

## Consumer Manipulation and Its Effects

The United States is one of the only countries that does not restrict the amount of advertisement that is exposed to children (*Consuming Kids*). The lack of restriction has consumers at a state of consumer dystopia. Annie Leonard's *The Story of Stuff*, Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and the *Consuming Kids* these readings and documentaries explore how little consumers are self-aware about how they are manipulated by consumerism and the negative implications it has on other subsystems. Manipulating consumers negatively impacts consumption, workers, and our environment.

The manipulation of consumers starts at their infancy and follows them to their deaths. One of the terms or strategies marketers use is called the "Cradle to Grave" (*Consuming Kids*). Essentially, this means companies target children with their marketing strategies to create a life brand loyalty. With no defense, children can easily be manipulated from a consumer standpoint; companies look to create a life brand loyalty to gain a consumer for life. If children are being bombarded with advertisement, this can strip the United States of America's youth of their ability to "promote reason". This is also a valid point the documentary brings up and in most cases overlooked. After not having any defense against this predatory type of advertisement, and no ability to reason with oneself, how can a consumer be self-aware enough to negate this manipulation, not to mention the negative implications consumer purchases have on workers and the environment? This over-consumption follows children into adulthood. Leonard brings up a prime example, a consumer comes home from work watches television, is advertised to,

consumes and repeats. Very little do consumers know how being manipulated and partaking in overconsumption has lasting effects on workers and these companies' practices.

The birth of "Super Brands" is also attributed to the consumer practice influenced by overconsumption. "Super Brands" influence consumers to overconsume and help companies take on new personas with profit in mind. Klein quotes Hector Liang former Chairman of United Biscuits, "Machines wear out, Cars rust. People die. But what lives on are brands" (197). With this philosophy companies have looked to create these "Super brands" by getting out of the manufacturing industry and contracting jobs overseas. Wall Street has also influenced companies to invest more in their brands by valuing or devaluing how much the company is worth based on their brand. Klein brings up the case of Sara Lee Corp., a corporation still considered to be old fashioned in terms of their branding strategy. Klein states

Despite the fact Sara Lee enjoyed solid growth, healthy profits, good stock return and no debt, by the mid-nineties Wall Street had become disenchanted with the company and was undervaluing its stock. Its profits had risen 10 percent in the 1996-1997 fiscal year, hitting \$1 billion, but Wall Street, as we have seen, is guided by spiritual goals as well as economic ones. And Sara Lee, driven by the corporeal stuff of real world products, as opposed to the sleek ideas of brand identity was simply out of economic fashion. (199)

So even though Sara Lee Corp. was operating just fine by not investing in its brand, Wall Street was not too happy with that business decision. Seeing how this had affected their stock, Sara Lee Corp. announced in September of 1997 "a \$1.6 billion restructuring plan to get out of the 'stuff' business by purging its manufacturing base" (201). Companies now looked to invest more

money in their marketing practices and pull out of the manufacturing business altogether leading into “job flight stories”. Numerous companies, after investing millions in their brands, looked to ship their manufacturing business overseas leaving millions of Americans unemployed. Companies contract their manufacturing jobs to contractors in various foreign countries with efforts to reduce the cost to make “stuff” and gain higher profits.

With this new system in place for manufacturing purposes, contracted workers in these countries are now being manipulated by these companies to seek higher profits and build their “Super Brand”. Klein also dives into this topic in detail on how these workers were mistreated in terms of their wages. Klein states, “A 1998 study of brand-name manufacturing in the Chinese special economic zones found that Wal-Mart, Ralph Lauren, Ann Taylor, Esprit , Liz Claiborne, Kmart, Nike, Adidas, J.C. Penny, and the Limited were only paying a fraction of that miserable – some were paying as little as 13 cents an hour” (212). Companies will knowingly under pay Chinese workers to exceed their profits by larger margins. Klein also writes,

“The only way to understand how rich and supposedly law-abiding multinational corporations could regress to nineteenth century levels and exploitation (and get caught repeatedly) is through the mechanics of subcontracting itself: at every layer of contracting, subcontracting and homework, the manufacturers bid against each other to drive down the price, and at every level the contractor and subcontractor exact their small profit” (212).

Companies after seeing how investing in their brand influenced their profits, have sought to squeeze the most out of their contractors and contractors squeeze their workers. This is directly related to the amount consumers consume and the influence brands have on these

consumers. With companies seeing their influence brands have on consumers, they seek ways to exploit their consumers.

The effects consumerism has on our environment is the greatest issue that may not have a solution. Annie Leonard's video *The Story of Stuff* mentions the "materials economy" and how "stuff" moves through a system. The materials economy consists of extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal. Leonard also refers to how this system is in crisis due to the finite amount of resources and it is an infinite system. The first step of the materials economy is extraction. Extraction is key to this system as it is finite and "the U.S. currently uses 1/3 of the worlds resources" (*Story of Stuff*). Production brings us back to the manipulation of workers. Workers are put under extreme working conditions and compensated unfairly. The production stage also effects our health. As the production process "produces 4 billion pounds of toxic chemicals a year" (*Story of Stuff*). These chemicals and toxins that these production factories regularly produce have never been tested to see how they affect health. It doesn't stop there as babies are the ones that consume the highest number of toxins. Distribution is lead by

"externalized cost", meaning that the original price of products is not captured at retail prices.

Consumers don't pay for it our environment, workers and health add to the price of an item.

Consumption, consumers are told by companies that they need the newest "stuff". The

companies' ultimate goal is to make consumers feel bad about themselves, so that they consume their new product which turns into a vicious cycle of consumption. As seen in this system this is the heart of the system. Consumption is also referred to as the "Golden Arrow" by Leonard. The whole system is dependent on this step. With all this "stuff" being consumed, disposal is the final step as the rest of the step is directly influenced by the consumption. Leonard states "for every

garbage can we put out on the curb 70 more are produced at the factories that helped make the stuff”(*Story of Stuff*). Garbage was one of the main catalysts that put Leonard on her path to discovering the materials economy and how it is all connected to one system.

Leonard also introduces the principle of being a “systems thinker”. Leonard defines a systems thinker as someone who “believes everything exists as part of a larger system must be understood in relation to the other parts”. Consumerism is just that: a subsystem that affects other systems that may be smaller or larger, but they all work in relation to one another in some form. Those affects are often negative towards those other systems unfortunately. Now how do we fix the system of corrupt consumerism? Raising awareness regarding this issue can go a long way, taking back the United States government can be the first step. Many of our political leaders are making decisions based off their donations, usually coming from corporate business leaders. The American consumer must realize they also have two ways to vote, one is through the ballot and two with their wallet. Consumers have more pull than ever to influence their political leaders and companies’ success, also being able to promote reason, we must tackle this issue through our education system. Require students in middle school, high school, or college to take a class with the subject matter being Consumerism, just how we have sex education, music, and art classes in place. Consumers must take action on their own behalf and not be allowed to be taken advantage of.

## Works Cited

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classes in place. Allowing the Federal Trade Commission to restrict the amount of advertisement we are exposed to. Trial and error will also be key this is a system with so many different variables having the ability to try different solutions will be extremely helpful. Ultimately consumers must protect their children from consumerism and put in place guidelines so that consumerism is restricted on how it influences other aspects of consumers lives.