

# Public Attitudes Toward the Youth Marketing Industry and its Impact on Children

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**Abstract:** *Few public opinion polls exist concerning the burgeoning youth marketing industry. We therefore conducted an online survey of 978 U. S. residents in the Spring of 2004. Results suggest that a large majority of respondents believe: a) that the youth marketing industry is harmful to children and has questionable ethical practices; b) that the industry contributes to a variety of problems common in youth; c) that most of the marketing which takes place in schools is unacceptable; and d) that marketing directed at children under 8 years of age should be prohibited.*

## Background

Recent years have seen a boom in the youth marketing industry. Since the 1980s, an increasing number of advertising, marketing, and consulting agencies have emerged, providing psychological and anthropological insight into the behavior and attitudes of young people. These agencies help companies craft increasingly sophisticated marketing strategies to enhance the sales of their products. Clearly they have been successful in increasing marketing efforts. For example, in 1992 corporations were spending about \$6 billion annually on marketing to children and adolescents<sup>1</sup> while by 2003 the figure rose to an estimated \$15 billion.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time that the youth marketing industry has grown, research suggests that marketing to youth contributes to a panoply of problems for youth, their parents, and society. Outcomes as diverse as childhood obesity,<sup>3</sup> materialism,<sup>4</sup> eating disorders,<sup>5</sup> violence,<sup>6</sup> and family stress<sup>7</sup> have been linked to marketing to youth. Further, public health organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association have

issued policy statements suggesting that marketing to youth be restricted.<sup>8</sup>

Given the enormity of the youth marketing industry and the potential problems it is causing, it is rather remarkable that we know little to nothing about public opinion concerning marketing to youth. To our knowledge, only two other large scale opinion surveys have been conducted on this issue since the late 1990s. One, sponsored by the Center for a New American Dream in 1999, consisted of a random nationwide sample of 400 parents; the other was recently sponsored by Kid Power Xchange and sampled primarily from individuals who earn their living via marketing to youth.

Given the age of the 1999 survey and the rather biased sample of the more recent Kid Power Xchange survey, it is unclear what the general public's opinions are about the youth marketing industry. We therefore conducted a survey that assessed individuals from a broader range of backgrounds in the hopes of finding out more information concerning how people view the youth marketing industry.

## Methods

The survey assessed attitudes toward a range of issues related to marketing to youth. Items were generated by examining Kid Power Xchange's recent survey and making appropriate modifications, as well as by developing a variety of new items. The survey items were then posted on a website, and all respondents answered through this medium. The existence of the survey was advertised through a variety of newsletters and e-mail lists to organizations that might be potentially interested (including teachers and others who work with youth); word of mouth and Internet search engines probably also played some role in the recruitment of subjects.

Participants were told that the survey was a joint effort of researchers at Knox College, Judge Baker Children's Center, and Dads & Daughters. After receiving information concerning the purpose of the survey and their rights as participants, respondents answered demographic and opinion questions. Throughout, respondents were instructed to consider youth as including individuals under age 18. The survey was intended to take most individuals five to ten minutes to complete. All respondents were given the option of e-mailing the first

**78% agree: youth are harmed by having marketing directed at them**

author of this report if they had questions or comments. The survey was available to respondents from March 11, 2004 to April 15, 2004. Further information about the exact format of the survey can be obtained by contacting the first author.

### *Sample Characteristics*

1009 individuals answered at least some of the questions in the survey; 31 of these subjects reported living in a nation other than the United States and were therefore dropped from the study, leaving a total of 978 respondents. Not all of these subjects

replied to every question, and thus analyses reported below have somewhat varying sample sizes. The sample was predominantly female (85.5%), and had a mean age of 40.35 years SD=12.54). 65.1% of respondents were parents, and 46.1% reported that their paid work involved children. Respondents came from 45 different states and the District of Columbia.

**84.6% agree: youth marketers are not doing enough to regulate themselves**

## Results

### *Note*

This report provides a basic summary of the results. The percentage of respondents who chose "strongly agree" or "agree" to an item are summed to yield indices of "agreement." The same procedure was followed for indices of disagreement. Subjects in most cases were also given the option of responding "neutral." More detailed information about the respondents' answers and exact wording of questions can be obtained by contacting the first author.

### *The Ethics of the Youth Marketing Industry*

Respondents were asked a variety of questions about the ethics of the youth marketing industry. The results suggested that respondents do not hold a positive view of the industry on the whole. 78.0% of respondents agreed that "Youth are harmed by having marketing directed at them." Only 3.7% agreed that "The current practices of the youth marketing industry are ethical," while 85.1% disagreed. 75.9% of respondents felt that the ethical practices of the youth marketing industry had declined since their own childhood. Not surprisingly then, 84.6% agreed that "Those who market to youth are not doing a good enough job of keeping themselves in check."

### *Problems Caused by Marketing to Youth*

Respondents next were asked whether they felt that the youth marketing industry contributes to a variety of problems seen in youth. Table 1 presents an overview of the results.

<b>The youth marketing industry contributes to youth:</b>	% Sample Agree	% Sample Disagree
Nagging parents for things they want to buy.	91.3	4.1
Defying authority figures.	56.9	14.6
Being too materialistic.	93.3	2.3
Being overly sexual.	90.1	4.3
Being violent or aggressive.	78.0	6.3
Having poor values.	63.9	12.8
Eating unhealthy foods that cause obesity.	89.2	4.1
Becoming bullies.	39.8	18.3
Not caring about school.	32.0	22.2
Feeling badly about themselves for not having the products they see advertised.	85.0	3.8
Being less creative and imaginative in their play.	79.8	7.1
Playing with toys that promote unhealthy behavior.	72.7	7.4

These results suggest that the respondents view a wide range of problems common in youth as influenced by the practices of the youth marketing industry. Notably, respondents did show some differentiation, as certain problems (e.g., becoming a bully, not caring about school) were typically not seen as highly related to youth marketing. However, most of the problems (including aggressiveness, materialism, obesity, lack of creativity, overly sexualized behavior, and problems with self-esteem) were considered by the respondents as detrimentally influenced by the youth marketing industry.

### *Marketing in Schools*

We next asked participants to rate whether or not it was “okay” to engage in a variety of different marketing practices that currently occur in many schools throughout the United States. Table 2 presents these results.

<b>It's okay...</b>	% Sample Agree	% Sample Disagree
to market soda and junk food in schools.	3.7	90.4
for corporations to sponsor curricula.	16.1	59.2
to have corporate logos on sports equipment.	18.8	58.1
to have news programs with commercials in schools.	14.2	64.7
to have school book fairs that sell products from only one company.	15.6	61.6
to have exclusive pouring contracts.	8.3	79.0
to place ads on school buses.	5.0	83.9
to place ads on school book covers.	5.4	83.5

The results clearly show that most of the sample opposed all of the marketing strategies regularly used in schools. The respondents were especially opposed to the marketing of unhealthy foods in schools and the placement of advertising on buses and on school book covers.

### *Possible Solutions*

At the end of the survey, respondents were presented with a variety of proposals concerning marketing to youth. Opinions concerning these proposals are reported in Table 3.

	% Sample Agree	% Sample Disagree
Schools should be commercial-free zones.	81.4	5.8
All of children's television should be commercial free.	58.6	22.8
Marketing to children should be subject to more government oversight.	73.5	11.0
Marketing to children 8 and under should be prohibited.	79.7	9.1
Marketing to children 12 and under should be prohibited.	60.6	17.6
Marketing to children 16 and under should be prohibited.	35.8	37.1

Increased government oversight and the removal of marketing from schools received quite strong endorsement. A majority of

respondents also agreed that all of children's television should be commercial-free. Respondents were overwhelmingly in favor of prohibiting marketing that targets children 8 years of age and under. Support for similar prohibitions decreased for older children, however.

### **Limitations of the Results**

Several limitations of the survey bear comment before discussing the implications of the results. First, the results are historically limited, as the survey was only available for completion during several weeks in the spring of 2004. Concurrent political, economic, and social events may have influenced respondents' expressed opinions.

**79.7% believe marketing to children 8 and under should be prohibited**

Second, the sample, while more heterogeneous than the recent Kid Power Xchange survey conducted with respondents in the youth marketing industry, is clearly not a representative sample of U.S. adults. Many more women than men completed the survey, the survey was only available to individuals who had access to the Internet, and the recruitment strategy may have over-sampled individuals who hold negative views of the youth marketing industry. These concerns about a biased sample may be lessened, however, when the current results are compared with those from the random nationwide sample conducted by the Center for a New American Dream in 1999. Similar to the current results, that survey showed that 87% of parents felt that marketing made kids too materialistic, that 78% felt that marketing in schools is inappropriate, and that almost 2/3 of the sample felt that television ads to children should be reduced.<sup>9</sup> The comparability of those results with the current findings suggests that the current sample may not be overly biased. Of course, future surveys at other time periods with more systematically constructed samples could correct for the

limitations of this survey and help provide greater clarity as to public opinion about youth marketing.

### **Implications of the Results**

The results shed new light on the attitudes of contemporary citizens as they concern the burgeoning youth marketing industry. The respondents to this survey clearly view many of the practices of the youth marketing industry as questionable, as potentially harmful, and as in need of regulation. What comes across clearly in these results is that most respondents feel that the current practices of the youth marketing industry have gotten out of hand and are in need of regulation, especially as they regard children 8 years old and under.

In particular, a large majority of respondents feel: a) that the ethics of the youth marketing industry are unacceptable and have been declining; b) that the youth marketing industry contributes to a variety of problems common in youth; c) that most of the marketing practices which take place in schools are unacceptable; and d) that governmental regulations and marketing prohibitions are necessary to protect children 8 years and under from the marketing industry.

**81.4% believe schools should be commercial free zones**

Although debate about marketing to youth has been on the rise, few changes in public policy or laws have occurred. The results of this study suggest that many people are ready for a variety of public policy and legal initiatives that would change current youth marketing practices and protect children and adolescents from an industry that many feel do not have youth's best interests at heart.

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## End Notes

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<sup>9</sup> Center for a New American Dream, 1999. Retrieved April 16, 2004 from <http://www.newdream.org/campaign/kids/press-release.html>.