

Why and How Fast Food Advertisement Target
Children:

The Relationship between Child Consumerism
and Advertisements

VIA American Language and Culture program

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A typical American child might say, “Mom, I want to eat at McDonalds!” after watching the TV commercial between his/her favorite TV shows. There would be Ronald McDonald smiling at him, with many toys that make kids want to go. Their mother would not like them to eat unhealthy food, but she would just give in and take her child to the nearby McDonalds restaurant. This is a common scene, for people, especially children are easy to be influenced by advertisements that pervades around us every day. Our society is based on consumerism, and advertisements are ways to motivate us to use our money.

However, advertisements are starting to change their characteristics from how they used to be. Not only have they changed in quantity, they have also changed in quality, too. Before, the advertisements targets were mainly mothers, but now the target had altered to “little spenders” (Roche, 2009), who would bring in millions to the industry. This trend is especially typical in the fast food industry; famous restaurant chains now target children, and they have the opportunity to even enter into the education system itself.

During my stay in Stanford University, I was intrigued to find out that although many Americans say “we don't eat as much fast food as you think”, in actuality they still eat far more fast food in their daily lives than they actually say. Many famous fast food restaurant chains are in this campus too, and it is common to see people holding a paper bag with its infamous logo. Do they really like what they are consuming? Or are they only buying them because they have

been biased by advertisements for long time? To answer these questions, I have conducted a survey on August 16, 2011, interviewing 20 people in total. This paper aims to analyze the data from the survey and prove my theory that advertisements do affect people's choices, and it is more likely to be effective when it is in limited areas, such as schools.

The word "fast food" is defined as "hot, freshly prepared, and wrapped food items, served to customers across a counter or through a drive-up window" (Encyclopedia of Food and Culture, 2003). The most famous menu that would symbolize the fast food industry would be hamburgers and fried potatoes, though as the industry started to expand in the mid-1900s it is now common to see multi-cultural menus in fast food restaurants, such as Mexican, Italian, Greek, and Chinese foods. Although there is no consensus as to when and what the precise origin of fast food is, it can be followed back to the early 1900s "White Castle System", which has created the 3 key characteristics of today's fast food.

The 3 key characteristics of the fast food restaurant are 1) standardization of quality and performance, 2) the quick rotation of employees, and 3) relying on investors to franchise their restaurant chains. The first key characteristic could be traced back to The White Castle System, starting in 1916. It strictly standardized the quality of food by limiting the menu to simplified recipes, only including hamburgers, Coca-Cola, coffee, and pie. This system helped to maintain the quality in every restaurant, creating the feeling that customers would always get what they expect.

The second important characteristic is the work force of this industry. In the 1940s, fast

food restaurants suffered from low unemployment rates, which meant that most male American workforce bypassed the fast food industry for better paid jobs. The industry quickly replaced the lost labor with women and teenagers, which would continue to be the most common employees in the industry. As they are women or teenagers, the turnover rate is high, for they have the tendency to just quit when they become pregnant, have difficulty in school life, and when they do not like the job.

The last key characteristic is the franchising of the chain. The founders of McDonald and Burger King started to rely on their franchise investors to accomplish their goal of opening their restaurants in every American town. In order to maintain the quality throughout its chains, they strictly enforced product uniformity and used the mass media to advertise their shops.

There are now more than 150 fast food restaurant chains in the U.S, with over 500,000 restaurants according to the Google map. To keep the fast food restaurants familiar and common in every part of America, the industry puts their effort and money into advertisements, and those advertisements are especially aimed at children.

Children had become the direct target of mass advertisement; in Juliet Schor's statistics (2004) it was indicated that "American children view an estimated 40,000 commercials annually", which tells us how children had become an important target for the ad campaign. The number is significant compared to British children who view only $\frac{1}{4}$ of it. The target of advertisements has shifted from adults to children, who are the key factor of family's spending. This trend started in the 1980s which one marketing expert calls as "the decade of child

consumer” (Schlosser, 2001). Annually, over \$15-17 billion is spent on advertisements that target children in America, and ¼ of this money was spent by fast food industries (Shah, 2009).

Schlosser (2001) also points out how brand loyalty is maintained by placing advertisements in schools. It is said that brand loyalty may as well begin as early as at the age of two, and fast food companies aim to target school age children so that they will be their life long consumer. For instance, a fast food company would give school free alphabet charts children can use to study the alphabet, only that the alphabets are replaced with company logos (M for McDonald, S for Subways). Fast food restaurants also serve their meals inside the school, so that children will get used to its taste from earlier age, which enables the companies to have loyal customers. Schools allow this to happen due to lack of resources and money, and with a minimum fee, schools become one of the most strategic places to advertise and gain future customers that will visit the same food restaurant for the rest of their lives.

The market is expanding in correlation with how much American children are spending. James McNeal’s investigation revealed that in \$6.1 billion in 1989, \$23.4 billion in 1997, and \$30 billion in 2002 were spent by children aged four to twelve. The advertisements belittle the effect it will have on children emotionally or physically, but only think of ways make children shop more. If you turn on your TV, you will be able to see many advertisements on low nutrition snacks and drinks that would make children eager to have some, never mentioning its quality as food. And now, children must face these advertisements not only in their houses or while walking in towns, but also in schools, too.

According to United States General Accounting Office (GAO, 2000), due to lack of funds in public elementary and middle schools, more advertisements are entering into the education system. The commercial activities that are common are product sale, direct advertising, indirect advertising, and market research. The following are some examples of each:

Product sale- Sale of soft drink beverages, food, according to contracts or arrangements between school or school district and the company. It could also take the form of fundraising in kind donations or cash/credit rebate programs.

Direct Advertising- Signs or product displays in school corridor, or use of school equipment with corporate logos or brand names. TV commercials on Channel One are also examples of direct advertising.

Indirect Advertising- Educational material, teacher training system, or contest and incentives that are sponsored by corporations

Market research: asking students to fill in surveys or polls. Sometimes internet is used, and student's internet behavior tracking could be the target of market research.

Of the 19 elementary and middle schools GAO had investigated (November 1999-August 2000), all three commercial activities except for market research had been observed. The number has risen in the past decade, as both schools and businesses make much money or sales from adolescence. The public schools in America are lacking in resources, and selling out part of them (which is the children) is the best way to obtain money without raising taxes. Businesses will be able to monopolize the market within the school which not only benefits them

on the short term sales, but also on the long term span as well. As Gary Hemphill, senior vice president of Beverage Marketing Corp. puts it, "Teens are starting to make those decisions. They often carry those consumption habits with them throughout their lives". It will help corporations input brand loyalty into child's mind, which would decide his behavioral habits from then on.

The survey conducted on August 16, 2011 was aimed at mostly White Americans, who are aged 20-29. Due to their age, most were Stanford students, and described their income as average (when the average family income was given as \$46,230).

12

The graph 2 above indicates their behavioral habit on how often they usually go to fast food restaurants. As you can see, most people answered as going to fast food restaurants once a week to once a month. When asked with whom they go to the fast food restaurants, 50% answered they would go with their friends, 25% answered they would go to the fast food restaurants alone, and the rest answered they would go with family or co-workers.

To measure how much they are influenced by fast food advertisements, I asked them how many of the logos do they recognize from 17 fast food restaurant chain logos I have picked up unintentionally. The average number was 12.9, with lowest 7 logos and highest all 17 logos. They were able to remember 4.3 logos colors in average, and 10 people were able to state at least 1 catch phrase from those 17 restaurants.

3

The most recognized logos were McDonalds (many indicated the logo by pointing out the golden arch), Subway, and Starbucks. The least recognized were Hungry Jack's, Checkers, and Tully's. People who could answer the logo color were more likely to be able to answer at least one catchphrase.

Surprisingly, 9 out of 10 people who remembered the catch phrases were the ones who recalled seeing advertisements as a child.

15 out of 20 interviewees answered that they remembered seeing advertisements when they were children, and 6 of them answered as seeing advertisements inside the school. Of the 5 who answered no, two do not remember at all seeing the advertisements, but feel they are supposed to have seen the ads. The following charts are when during their childhood they saw the ads, and what kind they remember seeing.

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Graph 5 and 6 are column of the age period they have seen advertisements. The age period is divided by school period, in order to make it easier to compare between graph 5 that includes seeing ads during their childhood, with graph 6 which only includes interviewees who saw ads inside the school.

Graph 7 and 8 are pie charts of what kinds of advertisements the interviewees actually saw. Graph 7 and 8 are divided the same way as 5 and 6 (the former is during childhood, the

latter is only interviewees who saw ads inside the school).

When expanding interviewee to people who saw advertisements when they were children, we could see that most people thought they saw advertisements from elementary through college. The reason for this could be seen from graph 7. In graph7, we can see that most of the advertisements the interviewees saw were TV commercials and logos, which makes up 68% of the whole chart. TV commercials and logos are very common, and can be seen anywhere, so many people just answered as seeing them throughout their child hood.

However, when the interviewees are limited to those who actually saw the advertisements inside the school, there is a significant difference between college and others. This could be explained by how many fast food restaurants are on campus. It is more likely that we could find fast food restaurants on campus than inside elementary, junior high, or high school. In Stanford, there are two fast food restaurant chains on campus (Subway and Jamba Juice). College students would have more independent money, so the shops try to open on campus. Logos and posters could be easily found near the restaurant itself.

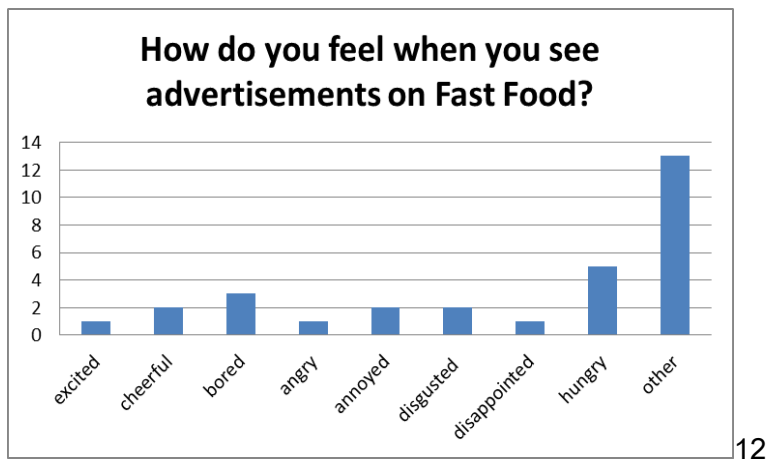
9 10

11

Graphs 9 to 11 indicates interviewees attachment to the fast food restaurants they currently go to. The 3 graphs are divided by the interviewees characteristics of whether they have seen any advertisements when they were children. As the data clearly shows, 86% of people who had seen fast food ads inside the school, 67% who had seen advertisements in their childhood, and

only 40% of people who didn't view or remember seeing fast food ads in their childhood said they are likely to go to same fast food restaurants. This data signifies the fact that the younger you are, the stronger the brand royalty toward fast food restaurant chains will be.

Another graph I would like to introduce is a graph on how people feel when they see fast food advertisements. The interviewees can choose more than 1 answer.



Only several people answered in positive ways such as excited, cheerful, hungry, and most answered other, which was indifferent and amused(only 1). 12 out of 20 people chose indifferent for their answer, saying they don't care about fast food advertisements. One interviewee expressed his reason for choosing other as "I've seen so many... they are every where that I really hadn't thought about the meaning." People who answered negatively such as angry, disappointed, annoyed, bored, and disgusted were 7 out of 20. "I feel like I'm being brainwashed. They leave out options so I have no other choices" is a comment given by a female interviewee who describes herself as disliking fast food, but still goes to fast food restaurants once a month.

These are some of the data I have obtained by conducting the survey. From the 9 graphs and their data, I have come up with a conclusion that fast food advertisement is more effective on earlier ages, especially in schools where information is limited, which proves my hypothesis as correct.

Fast food advertisements do leave out other choices. It eliminates its competitors by overflowing us with information on daily span. Especially when the targets of the ads are children, there is no place to escape from the overflowing advertisements. In Springs' words "Education is now a form of consumerism." (2003) Spring also notes that consumerism had become such a strong structure in our society, advertisements become the key factor to sustain the system, eliminating spaces where there is no advertisements. Advertisements are everywhere, driving us to consume what they want to sell.

From my survey data, I was able to recognize how effective fast food advertisements are in making people want to eat their food, educating them from early ages its own brand. I was surprised to see many of my interviewees getting the colors of the logos or stating the catch phrases immediately. What amazed me the most was how people were able to answer what the logos looked like, the colors, several catch phrases , but not being able to give their opinion about how they feel when they see those ads. They do recognize it, but it is then driven into subliminal areas of their minds, because there is just too much advertisements to remember all.

If I have a chance to do more in-depth survey on this topic, I would like to focus on the industry side and actually hear stories of how they commercialize children and how they

manage it. I would also like to frame the survey questions differently, so that the interviewees would not get too confused. Also if there is a next time, I would like to select the fast food logos in my survey according to the sum they spent on advertisements annually, and according to how many restaurants they have in the United States, especially in California, to match the interviewees background.

I have learned from my survey that advertisement is an important factor of American culture. Consumerism is essential in capitalism, and the advertisement is the fundamental to drive us into consuming more and more, without realization. They make us biased to one product over another, and when we realize that, it makes us feel disgusted to have to see them everyday. My interviewees were honest and patient when answering the questions asked, and I thank them for their cooperation.

Many people are now aware of the problem of child consumerism. However, there is still a need to raise social awareness of how truly advertisements that target children are developed and used on children. I hope to keep on studying this topic and see how advertisements for children will change as time pass.

Appendix

Survey Questions:

- 1) Circle the answers to the questions below.

Gender: ①Male ②Female

Age: ①under 15 ②15-19 ③20-29 ④30-39 ⑤40-49 ⑥50-59 ⑦over 60

Ethnic Origin: ①Caucasian ②Black ③Hispanic/Latino ④Asian

⑤Other ()

Occupation: ①Student ②Professor/teacher ③Staff ④Work at home

⑤Businessman ⑥other ()

- 2) How would you describe your living standard? (the average income per family is \$46,230)

1 High ②above average ③average ④lower than average ⑤low

- 3) How many people does your household contain (including yourself)?

- ①1 ②2 ③3 ④4 ⑤5-10 ⑥more than 10

4) Please circle/identify the logos you are familiar with.



①



②



③



④



⑤



⑥



⑦



⑧



⑨



⑩



⑪



⑫



⑬



⑭



⑮



⑯



⑰

5) How many fast food restaurants from question 4 have you actually been to?

6) If you remember any catch phrases or colors you know from advertisements on fast food, please specify.

7) How many times do you go to fast food restaurants? (ex. Dominos Pizza, Burger King, Taco Bell, PizzaHut)

- ① every day ② more than 5 times a week ③ 2-3 times a week ④ once a week ⑤ once in several weeks ⑥ once a month ⑦ once in several months ⑧ less than once a year ⑨ never

8) Who do you go with to the fast food restaurants?

- ① friends ② family ③ co-workers ④ alone

9) Are you the one who ask others out for fast food?

- ① yes ② no ③ half and half

10) Did you see any advertisements on fast food while attending schools?

- 1 yes ②no (skip to question 10)
 (☐elementary ☐junior high ☐senior high ☐college ☐other)
- 11) What kind of advertisements did you see? And how did you feel about it?
 ①logos ②flyers ③mascot characters ④posters ⑤other ()
- 12) Did you come from places other than major cities? (ex. San Francisco, New York)
 1 yes ②no (skip to question 14)
- 13) If so, do you think there are more advertisements here than your hometown?
 1 about the same ②about 1.5~2.0times more ③about 3.0~5.0times more
 ④other()
- 14) In general, how do you feel when you see Advertisements on Fast Food? (you may choose more than one)
 ①happy ②excited ③cheerful ④bored ⑤tired ⑥angry ⑦annoyed ⑧disgusted
 ⑨exhausted ⑩disappointed ⑪aggressive ⑫hungry ⑬have chest pains
 ⑭other ()
- 15) Do you usually go to the same fast food restaurant, or do you try new ones?
☐same fast food restaurants ☐new fast food restaurants

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