Teenage Consumerism: The Rationale and Results of Media Marketing

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Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Media marketing is growing in proportion with the advance of many forms of technology and the increase of advertising. Magazines, television, the internet and other media sources have become strong sources of information in a teenager’s life. Finding it profitable, companies effectively target adolescents because of four common characteristics: their mass consumption of media, their spending habits, their trendsetting ability, and the vulnerability associated with youth.

The effects that marketing institutes during adolescence include an increase in materialism as well as a commitment to brand loyalty. Although parents and peers lay the groundwork for the values that teenagers hold, media marketing is making an impact upon these values as well. Some effects go beyond the teenage years, such as the difficulty adjusting to living independently with limited luxuries and the urge towards becoming addicted to work. Solutions are limited, but include teaching financial responsibility and independence as well as helping teenagers set personal boundaries to heed.
Teenage Consumerism: The Rationale and Results of Media Marketing

Young people are growing up in a world saturated with an ever-expanding influence of technology and media. They have almost unlimited information at their fingertips – through radio, newspaper, magazines, television and most prominently from the internet. These young people thrive upon the commitment to freedom of speech, press, and religion. This freedom also brings a sense of bondage as well: “A free press is the inheritance of all young Americans. So too are the problems that go along with it. How they are dealt with will go far toward determining the world of tomorrow in which the young people of today are going to live” (Gottfried, 1997, p. 146). This bondage could be attributed to companies that are providing the resources to make mass media so powerful. A better understanding of this bondage could be described as a call to respond to the millions of promotions to buy into what entrepreneurs are selling. And the urge to buy has truly become a huge temptation.

Materialism has begun to grip our nation. Materialism, as discussed in the following includes “the tendency to give undue importance to material interests; devotion to the material nature and its wants” (Webster’s, 1996). One’s materialism is often gauged by the tangible objects, known as possessions, one owns or is beginning to gain tenure of such. However, materialism truly is the mindset of longing and focus upon these tangible objects and human goods.

As one generation passes and the next becomes more prevalent, this sense of bondage, often termed consumerism, is quickly gripping the nation and world. The greatest effort of mass media marketing is being focused directly toward the younger generation. This marketing is being blasted in the faces of children and teenagers who
will be stepping up as tomorrow's leaders. But why would the media target children when they are still young enough that they are not making as many decisions apart from their parents? Put simply, it works. So this issue of the media's effect on teenagers is very critical for those concerned about teenagers to understand.

Such targeting by marketers is effective because it affects not only the economic and moral decisions of teenagers, but through their influence, teens’ preferences affect the individuals surrounding them also. Young people are setting the pace that society endeavors to follow. The materialistic focus of the young audience is one of the driving forces behind the entire family being affected by media marketing and therefore becoming more consumer-driven.

What are the Major Influences in Mass Media?

As Americans of all ages indulge in consumerism, the possibility must be considered that such action is a direct result of the mass consumption of all forms of media offered. Media consumption has gripped the nation and the world. The result of such ingestion is a near crisis in this great nation. Rosenblatt (1999) found that an overdose of the media drives people from each other and from the truths of life – into their own little bubble. Technology and connection advancement has its perks and pleasures, but the associated negatives often outweigh the positives. The enhancement of life has brought many problems along with it, particularly for the young generation of consumers. Before questioning the effect of mass media, first it is important to examine what mass media is, what means of media are most prevalent, and how media became such a great part of America and the world.
Magazines

Media are simply the providers or sources of information. Mass media, therefore, are media that is available to large amounts of consumers. Much of mass media have developed into a source of entertainment from which individuals can experience and understand people, places or things they are unable to participate with in reality. However, “mass media are not primarily means for the transmission of culture – they are businesses first” (Eells, 1983, p. xiii). One powerful example of this is the magazine.

Magazines are a growing rage among teens who look to these sources for information and the latest gossip. Magazines were established well before the beginning of the 1900s as a form of mass media. However, by looking at a brief overview of the uprising of this media, one can clearly see that magazines did not become a major means of advertising until the mid 1900s. Burner, Marcus and Olsen (1995) reports that by the 1940s, magazines had shifted from receiving most of their income from subscription and purchase revenue, to the income from advertisement companies who placed their product on the pages of the magazine. Magazines’ audiences also changed with publishers no longer reaching only the elite class, but surged forward as they became more accessible to the general public (Burner, Marcus & Olsen, 1995). Teenagers quickly caught on to the availability of quick information through magazines, falling in love with the pictures, advertisements, and articles filled with gossip about the rich and famous. Today magazines are still a strong fascination among those ages twelve to nineteen. Fry (2000) reports that magazines are a crucial realm for interest of teenagers, especially those who are on the lower end of the age span, and even claims that this form of media is the number one medium in the lives of these young teens. If this claim is true that magazines
are the top source of mass media that teenagers consume, it is important to realize that advertising is an overwhelming component held within the pages of magazines. One overview of the portion of magazines devoted to advertisements found the following: “The Fall 2000 issue of Vogue contained 512 pages of ads, 77% of the publication” (Pieters, 2002, p. 765). This leaves only 23% of the magazine for pictures, articles and other information. Therefore, when teenagers choose to indulge in a magazine, they are being plagued with the lore of consumer goods and will probably find it hard to resist the desire to “need” such products.

Television

Television is another dominant form of advertising media and is one of the most substantially used forms of media: “Television ... is a powerful tool of mass communication in part because...it also provides much more information than radio..., and requires less education in order to be understood than the print media” (Condry, 1989, p. 2). Although the first television sets were introduced and sold to the public in 1939, it took many years for the concept of television as a strong form of media to take root. The growth of television took time, as families’ reliance on the radio shifted toward reliance on the television. Also slowing the growth was the limited number of television programs available. Findling (1996) reported that the climax of television history or the time period in which television had the greatest prominence in comparison with any other form of media throughout society was during the 1970s. Findling pointed out the prominence in America had an impact on people’s lifestyle choices. This developed into what could be considered a dependence on television in determining a person’s actions and lifestyle. According to psychologist John Condry (1989), television is influential
based on these three reasons: (1) the discovery of witnessing various situations and imitating what is seen, (2) the response that is given after observing certain situations, and (3) the ability of television programming to dismiss certain levels of inner tension. He terms these three effects of television: “observation and imitation…, arousal/desensitization, and… disinhibition” (Condry, 1989, p. 120). What is seen or viewed in all forms of media, but particularly television, has an effect on the actions of the viewers, even though this is often denied. In contrast, basic needs and desires are clearly affected by the participation in a medium, such as television, that fosters these desires.

Today the television no longer is a commodity held by those wealthy enough to own such a luxury; instead, it has become a basic household good which is part of nearly every household. Television once aired shows that could be enjoyed by the entire family, providing a source of clean, fun entertainment. However, this is no longer true. Rainey (1998) agrees that television is no longer simply a clean form of family fun, but rather sees television having become “so repulsive that even the federal government has become more involved by requiring warning labels on all programs” (p. 149). Television is shaping the culture negatively and has strong influence concerning the population’s spending habits. Teenagers are highly affected by many forms of advertisements, but they pay attention to some more strongly than others. Table 1 shows the results of a study done by TRU Teenage Marketing and Lifestyle (Zollo, 1999), when teens were posed with questions concerning which types of media advertising most easily caught their attention, television and magazines were listed as the top two selections.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising Media to Which Teens Pay Most Attention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most teens name cable TV, magazines, and radio as the advertising media to which they pay the most attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(percent of teens citing advertising source when asked, “Which advertising do you personally pay the most attention to?” 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before movies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before rented videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billboards, scoreboards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At sponsored events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet/online service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: TRU Teenage Marketing & Lifestyle Study
Within this percentile listing, television and magazines are chosen by over one-half of the respondents. In comparison, the lowest percentage of positive response towards advertisements is given to the marketing done on the Internet. The Internet is not very important as a means of gaining response to companies’ ads. But nonetheless, the Internet plays a significant part in the increasing rule of teenage consumerism because it is now a superhighway of online stores and auction sites. The use of the Internet to make purchases or to find deals on merchandise that is not available in common stores have become more widespread among Americans. A Wee and Ramach study (as cited in Teo, T.S.H., 2002) reported that the reason for this spreading was the availability and reduced stress over shopping and delivery issues. Online shopping may contribute to the rise in materialism among all ages, but particularly young adults who are the most advanced age group in internet technology. Therefore the Internet must be carefully considered when analyzing the factors involved in teenager consumerism.

Internet

According to Jupiter Communications Online Kids Report from 1997, television is “losing its stranglehold on our youth, albeit to another type of monitor. Internet usage among kids aged 2 to 17 (who have online access at home) is projected to grow from its meager 6.5 percent...to 31.4 percent by 2002” (Cravatta, 1997). If these projections were true of the late 20th century, it can be reasonably assumed that computer and internet usage in today’s age has only expanded further.

How did this strong force known as the Internet come about, and how is it being used as a form of mass media among young consumers today? The Internet can either be said to have been born in the 1960s when Arpanet served as the means from which the
first signals were sent, or it could be said that its birth originated in the mid-1990s when
the World Wide Web was first introduced. The later date is more practical considering
that the World Wide Web houses the majority of the Internet usage today (Cole, 2004).
The rise of the Internet occurred very rapidly, and its importance continues to grow
within the U.S. as well as around the world. With this growth come challenges as well.
The term “digital divide” has come about in the last several years to describe the impact
of current technology (which includes computer use) in separating the rich from those
who cannot afford such luxuries. Computer use, as well as Internet use, is not available
to all people if their income does not allow it. This leaves many consumers out of the
loop of the World Wide Web, but for young people, particularly those in public school
systems, Internet access is being made available to each student through school computer
labs. Though limited income may be a factor in personal computer ownership, teenagers
of all economic backgrounds may still have exposure to the Internet. Public libraries also
make the Internet accessible to the general public. Therefore, the reach of the Internet as
a source of influence in young teens and adults is far and deep. Because of this wide
reach and deep influence the Internet has become a major source of media information in
today’s society.

Without the development of these forms of mass media, it could be assumed that
advertising and marketing schemes would have less power to influence teens and create
an a never satisfied appetite for consumer goods. Unfortunately, the reach of media
stretches far beyond the magazine rack, the television set and computer screen. These
three forms of media have become the most prominent sources of information and
entertainment, but teenagers are targeted by many other forms of media including radio, movie previews and billboards as is seen in the survey of advertisement methods.

Why Study the Effects of Media?

Teenagers are one of the main age groups that are being reached by the messages of media for many reasons. One of those reasons includes the fact that adults have a difficult time connecting with this younger generation: “The age group between twelve and nineteen...usually referred to as “teenagers,” often behaves in mysterious, typically awkward, invariably embarrassing, and sometimes dangerous ways relative to adult standards of conduct” (Davis, 1999, p. 7). Sometimes adults and parents struggle with relating with teenagers today. Everything about them seems so fast paced, cutting edge, and opposite of what is expected of them. Where do they learn such behavior, and what influences their values and beliefs? The answer to this question is complicated because there are various influences in teenagers’ lives that ultimately determine their values and moral choices. Parents are major influencers in a teenager’s life, as are their peers. Another sway that needs to be considered is the immediate environment in which a teen lives, such as their community, neighborhood, or school because the actions of teenagers are also affected by their daily surroundings. But, beyond the influence of family, friends and environment, teenagers are also influenced by what they see and hear from media. This reveals itself in their everyday choices. The voice of the media, whether through a bright picture in a magazine, a television commercial, or a pop-up ad on the internet, is shouting loudly in a young person’s life. As the media advertises to teens, in response, teens are shaping their lifestyle and values based upon these influences.
Manufacturers study ways to make their products known, and specifically ways to reach specific audiences. For instance, the president of a large promotion company specializing in reaching tweens and teens with new products was quoted saying, “The new buzzwords for marketers trying to reach teens today are ‘guerrilla tactics’ or ‘underground,’ as mainstream corporate America realizes that smaller brands have started to do really well with marketing strategies that break away from the traditional approaches” (Thompson, 2000). Teens don’t want to be identified with the past or anything that is traditional. Instead, they are seeking out products that claim to be unlike any others out there. Thompson’s article includes another marketing director’s comments about reaching teens through various advertising strategies. This particular vice president stated, “One of the tenets of teen advertising is that they don’t smell the sell” (Thompson, 2000, p. 26). This means that teenagers do not desire to see advertising as simply a company’s means of selling its product. Instead, teens want something that is real and authentic, and therefore if they catch on to the tactics that marketers are up to as they are trying to sell their product, teens will likely choose not to buy into good. Well over half of teens – approximately 65% – claim that when it comes to commercials, honesty and sincerity are the most desired tactics in the promotion of products (Zollo, 1999, p. 288). In advertising, the goal is to make a profit; therefore, advertisers must know how to make their product appeal to the immense teenage audience.

Many companies have found that marketing directly to teens is profitable because this younger generation consumes such a large amount of mass media on a daily basis. It is evident from a study by Baran (2001) that young adults will consume over 2 million ads before reaching their mid-twenties. This divides out to be more than 8,000
advertisements every year of a young person’s life. Teenagers are huge consumers of media on a daily basis, and because of this marketers know that using mass media as a means to direct their advertising to adolescents is an idea that works. Even if a teen is highly resistant and unlikely to be persuaded to believe in the message of a single billboard or even numerous television commercials, the sheer volume of such messages parading before individuals every day might break down even a strong defense.

Teenagers need to be aware that the huge amount of advertising directed at them is not motivated by concern for their happiness or welfare, but simply to make a profit from their purchases. Maynes (2003) states this fact in his report on consumer markets in the United States: “Almost all seller-controlled messages are designed to increase sales of the company’s offering, no matter how far they maybe removed from the perfect information frontier” (p. 197). Making a company’s sales increase is the ultimate goal of all the effort put into creating, designing, and marketing products and services.

Teen and Family Consumerism

By the age of fifteen and sixteen, and sometimes even before that, most young adults are working part-time jobs to earn a salary. A study done by Swanson (1990) in the early 1990s revealed that teenagers were becoming wealthier and wealthier, with the average amount of money earned by a teenager in a typical week being approximately $60.00. The income of teens today should be figured to be much higher considering this figure was representative of an average from almost 15 years ago. The U.S. Department of Labor (2004), reported that minimum wage has increased, from $3.80 in 1990, to $5.15 where is remains today. Because of this increase, teenagers today are likely earning a good deal more per week from their typical part time jobs. Much of the money
that teens are earning from such jobs is disposable income, which they are using to buy products they want or desire. Because of this, with even the small amount of income teens earn, they have become huge consumers. Zollo (1999), showed that those who are categorized as teenagers spent approximately $94 billion in 1998, with the entirety of that figure being money that they had earned themselves. Adolescents are supplying a great percentage of profit for companies who are marketing their products.

But, young people don’t simply spend their own money. Susan Linn reports in her book that “children influence some $600 billion in annual spending, and marketers will stop at nothing to harness this kiddie-consumer juggernaut” (Brady, 2004, p. 26). Often referred to as kiddie-consumers or kid-buyers, it is evident that such influence upon family life is growing:

With societal changes such as... mothers working outside the home, and the increase in single parent families, children have had... substantially more influence when it comes to which restaurants and fast-food outlets to frequent, which pizza to order, which groceries and home necessities to buy, which computer systems, which brands of clothing – even which type of automobile to buy... (Acuff & Reiher, 1997, p. 1)

With or without their own source of income, teenagers are still in a stage of life where they are very dependent upon their parents to financially provide the majority of the money they spend. This is true throughout high school and even into their college years. According to UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, the money that the large majority (83%) of students use to pay their college costs, which include tuition, food, and other living expenses, comes from their parents (“Most students”, 2001).
By the time children are in their teenage years, they know how to get their parents to buy them what they want and need. This is shown by the increase in spending by parents on their older children in comparison to those with younger children: “Couples with school-aged children spent 39 percent more, while those with grown children at home spent 47 percent more... than average on most products and services” (“Most students”, 2001, p. 294). As marketers prey on teens for sales, this not only impacts them, but also their parents who are providing the money for them to indulge in these particular products: “For parents, the pressure to emulate is often experienced through their children... there’s little doubt that they are worried about whether their children are maintaining the pace with the Jonses’ offspring” (Schor, 1998, p. 85). A parent is more likely to overindulge or make exceptions to overspend in order for their child to be comparable to the teen’s peer group than adults without children. Media suppliers are focusing their attention on teenagers because this age group looks to media for influence, whereas adults often act in response to the social status that buying or having a product will bring.

Media does not solely advertise to children or adolescents. Marketers have to realize that single or married adults are also very influenced by such ads, and even more, they must be sensitive to the thinking of the children and teens’ parents. When considering the most important age category listed above, teenagers are the most important to reach because they have a huge impact on the choices of parents. Younger children are very important to consider in the consumer aspect of their parents, but because they are still young enough parents continue to make the decisions for them concerning what to buy and when to buy it. When it comes to making decisions for
teenagers, parents have less influence as to what they will buy, whether it is with their own money, or the money supplied to them by the parent. Therefore, teenagers are making an impact on the consumer choices of parents.

*Teen Purchases*

America is a consumer driven nation. From a very early age, children begin to understand the idea of wanting and buying. Young people are told by media and non-media voices alike, if you want something badly enough, get it. Many commercials use gimmicks, such as “Hungry? Why wait?” advertising Snickers® candy bars. With this type of mindset, teenagers move toward being a generation that is more consumer driven than any other generation in the nation's history. Teenage purchases are not simply small pleasures either. Because of the great income of teenagers as well as money supplied by parents either through gifts, allowance or simply provision, the power to purchase bigger items more possible as well as more likely among teens. Teenagers often are making major purchases including cars, cell phones, computers, and DVD players. However, such purchasing power is not a new development. Swanson (1990) stated that “teenagers have more possessions than you might expect: 86 percent of all teens own cameras, 89 percent own a radio, 66 percent own a stereo, 34 percent own a television, and 16 percent own cars” (p. 24). When it comes to big-ticket items, teenagers are truly a great part of the consumer domain. Teens who own multiple high priced items have become a huge segment of the target group that companies must consider when selling products. Teenagers are beginning to feel as if there are no products that they should wait to invest in after saving for awhile. With the availability of income as well as the ability for teens to make purchases with credit cards and loans,
there is a movement toward younger and younger adolescents investing in high priced goods.

Why Do Marketers Target Teens?

Adults of today often feel as if they do not understand teens. Although these adults are often parents or leaders of teens, they have difficulty dealing with teens because of differing lifestyles between the two groups. However, whether adults will admit it or not, teens are the ones who are on the cutting edge of society as the trendsetters for the American culture. Even beyond their immediate family, teenagers also have an effect on the choices of couples and singles because such individuals still look to the younger generation of teenagers as trendsetters: "Manufacturers focus on the teen market because teens are trendsetters, not only for one another, but also for the population at large" (Applegate, 2001, n.p.). Young and old alike look to teens for the latest fashion and trends that are popular and fresh. By "recognizing the enormous economic power of the teen market and teens' trendsetting ability, [it can be seen] what products or brands would be popular...in the coming year" (Zollo, 1999, p. 16). Marketers have studied the trends, and have seen that it is the idolized youth of this nation that are predicting what's in and what's not. According to Lopiano-Misdom & De Luca (1997), "the visible manifestations of trends...often start with the youth culture" (p. 3). Manufacturers know that by selling their product to this age group, they are really making a sale to the entire population. In a motivational book for marketers one of the tips offered asserts that "more than 80 percent of innovations in high-performing companies come from customers' ideas" (Kessler, 1996, p. 104). Teenagers are often the ones inspiring the ideas for what will be the next best product on the market. Companies
are seeking the opinions of teens to determine what they will sell as well as how they will sell it. Knowing how to sell a product is equally important as knowing what to sell. Adolescents are consuming media in enormous amounts, as well as setting the pace for today’s trends.

Merchandisers, however, are not basing their decision to target teens solely upon their trendsetting sway. It is the combination of this, along with the addition of the vulnerability of a young person that makes them valuable to sellers’ schemes: “The influence of mass media upon the minds and hearts of America’s youth cannot be overestimated” (Barna, 1999, p. 26). Vandegriff & Vukich (2002) use the analogy of adolescents being like babies or little children who have a fascination with putting things in their mouth and therefore put everything within reach into their mouths. This portrayal of the adolescent is used to help understand the actions of a teenager. Because the years between twelve and nineteen are a time when humans are trying to decide what they believe or like, it is said that they take everything in and then decide whether it is good or not as to whether they keep it or “spit it out”. Teens are in a process of searching for what path they should take with their lives and inherent in this process is much unsteadiness and uncertainty. Gene Bellolli, the vice president and general manager of teen.com was quoted saying, “A teen’s world is self-centered...It’s a point in time when you’re experimenting with yourself, your personality, trying different things, trying to figure out who you are and where you fit in the world. Anything that helps with that process gets to the core” (Benitez, 2001, p. 13). Companies who choose to market their products to a teenage audience, do so because they see teens as trendsetters in society and because of the distinguished vulnerability of teenagers to their messages.
As an adolescent, teens are in a stage of life where they are searching for their identity and who or what they should be. During this time, “young people are learning to define their tastes, values, and preferences. They are learning what they like and dislike” (Vandegriff & Vukich, 2002, p. 109). Media portrays images to youth concerning their lifestyle, and what a person “should have,” and teenagers respond by wanting and buying such products to make their life complete. Teenagers are seeking to be mature and independent. Teenagers respond to advertisements that help them achieve a better self-image or help build their self-esteem. Advertisements bring attention to something that is lacking in a teenager’s life. By simply zoning in on an area of teenage struggle advertisers create the need and then offer their product as the solution to the problem. Teenagers need to be encouraged and supported in order to develop a positive self-concept. The people who are involved in the daily lives of teens need to be strong influences in response to the pressure conveyed by the media.

**Consumer Choices**

Entrepreneurs are also pushing their products to this adolescent age group because youth are the foundation to the future of this nation’s society. Building a strong loyalty in this younger generation is important because, “everything about the future and our tomorrow has been planted, molded and nurtured by what is happening in the present” (Lopian-Misdom and De Luca, 1997, p. xi). One young entrepreneur stated their feelings about the ownership this young generation has upon what is to come: “we’ve already taken the baton from the Boomers and begun to show our presence in certain influential areas of society” (Holtz, 1995, p. 205).
Marketers are beginning to prompt teenagers now, as a way to mold what they will attribute to the companies’ future success: “Teenagers are important targets for advertisers because companies need to build brand loyalty. They want people to start using their products when they are young and continue using them for the rest of their lives” (Laboucan and Duncan, 2003, p. 1). Acuff and Reiher (1997) address this issue of early brand identification and state that although not all products are linked with brands that carry on throughout the years, much brand loyalty of adult consumers begins in their teenage years – such as the lipstick brands used by women, or the same brand of clothing that adults have used all their lives. Zollo (1999) summarized the results of a teenage study in Table 2 which displays products to which teens are already committed to a specific brand that they trust and use.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tampons/sanitary pads*</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antiperspirant/deodorant</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic shoes</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeans</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shampoo</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact-lens solution</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acne remedy</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toothpaste</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditioner</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast food</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft drinks</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Styling gel/mousse/spritz</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar soap</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gum</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nail polish*</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candy</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cereal</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera film</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potato chips</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cookies</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tortilla chips</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Girls only.

Source: TRU Teenage Marketing and Lifestyle
Because of the possibility teens hold upon the future, there are many marketers who are baiting the “hook” early to catch them now while they are still developing their likes and dislikes in hopes to keep their consumer allegiance throughout the longevity of their life. Mulligan (2001) describes the importance companies place upon seizing the devotion of young people now in regard to the long-term gain: “Companies targeting this demographic can profit substantially--and get a jump on long-term relationships with tomorrow's adult consumers--if they play it smart” (p. 101). Therefore, marketers are preying on youth because of their youthfulness and the possibility of long term commitment to their products.

*Media’s Role*

Parents and peers are both play a great role in shaping the character and nature of young people. Nevertheless, when it comes to their material desires, a third influence that must certainly be considered is the media. How much influence does each of these have in comparison to once another concerning the teenager’s consumer practices? Do peers truly shape who the teen will become, or does the parent set this foundation, and what part does the media play in regard to the consumer choices of young adults?

Parents are one of the most important role models in their child’s life from the moment of birth. They begin by having a child that is completely and utterly dependent upon them, and over the course of time a parent’s job is to move that child from sheer dependence to virtually complete independence. This independence is considered adulthood, in which life roles are fulfilled and the process continues as those who were once children now become parents themselves. In the early years of life, children are so reliant on their parents, that the influence of the parent is profound. Parents make
decisions concerning the eating and sleeping patterns of their children, where and when they will go and come, and what they will do and well as with whom they will spend time. This does not simply affect a child in their elementary years. A study done by the U.S. Department of Education's National Education Longitudinal Study consisting of about 25,000 8th graders showed that “adolescents are very aware of their parents' influence as well as their efforts to supervise them” (Jacobson, 1998, p. 1).

However, as a child enters the teenage years, he moves closer to independence and relies upon his parents for fewer and fewer of these choices. Peers become a source of influence regarding issues that the parents previously controlled – what to do, what to wear, and who to listen to or respect. The parent’s role in their teenager’s consumer behavior is mostly determined when the child is young before this shift to peer influence takes place. The area of consumer habits among parents is observed by their teen. In response to their parent’s lifestyle, children become familiar to this model of how important material possessions are. One college textbook shows the following regarding the financial cost of raising a child:

According to one survey, families of limited means, with income less than $38,100 per year, will spend an average of $124,800 to rear a child to age eighteen. A family of moderate means, with an income between $39,100 and $65,800 per year, will spend an average of $170,460 over the eighteen-year period, and a family with an income of more than $65,000, an average of $249,180. (Brooks, 2004, p. 7)

Parents with a more expanded income tend to spend more on their children than those with a more limited source of income. Therefore, children in more affluent homes
are raised to rely upon more material possessions to fulfill their learned standard of living. Based upon this we can see that parents are one of the first and most influential representations of consumer practices in the lives of their children. Children are likely to carry on many of the spending habits learned from their parents. However, parents are not the only influence upon teenagers. One must look at other pressures that weigh into this consumer battle adolescents are facing.

Peers also set a standard for what an adolescent will choose to indulge in for fulfilling themselves. Even before the child enters the official teenage year of thirteen, acceptance into a peer group is of utmost importance: “Individuality is out. Following the masses is in. The typical child learns what everyone else is doing and quietly, willingly complies” (Rainey, 1998, p. 50).

Although teenagers like to be known as individuals and try to set themselves apart from the “norm,” acceptance among people their own age is very important in their lives. As a teenager grows older, his self-esteem usually grows along with him, and usually in the early twenties he begins to be who he is, not who everyone else says he should be. But, throughout junior high and high school this simply is not true. Peers become the number one source for information, celebration and acceptance. Peter Zollo (1999) in his book *Wise Up to Teens* uses a study of teens to conclude that 55% of teens would turn to a friend when they need advice. However, the survey did not limit answers to one answer and so teens went on to say that 44% would seek advice and support from their moms as well as 23% who seek out support from a boyfriend/girlfriend (Zollo, 1999). As teens are developing their identity, they begin to seek independence from their parents and so peers become the number one source of information that is sought: “Teens are moving from
depending mainly on their parents to depending on themselves... The peer group is the place where they try out new things, develop their social skills, and define who they are. The group is very powerful" (Fanning, 2003, p. 18). Peer pressure begins to shape who a teen is, which often contrasts the actions or decisions their parents may desire from them.

Pressure to conform becomes a huge issue in junior high and high school. This pressure, in turn, impacts a teen’s values and even one’s worldview. If teenagers do not have a strong basis of belief in any particular area, they will easily be swayed to follow the crowd and to believe whatever makes them more popular.

A previous study has discovered “that materialism and social motivations for consumption increased with the amount of television viewing and with the extent of peer communication” (Flouri, 1999, p. 707). Although parents are very important in the shaping of their children’s consumer inclination, peers quickly become a key influence in the choices that the teenager will make. In addition to these two avenues of influence, media consumption pulls the teenager toward materialism and a preoccupation with consumerism. All forms of mass media, but those specifically attracting to the typical teen (television, Internet, and magazines), become a great link in the chain of influence motivating teenagers to become consumer-driven. The more media a child or teen is exposed to, the more their focus is directed towards buying or getting the bigger and better products available. Even so, parents, not the media, have been the most influential factor in a teenager’s life. The declining physical presence of parents due to the rise of dual-earner and single parent families is a source of concern, because sources of mass media are becoming a greater part of a young adult’s life. The television becomes an after school nanny, the internet a source of fulfillment for a teen’s loneliness or
magazines as a way to fill the time. Parents execute the primary model that teenagers look to for building a foundation of values, but, as parents are quickly becoming less involved in the lives of their children, teenagers are seeking alternative options from which to learn what they should believe and why.

*Less Moral Influence from Generation to Generation*

Earlier, as a teen expressed the influence of media on his lifestyle, this same teen added these remarks: “You're going to make your own choice, but media makes it easier for you and makes you put aside your family values. You see teenage shows and people have sex on the show. It's easier for that person to go and have sex and feel more comfortable” (The National Campaign, 1999, p. 1). This shaping of values by marketers is becoming more and more evident. It seems that children easily swallow the values of marketers, accepting them as valid and true because they saw it or heard it on a national media, which is in much greater demand now than when today’s parents were teenagers. Many parents were not ready for this great media overload because, “when parents who now have teenagers began their parenting in the mid-1980s, they did not have the media pressure that is in force today...we’ve got multiple computers,...internet, VCRs and DVDs...TVs, [etc.]” (Bucknam & Ezzo, 2000, p. 224). This shaping of a teen’s values plays a vital role in the adolescent’s future role in society. Ramos (2003), a filmmaker, expressed shock in response to what teens are listening to, and also stated his concern that they develop a sense of right and wrong from such sources. Kids are confused about the values proclaimed from the messages targeted towards them. Values that the current generation cherishes may not be those that are passed on to the next generation. Instead of parents and grandparents taking the role of influencing their children, media is
defining what is right and wrong and what values a person should cling to as their own. Moral rights and wrongs are quickly changing and this can greatly change the lifestyle that these teens will make once they are adults.

How does Consumerism in Teenage Years Affect the Future?

As marketers target teenagers, much of the effect from this is evident in the teenage years of life. Teenagers are consuming mass amounts of media and from this are becoming material focused. The desire to have more is not necessarily characterized by the possessions one owns because it is really an attitude or focus of one’s life. But, because teenagers have become more able to purchase more possessions based upon their growing income and their parents’ provisions, teenagers have become a part of those who own many tangible goods. This influence from media does more than just modify the lives of a teenager in the here and now. Such power will bring future results that can tragically change one’s way of life.

Lack of Restraint

Obviously media is making a difference in the day-to-day lives of teenagers. Even if these young people claim that media is not having an effect on them now, the subtle influence will show up in the future – after high school graduation, into college and beyond. Broadcasting of products will likely change the way young people believe and act throughout their lifetime. Swanson (1990) concluded that the spending level chosen or allowed by teens on purchases that are not necessities is unlikely to be matched when that teen begins to provide for their self away from home and from this dissatisfaction may rise among young adults. Providing for oneself after leaving home for the first time can be a huge shock. Often teens don’t realize the expenses that go along
with paying for rent, insurance and other recurrent bills. Beyond this, those who are exiting the teenage years and becoming self-reliant often realize that as teenagers they were provided with costly luxuries for which they never held any appreciation of the accompanying value. Teenagers may find that the comforts that once surrounded them in their parent’s home are no longer available to them when they rely solely upon their own income. This can quickly lead to dissatisfaction with life and the products that they can afford. From this can stem the quick fix of using credit cards or loans to fund the desired items. These means of payment become a problem for young and old alike when they use them to make purchases that are not necessities, but simply frivolous pleasures that they do not have the income to afford. Therefore, consumer indulgences as a teenager can greatly affect the adjustment to life outside of a commodious income that a well-established parent or other adult may have.

*Work Addiction*

Swanson (1990) goes on to point out another obvious obsession, which results from the desire to have more and more during a person’s adolescent years – that of workaholism:

Some worry that the amounts of time teenagers commit to earning money may lead to an overly materialistic orientation to adult life. One third of the male and one fourth of the female teenagers studied by Bachman work more than 20 hours a week. One teenage boy was quoted in a press article as saying, “I'd rather have money than pass a class.” (p. 24)

This attitude in such an early stage of the lifespan is only setting the teenager up for a sickness later in life. A huge number of Americans suffer from work addiction. For
many adults, men especially, the work week has accelerated to incorporate many more hours than the typical forty hour work week. For some, seventy to eighty hours a week is now becoming the typical workweek. For an adolescent who is a full-time student throughout their junior and senior high years and has extracurricular activities, sports or music involvement, the addition of a twenty-hour workweek is an incredible load. Teenagers will endure this, however, because they hold such a high standard of material wealth. This type of mindset is only setting them up for future overload when it comes to worker harder to get more. They may find themselves putting aside family and other relationships, as well as leisure and relaxation as they work to fulfill their dream of owning the bigger and better that media is proudly displaying for them to see. Building a foundation of a balanced life during the teenage years is very important to set the precedence for the rest of one’s adult life.

Some of the effects of materialism in teenagers have begun to take produced negative changes in their lives already, but from the knowledge gained steps can be taken to prevent further damage. One such step would be the idea of letting teenagers get a taste of providing for themselves by teaching parents when to say “no”. “No” is an important word to use, not so much in the form of punishment, but as a way to teach kids that they must learn to provide for themselves within their allotted income. Letting teens go without some of the consumer goods that they demand will help them understand the concept of scarcity and the necessity of priorities in making economic choices. Schools can also become a resource in this by providing economic classes that apply the exercise of budgeting and understanding income and how to live sensibly. Teenagers need to be informed of the danger that debt and credit cards can bring before they are allowed to use
them. Even then, because of their level of inexperience, teens should have limited access
to credit cards and should use extreme caution when determining if they should take out a
loan to make a purchase.

Obviously helping teenagers build limitations is extremely important. The most
critical example of this would be limiting one’s intake of media in all its forms. From
being careful what movies they choose to attend, to how often they check out internet
auction sites, limiting the pressures from the media will be the single greatest factor in
improving consumerism among adolescents. The government has stepped in and provided
some forms of limits such as the age stipulation to attend R and PG-13 rated movies.
They also provide television ratings to help parents and young people make good choices
concerning the shows they watch. Parents also need to be an active voice in helping their
children set limits and setting consequences for breaking these limits. However,
limitations must also be set by the teenager as to how much they can and will do or be
involved in. Setting achievable goals – physically, mentally, socially and spiritually –
will contribute to learning balance early in life and avoiding long term pressure to
perform.

Conclusion

Three major forces of media that are having a huge impact on teenager’s lives are
television, magazines and Internet. Television and magazines play a big role in providing
the “lure” to draw teens towards purchasing consumer products. Commercials and
advertisements have become a major part of television and magazine content and impact.
The Internet differs from these in that the effectiveness of the marketing on the internet is
low, but the Internet provides a means of fulfilling product decisions and purchases.
Media has a prominent position in the lives of teenagers as a source of persuasion. Knowing the effects of mass media on teenager’s consumer attitudes will help parents, leaders and society as a whole better equip teenagers to combat the negative effects of mindless action. The huge amounts of media ingested by teenagers compels adults to teach teenagers to recognize the profit making tactics of the marketers and assist them to understand the difference between fulfilling one’s needs and one’s wants.

Teenagers are fast becoming independent adults, but are in a stage where they remain semi-dependent. The purchasing power of teenagers, based upon their earnings alone is astonishing. They have a great effect on the purchases made by or for their parents and families and so if they become too consumer-driven, this induces problems for the whole unit. Teenagers are also setting the pace for those outside the family. Because they are young trendsetters, many other adults look to them for influence concerning consumer acquisitions. Targeting teenagers with fresh and catchy advertising tends to reach society as a whole, or at least a large part of this whole.

Some of the effects of marketing to teenagers are valid while the teenagers are still adolescents. There has been an increase in the desire for more and more material pleasures. The desire to have bigger and better products is plaguing the youth of this nation. This is changing the way people live and interact with the world around them.

One other change that takes place during the teenage years is that the influence parents and other adults once had on shaping the values, preferences and goals that a young person had has now begun to be shaped instead by the media position. Parents and peers still have a place in the lives of teens, but their self-esteem and self-identity as well as the daily choices and decisions they make are affected by what they see in the media.
Beyond the teenage years, mass marketing is quickly accelerating the level of dissatisfaction among young adults as they feel that their level of income is less than desirable when compared to that which they had known at home. In response to this dissatisfaction many adults are stricken with the problem of working too much in order to fulfill their material desire for more and better. There is no one action that will bring an end to this chaos. But, consistency among parents, leaders and teachers of parents will help better this situation. Helping children learn to base happiness upon matters other than the material is an important step to success. Also, giving them authority and responsibility to learn how to become independent and able to provide for themselves with pride and satisfaction is critical. Beyond this, simply setting limitations and training teenagers to set their own standards of conduct will bring about a change concerning the amount of media that they consume. Finally, teaching adolescents to hold values based upon true reality, not media’s fantasy, will help teens refocus upon who they are rather than what luxuries they have.
References


