany.

personalized advertising based on their browsing and viewing habits. While laws in the United States and the European Union prohibit the collection of personally identifiable information from children under thirteen, in 2016, the websites of leading marketers Mattel, Hasbro, and Nickelodeon were discovered to be tracking kids. Other apps and websites popular with children simply ignore existing prohibitions on data collection and targeted marketing by pretending that their users are thirteen and older. And there are no laws protecting the information of teenagers. On social networks, friendships are mined for data, sold to marketers, and then used to design ads capitalizing on kids' relationships.⁹

Even traditional educational spaces are commercialized. Thousands of U.S. schools show Channel One News, a current-events program with specially designed student-targeted commercials. Schools that use Channel One lose a full day of school each year to ads. Ads appear in school gyms, on walls, and even across students' lockers. And under the guise of promoting everything from reading to healthy lifestyles, Ronald McDonald regularly visits pre-schools and elementary schools in Australia, Brazil, China, The Netherlands, and the United States.¹⁰

In recent years, a wealth of research has confirmed that a commercialized childhood undermines children's social, emotional, and physical well-being. Exposure to marketing is a factor in childhood obesity, eating disorders, unhealthy body image, youth violence and aggression, sexualization, and family conflict. Less understood is how marketing indoctrinates children into consumer capitalism, developing habits and values that are unsustainable not only for kids' physical and emotional health, but also for our planet.¹¹

The Unsustainability of Commercial Culture

As an outgrowth of consumer capitalism, the commercialization of childhood has contributed to the rapid changing of our planet. It is unhealthy and unsustainable, and it imparts values and behaviors to children that are directly at odds with the values and skills they will need in a changing world.

First, and most simply, the products marketed to children are wasteful. Take the Happy Meal, the centerpiece of McDonald's comprehensive strategy to hook kids on a lifelong habit of resource-intensive fast food. In 2011, McDonald's sold 1.2 billion Happy Meals, making the company the largest toy distributor in the world. Happy Meal toys are generally small, plastic, and disposable. Most are tie-ins for kids' movies, television shows, and other media

properties. Because each of these properties also has countless other toy lines, the appeal of Happy Meal toys is transient at best, sometimes lasting only as long as the meal itself. As one giveaway replaces another, toys inevitably end up in landfills.¹²

It's not just McDonald's that sells kids on this cycle of never-ending consumption. The proliferation of brand licensing means that children's favorite media characters beckon from grocery store shelves, toy store displays, and in nearly every department of big-box stores like Walmart. Licensed characters star in kids' television shows, which, in turn, feature commercials for toys and media starring other licensed characters. These programs and commercials reinforce one another and encourage children to express their love for a character by owning it in as many forms as possible. This is particularly dangerous at a time when the need to consume fewer nonessentials has never been more urgent, but it also signals a larger, deeper problem with the commercialization of childhood: marketers are selling not just products and brands, but also the notion that consumption is a path to happiness. Yet evidence suggests that the opposite is true: the pressure to spend and consume actually makes people *less* happy.¹³

A materialistic orientation, or the idea that buying things will make us fulfilled and successful, has been repeatedly linked to advertising. One study found that materialism among high school seniors was linked over time to national advertising expenditures, while another found that exposure to advertising in schools is associated with increased materialism in students. Studies from around the world consistently demonstrate a relationship between children's media use and materialism, and a recent study found that materialism increases among American and Arab youth as their social media use increases.¹⁴

Materialism, in turn, is linked to ecologically destructive behavior in children and adults alike. Materialistic people place less value on protecting the environment and are less concerned about the effects of environmental degradation on people living today, as well as the impact it may have on future generations. Consumer capitalism, which drives materialism, prioritizes values such as hierarchy, authority, status, and wealth over unity with nature, social justice, curiosity, and creativity. It is unsurprising, then, that materialistic values are negatively correlated with the prosocial values that are crucial to functioning communities.¹⁵

These are particularly sobering thoughts as our climate becomes increasingly unpredictable and as our ability to rely on one another, and to respect

and understand the natural world, becomes more important. Through a nearly constant barrage of marketing, children are internalizing the dangerous values that led us here in the first place: that we need to buy things to be happy and

that our own happiness comes first, even if it is harmful to others or to the planet.

It is now more important than ever to create advertising-free spaces where children can experience nature, build community, and develop a sense of curiosity. Historically, and with varying levels of success, schools have played a role in this kind of value-building, which makes the influx of in-school marketing particularly troubling. As school budgets shrink and as funding gaps expand, brands and industries are able to insinuate them-

selves and their agendas into the lives of children. Sometimes these insinuations are blatant—such as fundraisers where teachers “work” at a McDonald’s for a night and encourage their students to buy fast food—but often, they are more difficult to discern.¹⁶

In particular, sponsored curricula and classroom resources pose a threat to children’s education. A review of seventy-seven corporate-sponsored classroom kits found that nearly 80 percent were biased or incomplete, “promoting a viewpoint that favors consumption of the sponsor’s product or service or a position that favors the company or its economic agenda.” For example, the International Food Information Council (an industry group funded by Monsanto, DuPont, Nestlé, and McDonald’s, among others) and the American Farm Bureau Federation (an agribusiness lobbying group) developed lesson plans about the benefits of biotechnology and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that gave no space for students to debate or discuss the environmental implications of those technologies. This use of classrooms by corporations to promote industry-friendly viewpoints and brand loyalty is not limited to the United States: in Australia, Apple and Mazda are among the companies that actively promote their brands in schools under the guise of education.¹⁷



Claudio Lobos

A Happy Meal in Madrid, Spain.

Reducing and Reversing the Impact of Commercialism in Children's Lives

Given the impact that the commercialization of childhood has on the health of children and our planet, ending it should be a high priority for educators, advocates, and parents concerned about the future of the world. A three-pronged process for reducing and eventually eliminating child-targeted marketing includes: strong regulation, the designation of schools as commercial-free zones, and a reduction of screen time in favor of physical, creative play.

Regulating Kid-targeted Marketing

The commercialization of childhood is a fairly recent phenomenon and, in the United States, is a direct result of deregulation. In 1980, the Federal Trade Commission was stripped of much of its authority to regulate marketing to children. A few years later, the Federal Communications Commission gutted the rules governing advertising on children's television. Today, the minimal ad regulations on children's television do not apply to programming that kids consume on the Internet or mobile devices. As a result, YouTube and other online platforms are awash with content that would be illegal on children's television, including "host selling," where the host of a program endorses a toy or product.¹⁸

Other countries offer, or are beginning to develop, better protections for children. Most notably, Sweden and Finland prohibit any advertising to kids. In 2014, Brazil declared marketing to children under thirteen abusive and therefore illegal, although it remains to be seen whether this policy will be enforced. And in 2016, a bill was introduced in Canada that would ban *all* food and beverage marketing targeted at children, an acknowledgement that commercialism—and not just advertising for junk food—is harmful to them.¹⁹

For countries that are not ready for all-out bans, policies can be adopted that would greatly limit children's exposure to marketing and lessen its negative impacts. In the United States, the Center for Digital Democracy and the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) are leading efforts to advocate for cross-platform rules that limit and govern marketing to children. Such policies would include time limits on the amount of advertising that can be shown to children, clear separation of programming and commercial content, and significantly more-robust prohibitions on collecting data from children on the Internet.²⁰

Commercial-Free Schools

In order for children to become critical thinkers and active problem solvers—two skills that will be invaluable in the coming years—it is crucial that they have time and space to learn and develop without being subjected to commercial pressures or corporate propaganda. Children need to learn how to objectively evaluate the companies and industries whose actions are creating or affecting the social and material conditions of the future. In addition, allowing advertising and sponsored educational materials in schools teaches children and adults to rely on the largesse of corporations rather than to view education as a public good. For these reasons, it is critical to enact policies that prohibit all forms of marketing in schools.

There is considerable public and global support for such prohibitions. Eight countries, including Finland, France, and Vietnam, already ban in-school advertising. In 2014, the United Nations Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights issued a report calling for a complete ban on advertising and marketing in both public and private schools. In the United States, chronic underfunding of public education has led many school districts to experiment with advertising as a source of revenue. Yet public opinion remains firmly opposed to marketing in schools, even in difficult economic times: in a 2014 U.S. survey, 66 percent of respondents supported bans on advertising in schools, textbooks, and school buses.²¹

Grassroots efforts can play an important part in ridding schools of harmful commercialism. Consider, for example, the campaign against a 2011 curriculum paid for by the American Coal Foundation and distributed by the publishing company Scholastic to seventy thousand fourth-grade classrooms. Scholastic, a highly trusted brand among educators, claimed that “The United States of Energy” would teach kids about the advantages and disadvantages of different types of energy. Yet the curriculum failed to mention a single negative aspect of coal—not a word about greenhouse gases or the massive pollution caused by mining.²²

CCFC partnered with Rethinking Schools and leading environmental groups to mobilize parents and educators against the biased materials. Faced with the possibility of long-term damage to its brand, Scholastic pulled the curriculum. The coalition then turned its attention to Scholastic’s InSchool Marketing division, which produced “The United States of Energy” and other sponsored materials on behalf of clients like Nestlé, Shell, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Once again, Scholastic relented and agreed to

significantly limit its practice of partnering with corporations to produce sponsored teaching materials.²³

Replacing Screen Time with Unstructured, Physical, Creative Play

Screens are by far the number-one way that marketers reach children. Children and teens spend more time with screens than on any other activity except for sleeping, and most media are ad-supported—if not through visible advertising, then through data collection that is used to serve advertising elsewhere, or through brand licensing that makes entire media programs essentially one long commercial. The simplest and quickest way to limit advertisers’ access to children is to reduce the amount of time that children use screens.²⁴

In place of screen time, educators, parents, and caregivers should focus on increasing the amount of time that children spend in unstructured, physical, creative play. (See Chapter 7.) Research links decreased screen time and increased play to numerous emotional and physical health benefits, including better sleep, better connection within families, and healthier Body Mass Index. In one study, just one week at a screen-free (read: ad-free), nature-based camp increased preteens’ abilities to empathize with one another and to read emotion in other people’s faces. (Increasingly, screen-based games, such as Pokémon Go, sell themselves as a kind of nature-based play, but there are reasons to be skeptical of such claims; see Box 13–1.)²⁵

Children learn best through unstructured, creative play. Play is where kids learn to problem solve, to figure out how their bodies move through space, and to understand the world around them. Unguided play lets children work through their anxieties, explore their surroundings, and build relationships with their peers. In contrast, play that is shaped by branded and licensed characters—or by toys that have computer-driven “personalities”—can limit children’s creativity, reducing a universe of potential imaginative scenarios to a small set of narratives shaped by corporations.

Moving Toward an Ad-Free Future

A social, political, and economic system built on a foundation of ever-expanding consumption has created a world where our shared and individual futures are precarious. Children occupy a unique position in this system. They are trusting, eager, and developmentally vulnerable to persuasion. When children hear more from marketers than they do from parents, caregivers, educators, and friends, it stunts their radical potential, limiting their creativity and

Box 13–1. Pokémon No Go

For many years, and particularly since the 2005 publication of Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*, there has been increasing concern that children spend too much time indoors and, as a result, are disconnected from the natural world. Thus, many welcomed the phenomenal success of Pokémon Go, a location-based, augmented reality game where players visit real-world places to capture, battle, and train virtual creatures. Reports of players of all ages spending more time outside and joining with strangers on cooperative Pokémon hunts filled the news, and many hoped that this would be the start of a new age—one where technology would be used to get kids outside, into nature and interacting with one another, rather than immersed in solitary, indoor screen pursuits.

Within weeks, however, the game's producer, Niantic, announced that it would start selecting specific "PokeStops" and "Pokémon Gyms"—the real-world locations that players must visit to succeed in the game—based on paid sponsorships. The first sponsor was McDonald's, and in Japan, every McDonald's became a Pokémon Go hotspot. When children playing the game arrived at the restaurant, they were enticed to buy Happy Meals with Pokémon Go toys. The promotion was wildly successful and a boon to McDonald's sales.

Perhaps there are ways to use new digital technologies to connect children to nature and each other. But as the Pokémon Go experiment demonstrates, under our current economic model, apps are more likely to drive children to familiar commercial establishments than to unexplored places.

Source: See endnote 25.

their ability to imagine a different world. Marketers teach children to continue the values and behaviors—the overconsumption, the allegiance to destructive corporations, the focus on individual attainment, the dedication to *objects* and *things* over people and planet—that have brought us to this brink.

As we move into an unpredictable and almost certainly turbulent future, seeking out individual success in the form of consumption will not get us very far. Neither will trusting industry to know what is best, preserving hierarchies at the expense of creative problem solving, or looking to shopping as a means to fulfill our emotional needs and desires. The values imparted to children by marketers are necessarily at odds with our rapidly approaching future, and require us to take action now.