

## **Project History and Definition**

Childhood obesity is a prevalent issue in modern American society. The cause of childhood obesity is persistently debated, but a withstanding argument is one against the fast food industry for the unhealthy products they sell and the deceptive methods in which they market their products towards children. A series of lawsuits against the fast food industry known as the “fat suits” led to this research proposal examining the differences in McDonald’s advertising before and after the fat suits. It is our hypothesis that McDonald’s still uses strategic marketing to reach children, but they also blatantly offer healthier opportunities and display nutritional information to shift attitudes and reposition fast food in the consumer’s mind as a relative good, rather than an evil.

McDonald’s and other fast food industries have been marketing towards children for a significant amount of time. Children are persuasive and have a shocking amount of buying power in America. Children use “pester power” to convince their parents to buy them certain products, which causes marketers to constantly take advantage of this pester power (McDermott, 514). Many argue that fast food advertisers have a right to ‘commercial free speech’, that responsibility lies with the consumer, or that pester power is just a myth (McDermott, 521).

Very few brands have caused more controversy with their marketing and advertising than McDonald’s. Phil Kotler, a marketing professor at Northwestern University, argues that McDonald’s relied on public relations in its early years by saying “I don't think they've changed the edifice of marketing. They didn't create any new marketing concepts” (MacArthur). In its beginning stages the company focused on placing positive stories in newspaper articles to form a positive relationship between McDonald’s and the local communities. Ray Kroc, an early

franchisee, illustrated this idea by having a newspaper run a front-page picture of Mr. Kroc handing out hamburgers to Salvation Army workers during the holidays in Chicago (MacArthur). McDonald's recognized very early the importance of promotion and advertising and in 1959 began requiring franchisees to use 2.5% of sales to promote their business (MacArthur). A large milestone occurred in the mid-sixties when McDonald's made its first large media buy. In 1965 McDonald's was offered a quarter-sponsorship of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and used their time to promote the new child-friendly mascot; Ronald McDonald (MacArthur).

The authors in "Combating Obesity in the Courts: Will Lawsuits Against McDonald's Work?" compare cases such as *Pelman v. McDonald's Corp* to lawsuits against tobacco companies. In *Pelman v. McDonald's Corp* the plaintiffs argued that marketers for fast food restaurants mislead consumers about the nutritional values of their products, causing consumers to over-consume and become obese. The plaintiffs also argue that fast food is addictive and represent a class of consumers that are obese due to eating fast food. The authors use information from a Gallup poll to say "90% of the American public disapproves of efforts to sue fast-food restaurants for obesity claims, and 14 states have passed so-called cheeseburger bills, which are designed to protect restaurants and food manufacturers from obesity lawsuits" (Robinson, 299). The plaintiffs in *Pelman v McDonald's Corp* attempt to attack fast food restaurants in the same way that tobacco companies have been attacked by consumers. The plaintiffs allege that McDonald's fails to tell consumers that their product can lead to obesity, and that McDonald's is knowingly selling addictive products to consumers without warning them of its addictive nature (Robinson, 300). The authors argue that the fast food industry is vulnerable for future lawsuits

for a variety of reasons, including the reasoning that fear of these lawsuits “can motivate the industry to do more on its own to combat obesity” (Robinson, 303).

### **Significance/Meaning/Implication**

Food Advertisements on Television have always been a relevant issue, but it has become more of a controversial issue within the past decade. Garsten states, “In the *Ethics* Aristotle described deliberation as a process through which we could discover how to achieve a set goal: We deliberate not about the ends, but about what promotes ends” (Garsten, 126). When addressing the concept of deliberation and debate he writes of how important it is to public discourse and how necessary it is for the growth and development of a community.

Our research on the recent “fat suits” between overweight individuals and the McDonalds Inc. shows that public advocacy and debate over fast food advertisements is now being recognized as a prominent health issue. Before public advocacy groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) were implemented there was no organization with enough power to debate the issue of food advertisements and their affects on adolescents. Prior to the fat suits, tests such as the Central Hudson Test (CHT) were put in place to determine whether “regulatory standards impact commercial speech” (vlddeck, 34). These laws were set in place to ensure that freedom of the press, including advertisers, had their right to free speech. The lawsuits against the McDonald’s corporation caused their advertisers to change the way that they advertised to adults and adolescents. After the lawsuits McDonald’s launched a new campaign titled “Eat Smart. Be Active” and in 13,000 U.S. restaurants began to take the “supersized” items out of their menu (PT Magazine, 11). In addition to smaller portions, McDonald’s Inc. also started marketing their “all white meat” chicken nugget meals, which were 40 calories fewer than before the suits, also reducing the grams of fat from 13 to 10 ( NYTimes, 4).

From this proposal we hope that society as a whole will take a second look at what they choose to eat and why these advertisements really have an effect on people. According to Environmental Nutrition, “Adult obesity rates now exceed 25 percent in 31 states and 20 percent in 49 states and Washington, D.C. consider that in 1991 no state had an obesity rate above 20 percent, and in 1980 the national average for adult obesity was 15 percent. Childhood obesity rates have more than tripled since 1980 (Environmental Nutrition, Vol. 32, #11).

We hope that through our proposal of information on the advertising effects before and after the “fat suits” will help consumers think about the power of persuasion that advertisements have over them and their eating habits and choices. There is also a practical implication of the research proposal, so that the information and examples or proof are there for viewers to see, interpret and make their own informed judgment about eating fast food and the ways in which advertising plays a huge role in their daily lives; not only with fast-food advertising but in other aspects as well.

We feel that along with visual stimulation of McDonald’s advertisements towards adolescents and adults, that there is a huge impact psychologically through advertising. We feel that the visuals of televised commercials are just a small tactic of the whole enterprise of food advertising. We would like to further research the extensive, psychological effects on adolescent’s as well as adult’s minds as to how and why decisions are made about consumers’ choice and how advertisers are so effective at changing the preference of consumers for certain products.

## **Role/Preparation/Experience**

Other experiences that have helped prepare our research proposal were past experiences, previous coursework, internships, daily life and the advertising strategies that we plan to incorporate into our future careers. The role of each person in our group has been vital. During the beginning of this project we all brought different, individualistic ideas to the table and gradually built on each others' ideas throughout the process of this proposal. We all feel strongly that commercial advertisements persuade viewers and we recognized the relevancy of the McDonald's advertising campaign as an example.

As we have learned throughout this semester, there are many aspects other than verbal rhetoric that influence and persuade viewers. Aspects such as color, sound, shape, tone, lighting as well as many other forms of non verbal communication. One particular past experience that led me to question how persuasive advertising is for a child was an internship at a local elementary school. When working there I observed many instances where a child would see a Barbie or G.I. Joe advertisement. Along with wanting to own the doll the child would come in the next day acting like the action doll that he or she saw in the advertisement. The young girl would wear high heels and constantly apply lip gloss, whereas the little boy would want a toy gun and come in the next day acting like a military soldier. I experienced first-hand how influential television commercials are for a child's developing mind. In our daily lives we each experience the influence of television advertisements; now more than ever because of the holiday season. There are commercials running constantly for sales at retail stores, car commercials and food advertisements, not just for just fast food but other holiday dinner foods as well. When we see these advertisements for new products that appeal to us we want to buy them or ask for them as gifts, just as small children do with their parents.

Because food advertising affects each of us daily, each person in our group felt the urge to explore different parts of researching our proposal. Ben researched and proposed the history and controversy of the issues of the McDonald's lawsuits and the advertising implemented. Both Ben and Matthew proposed our groups Approach and interpretations of the researched findings and how we used them specifically in our proposal. Matthew also researched how our proposal can affect our personal outcome and how it contributes to our future lives. Angela proposed both the location and specifically tracked the time put into the proposal and why. Cara Lee researched and proposed the preparation and previous knowledge that we incorporated into our food advertising project and explained the significance and possible implications that we hope our proposal will produce. Every group member's role was important and vital during the brainstorming, research, development and presentation of our research proposal.

## **TITLE**

Each member of our group has a major in Communications with a concentration in advertising. This proposal topic relates well to our major and concentration. Researching and learning about how advertising affects people, and pertains to our persuasion class, has been very helpful and almost like a preview of what our lives will be like in the advertising industry. We looked at fast food advertising before and after the "fat suits" and we got information about how it constructed a new rhetoric of "health" after the suits happened. Incidents such as the fat suits are something that could happen to any of us as we grow and work in the industry. There will always be arguments of ethics in advertising, and this particular topic relates to the ethics of the fast food advertising before the suits and how it changed after they were concluded.

Every advertising agency must choose their clients wisely, and thoroughly research that client to determine their morals and what message they convey. It does depend on the company's ethical beliefs, but most agencies would not want to advertise a product or service that would eventually or immediately hurt someone. This is not saying that the fast food advertising directly hurt people before the "fat suits", but it was proven to persuade young people to eat less healthy foods, in higher quantities. All of the research that was done really helped to enhance our understandings of the advertising field, and how this proposal relates to the major as well as our overall futures in the field.

Our group decided that some of our educational goals were to better understand how to do a proposal, how to relate that to our future jobs, and to use what we learn from this project to enhance our understandings of the advertising field. This project really contributed to all of these goals, because the proposal is about fast food advertising, the "fat suits", the persuasion and rhetoric of the advertising, and how it all links together. We have learned the effective and ineffective ways to write a proposal through this group project, so we each feel confident that we would be capable of writing one on our own. The scenario of the advertising, and the "fat suits", is one that could eventually be part of our future jobs in the advertising industry, so it did indeed help us to relate to our future jobs in the particular field that we are studying here at ASU. It definitely helped us to understand our major in a different light, as opposed to the creative and literal ways that we have been learning in the other classes required for our major. The class in general really gives us a good idea of how persuasion will be used in our everyday lives to get people to buy or use the product that we are advertising. We have learned that persuasion is a very powerful tool, and through the books we have read we can now better argue and persuade to excel in this field.

This proposal also contributes greatly to our group's long-term career goals. A few examples of these goals are that we each would like to earn money in an ethical way, expand our creativity, and also to advertise for movies, TV shows, and/or magazines in a big city. All of these goals have been addressed with this particular proposal topic, because learning and researching about the fast food industry's advertising before and after the "fat suits" really helped us to understand what it would be like to do television commercials, and also advertisements in general for a similar company. We have seen how the creativity has grown over the years, and how it continues to expand throughout the world. We all have gotten some great insight and ideas about how to continue to change the advertising industry for the better, make advertisements more creative, and how to make them more ethical as well as have a more beneficial outcome for the consumers. We learned that carefully choosing a target market to persuade the consumer to buy the product that is being advertised is very important because if persuasion is used effectively the consumers will listen to the message being advertised.

At the end of this course we will have a few tangible products of this project, such as a written and typed proposal, a presentation, and also a power-point of everything that we discuss in both the presentation and the typed proposal. All of these artifacts can be expanded on in the future if the whole group agrees to release our work, or work together to expand it. It could later be used for further research on our proposal to really find the outcome of what we proposed. It could also be used to produce an exhibition, or film, on the subject that could eventually help students in our position selecting their major. This film or exhibition could even inform the world a little bit about how important advertising is and how it can affect people's everyday lives and decisions.

## **Timetable**

Our group spent a great deal of time on the “rough draft” of our proposal, and then spent nearly double the amount of time on the final draft of the paper. Time allocation will be discussed in detail further in the timetable. We also spent a good deal of time constructing and practicing for the colloquium.

**Research activities included:** \_\_\_\_\_.

## **Group Timetable:**

### Rough Draft:

- Sunday, October 11<sup>th</sup> - Group meeting at the library from 9pm to 10:30pm.
  - Big ideas discussed at the library and work assignments divided amongst group.
- Tuesday, October 13<sup>th</sup> - Group meeting at the library from 8:30pm to 9:30pm.
  - Group members brought in rough drafts and the drafts were combined and analyzed to determine what needed revisions.
- Wednesday, October 14<sup>th</sup> class time was used in the library as a group.
  - Final revisions were made and the rough draft was completed.

### Final Draft:

- Monday, November 9<sup>th</sup> - Class time was used in Dr. Spurlock’s office as a group.
  - Rough draft was returned and discussed thoroughly amongst the group.
- Wednesday, November 11<sup>th</sup> - Class time was used in the library as a group.
  - The group decided on the final topic proposal and new ideas were discussed.
- Wednesday, November 18<sup>th</sup> - Group meeting in the library.

- Ideas for the paper were further discussed and work was divided amongst the group.
- Wednesday, November 18<sup>th</sup> continued... from 9:45 to 11:00.
  - The group discussed progress and worked on individual research.

Colloquium Timetable:

- Wednesday, November 18<sup>th</sup> - Group meeting in the library from 9pm to 9:45pm.
  - The group brainstormed ideas for the presentation.

\*\*Each student individually spent approximately four to six hours individually on the rough draft of the proposal and approximately six to ten hours on the final draft of the proposal.

## **Bibliography**

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