The Contemporary American Child as a Docile Consumptive Body

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that the contemporary relationship between children and advertising can be seen as illustrative of Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and docile body production. I contend that, within the context of a consumption-based economy, an individual's prime utility is her rate of personal consumption. Therefore, the subjection of children to ubiquitous advertising can be seen as the discipline through which the utility of personal consumption is maximized.

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and docile body production is manifest in the contemporary relationship between children and advertising. Foucault argues that disciplinary power strives to maximize each individual's utility as determined by the greater social system of which she is a part.[1] For example, disciplinary power as inscribed upon a factory worker is designed to encourage maximum speed, minimal error, and group cohesiveness. Within the context of a consumption-based capitalist society, a prime marker of an individual's "utility" is the rate at which one consumes. This contention is supported by the fact that, as per the Federal Reserve's 2013 GDP report, consumer spending counted for 71 percent of yearly GDP in the United States.[2]

Within the context of a consumption-based economy, the creation of docile bodies has been refocused towards instilling in children an obligatory response (consumption) to a particular learned stimuli (advertising). I believe: (1) enticements to consume, in the form of direct or indirect advertising, have come to permeate the spatial and temporal realities of American children, and (2) the ubiquity of such enticements, in the form of "discipline," produces citizens who remain docile and consumptive even after

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1997), 115.
[2] Economic Research Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, *Graph: Personal Consumption Expenditures/Gross Domestic Product,* accessed February 21, 2014, http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/graph/?g=hh3.

childhood. I examine two ways in which the productive nature of disciplinary power is demonstrated: (1) the internalization of a consumer-materialist mindset on the part of children exposed to heavily targeted advertising and (2) the transformative effect such ubiquitous advertising has on both the spatial and temporal realities of children's bodies. In order to demonstrate the psychological effects of ubiquitous advertising on children, I will rely heavily on a report from the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Advertising and Children entitled *Psychological Issues in the Increasing Commercialization of Childhood*.[3]

Foucault's Theory of Body Docility and Disciplinary Power

Foucault defines a docile body as one "that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved."[4] Bodies are made docile through disciplines, which Foucault defines as "the meticulous control of the operations of the body."[5] The purpose of discipline is to accomplish "the maximum extraction of force and time" from each constituent individual of a larger whole.[6] Discipline guarantees that each individual reaches her maximum utility as defined by the greater economic or social system of which she is a part. The utility of the pupil is to be maximally obedient, the factory worker to be maximally efficient, the soldier to manipulate both her weapon and her body in the method deemed maximally desirable by the military strategists of the time. I divide Foucault's modes of disciplinary training into three basic categories: spatial, temporal, and signal-response.

Spatially, individuals are constrained by what Foucault calls "the art of distributions," which are the method by which schools, hospitals, and prisons determine where each individual will reside in space (e.g., seating charts in classrooms, prison architecture, the floor plans of a hospital).[7] According to Foucault, the purpose of spatio-disciplinary control is both to encourage overall efficiency and to remind each individual of one's constituent role within a greater whole: "Each individual has his own place, and each place its individual."[8]

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[3] American Psychological Association [APA], *APA Task Force on Advertising and Children: Psychological Issues in the Increasing Commercialization of Childhood,* 2004, http://adage.com/images/random/childrenads022404.pdf.
[4] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136.
[5] Ibid., 137.
[6] Ibid., 192.
[7] Ibid., 141-148.
[8] Ibid., 143.

Temporally, individuals are constrained by what Foucault calls "the control of activity."[9] This discipline manifests in the implementation of schedules and the drawing up of time tables. Foucault uses an elementary school schedule as an example of how the implementation of time tables serves to extend and specify control on a minute level: "8.45 entrance of the monitor, 8.52 the monitor's summons, 8.56 entrance of the children and prayer, 9.00 children go to their benches, 9.04 first slate...."[10]

The third form of training discussed by Foucault is the "composition of forces."[11] While spatial and temporal control serve to construct the reality of an individual's surrounding environment, the composition of forces serves to exert control over an individual's very physicality. This control over physicality is accomplished by disciplines that train bodies to perform tasks and react to stimuli in highly specified, meticulously instructed ways. In order to introduce this concept, Foucault once again returns to an examination of seventeenth-century French military science. Foucault explains that, with the introduction of the rifle into military science, the "technical problem of infantry had been freed from the physical model of mass" and reconfigured towards ensuring that each individual soldier be trained to manipulate her weapon and her body more generally in the way deemed maximally efficient for the unit as a whole.[12] In Foucault's words, "The body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others.... The soldier is above all a fragment of mobile space."[13] In this sense, the soldier is no longer defined by the nature of her individual character; instead, each soldier is associated with her body. That body is nothing more than a single unit of a greater whole, which must be submitted to various disciplines in order to maximize the utility (efficiency) assigned to it by a given social system (military science).

A crucial aspect of the composition of forces is the stimuli-response relationship. As Foucault states, "All the activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions" that "must trigger off the required behavior."[14] In order for the disciplined individual to reach her maximum utility as determined by the greater social system of which she is a part, she

[9] Ibid., 149.
[10] Ibid., 150.
[11] Ibid., 152.
[12] Ibid., 162.
[13] Ibid., 164.
[14] Ibid., 166.

must be trained to respond to specific stimuli in highly predictable ways. A particularly illustrative example provided by Foucault is that of the typical French schoolchild, who knows to open her book at the single striking of a signal bell, repeat a mispronounced word when the signal bell is struck twice, and begin the paragraph from the beginning when the bell is struck three times.[15] This is the most important requirement of a docile body: the extent to which an individual reacts to certain stimuli exactly as she has been trained to do.

Advertising as Discipline; Children's Bodies as Docile Bodies

In order to support my claim that enticements to consume have followed the pattern of disciplinary power laid out by Foucault, I must establish that advertising has permeated the life of an individual subject as completely as Foucault's three modes of discipline suggest.

Foucault states that the efficacy of disciplinary power is at least partially due to the fact that it is "both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade...and absolutely 'discreet,' for it functions permanently and largely in silence."[16] In other words, disciplinary power, embodied by the implementation of time tables, the assignment of individuals in space, and meticulous signal-based training, is a particularly effective form of power because it necessarily leaves no aspect of an individual's life—either spatial or temporal—in which to experience a reality uninformed by the normalizing tendencies of the prevailing disciplinary order. The schoolchild has no *time* in which to question her greater social context because literally every minute of her school day is planned and dedicated to a specific task. Likewise, the prisoner lacks a spatial arena in which a similar kind of non-ideologically informed introspection may take place. Let us explore these two modes of disciplinary control—spatial and temporal—in relation to children and advertising.

Temporal Control

Temporally, children's days are divided between two areas that have been given over to advertising: leisure time and school time. According to a 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation report, the

[15] Ibid., 166-167.
[16] Ibid., 177.

average American between the ages of 8 and 18 spends about 7 hours and 38 minutes per day consuming some form of entertainment, strung across diverse platforms such as television, smartphones, and computers.[17] Given that the vast majority of free internet content is ad-supported, these 7 hours per day are likely as imbued with advertising messages as television-viewing. Given that the vast majority of American children spend the largest chunk of weekdays in school, it follows that the 7 hours of entertainment consumption per day detailed by the Kaiser report constitute the majority of children's non-school time.

Many American public schools now welcome advertising as a formal component of a child's education in order to generate more revenue and/or receive discounted products. For instance, one-third of U.S. middle and high schools show their students a current event newscast, which includes advertising messages between segments.[18] Additionally, commercialization has entered the public school by way of "posters, billboards, corporate-sponsored educational materials, and product placements in textbooks."[19] While schools pursue such relationships with companies in order to further the noble goal of increasing the financial resources with which they can assist their students, the intrusion of advertising into the educational sphere results in the further reduction of an advertising-free space for most children.

In the section of *Discipline and Punish* concerned with the historical implementation of time tables, Foucault references the way in which seventeenth-century educational science seeks to assign a particular disciplinary technique to each moment of a schoolchild's day (e.g., "8.45 entrance of the monitor, 8.52 the monitor's summons, 8.56 entrance of the children and prayer, 9.00 children go to their benches, 9.04 first slate..."[20]). In order to understand the ways in which enticements to consume inform the realities of contemporary American children, it is helpful to imagine an average child's daily time table: *7:45 listen to the radio on the way to school, 8:30 watch corporate news and its attendant commercials in homeroom, 12:00 get a fast food meal in the high school's food court, 4:00 go home and watch television with parents, 7:00 watch streaming video with friends, and stay glued to smartphone throughout the day.* What is salient about such

[17] Kaiser Family Foundation, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds,* 2010, http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/8010.pdf.
[18] APA, *APA Task Force*, 4.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 150.

a time table is the lack of a temporal window uninformed by the consumptive imperative; like the child in Foucault's seventeenth-century France, the average contemporary American child lacks a window of time in which to question the reigning ideology of her social context.

Spatial Control

Spatially, children are bombarded with enticements to consume in two ways. First, children are as susceptible as the rest of the population to the explosion of print advertising messages that have come to plaster much of America's "public" places, such as billboards, subway ads, and even advertisements placed on the insides of bathroom stalls. A 2007 *New York Times* article quoted a market research expert who estimated that "a person living in a city thirty years ago saw up to two thousand advertisements a day, compared with up to five thousand today."[21] Second, the more than seven hours per day of entertainment consumption is experienced by each individual child largely within the specific spatial domains that have been assigned to her: watching television in the living room, watching streaming video in her bedroom, browsing the Internet on her smartphone on the bus or surreptitiously under her desk in algebra class. Insofar as advertising can be understood to have an agenda, that agenda has successfully infiltrated the private spatial domains of American children, making those domains essentially ideological.

The ideological giving-over of the spatial arenas in which children exist is not only the mode by which Foucault's theory of the spatial effects of disciplinary power are manifest in the contemporary relationship between children and advertising. The amount of time that children spend consuming advertising-imbued media via technological platforms has started to affect the spatial realities of children's bodies. In 2013, the Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board in Wales commissioned a study examining the relationship between tablet use and poor posture "after it found that the number of children treated for back and neck pain had doubled in just six months." The study concluded that 64 percent of students ages seven to eighteen had experienced severe back pain:

[21] Louise Story, "Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Likely to See an Ad," *New York Times,* January 15, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/15/business/media/15everywhere.html?_r=1&.

a finding that the Board's physiologists linked to an increasingly sedentary, tablet- and smartphone-centric lifestyle.[22] Additionally, doctors at the University of Nebraska have linked early-childhood technology use in children to increases in poor eyesight and weight problems.[23]

What is salient about this information is not the detrimental health effects described; rather, what is important is the fact that the prescribed physicality of a technology-based, consumption-encouraging lifestyle (sedentary, passive, receptive) has altered the spatiality not only of children's environments but also of children's bodies. While discussing the ways in which soldiers in eighteenth-century France were subjected to disciplinary control in order to encourage maximally efficient weapons handling and group cohesiveness, Foucault states, "Disciplinary control....imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body, which is its condition of efficiency and speed."[24] The efficiency required by the power system of Foucault's example was the ability of a soldier to quickly and effectively handle a weapon; the efficiency required by the power system of consumption-based capitalism is constant subjection to the consumptive imperative; namely, passive reception of ubiquitous advertising. Thus, as a child's body literally morphs to accommodate the frequency with which she hunches over a tablet screen, watches videos on computer screens while lying down in bed, or cranes her neck to peek at her social media feed under her desk in Algebra class, an additional dimension of Foucault's theory of body docility becomes manifest: the ability of disciplinary power to alter not only an individual's behavior but, indeed, to alter an individual's physicality.

Anatomo-Chronological Control and the Stimuli-Response Relationship

While both the spatial and temporal dimensions of advertising-as-discipline are fundamental aspects of docile body production, what is most salient about these mechanisms is that they exist in tandem. The temporal infiltration of the consumptive imperative,

[22] Cardinus Risk Management, *Tens of thousands of children are facing a lifetime of back pains and misery,* 2013, http://www.ergonomics4kids.com/pdf/Healthy%20Working%20Back%20Pain%20Misery%2027%20Nov.pdf.
[23] YaeBin Kim, "Young Children in the Digital Age," *University of Nevada Cooperative Extension*, 2013, accessed October 7, 2014, http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/cy/2013/fs1322.pdf.
[24] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 152.

combined with both the introduction of enticements to consume in formally "private" spatial domains and the altered physicality of the child's body, results in the realization of an "anatamo-chronological schema of behaviour" described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*.[25] The ability of the consumptive imperative to construct both the temporal and spatial realities of children creates a kind of overarching behavioral web within which all behaviors and perceptions necessarily occur. The presence and continued expansion of this web allows for the realization of Foucault's third aspect of docile body production: the predictable and particular response of the individual to learned stimuli.

In his section on docile bodies, Foucault recounts the entrance of disciplinary training into the early school environment. He describes a method of school discipline envisioned by LaSalle in which the pattern of bell-strokes made by a teacher would, through repetition and training, result in the immediate and compulsory completion of certain tasks by the pupils without the use of explicit instruction. Such a system was deployed in order to "place the bodies in a little world of signals to each of which is attached a single, obligatory response...."[26] The purpose of such regimented discipline was to encourage the creation of docile bodies for whom the employment of particular learned stimuli would result in predictable and systemically advantageous individual responses.

The grocery store as experienced by the child is exactly one such "little world of signals." Numerous studies cited in the American Psychological Association [APA] report have demonstrated that both product recollection and brand preference can be strongly imbued in children after viewing a single advertisement for a particular product. Importantly, numerous studies have also shown that the "purchase-influence" exerted by children over their parents has a "relatively high degree of success," particularly in the United States.[27] A child in a supermarket is the subject of a signal (specifically packaged brand display), that signal triggers both the memory of and a positive emotional response towards that particular product as a cognitive result of being subjected to advertising, and the child's subsequent demand for the product results in the parent's decision to purchase said product. Although it may seem that the effect of a signal-based response is negligible, it is important to note that "children age

[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 166.
[27] APA, *APA Task Force*, 11.

fourteen years old and under make $24 billion in direct purchases and influence $190 billion in family purchases...."[28] The financial benefit gained by companies with heavy advertising budgets as a result of child-influenced parent purchases are, therefore, a direct result of the formative cognitive effect such advertising has on children. If my original conceit that one of the most important functions assigned to individuals within a consumption-based economy is the rate at which they consume, then ubiquitous advertising can be seen as one of the "methods of correct training" by which a particular trait of bodily docility (signal-based consumption) is achieved in order to maximize individual efficiency (overall rate of consumption).

Conclusion: The Production of Constitutionally Consumptive Citizens

Although signal-based consumption is one success of disciplinary power as exercised by advertising, it is not the only accomplishment of such a system, nor is it the only aspect of the system that can be described as "Foucaldian." Foucault very explicitly contends that power is productive. Power not merely censors, or says "no" to, certain behaviors or personal characteristics, but it also actively constructs desired characteristics and modes of behavior within subjected individuals. Joseph Rouse explains why disciplinary power as described by Foucault is more efficacious than alternative modes of power, stating that "other ways of exercising force can only coerce or destroy their target. Discipline and training can reconstruct it to produce new gestures, actions, habits and skills, and ultimately new kinds of people."[29] For example, by subjecting a schoolchild to comprehensive signal-based drills and creating an atmosphere of imperative obedience, the disciplinary power of Foucault's example not only creates a body which responds to certain signals in a specific way, it also constructs an individual for whom obedience is a primary value and the authority of her teachers an intellectually unquestioned fact. Thus, the payoff afforded to the normalizing tendencies of the disciplinary power does not end when the child is no longer in a classroom equipped with a signal bell. Rather, a new obedience-valuing, instruction-following, docile-bodied individual walks out of the schoolhouse at the end of her

[28] Ibid., 10.
[29] Joseph Rouse, "Power/Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98.

schooling and ideally remains one such well-behaved citizen for the rest of her life.

The APA report concludes that the ubiquity of advertising led children to "develop the mindset that 'you are what you buy.' Material possessions become the source of judgment by others as well as the source of one's own self-evaluation."[30] By instilling this sense of consumption-based identity formation in childhood, the disciplinary power of advertising ensures the creation of docile (consumptive) adult citizens. In this sense, youth-targeted advertising achieves two of the objectives attributed by Foucault to disciplinary power: predictable individual signal-based response and the internalization of an identity based largely on maximizing one's individual utility as defined by an overarching social system. In this case, the maximized utility is consumption, and it has been designated as a primary mode of individual utility by the imperatives of consumption-based capitalism.

[30] APA, *APA Task Force*, 11.