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Abstract

In the last decade, a new age cohort of 8 to 14 year olds has emerged and been deemed the newest and most vulnerable target audience for advertisers. Advertisers work to create brand loyalty amongst tweens via clever marketing and increasingly interactive branding strategies. In this paper, it is argued that the concept of a 'tween' was constructed and defined for the purposes of profit via selling brands, ideas, and products. An analysis of advertising in education, the tween influence on family spending and the integration of branding into popular culture and gaming indicates a strong trend toward increasing market share and profit by reaching out to young adolescents.

KEYWORDS: Tween, branding, advertising, marketing, education, adolescence, childhood

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At every point in a child's life, an awkward stage is reached where teenage status is on the horizon and the designation of 'child' no longer seems fitting. 'Tween' is a term that has come to represent those aged 8 to 14, a group that exists almost exclusively as a lucrative market for advertisers looking for wide-scale profit. This vulnerable generation has been "raised by a commodity culture from the cradle [... their] dependably fragile self-images and their need to belong to groups are perfect qualities for advertisers to exploit" (Quart, 2003:xii).

Tweens are vulnerable because they are the richest generation in history, characterized by having excess pocket money and influence over parental purchases. Furthermore, the tween years can be distinguished by a lack of confidence and individual identity. This age group is likely the most brand-sensitive and knowledgeable, as they often attempt to define themselves through purchases. These vulnerabilities are frequently capitalized upon by marketers and advertisers via the integration of branding into all aspects of tween culture. As such, tweens have become the newest and most vulnerable target for advertisers, who work to create brand loyalty through clever marketing and increasingly interactive branding strategies.

The average child in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom views 20 000 to 40 000 commercials every year (Lindstrom, 2004:175). Children can begin to form mental pictures of corporate logos and mascots around the age of two, and therefore can be influenced by different brands before they are even able to have a conversation (Lindstrom, 2004:176). Teen oriented brands are now designed to "to register so strongly in kids' minds that the appeal will remain for life" (Quart, 2003:xiii). Toddlers are suited by Baby Gap and amused by Disney, while teenagers are outfitted by the Gap-owned Old Navy and entertained by Disney-owned horror films (Quart, 2003:xiii).

The concept of teenagehood can officially be traced back to 1941 as a term coined by Madison Avenue (Quart, 2003:xii). The term teenager was a vague category that grouped together a cohort of people that were no longer children, but had not yet reached adulthood. Immediately, teenagers became a lucrative market for advertisers and marketers; they existed as a new demographic created for the sole purpose of selling products and promoting brand loyalty.

Soon after the concept of the teenager gained popularity, the preteen years became the new vogue target market. In the late 1950's, the addition of junior high separated elementary schools from senior high schools in the United States (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:207). This social change is partially attributed to the increasing recognition of the tween age group. Junior high school students strove to differentiate themselves from their younger counterparts by attempting to look older and more mature (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:207). This appearance was easily achieved by mimicking the activities and trends of the senior high school students.

In many schools across North America, a child's popularity, social group, and 'cool' factor is primarily based on the brands that they wear and consume. Russell and Tyler discuss the "immense pressure [for children] to perform in line with ever-higher academic and consumer expectations" (2004:228). They go on to identify this pressure as a form of "corporate pedophilia," which includes

“marketing, advertising, and merchandising aimed specifically at children whose childhoods [...] are] stolen for profit through [...] precocious sexualization” (2004:228). The commercial identity of tweens is alarming because of its demonstrated ability to create awareness, preference, and desire for often unaffordable brands that inevitably create a division amongst children who can afford these luxuries and children who cannot. Children become defined by what they wear, rather than who they are. Bettig and Hall believe that it is the responsibility of “a democratic society to provide equal educational opportunities for all its citizens” (2003:109). With the increasing commercialization of public education, children are in constant contact with aggressive branding techniques from their entrance into kindergarten. Not even an educational setting is able to provide an escape from advertisers, whose efforts seem to be more concentrated on generating revenue than simply providing superior pens, binders, school uniforms, and nourishment to improve the quality of children’s education.

The question becomes how tweens have money to purchase designer-label brands in the first place. According to Cook and Kaiser, “tweens have designer-label tastes and frequently the buying power to match” (2004:218). One theory attributes the rise in single parent families to the rise in tween spending. Single parents are often required to work long hours and may feel guilty for lack of time spent with their children. This remorseful and over-worked single parent will often give in easily to tween requests for money and designer-clothes (Quart, 2003:70).

Tweens find themselves too young to legally work but too old to be entirely dependent on their parents, particularly for designer-label and accessory purchases. Another theory points out that tweens are able to earn pocket money from chores, paper routes and babysitting. Through these money-making opportunities and with a lack of bill-paying responsibilities, tweens can afford some of the brand name clothing worn by their older, employed teenage counterparts. Moreover, in Colorado and various other Western communities, there have been attempts to make it legal for children from ages 9 to 14 to be gainfully employed (Quart, 2003:16-17). Herein lies a common misconception that working children develop a greater understanding of responsibility and work ethic; this is true only to a certain extent. As soon as working interferes with a child’s focus on school and ability to complete homework, it becomes detrimental to the child’s academic success. With the increasing pressure on tweens to own designer-labels, focus may be pulled away from school and toward earning more money. As a result of this trend, Western children are often described as the “new proletariat,” who work in order to consume more commodities (Quart, 2003:12). For example, more than 55% of American high school seniors work more than three hours per day, while only 27% of foreign students work at all (Quart, 2003:16). The excess pocket money that these working hours generate makes it easier for young people to afford brand name items.

It is commonly believed that the tween years focus around discovering oneself, as well as building confidence and self-esteem. Instead, children obsess over and define themselves by the brands that they wear. A child wearing Gap clothing has committed to a mainstream designation; a child in Abercrombie & Fitch to preppy; Nike to athleticism; and Roots to patriotism. Each brand carries a strong connotative meaning that comes to define the wearer. Tweens become a lucrative market because expressing and defining oneself can be purchased and physically displayed – an easy solution in years that are often marked by uncertainty.

While Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger introduce new clothing lines for tweens (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:218), magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* introduce *CosmoGirl* and *ElleGirl* (Russell and Tyler, 2004:228). Conferences including the Annual Advertising and Promoting to Kids (APK) recognize and celebrate the most successful children’s advertisers while analyzing new opportunities to invade these children’s lives. By effectively securing the tween market, advertisers vie to gain brand loyalty that will continue into teen and adult years.

Tweens spend an estimated 1.18 trillion dollars of pocket money yearly, including their general influence over parental spending (Lindstrom, 2003:175). This is not a completely new phenomenon. In the 1959 winter holiday season, an estimated \$450 million was spent on or by preteens (Cook and Kaiser, 212). Marketers are not oblivious to these trends, and the realization that brand loyalty can be created in toddlers has led advertisers to work aggressively and competitively to appeal to younger and younger audiences. The competition can be fierce, as the average lifetime consumer can be worth up to \$100 000 US dollars (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:176).

Besides tweens' consumerist contribution each year, one aspect that differentiates a 21st century tween from previous generations is an unprecedented level of commercial influence over major family purchases (Russell and Tyler, 2004:228). Young adolescents are described as "highly influential in the choice of major family purchases such as houses, furniture, holidays and cars" (Russell and Tyler, 2004:228). Tweens are found to influence their parents' brand choices even when the brand is aimed at adults; an estimated 80% of all brand choices are controlled by tweens. Additionally, more than 60% of tweens strongly influenced parental decisions regarding vehicle purchases, despite the fact that tweens cannot even drive (Lindstrom, 2004:175). As such, tweens have become the "major target of the culture industries" (Russell and Tyler, 2004:228). Tween impact on family purchases has also been affected by the sheer rise in numbers within the cohort. In 1999, the tween age group was at its peak population of 27 million – the highest since 1979 (Russell and Tyler, 2004:204). A 33% increase of tweens from 2000 to 2005 was also recorded (Russell and Tyler, 2004:224). It is speculated that by 2010, the United States will have more teens than ever before in history with a 20% increase from 1995.

Although they are often conflated, it is essential that tweens are recognized as a cohort unto themselves, rather than assuming they are just children waiting until they can officially be considered teenagers. The need for a separate space for the group in department stores has helped make this concept clear. Tweens will not shop in the children's section, yet are not physically developed enough to fit the teenager or young adult section. A separate section for tweens has become essential, featuring teenage styles with less risky cuts and more appropriate sizes.

Tweens have a tendency to want to look alike or to 'clone one another' to blend in or avoid being social outcasts (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:211). However, tweens imitate teen fashion ideals only when the provocativeness and sophistication is toned down (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:221). What seems to be occurring, however, is a desperate attempt to maintain tween interest by marketing increasingly mature styles. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch has been widely criticized for developing clothing that many view as sexually inappropriate for tweens. The company has been attacked for marketing thong-style underwear for children as young as seven, characterized by explicit images and print, such as a drawing of cherries with the words "eye candy" underneath. (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:221; Quart, 2003:11).

The phenomenon or desire for younger girls to dress in older and more mature styles is described by Cook and Kaiser as a trickle-down process. Alissa Quart states that the most potent danger of this trickle-down process is the "aggressive twinning of logos and sexual desire when marketing to kids" (2003:11). In addition to imitating older fashion styles, tweens also mimic sexual behaviour of young adults. Female tweens have been found to commonly initiate romantic and sexual activity (such as oral sex) with older males (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:221). This behaviour has often been attributed to low self-esteem and negative body image, which has been partially related to media and Hollywood portrayals of women and teenage stars (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:221).

A trickle-up process is simultaneously occurring alongside the trickle-down phenomenon, where older women are mimicking more youthful fashion statements. Women appropriate young girls' clothing in order to convey a sense of youthfulness and sexiness, yet they do not realize the danger and impact of such trends. For example, the 'little girl' school uniform has been sexualized

specifically by the Britney Spears' music video *Hit Me Baby*. Spears wears an unbuttoned and belly-baring white dress shirt, a plaid mini-skirt, and pig-tail braids. While tweens work to look older, adults attempt to look younger in a way that fetishizes young girls' clothing (Cook and Kaiser, 2004:219).

Since the 1950's, television has been the primary medium for advertising and influencing teen and tween fashion and brand loyalty. Today, television commercials are described as creating a buzz around a brand and product. However, the most effective form of advertising for the new generation is no longer the 30 second television commercial played during program breaks. A survey of 12 000 adolescents indicated that on average, 12.2 hours were spent online while only 7.6 hours were spent watching television each week (Quart, 2003:100). This indicates a trend away from watching television, and consequently less time spent watching television commercials. Furthermore, with the introduction of TiVo and DVR, people can avoid television commercials completely (Quart, 2003:100). As well, the Internet has created the opportunity for free online streaming of nearly all television shows, and more recently movies. Advertisers aiming to reach the tween generation must take these facts into consideration in order to successfully adapt their methods of dissemination. If anything, television commercials directed at the tween market need to create a buzz that will inspire tweens to learn more through their own choice of media on their own time. Effective campaigns will trigger interest in the tween market, and will supply interactive information on as many modes of communication as possible. The more accessible the communicative medium, the more successful, powerful, and influential the branding technique.

In "Branding is no longer child's play", Lindstrom discusses the aspect of new media's availability to tweens 24/7 (2004:176). It is essential that information about products and advertisements are available to tweens around the clock to enhance brand interactivity and impact. While the Internet exists as one form of constantly available information, interactive advertising in video and virtual reality games can also be accessed at a tween's every desire. Brand placement in video games is a cheaper and an arguably more effective way to reach tweens than television advertising (Quart, 2003:100). Its success is also apparent: in 2001, the video gaming industry made \$9.4 billion (Quart, 2003:97). Subsequently, current marketing and advertising campaigns are working to incorporate brands into popular video games. For example, in "Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3," players choose what brand of shoes and skateboard their players will use. Quiksilver's logos are planted throughout the game, in addition to a Quiksilver store that virtual players can shop in (Quart, 2003:98).

What makes video game advertising so powerful is its association with a pleasurable and often exciting activity. A child playing Tony Hawk's skateboarding game may have just landed a tricky jump to pass a level after a Red Bull energy drink is offered to his or her player in the game (Lindstrom, 2004:180). In the video game "Croc 2," the main character Croc must buy LifeSavers Gummi Savers in order to make the jumps required to pass a level (Quart, 2003:101).

Advertisements are so smoothly incorporated that the brand is actually a part of the game, rather than an interruption from the game. The child has now made a positive association between success in the virtual video game and a brand to consume in reality. Advertisers can only hope that the pleasure from playing the video game is transferred onto the brand. The pervasiveness of such brand placement is clear – children are literally being "programmed" to want, desire, and crave these brands (Quart, 2003:99).

Moreover, the popularity of virtual reality communities and games has sparked another new mode of brand dispersion. Contracts worth over two million dollars have been made between the virtual game "The Sims Online" and the companies McDonalds and Intel. The concept of the partnership is to fully integrate brands in the "lives" of virtual characters (avatars) by having them eating McDonald's food and typing on Intel computers, instead of having brands simply flash by in the background (Quart, 2003:107). When brands become a part of the avatar's lifestyle, the message

becomes increasingly subliminal. There is no interruption from activity because eating McDonald's is the action itself. The result is an unconscious desire in the individual for the product, or an untraceable preference for a specific brand. The future of advertising seems boundless with the innumerable marketing opportunities on the Internet.

Where do ethical concerns enter in this aggressive marketing scheme? Sweden has already banned advertising to children under twelve (Quart, 2003:58). The ban has been placed on any toy, food, or electronic game that is geared toward children. The United Kingdom is following suit, with an onslaught of media literacy programs for children and increased regulation of interactive children's advertisements (Quart, 2003:58).

In Canada, the Advertising Standards Council (ASC) was created to set the standard for honest advertising and industry self-regulation. The ASC Code is not comprised of binding legal regulations; instead, it acts as a guideline for the advertising industry to voluntarily follow (Advertising Standards Canada, 2006). Additionally, the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council promotes self-regulation in programming by Canada's private sector broadcasters. While this voluntary self-regulation leaves principal control in the hands of the advertisers, it is potentially the beginning of improved regulation. The difficulty is that the focus of advertisers is to increase the interactivity and impact of advertisements on children, and not to protect children from aggressive branding efforts. This protection must come from increased regulation. The effort to protect children from intrusive commercialization is clearly evident in the U.K., while the rest of the world seems to be falling behind.

According to their revenue-motivated business model, what matters most to advertisers is that tweens continue to spend and influence parental expenditure in order to maintain their large scale profit margin. Tweens remain in a vulnerable position partly because there is no option of avoiding advertisements. From birth to adulthood, aggressive marketing strategies strive to connect and create brand loyalty at a young age. Tweens have sizeable spending power, and use this money to foster a sense of confidence and identity through commodities. Advertisers are aware of the tactics, including interactive branding in video games, which draw in the tween market. Tweens come to believe that the connotative associations of the brand will help define who they are. Tweens have been defined and constructed for the purposes of selling brands, ideas, and products. The life experiences of these categorized children are ignored. Instead, these children are deemed worthy only by quantifiable means – spending power and profit margin.

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