



SPRING SEMINAR SERIES

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The Impact of Consumer Culture on Children's Well-Being

- Author of “The Overworked American” and “Born to Buy”
- Professor of Sociology at Boston College
- **Research for book:**
 - Conducted qualitative research
 - Was able to get inside the advertising industry through the AED (Advertising Education Foundation) which teaches educators about the field of advertising because they feel misunderstood
 - Was placed with a child marketing group – shadowed marketers, sat in on meetings, conducted 40+ interviews, was a fly on the wall
 - Surveyed 300+ kids (twens, age 10-13) in Boston schools
 - Created a scale of consumer involvement that she used to predict psychological outcomes (i.e. depression, anxiety, boredom, headache, etc.)
 - Interviewed parents and often the issue of food came up
- We come from a child protection view, but we need to remember the agency of kids. They have a savvy shopper view point.
- The food kids eat determined by 3 points on a triangle: 1) the child 2) the marketers 3) the parent
- Food has become symbolic. It is part of a child's identity.
- There has been an increase in children's purchase power. They increase both family purchases and their own economic resources.
 - This propels the advertising which follows the money.
- **The Nature of Food Marketing:**
 - There has been a shift from food ads that show functional benefits of the product (i.e. Frosted Flakes Taste Great!) to food ads that contain symbolic meaning (i.e. Frosted Flakes make me cool).
 - This is a very important shift that has a profound impact on the way we look at food.
 - Today the product is irrelevant. It's all about the story.

- Models about injecting desire into consumers are way too simple. Advertising doesn't fill you up with a desire for a product because if the advertising went away their desire wouldn't go away. It's a much more complicated process.
- Advertising taps into social dynamics in a powerful way.
- Alison James conducted a study with "kets," a popular candy in the UK that literally means rubbish.
 - Adults thought the candy was gross and wouldn't eat it, which is exactly why kids did. It was symbolically off limits to adults so kids wanted it.
- Number 1 symbolic value promoted in marketing to kids is the concept of cool.
- This seems obvious but think about what cool means
 - You are cool in a context.
 - Cool has a range of meanings.
 - There are a range of things that can be cool.
 - Examples: McDonald's – "I'm Lovin' It". McDonald's is now cool for young people after having lost their coolness.
- Should it matter to a 4 or 8 year old if a food is cool? Historically children only cared about a product's function (if a toy was fun or a product tasted good), now they are beginning to code foods socially.
- **Cool = the Forbidden Fruit**
 - Food is marketed as cool by virtue of opposition. The kid wants it because it goes against adults.
 - There are 2 food categories: 1) kid loves it but mom hates it 2) mom loves it but kid hates it.
 - **Anti-adultism:** marketers position themselves with kids against parents. They tell kids "we're on your side" and parents are the enemy.
 - Nickelodeon does this: "Kids Rule" (as oppose to parents)
 - **Age Compression:** marketers get kids to want what older kids and teens have – aspirational
 - i.e.) Soft drinks: don't market to kids, but kids see ads with teens drinking soda and want it
 - **Junk Food Marketed as a Drug:** "gives a buzz" like Red Bull or Mountain Dew – ingest food and put you in altered state
 - Kids report that they use sugar likes adults use coffee, to give them a boost.
 - Mothers say that they care most about their child's achievement, which depends on their child having energy.
 - **Eat-er-tainment:** turn food into toys (food counting books, advergames)—leads to deterioration in diet
- **Influence Marketing:** The influence kids have on parents purchase
 - Began in 1980s with Kraft who said that they could market cheese to a child. Before this only candy, cereal, and sugary foods were.

- Now we have blue butter and green ketchup being marketed to children and it works because parents think it's gross.
- Marketers pushed the nag factor, now they are trying to train parents.
- Marketers think about how they can get mom to allow the product in their homes.
 - Moms were the gatekeepers for foods in the homes, now they are the Easy-Pass. There are less boundaries and more access to the foods.
- **Wholesome Halo Product:** i.e. AlphaBits: they are letters that help kids learn so therefore they are good
 - These foods have easy access to mediums such as PBS and therefore are the worst abusers.
 - Moms are guilty about working a lot, and since food=love they don't say no to food.
- Dual Message: Two different messages are on food packaging: one gives mom the nutrition info and one gives children the cool factor.
- Parents fight so many battles, like sex, drug, violence, and school, that food is the one battle that is lost. This is a problem because food is the most threatening to children's well-being.
- Companies are marketing food the same way they marketed tobacco.
- Junk food is the gateway to other drugs.