SNEAKY PEEKS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE USE OF
SUBLIMINAL MESSAGES
IN CHILDREN’S TELEVISION AND FILM

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Abstract

This thesis project is an account of how advertising agencies and film and television companies make use of subliminal messaging and product placement to manipulate viewers’ subconscious minds. According to research, there is some skepticism in some areas as to the effectiveness of their subliminal messages. However, it is clear that there is some recognizable effect; statistics show an increase in obesity and self-image and self-esteem problems spurred on by subliminal messaging in television and film aimed at the young.

The selected literature included well-known books on subliminal messages and other materials covering 50 years of research. The literature also included studies of the ethics behind placement of subliminal messages. The main usefulness of the thesis project is the discovery that there appears to be no current publication on the subject and no current legislation on behalf of young viewers who are subjected to a steady diet of subliminal messaging and product placements in two of the most popular forms of entertainment. Further study could be made and a campaign begun to recommend that television and film companies examine their ethical and moral standing on this issue, and attempt to find a way to lessen the harmful effects product promotion through electronic media has on impressionable minds.
Chapter 1 – Introduction

Parents bring their children to the movies and allow them to watch television for relaxation and entertainment. Subliminal messages, which are broadcast at microseconds during a movie or television program so that they can barely be seen or recognized, force viewers to absorb an idea or thought without their conscious knowledge. Thus, subliminal messages can interfere with a person’s peace of mind and right to privacy. To intentionally manipulate a child’s mind is blatantly deceptive, and, since to deceive is to lie or cheat or steal, to do so can be labeled a criminal act. Even the Federal Trade Commission states that using subliminal advertising is illegal, “. . . although most consumer behavior experts have concluded that such methods aren’t effective . . .” (Federal Trade Commission, 2001, p. 31).

According to an article in the Loyola Law Review, published in 2006, product placement is big business:

The amount of money spent on product placement increased from $190 million in 1974 to $3.458 billion in 2004. From 1999 to 2004, the overall product placement market grew at a compound annual rate of 16.3 percent. Product spending in 2005 is expected to increase 22.7 percent to a total of $4.24 billion. (Campbell, 2006, p. 449)

The importance of this paper and the research done on this subject is evident in the fact that it supports the children who are subjected to sequences of messages up to five hours daily (Fine & Nairn, 2008, p. 452) without their knowledge or conscious participation. Furthermore, it exposes the fact that an external someone or something is using television and film to sell products and make money through surreptitious methods and means (see examples 1, 2, and 4 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/).
Subliminal messages come in many different forms – they can be flashes on a screen that last a microsecond, but they can also be openly visual messages about age, race, gender, and class that are embedded in a script. For example, some minorities, as represented in some scripts, are represented as less intelligent than their Caucasian counterparts.

Such repeated suggestions can do much damage to the young viewer who may accept them as the norm. For example, the Disney Channel television character Miley Cyrus was portrayed as an ordinary, upper-middle-class girl who led a double life as rock star Hannah Montana. Her teenage rivals in the television program, Ashley Dewitt and Amber Addison, were portrayed as wealthy, devious, spoilt, and foolish. Ashley is a Latina, while Amber is African American. Miley and her friends are Caucasian. This show was a marketer’s dream, with product placements and after-show marketing that helped Disney emerge “. . . as the new powerhouse . . . .” According to an article in the Los Angeles Times in 2008, “Chief Executive Robert Iger singled out the success of the Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus: Best of Both Worlds Concert Tour 3-D film, which reaped $31 million in box-office receipts, a domestic record for Super Bowl weekend” (Chmielewski, 2008, p.1).

As Iger stated:

Its impressive performance highlights our mission perfectly . . . That is, to create high-quality content and apply innovative technology to raise the level of consumer experience in a way that differentiates Disney. (Chmielewski, 2008, p. 1)

More dangerously, there appears to be a whole science regarding how to relay the message that “thin is in and stout is out.” As Klein and Shiffman state in their paper of that name:
Recent studies suggest that such messages have become more prevalent over time and that today, more than ever before, the media provide highly unrealistic – some would even say highly unattainable – portrayals of body weight…such messages about the importance of losing weight, the importance of being thin, and the implied relationship between thinness and attractiveness are of concern because they present people with repeated messages about physically and psychologically unhealthy notions of what one should or should not look like. (Klein & Shiffman, 2003, p. 1-2)

Marketing agencies are very careful about where they situate their produce placements, and when. Advertisements for a sugary children’s cereal would never appear in a prime time adult show just as an advertisement for feminine sanitary products would not appear in a children’s’ morning show (see examples 1-3 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/).

But where do ethics come into this?

*The Christian view*

The basis of the Christian view is defined in Boa’s article as an appeal.

To certain truths about God and human nature. The belief that all human beings at whatever stage of development are persons deserving of respect really assumes that human beings are not mere animals but are creatures endowed with a capacity or potential for a relationship with God that distinguishes them among all living things. (Boa, in Espejo, 2006, p. 42).

This capacity for a relationship with God is affirmed by people of faith practicing religions other than Christian, and is a confirmation that, as Boa states, “Any moral system not based on that premise must ultimately allow human beings to determine their own purposes, if
any, and to make whatever choices they wish” (Boa, in Espejo, 2006, p. 42). Subliminal messaging undermines the ability of human beings to make their own choices by enlisting unethical methods of persuasion and by eliminating moral choice through subterfuge.

The Roman Catholic Church issued a statement in 1997 describing the ethics of advertising and its cultural, economic, moral, and religious abuses:

Advertising can be tasteful and in conformity with high moral standards, and occasionally even morally uplifting, but it can also be vulgar and morally degrading. Frequently, it deliberately appeals to such motives as envy, status seeking and lust.

Today, too, some advertisers consciously seek to shock and titillate by exploiting content of a morbid, perverse, or pornographic nature. (Foley & Pastore, 1997, p. 4)

In regards to the danger of the influence subliminal advertising may have on children, the authors stated the following:

Much advertising directed at children apparently tries to exploit their credulity and suggestibility, in the hope that they will put pressure on their parents to buy products of no real benefit to them. Advertising like this offends against the dignity and rights of both children and parents; it intrudes upon the parent-child relationship and seeks to manipulate it to its own base ends. (Foley & Pastore, 1997, p. 6)

The article also described the need to maintain the dignity of a human person, and the need for a sense of social responsibility in advertising.

It was not all bad news, however, as the article covered some of the benefits of advertising, including its economic benefits, its use as a method for political advertising, and its cultural benefits, which included the ability of advertisers to “exert a positive influence on decisions about media content” and to support “material of excellent intellectual, aesthetic, and
moral quality presented with the public interest in view” (Foley & Pastore, 1997, p. 2).

**The rational view**

Personal ethics can also have a simple, rational basis:

For ethics to be ethics, it must do the same thing: bring rational order to our lives. Which means explaining how human action really works, the raw reasoning we need before we let ideology, religion, or tradition determine our conduct…a human being’s will is self-governing – that is, one person can influence but not control, another person’s will.

(Wilson, in Espejo, 2004, p. 49)

The rational view claims that an external view that exerts governance over an unwilling human being is unethical. Subliminal messages that are produced in an effort to control another person’s will are also unethical.

**When is it okay to advertise to children?**

Nairn and Fine wrote that debate has circled around the question regarding the age “at which children acquire an acceptable degree of ‘persuasion knowledge’ . . . research shows that older children with a greater degree of persuasion knowledge are no less influenced by advertising than are younger children” (Fine & Nairn, 2008, p. 1). Apparently, age does not matter.

Theories regarding the exact stages through which a child progresses as he or she ages abound. Jean Piaget used an “age-stage” model in which “the child’s mental and interactive capacities evolve in a linear fashion through a set of biologically predetermined stages” (Fine & Nairn, 2008, p. 449). Other approaches from the area of cognitive psychology have also been proposed, including information processing, social perspective taking, and consumer socialization (Fine & Nairn, 2008, p. 449). The authors also recommend a campaign to help
children learn to recognize advertising when they see it, although “this is likely to be a large-scale undertaking given the many and various forms of marketing that use evaluative conditioning formats” (Fine & Nairn, 2008, p. 461).

The nonprofit organization Commercial Alert (Commercial Alert, n.d.) is currently working for children’s rights to peace of mind and privacy. However, in 2006, when Commercial Alert called on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to investigate product placement practices which were in violation of current FCC rules, no action had been taken in response as of 2008. The published stance of the FCC regarding subliminal messaging is as follows:

Use of subliminal perception is inconsistent with the obligations of a [broadcast] licensee, and . . . that broadcasts employing such techniques are contrary to the public interest. Whether effective or not, such broadcasts clearly are intended to be deceptive.

(Campbell, 2006, p. 485)

While the FCC has control over television broadcasting, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has control over motion pictures, video games, magazines, songs, and books.

Commercial Alert documented that product placement has grown in scope, sophistication and intensity, and argued that use of product placement is ‘deceptive because it flies under the viewer’s skeptical radar. It is unfair because it is advertising that purports to be something else’. (Campbell, 2006, p. 458)

And yet, according to Campbell, in 1992, “the FTC declined to take any action against product placement in movies” (Campbell, 2006, p. 457). Campbell also states that “the FTC staff recently found that product placements generally, including those seen by children, are not
deceptive . . .” although they also admit that they have “no awareness of the recent research on product placement . . .” (Campbell, 2006, p. 486).

**Terminology**

**Subliminal:** Below the threshold of consciousness. (Oracle Thinkquest Education Foundation, n/d)

**Subliminal message:** A subliminal message is not intense enough to produce a sensation but has sufficient intensity to influence the behavior and mental processes of one’s mind. (Oracle Thinkquest Education Foundation, n/d)

**Subconscious:** The subconscious mind is below the conscious and has no reasoning skills, and no ability to distinguish right from wrong, or to judge the information it receives. When a suggestion enters the subconscious mind, it is taken as truth and stored for future reference. (Oracle Thinkquest Education Foundation, n/d)

**Conscious mind:** Where the individual is aware. The decisions the conscious mind makes are based upon the knowledge and reasoning skills developed through experience and education. (Oracle Thinkquest Education Foundation, n/d)

**Information processing:** Describes the maturation stages of a child’s mind.

**Consumer socialization:** Study of humans as consumers.

**Organization of remaining chapters**

This thesis project is divided into five chapters, with an accompanying weblog called *Sneaky Peeks*. Chapter One is an introduction to the problem, which is an examination of the ethics behind the placement of subliminal messages in children’s television and film. Chapter Two is an in-depth analysis of the available literature on the subject, and covers more than 50 years of available research. Chapter Three is a description of the scope of the thesis project and
the methodology used. Research materials used were drawn from such resources as EBSCO Host, ILLiad, public library materials, web searches, YouTube, Google, and other online search engines for downloads of web material for the weblog. Chapter Four is a description of the thesis project, specifically focusing on the content of the weblog. It contains samples of the work included there, and a link for review. Chapter Five contains summary and concluding information, limitations of the study, and a description of a future study on the subject.
Chapter 2 – Theoretical basis and philosophy of assumptions

In the section on Media and Culture in the Griffin text (Griffin, 2009), Postmodernism is described as, among other things, an area in which “recurrent media images take on a hyper-reality – they are more real than real” (p. 309) This part of the postmodern theory is relevant to the use of subliminal messages in television and film: What the viewers see is “more real than real” and therefore, must be worthy of their consideration and acceptance as truth.

In the chapter by Marshall McLuhan (Griffin, 2009, p. 312), we are also labeled as “tools of our tools.” By this, McLuhan declared that as we shape our tools, they, in turn, shape us. As the media uses us as a tool to promote itself and its advertised wares, we also are promoting ourselves -- to ourselves -- through the media as consumers of those same wares. In this, the media is the message, and the message is ourselves.

Furthermore, Postmodernism is described in the text as a “new kind of economic order -- a consumer society based on multicultural capitalism.” This thesis project debates this topic by arguing that the new “economic order” has been shoved down our throats for far too long. It is time to make a stand, resist the “economic order” founded on capitalism, and, within the world of media, return to a normal state of affairs where privacy is respected, ethical behavior and social responsibility are prized, and a healthy peace of mind is guaranteed for all consumers.

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications issued a statement on ethics in advertising in 1997. The statement offered excellent insight into the many questions surrounding the ethics of and where the Vatican stands in relation to the placement of subliminal messages in television and film:

If an instance of advertising seeks to move people to choose and act rationally in morally good ways that are of true benefit to themselves and others, persons
involved in it do what is morally good; if it seeks to move people to do evil deeds that are self-destructive and destructive of authentic community, they do evil.

This applies also to the means and techniques of advertising; it is morally wrong to use manipulative, exploitative, corrupt and corrupting methods of persuasion and motivation. In this regard, we note special problems associated with so-called indirect advertising that attempts to move people to act in certain ways – for example, purchase particular products – without their being fully aware that they are being swayed. The techniques involved here include showing certain products or forms of behavior in superficially glamorous settings associated with superficially glamorous people; in extreme cases, it may even involve the use of subliminal messages…we can identify several moral principles that are particularly relevant to advertising…truthfulness, the dignity of the human person, and social responsibility. (Foley & Pastore, 1997, p. 5)

The U. S. Federal Communications Commission, which was established to set standards for radio and television broadcasts, declared in a report on the public and broadcasting (Federal Communications Commission, 1999, p. 10) that “subliminal programming is designed to be perceived on a subconscious level only. Regardless of whether it is effective, the use of subliminal perception is inconsistent with a station’s obligation to serve the public interest because the broadcast is intended to be deceptive.”

A study performed by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (Nalkur, Jamieson, & Romer, 1996) on the effectiveness of the Motion Picture Association of America’s (MPAA) rating system from 1950 to 2006, in summary, stated that “the MPAA rating system fares relatively
well in informing parents about potential youth exposure to explicit sex,” but that its treatment of violence is “more lenient.” The article continues onward, suggesting that:

Future research should examine the processes that facilitate youth access to harmful content . . . health care professionals working with parents and youth can play an important role in advocating for consistent ratings criteria for protecting youth from potentially harmful screen images. (Jamieson, Nalkur, and Rumer, 1996, p. 14)

Music and lyrics are monitored by the Recording Industry Association of America, which proudly boasts on its website that it is working “to protect the intellectual property and First Amendment rights of artists and music labels” by conducting consumer, industry and technical research; and monitoring and reviewing state and federal laws, regulations and policies (RIAA, 2011).

Freedom of speech and the First Amendment of the United States Constitution played a part in a trial that was held in Reno, Nevada, in 1989, when two boys allegedly attempted suicide after listening to the subliminal message “do it” hidden in a track on an album by the British heavy-metal band Judas Priest. The band claimed that they did not place subliminal messages onto any track in any album, but if they had, they would be protected by the First Amendment (University of Michigan, n/d).

In this well-reported case, the judge, Justice Jerry Carr Whitehead, ruled thusly:

The First Amendment’s protection of freedom of speech and press does not extend as far as subliminal messages. Since the recipient of a subliminal message is unaware of it, the message can’t contribute to dialogue, the pursuit of truth, the marketplace of ideas, or personal autonomy. There is no information exchange when it comes to subliminal
messages, and no disagreement or argument is possible if recipients are unaware of the message’s presence. (University of Michigan, n/d, p. 2)

The judge claimed that people have a right to be free from unwanted speech, and that, “since subliminal material cannot be avoided, it constitutes an invasion of privacy” (University of Michigan, n/d).

Nevertheless, in spite of the above statements, the judge ruled in favor of Judas Priest, explaining that “the scientific research presented does not establish that subliminal stimuli, even if perceived, may precipitate conduct of this magnitude . . . ” (University of Michigan, n/d).

The 1forall.us website has recently been created in support of First Amendment rights for all. It contains information for teachers and students on how to ascertain their rights and how to protect those rights (1forall.us, 2011). The site includes downloadable images in poster-size formats that cover such themes as “Free to assemble,” “Free to petition,” “Free to report,” “Free to tweet,” “and “Free to pray.” There are none, however, that say “Freedom to enjoy personal privacy” or “Freedom to live in peace.”

The literature

Fifty years of literature and research on the subject of subliminal communication and product placement were collected. Many of the literature resources related to subliminal messages mentioned the early study made by James Vicary, a private researcher who claimed that he had posted two subliminal messages, Drink Coca Cola and Eat Popcorn, during a showing of a film in 1957, and that sales of cola and popcorn had increased dramatically.

Unfortunately, this study turned out to be fraudulent, and was perhaps never conducted at all.

Two widely read books published since that time on the subject, Subliminal seduction (Key, 1973) and The hidden persuaders (Packard, 1957) are considered legitimate resources in
many of the materials. Key’s book focuses on the placement of certain mainly sexual works or images in paper and televised advertising. The Packard book is more of a treatise on ego gratification and paranoia.

In the chapter on the psycho-seduction of children in his book, Packard explains how fad-creation works through words such as “scientific” or “American history” that are used to described children’s television shows and promote them to mothers. Most of the television shows that are labeled for children today seem to focus on entertainment or comedy, but certainly they are packaged as being “good” for children to watch. How many parents assume that if the show is on the Disney Channel, it comprises wholesome and healthy viewing?

*The suite life of Zack and Cody*, and its spinoff show, *Suite life on deck*, Disney television productions which ran from 2004 to 2011, is about the life of blonde, blue-eyed, twin brothers. The scripts written for the two shows are blatantly racist and sexist, but have nearly a million Facebook fans (Social Bakers, 2011). In *Suite life on deck*, the twins live in a cruise ship and are meant to be a chaperoned by an obsessive-compulsive, African American concierge named Mr. Moseby. Another character in the story is an impoverished girl of Irish descent, Maddie Fitspatrick, who works at various jobs on the ship.

A fifth main character is London Tipton, the daughter of the wealthy owner of the cruise ship. The script for London has her portrayed as Asian American, beautiful, and obsessed with her own money and others’. She is also rather stupid or foolish. Other characters in the show are given similarly demeaning and racist characteristics. The television show was nominated for an Emmy awards for Outstanding Children’s Program in both 2007 and 2008 (Emmy.com, 2011) (see example 10 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at
http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/ for one viewer’s opinion of a single episode of this program).

Another Disney show, *The Wizards of Waverly Place*, features a main character, which, in the scripts she is given, is very negative, and constantly boasts about her poor grades and about how she never does her homework. This show won an Emmy award in 2009 for Outstanding Children’s Program, and was nominated in the same category in both 2010 and 2011.

The main body of literature used in this thesis project comprises three categories: the believers, the skeptics, and the children. Food issues such as anorexia and bulimia, as well as body image, teenage pregnancy, and suicide also play a role in the thesis project.

*The skeptics*

Not surprisingly, many writers on subliminal messages and advertising protest the fact of its existence. In an article on subliminal persuasion, authors De Fleur and Petranoff designed a test to see whether or not a group of subjects could be persuaded to change their buying habits over a course of five weeks. By the end of the experiment, the findings suggested that the increase or change in buying habits were “negligible, indicating that the subliminal message alone had no measurable effect as a persuasive device” (De Fleur & Petranoff, 1959, p. 175).

However, when the subliminal messaging was combined with more significant persuasive techniques, sales rose from 282 percent to over 500 percent. The authors suggest in the conclusion that subliminal communication alone is ineffective, and that, even were an audience to be subjected to subliminal persuasive techniques, their “protective habits would operate to resist subliminal persuasion” (De Fleur & Petranoff, 1959, p. 179). The authors do
admit that subliminal messages have been a part of our lives for decades, but viewers have been primed to find a way a way to resist their persuasiveness in whatever form they may take.

Another skeptic, Bertrand Klass, states in his article on subliminal advertising, that stimuli are naturally not the same for everyone.

Many seem to think that there is a strong link associating “motivation research” with subliminal advertising. They fear motivation research because of claims that it is capable of reaching into the unconscious for more complete explanation of human behavior. Subliminal stimuli, if defined as messages or forces that can reach into one’s unconscious mind to influence his behavior, understandably become even more fear provoking.

(Klass, 1958, p. 146)

He speaks more on the subject of fear – a ruckus was raised after Vickary’s experiment was broadcast and many people expressed fear that their subconscious was being penetrated by subliminal advertising. Klass attempts to calm these fears by saying that any such fears of intrusion are “erroneous” because “the unconscious, after all, is not something that we can measure, see, feel, hear, or touch” and “fears about the ability of subliminal stimulation to influence behavior markedly are grossly exaggerated” (Klass, 1958, p. 146). In summary, Klass states that subliminal advertising is not the technique that will revolutionize the principles and methods of the mass-communication industry.

In 1982, T. Moore wrote a paper about subliminal advertising, again describing the Vicary affair and how some people compared it to Orwell’s 1984 and Brave New World. Moore details similar follow-up instances, including the incorporation of such advertising into two movies, and the incorporation of a subaudible message into a radio broadcast: “TV’s a bore.” Moore explains the use of a tachiscope, a device that is used to control the duration of a visual
stimulus wherein a directive is flashed so quickly that a viewer is unaware of its existence. The directive appears so quickly, at a thousandth of a second in some instances, that it only registers in the subconscious mind and thereby causes the viewer to act as directed.

Moore claims that, through experimentation:

Stimulation below the level of conscious can be shown to have measureable effects upon some aspects of behavior. The point at issue is whether these effects are sufficient to warrant the conclusion that goal-directed behavior can be manipulated by such stimulation. (Moore, 1982, p. 40)

The other two methods Moore describes that are used most frequently in attempts to control a subconscious impulse are “the use of accelerated speech in low-volume auditory messages”, as in “Paul is dead” which was a message purportedly hidden in the Revolver #9 track on the Beatles’ White Album (Tas4158.tripod.com, 2011), and “embedding or hidden sexual imagery (or sometimes words) in pictorial advertisements” (Moore, 1982, p. 39) (see example 3 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethnic.blogspot.com/).

In regards to visual and auditory stimuli, Moore’s summarizes his findings by stating that “the assumption that behavior can be automatically triggered by the presentation of some particular stimulus is as unwarranted for auditory messages as it is for visual ones” (Moore, 1982, p. 45).

However, in regard to embedded stimuli, such as those described by others such as Key, Moore found that:

While Key appears to have misjudged the efficacy of embedded stimuli, it would be a mistake to dismiss out of hand all of his remarks concerning the latent effects of advertising . . . If women are consistently portrayed in insignificant or demeaning roles,
the viewer may develop an attitude towards them that is ultimately prejudicial and harmful to women as a group. Moreover, these attitudes are not consciously formed . . . While the acquisition of such attitudes may occur subconsciously, there is nothing subliminal about the presentation of the role models. On the contrary, they are distressingly conspicuous. This kind of implicit learning can have important and pervasive consequences . . . (Moore, 1982, p. 46)

The believers

Beside the Vatican (Foley & Pastore, 1997), Key and Packard head the list of believers in the existence of subliminal advertising. The Key book, which is frequently mentioned in other works about subliminal message placement, contains advertising samples from the 1970s, as well as descriptions of other samples. Most of what he describes is sexually based imagery embedded or hidden in advertisements for products consumed by adults, such as alcohol and cigarette advertisements. In the introduction, Marshall McLuhan states:

Key has helped to show how the deceits of subliminal advertising can be a means of revealing unexpected truth: the childlike faith of the ad agencies in four-letter words point to our obsession with infantile bathroom images as the chemical bond between commercial society and the universal stereotypes. (Key, 1973, p. vii)

The Packard book is the second most-often-referenced book when it comes to believing in the existence of subliminal messaging, as he asks endless questions about the “how they do it” of advertising. In regard to the condition of youngsters as young as four years old, he claimed that:

The potency of television to loyal enthusiasts of a product, whether they are old enough to consume it or not, became indisputable early in the fifties . . . most children were
learning to sing beer and other commercials before learning to sing “the Star Spangled Banner”. (Packard, 1958, p. 154)

Director Peter Bogdanovich wrote the introduction to the Valenti book, More than a movie: Ethics in entertainment, apparently inspired by the idea that many filmmakers seem to believe that “anything goes”:

What has happened to the movies is not unique to the movies, and yet . . . to say that most films’ lack of ethics reflects their society’s lack of ethics is not an excuse, but it is most certainly true. The only hope is quality education in the history of the world, from the true beginnings of civilization . . . to the present . . . If we care about the world and care about the movies, it is incumbent upon us to try to improve the situation of both . . . if we stop to examine the ethical implications of what we do as creators and citizens . . . the start will have been made. (Valenti, 2000, p. xv)

Bogdanovich is a believer in the power of film, as is the author of the book, F. M. Valenti, who in the chapter on media culture states that movie theaters are one of the last places people gather to “focus on the same stimulus.” He claims that the movie theater has replaced the village green. The implications of this are multiple as the audience experiences “societal bonding through common experience.” (Valenti, 2000, p. 3)

A film viewed at home, often in the company of family or friends, can have the same sort of bonding effect as can television viewing. However, suppose this “common experience” has questionable attributes, or is geared toward the wrong age level, with scenes and messages that are “below the threshold of consciousness,” that is, subliminal? Is the community able to accept the message as a group, or is there some level of misunderstanding involved?
According to Joan Ganz Cooney, one of the founders of Sesame Street, the time has come for a revamping of children’s media legislation that looks at the impact of current media on children. In an article about Cooney, Goodstein seconds the recommendation and states the following in regard to digital media:

We clearly need to develop standards when it comes to kids’ digital media . . . the standards for what constitutes “educational” content are weak at best. Digital media is saturated with ad-supported content. And unlike TV ads, most digital marketing is interactive and immersive. Even broadcast TV is changing how it delivers commercials in an age where multitasking youth have become adept at using ad-skimming technology such as digital recorders. (Goodstein, 2008, p. 1)

Goodstein further acknowledges that marketing agencies have learned how to place products within shows or to craft an entire show around a product or brand through *content wraps*, appearing throughout a show.

According to Goodstein, Disney and Viacom’s Nickelodeon planned to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on virtual worlds and games, and more and more websites appeared that were connected to an immersive real-life toy, such as Ganz’ WebKinz, Build-a-Bear Workshop’s *Build-a-Bear*, and Mattel’s *Barbie*. The websites for these toys promote the purchase of another toy so that the website can grow: The more WebKinz or Barbies you own, the more fun you can have, and the more ads you can see.

One of the main rules of WebKinz world is you must buy a toy a year to have access to the online game. The website is framed with advertisements for various digital devices (the latest one is an advertisement for a Disney television program, spam-mail software, and an invitation
to a food expo at a casino – the latter two advertisements are obviously aimed at adults) and to buy new “pets.”

Goodstein claims that:

An American Psychological Association task force has recommended limits, citing research that shows kids under the age of 8 can’t critically comprehend TV ad messages and that they’re prone to accept advertiser messages as truthful, accurate, and unbiased. (Goodstein, 2008, p. 1)

This fact, if true, could potentially lead to much frustration if a child sees objects and clothing that he or she cannot have, and is tempted by foods that are bad for their health but that mommy or daddy cannot or will not buy. To continue, Goodstein notes that the “Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) argues that exposure to marketing exploits children’s developmental abilities,” (Goodstein, 2008, p. 2) and that the pressure to conform can lead to bullying and obesity. Although some European countries have banned marketing to children on TV or in schools, the United States has yet to take that step.

Goodstein’s recommendations for updating the Children’s Television Act include reaching out to industry to cooperate; creating research-based standards; building new, ad-free business models; and increasing transparency and labeling of digital content.

The children

Children are the most susceptible to subliminal messaging since they are the most vulnerable due to their inexperience and lack of knowledge of the world. The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry state that, in regards to watching television:

By the time of high school graduation, they will have spent more time watching television than they have in the classroom . . . children who watch a lot of television are
likely to have lower grades in school, read fewer books, exercise less, and be overweight. 

(AACP, 2010)

Having spent so much time watching television, they are, therefore, more likely to have seen incidents of violence, sexuality, racial profiling, and gender stereotypes, since these are common themes and concepts on television programs, even children’s programs. Since they are so impressionable, they may then assume that what they see is the norm. Recommendations by the AACP are to limit the amount of time spent watching television, turn off the TV during family time, select shows of the appropriate age level, and turn off inappropriate programs.

Despite these recommendations, children in the United States watch video of some sort, whether it be via television, computer, electronic notebook, tablet, or phone, for more than five hours a day every day or 35 hours a week (Nairn & Fine, 2004, p. 452). Often, much of what they are viewing is advertisements of some sort, and more often than not, there is some subliminal persuasion or product placement involved in the advertisement.

Chris Preston wrote an article about the need for adjustment and regulation of advertising aimed at children.

No manufacture or advertiser wishes to publicly portray that they study children’s minds, and utilize that knowledge to sell them things, even when that is equivocally what they do…If advertisers are held therefore to be exploiting children, it is an ethical view based upon the moral principle that children require to be protected, but from what? (Preston, 2004, p. 364)

Children are enticed by the advertisements for unhealthy food choices by the guile of wily advertisers, which prompts Preston to ask the question “Why not regulate the production of unhealthy processed food?” – a question whose time has come (Preston, 2004, p. 368).
The ethics of advertising to children, he explains, is that it is “bound up in the inconvenience of extra-familial purchases demanded by highly motivated children who may exert a good deal of pressure to acquire the desired item” and that “The strongest argument against advertising to children is simply because they are children” (Preston, 2004, p. 369).

In an article by Nairn and Fine, the authors restate the responsibility of advertisers to use restraint in their advertisements aimed at children and to ask for a re-evaluation of “what constitutes responsible children’s advertising, a new research agenda, and a new approach to media literacy strategies” (Nairn & Fine, 2008). In their article, they discuss a test in which a branded movie clip increased the likelihood of choosing the brand soon after watching the film equally among eleven to twelve year olds as in the six-to-seven-year-old group. Their summary stated that “children needed to be better informed about the nature and intent of advertising” (Nairn & Fine, 2008, p. 451).

The authors claim that for a child to be able to resist implicit persuasion, he or she must be able to control its effects on their consumer preferences and behavior…we doubt that there will be any “magic age” at which children will attain these abilities, as this will depend on the advertising format under discussion. (Nairn & Fine, 2008, p. 459)

Other factors in a child’s ability to resist implicit persuasion include “heightened self-consciousness and the need to ‘fit in’ with peers” (Nairn & Fine, 2008, p. 460).

Another danger that lurks behind subliminal messages in children’s television and film was revealed in a report published in May 2009 about the early onset of sexual activity due to the amount of adult content to which teens were exposed during their childhood. According to their findings, “when the youngest children in the sample, ages six to eight years old, were exposed to adult-targeted television and movies, they were more likely to have sex earlier when compared to
those who watched less adult-targeted content” (Children’s Hospital, 2009). Apparently, for every hour the youngest group of children watched adult-targeted content over two days, “their chances of having sex during early adolescence increased by thirty-three percent” (Children’s Hospital, 2009, p. 1).

Children who are susceptible to dietary anxieties are another area where subliminal messaging can come into play. Food marketing to children and adolescents is a major public concern. Product placements skyrocketed into a $3.5 billion per year industry after Reese’s Pieces candy was used as a theatrical property in the movie E.T (see example 6 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/).

According to the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity, “the food industry spends over $1.6 billion per year in the United States to market their products directly to young people” (Rudd Center, 2011). The center claims that every child in the United States sees over fifteen food commercials a day, or approximately 5,500 commercials a year. Ninety-nine percent of those ads are for food containing sugar and fat. Fewer than 100 commercials advertised fruits, vegetables, or bottled water.

Meanwhile, an article by Greenberg, et al., states that a mortality trend shows heart disease as the number one cause of death in the United States. Between 2003 and 2004, 67 percent of adults and 17 percent of children and adolescents were overweight (Greenberg, et al., 2009).

The authors did a test on television shows to see with what frequency alcohol and food containing oils, fats, and sugar were consumed on television programs aimed at a young audience, and discovered that the Fox Network contained the most frequent instances where
these types of foods and alcohol was used within children or tween programming with 53 percent “acts and incidentals” such as partying and celebrations.

Their findings support “several social cognitive theory factors that influence the likelihood of imitative behavior” (Greenberg, et al., 2009) and therefore constitute a risk to children from the subliminal persuasiveness of the content: Lack of negative consequences from consuming foods with oils, fats, and sugars makes them more attractive; lack of negative consequences from drinking alcohol makes it more attractive; stronger association of foods containing with oils, fats, and food with sugar with adults signifies approval; greater consumption signifies social acceptance; characters are consuming “real” problematic foods; and social rewards and celebrations always accompany alcohol consumption.

_Thin is “In” and stout is “out” _is the title of a research paper that covers the prevalence of the assumption that thin people are somehow better or more worthy than stout people. This idea is reflected often enough in the media, on print and on film, to shape behaviors through the repeated and consistent weight-related messages they provide. Research has shown that early-life exposure to media messages does, indeed, affect the formation of attitudes and contributes to the crystallization of notions about a variety of aspects of young viewer’s social worlds (Klein & Shiffman, 2003. p. 5).

The study was based on a collection of randomly selected animated cartoons (Bugs Bunny, Popeye, Mighty Mouse, and Yogi Bear) created between 1930 and the mid-1990s. Their final results were that thin characters are attractive and heavy characters are below-average in attractiveness and especially below-average when it comes to their physiques. Below-level intelligence was associated with the less-valued group comprised of heavier-than-average characters.
It would seem then, as the authors state,

Animated cartoons…both reflect and shape social values about body weight, and help to form children’s initial notions of what it means to be thin or heavy…that it is good to be thin and bad to be heavy…the adverse effects of internalizing such messages about body weight have been shown in numerous studies that have linked them to problems like low self-esteem, poor body image, eating disorders, and depression. (Klein & Shiffman, 2003, p. 16)

The authors advocate an improved diet and health program for the cartoon characters. For example, they noted that the heavier character’s in today’s cartoons are shown as more apt to exercise but to eat more junk food. Their thinner counterparts, on the other hand, ate the most, exercised the least, and spent the most time watching television. Nevertheless, some of the leading cartoon studios have “implemented educational or prosocial interstitial segments into their animated cartoon programming, and these programs have been entertaining and positive in their content” (Klein & Shiffman, 2003, p. 21).

This discussion leads to the “wonderful world of Disney” and the company’s questionable use of subliminal messages and communication of a sexual nature in its films and television series (see example 9 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/).

There are blatant examples of the use of sexual images in at least three of the company’s films, *The Little Mermaid, The Rescuers*, and *Who framed Roger Rabbit?*, all of which can easily be found on the Internet. There also appear to be multiple cases where the word “sex” was embedded in blowing sand or in the arrangement of items in the background, and there is at least one case of an auditory message hidden in *Aladdin* (Jenkinson, 1995), but the messages are so
well hidden as to be either completely misapprehensions or to be the imaginings of professional Internet users with too much time on their hands. Nevertheless, Disney did pull *The Rescuers* from circulation in 1999 to redraw a scene, and another scene in *The Little Mermaid* was redrawn after public complaint.

A study describing subliminal messaging that can be found in five of the top Disney films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *the Jungle Book*, *the Little Mermaid*, and *the Hunchback of Notre Dame*, was conducted in 1999. The author of the study was looking for certain themes: gender stereotypes, heterosexual couplings, good versus evil, and family composition. One of the main discoveries was the male to female ratio in the films: *Snow White* – 9:2, *Cinderella* – 8:6, *The Jungle Book* – 11:3, *The Little Mermaid* – 8:4, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* – 8:3 (Wiersma, 1999, p. 50).

The females are either “attractive and good or unattractive and evil” (Wiersma, 1999, p. 50), they are all on the hunt for a husband (except for the girl in The Jungle Book who is only ten years old), and they eventually all get rescued from some evildoer. The women are all weak, good-looking, and with soprano voices. The men are manly, and, with the exception of Quasimodo, have titles such as Prince, King, Captain, Archdeacon, or Grand Duke. The women, on the other hand, do not enjoy as wide a range of occupations – employment as housekeepers, dancers, singers, or water-bearers complete the main employment spectrum for most Disney women and girls – but this could be due to the historical period in which the stories are set (Weirsma, 1999, p. 55).

Keeping women in traditional roles keeps the equilibrium of the social order. It is only when groups take action against these messages and the treatment of women in society that the equilibrium is upset. Thus, traditional gender roles are functional for society.
This content analysis of full-length animated Disney films indicates the wonderful world of Disney may not be as wonderful as people believe. The perpetuation of gender stereotypes, the presentation of family constellations, and the process of heterosexual couplings are only three of the negative messages contained in these films (Wiersma, 1999, p. 66) (see example 9 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/).

These and other elements intrinsic to the placement of subliminal messages have translated into big business for the self-improvement industry. The Unilever Company, which produces Dove soaps and shampoos, created a series of commercials and videos that show various ways that young girls can be mentored and encouraged to accept themselves and to maintain their self-esteem without the influence of advertising that surrounds the pursuit of perfection. Unfortunately, the company is also using their message to sell their own product, which is marketed as “pure” and “mild” (see examples 12 and 13 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/).

Rationale and recommendations

For concerned parents and caregivers, finding the right balance in all aspects of everyday life is a challenge. It may be difficult to stop children from watching television or films, especially when they are surrounded by media and its influence all day long, but it is a worthwhile campaign to begin at home and in the classroom.

Dangers lurk in children’s programming, a fact that is often ignored. The people who create the advertising campaigns that are being fed to children, even the youngest children, are not concerned for the welfare of their viewers, but for the income they can gain from habits of consumption. The last episode in the Twilight saga, New Moon, is shown to have contained 131
product placements, including individual items branded and sold in stores, such as makeup and hair products. There is a cornucopia of other items created specifically for the series that were then directly marketed, including jewelry, clothing, makeup, beer, and bedding, not to mention several items that were included in the film as theatrical properties, such as Rainer beer, Coca-cola, Apple computers, Red Vines candy, and Volvo sports cars (Fanzter, Inc., 2011). The first three parts of the saga have earned a reported $2 billion in film format, while over 100 million printed copies have been sold world-wide (see example 5 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/).

The importance of this subject

This thesis describes the current state of subliminal messaging and communication in television and film, and the many ways that marketing and advertising agencies are manipulating the viewer into purchasing their products. This topic is important to review because of the proliferation of new technology, which parents have less access to. Parents must be reminded that just because they cannot share a screen as well as they used to with their children, access to subliminal advertising is available on the web via iPhones, iPads, tablets, cell phones, and electronic notebooks. The suggestions posted as to how to limit exposure remain the same.

Ideas that can help in restricting access to the web and exposure to unwanted messaging include limiting access to two hours or less (most children in the United States watch five hours of video a day), pick the shows together, and then watch the shows together to get a sense of how much violence, racist language, discriminatory behavior, and negative attitude is displayed.

Parents and caregivers should also take the time to study media literacy programs on a wide range of subjects, and campaign for a new public policy on using celebrity endorsements aimed at children.
Avoid impulse purchases, anything with a movie tie-in, and obvious product placement within a show. Help children understand that product placement is also an advertisement – just because everyone in the show is drinking a certain drink, does not mean you have to drink it, too. It is a commercial designed to make you buy something.

Help children understand the difference between what is real and what is not by using a flag during commercials that signify the difference, such as a red flag for “unreal” and a green flag for “real” (BBB, 1991).

And, most importantly, begin to insist on increased transparency and labeling of sponsored digital content so everyone is aware of the marketing intent of the items displayed on the screen.

The advertising and marketing industries should consider how they can best approach responsible and ethical children’s advertising since it is well-recognized that “much of advertising to children does not work like this at all, but instead operates darkly, beyond the light of consciousness” (Nairn & Fine, 2004, p. 463).
Chapter 3 Scope and methodology

This theory project was initiated after an examination of *Division Four: Mass Communication* in the *Communication* textbook (Griffin, 2009). In the chapter on Media Ecology (p. 312), Marshall McLuhan’s ideas about the ages of man, and, in particular, the Digital Age, are discussed as questionably of benefit to mankind: “McLuhan’s probes stimulated others to ponder whether specific media environments were beneficial or destructive for those immersed within them” (Griffin, 2009, p. 319). Specific media environments are the worlds of television and video, which includes film, computers, and other video technological devices. Consumers of all ages are on record as spending many hours daily using these tools to absorb information and entertainment.

Neil Postman, founder of the media ecology program at New York University, “believed that the forms of media regulate and even dictate what kind of content the form of a given medium can carry” (Griffin, 2009, p. 319). For instance, modern television is used to broadcast news and information, while movies shown in a theater strictly show previews and films. Other types of information that is regulated by the media can be observed by the current use of portable technology that is available for a reasonable cost. Electronic notebooks, cell phones, smart phones, and tablets now are used to broadcast news, all types of information, and all types of entertainment, as well as navigation systems and gaming controls. Thousands of downloadable applications contain every sort of imaginable convenience that can be contained within a relatively small space. Their portability makes it ever easier to spend more time viewing a screen.
Postman believed that moral judgments were required in any medium. He said that he didn’t see any point “in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context” (Griffin, 2009, p. 319).

Postman also believed that a new technology is always accompanied by a Faustian bargain; “Technology giveth and technology taketh away” (Griffin, 2009, p. 319). Within his approach to the study of technology, he asked: “What were the moral implications of this bargain? Are the consequences more humanistic or antihumanistic? Do we, as a society, gain more than we lose, or do we lose more than we gain?” (Griffin, 2009, p. 319). With all of the technology available today, children are spending less and less time meeting and talking face-to-face with family and friends. What are we losing, and what are we gaining? Again, we gain the skill to manipulate technology to our own devices, but at the cost of interpersonal relationships. With the loss of personal relationships, is our innate sense of what is right and wrong, ethical and moral also at risk?

The “moral or ethical context” of this thesis project is to determine the reason behind the placement of subliminal messages in children’s television and film and to offer a reasonable solution and a statement of ethics and morals that could improve the current state of entertainment aimed at children and provide young viewers the right to personal privacy and peace of mind.

Research began with the most widely recognized texts on subliminal messages: *The hidden persuaders* by Vance Packard and *Subliminal seduction* by Wilson Bryan Key. The Packard book is a well known, and recognizably paranoid, treatise on the subliminal messages that surround us every day. Packard insists that we all are made to do things we do not want to do, and buy things we do not want to buy, through the influence of media communication.
In the chapter on how women react in grocery stores to the steady bombardment of colors and lights, Packard describes the discovery made by the DuPont company in 1954 that found that women do not need a shopping list when they go shopping, because “seven out of ten of today’s purchases are decided in the store, where the shoppers buy on impulse” (Packard, 1957, p. 112). Men respond in the same way, bringing home more than they need.

The names of the chapters in the book compile a list of Packard’s beliefs on the means and the ways used by the media to sneak into the subconscious mind and lure people into spending money on things they do not need: *Self-images for everybody; Rx for our secret distresses; Marketing eight hidden needs; The built-in sexual overtone; Back to the breast, and beyond; Babes in consumerland; The psychoseduction of children*; and more.

The Key book, *Subliminal seduction*, which was published 15 years after the Packard book, contains more graphic material and photos of instances of subliminal messages inserted into advertisements for alcohol, cigarettes, and toys. Some of what Key sees is obvious, but there are others that are difficult to discern. Nevertheless, some of the examples Key shows are legitimate, and are representative of the types of message that have been used in the past.

Once those two texts had been read, the next step was to consider and reconsider the breadth of the subject, going beyond subliminal messaging into the advertising world of product placement. Product placement was included because it soon became apparent that product placement exists as a form of subliminal messaging in that it also affects viewers’ subconscious perceptions.

These thoughts lead to investigations into food advertising aimed at children and to the absence of a meaningful nutrition-based message. Food messages via product placement were usually related to alcohol consumption by the very young and depictions of body weight and
self-image. Messages that were more subliminal in nature promoted negative influences on body image, teen pregnancy, food consumption, and so on, and have been proven to be detrimental to the mental health of teens and tweens (Sutherland & Thompson, 2001; Campbell, 2006; Greenberg, et al., 2009).

From there, the question of the legality of subliminal messages was considered, as well as the First Amendment of the U. S. Constitution, and how it related to the ethics of the issue. An article published by the Mass Media Bureau described the rules laid out for broadcast radio and television, while an article about the effectiveness of the Motion Picture Association’s rating system answered the question about the rules they have had in place from 1950 to 2006 regarding the effectiveness of the current ratings system (Federal Communications Commission, 1999; Jamieson, Nalkur, & Rumer, 1996).

There is much literature available on the subject, and many online videos that were in scope, although many of them were of poor video quality. As far as the Disney Company goes, their reputation preceded them, and videos of their subliminal messages were fairly easy to locate. Some of the literature also pointed in the appropriate direction (Booker, 2010; Davis, 2006; Wiersma, 1999).

One of the more shameless uses of subliminal casting was the appearance of certain Disney characters within one of their own films. In the Hunchback of Notre Dame, the character Belle from Beauty and the beast, Poomba from the Lion King, and other Disney characters can be seen walking around in Paris within view of Quasimodo as he sings and swings across the twin towers of Notre Dame cathedral. By keeping theses characters within view, the Disney marketing people ensured that the films with which they are associated returned to the subconscious minds of their audience.
Pixar uses something called an *Easter egg* to link their movies together in promotion of other films. An example of this is the Pizza Planet truck first spotted in *Toy Story 2*. This sort of promotional device can be regarded as product placement with advertising intentions: There are Pizza Planet restaurants at both Disneyland and Disney World (Disney.com, 2011). The Pizza Planet truck can be easily spotted in the animated films *Toy story 3, Wall-E, Up, Cars, Monsters, Inc.*, *Bug’s life*, and *Finding Nemo* (see example 8 in the weblog portion of this thesis project at http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/).

The ethics in consideration by advertisers, marketers, filmmakers, and television producers appear to be nonexistent, despite rules and regulations that insist some sort of consideration be made for the audience. The First Amendment comes into play, and would play a larger role if rulings begin to be officially made and upheld against subliminal messaging and product placement, to protect children from potentially damaging influence. As the judge in the Judas Priest trial declared, “since subliminal material cannot be avoided, it constitutes an invasion of privacy” (University of Michigan, n/d). People have a right to be free from unwanted speech, and from unwanted influence.

Throughout the research activity, many solutions to the question regarding the ethics of subliminal messages in children’s television and film were raised. Some of the authors suggested that the time had come to review the content of all broadcasts with an eye toward the First Amendment as the censor, but with a perceptive regard for freedom from unwanted speech and for peace of mind. Other possibilities include the idea that besides attempting to eliminate advertisements for damaging foods such as foods containing oils, fats, and sugar, more advertisements for the consumption of healthy foods should be promoted. This could, in turn,
improve health standards among all children, as well as improving damaged self-esteem and self-image. It could also lead to a decrease in mental health issues due to poor diet.

Another sort of solution that might be viable is that instead of promoting sex and poor diet (e.g., Pizza Planet) in children’s television and film, the creators of these programs promote healthy lifestyles, education in a proper diet, and mental health programs and other support for parents in need.

Methodology

Over fifty years of literature on the subject was available for the creation of this thesis project. To begin, the EBSCO Host database was used for the closest match to the words subliminal message. One of the first articles to appear was by Foley and Pastore representing the Vatican (Foley & Pastore, 1997). Several other articles were immediately available, but some took further searching. A few of the articles were requested through ILLiad, and were submitted as downloads through the Gonzaga email system. Other databases were visited, including the Psychology database, Primary Search, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycInfo, Communication & Mass Media, LexisNexis, Primary Search, and others.

Literary articles were continued to be gathered throughout the time spent gathering books on the subject. Some of the books used were purchased from Amazon.com, others were gathered from the Kirkland Public Library in Kirkland, Washington. An advertisement for 1forall.com was spotted in Parade magazine. For the web portion of the project, hours were spent combing the web for appropriate and relevant content.

Search terms included “subliminal messages,” “subliminal,” “subliminal messaging,” “subliminal messaging television and film,” “television and film subliminal,” “First Amendment subliminal messaging,” “right to privacy,” “sexual persuasion,” “media and sexual persuasion,”
“media and subliminal persuasion,” “psychology of subliminal messaging,” “government agencies and subliminal messaging,” “FCC,” and so on.

Online search terms following along this vein; the last few articles, gathered on September 28, 2011, were on product placement. Among these articles, an article from 2008 appeared most interesting. According to the Campaign for a commercial-free childhood, cable programs hosted 160,000 product placements in 2008. Advertisers paid for 26,000 product placements in 2007. Also, the Writers Guild of America, West, has asked the FCC to attempt the following:

Force programmers to include real-time notices of product integration and placements in notices stripped across the bottom of the screen. Such a proposal would deter advertisers from embedding their products into shows. That proposal won’t be included in a new rule, the FCC said. (Kang, June 27, 2008, p. 2)

During the time that the proposal was being constructed, the articles were read, notes were taken, and then the books were tackled.

Although at first look, some of the books and articles gathered seemed to be relevant, they turned out to be not useful at all, at least for this project, and went into the reject pile. One of those was the article by Byrd-Bredbenner, et al., which focused on the dietary cognitions and resultant behavior, which, though relatively close to the subject of this project, did not focus on children in particular. Others articles about the suspected homosexuality of specific characters or promotion of a vegetarian diet also appeared, but discussion of those topics was deemed politically based, and so was not included.

Throughout the gathering of materials, and despite the fact that the bibliography of references for the project is quite lengthy, it has seemed that something was missing.
Government offices and organizations should have more current and available information on the subject, some clear definition of the legal status of subliminal messaging and product placement, but it is not there or not available. There was no one current book on the subject covering the ethics of subliminal messages; if there is, it is ironically very well hidden.

Other articles on each subject were located within bibliographies. New processes and procedures that could be put in place that might ensure children were safe from subliminal messages and product placements that were controlling and potentially damaging were also considered.

Once the materials were gathered, they were sorted into areas: One for subliminal messages, one for product placement, one on the First Amendment, and one for Disney and *Twilight* product placement and subliminal messages. They were then sorted into the subgroups skeptics, believers, and children, the focus of Chapter 2 above.

Throughout the reading and searching process, web searches were begun for examples of product placement and subliminal messages. Many related blogs and websites were found, as well as YouTube videos. A representative assortment has been collated and is now available in blog format created specifically for this thesis project at http://sneakypeekethics.blogspot.com.
Chapter 4 - The Thesis Project

The project portion of this thesis project is a weblog that contains 13 clippings from YouTube or links to websites that further clarify the message. Some of the videos show sample product placements aimed at children, others show sample Disney/Pixar subliminal messages and *Twilight* product placements. The list includes a subliminal message for Kentucky Fried Chicken; one for McDonalds on Iron Chef; on *Fox 5 News*; a series called *Shameless Product Placements* that features Apple and Microsoft, among other products; a video on Pixar Easter eggs; *Disney, Sexy, naughty, bitchy me*; a sample of product placement in *Twilight*; two films on self-esteem by Dove; and Mind Master – an advertisement for a company that records subliminal messages for absorbing during slumber.

The address for the weblog used in this thesis project is

http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com/
Chapter 5 – Summary and Conclusion

Discussion

Despite the skepticism that exists in some writings about subliminal messages, amid the protest of advertising agencies, it is clear that this sort of advertising and promotional tactic does exist and that children are often the target of both subliminal messages and product placement. Both are well-acknowledged as being present in much of children’s programming, despite its illegality, as discussed by the FCC and the FTC.

The dangers of subliminal messages and product placement lie in the fact that they help promote dangerous habits among the young, such as anorexia, and other poor eating habits that contribute to poor self-image. They also are recognized as dangerous to children’s health, as many of the widely advertised products contain high amounts of oil, fats, and sugar.

The ethical stance, both from a Christian and rational view, is that products promoted through the use of such advertising and marketing techniques be reviewed for content, value, and wholesomeness, and limits placed and enforced by responsible agencies. Subliminal messages that interfere with a child’s subconscious mind should be made illegal. Product placements should be acknowledged as such at the beginning or end of television programs or films so as not to continue to the feeble attempt to appear to be anything but the marketing materials they are intended to be.

Limitations of the study

To be complete, a study into the value of subliminal messages and product placements in children’s’ television and film would require an in-depth live analysis of children of various ages as they reacted to an established test of several television programs and movies to judge their reaction to specific subliminal messages and product placements. To do so would require the
cooperation of several different classrooms in several different schools with children of all ages and their parents. Such a project would require more time that is permitted by the deadlines attached to this thesis project. However, it is a project that could be considered for the future.

Other limitations include the ability to collect clippings from the television shows and films mentioned that show the demeaning scripting and racial profiling discussed above.

Since the web is a transient medium and what is available there today may not be available tomorrow, there is no guarantee that any of the videos collected for the weblog http://sneakypeeksethics.blogspot.com will be available in the near or distant future.

Recommendations for further study

Further study could be made on a wider range of selected films and television programs, including those available internationally to observe how other countries are managing their media-related freedom of speech issues and freedom to personal privacy and peace of mind.

Research might be conducted on recent legal cases wherein the FCC, FTC, and Motion Picture Association were brought to trial for cases involving the First Amendment.

Another study might be conducted on how to create ad-free programs and films free of product placements aimed at a young audience, perhaps through a low-cost subscription campaign on special channels (Goodstein, 2008, p. 2).

Queries might be addressed to the current media industry, such as the Sesame Workshop, Common Sense Media, and the MacArthur Foundation, for pointers to their projects (Goodstein, 2008, p. 2).

Research questions

How do different age groups respond to and use the information gained through subliminal advertising? Is it used at all?
How might a campaign be established to seek change in the way ethics are used in the development of children’s television and film?

How do children of different ages regard the unethical use of potentially damaging images in television and film? Are they aware of their rights to privacy and peace of mind?

Ideas for future action

The following ideas are suggested as partial solutions to the problem of high-calorie food products and subliminal advertising to children:

Create a campaign for teachers to teach about product placement in class.

Petition cereal manufacturers to lower the sugar content of their cereal or eliminate it altogether.

Petition processed food manufacturers to consider the amounts of oil, fats, and sugars used in snack foods designed for consumption by children.

Start Twitter campaigns asking cereal and snack manufacturers such as Kellogg and Post to concentrate on lowering the use of fats, oils, and sugar in their products aimed at children.

Start Twitter and Facebook campaigns asking the FCC and the FTC to reconsider their position on subliminal messaging and product placement in children’s television and film, and ask them to review their current standards and laws with an eye toward upholding them.

Start Twitter and Facebook campaigns asking that films with product placement have the marketing information posted up front, so the audience knows that the products they are seeing in the film are being directly marketed to them.

Tweet and write letters to state officials and congressional representatives to campaign for stiffer penalties for use of subliminal messaging and product placements of harmful snacks in
children’s television and films. Include statistics on the amount of time children spend watching television, and statistics on health, anorexia, bulimia, and other self-esteem-related health issues.

Encourage filmmakers and television producers to promote fruits and vegetables rather than foods containing oils, fat, and sugar in films and on television.

Conclusion

As described in Chapter 2, Postmodernism is a “new kind of economic order -- a consumer society based on multicultural capitalism.” The research conducted in this thesis project supports debate on the topic by describing how families can learn more about what they are being fed, and learn how to resist corporate marketing and advertising that endangers their children. By educating themselves about advertising ethics and the dangers of subliminal messages and product placement, families can find a way back to a healthy peace of mind and personal privacy.
Method used for collecting information

The method used for this project/thesis is qualitative, as described in the quote by James Carey (Lindof & Taylor, 2011):

To seize upon the interpretations people place on existence and to systematize them so they are more readily available to us. This is a process of making large clams from small matters: studying particular rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, and myths, and gingerly reaching out to the full relations within a culture or a total way of life. (Lindof & Taylor, 2011, p. 5)

Here is a list of early references that “make large claims” from seemingly “small matters”:


Online resources

Foley Library at http://www.gonzaga.edu. ERIC, ILLiad, and EBSCO, Communication & Media databases

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