

Should Ronald McDonald Be Forced to Retire?

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the ethics and politics of the advertisements from fast food companies, particularly McDonald's toward young children as consumers. It looks at various means and strategies of advertising designed specifically to children and the effect of advertising toward childhood obesity and diet choices. Using various established ethical frameworks, including the universal moral codes, utilitarianism, deontology, and reciprocal altruism, the paper looks at the corporate and consumers' responsibility and evaluates the morality of advertising toward children based on these duties and obligations that the corporation has to fulfill. The paper ultimately answers the question of what determines the "moralization" of certain social actions and behaviors.

Introduction

Obesity in children has been pandemic in America in the past thirty years. Research has shown that the number of overweight children has doubled in the last two to three decades, including regions where an increase in Westernization of behavioral and dietary lifestyles is evident (Deckelbaum 1). Obesity is defined as an excess proportion of total body fat and obesity occurs when a person consumes more calories than he or she burns. Childhood obesity is attributed to many causes but in the eyes of the public, the leading cause is usually associated with typical fast food restaurant like McDonald's and its marketing strategy toward children. As Morgan Spurlock, author of *"Don't Eat this Book,"* points out, McDonald's marketing products includes Playlands, Happy Meal, "Meal-plus-toys packaging," and various promotional materials such as McDoodler stencil, McWrist wallet, ID bracelet and McDonaldland character erasers, designed just to attract young children. One might question the ethical values of all these marketing strategies toward young children and its effect on childhood obesity in America. Should McDonald's target young children? Should they be held responsible for the increasing trend of childhood obesity in America? To what extent is a company morally responsible for the way in which its customers use its products and how can a company minimize its exposure to this kind of moral responsibility? Steven Pinker in his essay "The Moral Instinct" has provided several ethical frameworks, including utilitarianism and the five moral codes (harm, fairness, authority, purity, community) that could be useful in approaching these ethical questions (Pinker 36). In addition, Paul Rozin introduces in his articles "Moralization and Becoming a Vegetarian" the concept of moralization as a

principle that “converts preferences into values, and in doing so influences cross-generational transmission [...], increases the likelihood of internalization, invokes greater emotional response, and mobilizes the support of governmental and other cultural institutions” (Rozin 67). He gives an example of how cigarette smoking evolved from a personal preference into an immoral activity as cigarette smoking harms other people and is a clearly an immoral act. With the cigarette analogy, does it make sense to moralize fast food advertisements or the fast food itself? In addition, how relevant and what are some implications and consequence if eating fast food is treated as unethical? Would the American obesity pandemic decrease or would it lead us to more omnivore dilemmas? In reality, it may not be completely important how much harm or unethical certain actions or behaviors impact that would turn on the social “moralization switch” (Rozin 67). Rather, it ultimately depends on the consumers and how they realize the impacts and consequences of these harms that would drive the final decision of moralization. Yet the decisions and realizations often ties with the consumers’ lifestyles, the producers’ power, and how the society is structured. The moralization of behaviors therefore depends on social awareness, lifestyle, political power and social conditioning.

Consumers’ Responsibility

Fast food restaurants are one of the contributors to the obesity epidemic in America, but ethically speaking, the consumers have free will and are never forced to purchase or do anything against their own will. Lewis in his article “Collective Responsibility” states that “Each of us is responsible for our own conduct, but never is one person morally responsible for the conduct of another. No one is ever ethically responsible for the conduct of another” (Lewis 3). With that being stated, the children’s obesity problem is not and should not be attributed to others. Rather, one should look at the underlying causes such as eating habits, education, and parental conditioning. This argument can be strengthened by Kant’s deontology view that states to act in the morally right way, people must act from their sense of duty. It is one’s duty to take care of oneself and one’s family first. It is one’s responsibility to eat healthy food, exercise and be conscious of what one is eating. However, the argument can be complicated by two facts. First, the children are not those who are making the purchases. Yet, the degree to which parents’ purchasing decisions are based on being nagged by their children, called the “nag factor,” is quite important and the marketing industry know this (Deam 26). It is hard for parents to refuse

their children because they keep cajoling for the fast food. Second, children are not fully developed in their cognition and their judgment of what is responsible eating is far different from adult. Moreover, although one is held responsible for one's action, but the persuasive effect from advertisements plays a key role in one's decision. Robinson et al. conclude in their case study "Effects of Fast Food Branding on Young Children's Taste Preferences" that "children preferred the tastes of foods and drinks if they thought they were from McDonald's. [...] Branding of foods and beverages influences young children's taste perceptions" (Robinson et al. 792). It is obvious that children are prone to more programming and propaganda than adults and thus it would that make McDonald's actions unethical, since there is no free will in the first place. The will of children has been depressed by Ronald McDonald and other branding effects.

Corporate Responsibility

Moral responsibility can be interpreted in terms of obligation or duty as Kant's deontological view. According to this principle of duty and obligation, it can be deduced that a person is morally responsible for an injury if he or she causes it, whether intentionally or not, and could have prevented it. This is not to be confused with the point established previously that "no one is ever ethically responsible for the conduct of another" (Lewis 3). For example, one could argue that it is the parents' responsibility to teach their children to eat healthy food, but since it is McDonald's marketing's strategy that contribute to the increasing obesity rate in children, McDonald's should be responsible no matter if it is their intention to do harm or not. Furthermore, Steven Pinker mentioned about "the impulse to avoid harm" as one of the candidates for a "periodic table of the moral sense" (Pinker 8). Humans, especially children, deserved to have freedom from harm. An ethical action is the one that best protects and respects the moral rights of those affected. Humans have dignity simply because of their human nature and their ability to choose freely what they do with their lives. On such a basis, they have a right to be treated as ends and not merely as means to other ends. Given that, they have the right to be told the truth and not to be injured.

McDonald's has their right also, but as a large corporate supplier, these rights also imply duties - the duty to respect its customers' rights and the duty to its shareholder. Both of these duties create a conflict between interests. Dubbink and Smith state: "[They] need to be administrators of duty because they are essential to the social coordination

needed to maintain the interest satisfaction of citizens within liberal political societies” (Dubbink and Smith 226). This means that corporations have to voluntarily incorporate moral principles into their decision making processes and think about how they conduct business. They need to look at the ultimate consequence of their actions and the cost to the society, not just simply the cost of production of their goods themselves. The fast food industry’s way of producing their product and services are thought of as the most efficient way to minimize cost and maximize output. However, there is no such thing as free lunch and there is always trade-off. The corporation’s burden of production cost is transferred to the society as a cost. Cheap fast food receipts will eventually result in piles and piles of medical bills, and who is going to pay for this? Is it McDonald’s? Is it the consumers whose incomes can only afford the daily meals? Or is it ultimately the tax payers’ money that eventually pays for these costs? In reality, it is the combination of all. The stakeholders theory, proposed by David Rodin, addresses the morals and values in managing an organization. It identifies and models the groups which are stakeholders of a corporation. In short, it attempts to address the "Principle of Who or What Really Counts." On one hand, in "What's Wrong With Business Ethics," David Rodin states that the stakeholder theory is conceived as a set of formal mechanisms for resolving and balancing conflicts of interests, and this means that they could not themselves be the subject of moral responsibilities. The stakeholders, defined by Rodin, are typically owners, managers, employees, suppliers, customers, and local communities. In relation to McDonald’s and its marketing to children, we cannot justify or evaluate whether it is ethical or not based on the interaction between these groups. On the other hand, Milton Friedman claims that corporations owe positive moral obligations only to their shareholders: “There is one and only one social responsibility of business: to use its resources to engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition, without deception or fraud” (Friedman 133). In a sense, Friedman argues that since stockholders contribute their capital to corporations, it is their duty and responsibility to act as agents in advancing their interests. We can see here that the principal of reciprocal altruism encounters some conflicts. Both the consumers and the stockholders are doing favors for the corporation. So whose priority does the corporation serve first in return? Is it the consumers or the stockholders and to what extent?

To address the question, let's look at a scenario similar to that of the trolleyology or the Trolley Problem mentioned in Pinker's "The Moral Instinct." Imagine there is a group of children on a bridge and below the bridge on a rail track are five largest stockholders of McDonald's. A train is coming toward the stockholders and one has an opportunity to save the stockholders by pushing the children down the bridge to block the train. If these stockholders were to die, the whole entire McDonald's Corporation will collapse tomorrow, and there will be no more McDonald's in the world. However if the children were to die, only the family and friends of the children will be affected. What would one do? Is it ethical to put children's life at risks to save any global business? Maybe it is somewhat extreme when we use the scenario as an analogy because no one is going to die immediately after a bite of the Big Mac, but in the long run, eating McDonald's every day will expose one to serious health diseases and thus the consequence would be the same, if not worse since it creates so much more burden to the society and family than simply dying immediately. Regardless of how much profit the McDonald's Corporation might lose because of the death of the stockholders, one should not use anybody else as a means to an end. Children are sentient beings and deserve rights and dignity, and above all, they deserve freedom from harm. Now consider a different scenario where instead of the children on the bridge, it is the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of McDonald's who is on the top of the bridge. Does it make sense now to sacrifice the CFO to save the stockholders? According to the fiduciary duty, isn't it the corporation's duty to protect its shareholders? Of course in a more general sense, the corporation has the duties to both the customers and the shareholders, but making profit does not necessarily mean that businesses and corporations have to target children. By fulfilling the duty to one entity, one does not necessarily have to violate the duties to others.

The Roles of McDonald's Costs Versus Benefits

Judging on the principle of fairness, it is clearly seen that there is a huge leap toward McDonald's. Pinker mentions "reciprocal altruism" as "where a willingness to be nice to others can evolve as long as the favor helps the recipient more than it costs the giver and the recipient returns the favor when fortunes reverse" (Pinker 8). Let's take a look and compare between the profit McDonald's has made by solely selling Happy Meals and the cost of the children whose money has helped McDonald's grow stronger and richer. Statistics shows that by 2003, Happy Meals accounted for about 20 per cent of all

meals sold or about \$3.5 billion in annual revenue. This is 40% of McDonald's total revenue (Spurlock 150). On the other hand, what does McDonald's provide its consumer in return? It offers the cheapness and convenience to its customers. Nowadays when both parents are working and do not get home till late, children have little choice but to eat outside and the choice that works the best are the cheap and convenient fast food restaurant. Moreover, McDonald's food is very tasty and their customers will enjoy great satisfaction from eating. Nevertheless, in the long run, daily consumers of fast food are prone to serious health risks including diabetes, heart disease, and strokes (Deckelbaum 240). Furthermore, the children being raised in this diet will grow up with this type of food and taste reference and the effect keeps spiraling down. No wonder America can never resolve its obesity dilemma. It is obvious that there is an issue with a sense of fairness here. First, the favor does not help the recipient more than it costs the giver. The favor giver in our case is the consumers, and the recipient is McDonald's. The givers provide huge profit to the corporate, but in return, what do they get? They get low quality and unhealthy food that predisposes them to many health risks in the long run. Of course, there is a trade-off between cost and long run effect, but in a low income family, nobody is going to think much about the future's consequence. What is pressing the most is what to eat to survive and pass on every day, and McDonald's knows this. In the long run, the cost to consumers is much higher than the favor the consumers give to the corporate

In the recent years when people start associating and seeing the link between fast food restaurants and childhood obesity, fast food restaurants, including McDonald's have been trying effortlessly to "mend" the situation. They have been donating to numerous charities and establishing the [Ronald McDonald House Charities](#), which helps the critically-ill children in hospitals. However, does the fact that they have been trying to do good deeds in one area, such as donating to charity, counter balance for their unethical actions in other areas, such as advertising to young children? By applying the utilitarianism approach - "the greatest good for the greatest number of people," we can evaluate the moral value of McDonald's and its action. Utilitarianism was originally described by Bentham as "the greatest happiness or greatest felicity principle" (Bentham 4). In general, the idea is that the moral worth of an action is determined based on its value in maximizing the utility or happiness as a whole. In other words, the morality of an action, or a corporation like McDonald's in our case, is determined by its outcome.

One might look at many positive things McDonald's have contributed to the American society, from the way their food is designed as convenient and cheap, to the more sophisticated form such as the Ronald McDonald House Charities, which helps the critically-ill children in hospitals. In a sense, they have been trying to do more "good" and responsible marketing, including giving out calorie facts and adding in their Happy Meal menu healthier choice. In reality, is this completely true? A study "Food Industry Promises to Address Childhood Obesity: Preliminary Evaluation" by Lewin reveals hidden facts behind these "good" deeds that McDonald's has been promoting:

Despite promises to promote more healthful foods to children, McDonald's continues to place toys inside Happy Meals and to market toys – such as Hummer trucks– to young children. Packages of French fries and soda are illustrated with movie advertisements, and movie tie-ins appear on window posters, on gift cards, with Happy Meals, and on drive-thru signs. McDonald's stores advertise games and chances to win prizes such as trips to Disney World. Codes on Big Macs, Large Fries, and Large Drinks offer chances to win additional prizes (Lewin 331).

In reality, for every positive step, McDonald's takes countermeasures that could weaken efforts to promote more healthful eating. In addition to the heavy promotion, McDonald's also capitalizes numerous leading children hospitals in America. Morgan Spurlock, author of "Supersize Me" cries out: "The top-ranked pediatric hospital in the country, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, has a McDonald's outlet. Why shouldn't there be one in Houston?" (Spurlock 50). Sahud et al. in their study "Marketing Fast Food: Impact of Fast Food Restaurants in Children's Hospitals" has concluded that fast food restaurants, particularly McDonalds' are fairly common in hospitals that sponsor pediatric residency programs: "Fast food restaurants are found in 29.5% of US hospitals with pediatric residency programs" (Sahud et al 2296). The restaurant's presence in children's hospitals correlates with increased purchase of McDonald's food, and this leads to the belief that the McDonald's Corporation supports the hospital financially. Thus, McDonald's action might aim to affect the "greatest number of people" with the "greatest good," but its "greatest good" in one area, such as charities, comes with the "greatest greed," and maybe some time evil in other areas, such as advertising toward children. Can utilitarianism address for this? McDonald's social behaviors actually suggest further development to utilitarianism. Doing the "greatest goods" might not be enough; rather,

doing greatest goods must have the consistency and honesty component throughout the course of actions. One should not do some good deeds just to cover up the bad deeds one is inflicting.

Why Children?

Judging by virtue ethics, children are thought of as pure, innocent, and sacred beings and making children as a target for marketing goods and services that can harm them is immoral. Yet, why are there still numerous advertisements toward children in our society? Haidt and Graham propose that it ultimately comes down to the society and culture that determine the degree of harm:

Because people have a sensitivity to cruelty and harm (analogous to the negative sensations caused by taste buds for bitterness), they feel approval toward those who prevent or relieve harm, and this approval is culturally codified in virtues such as kindness and compassion, and also in corresponding vices such as cruelty and aggression. Cultures vary in how much they value and emphasize (Haidt and Graham 6).

The moral agent used as an evaluation basis for ethical evaluation is consistent with certain ideal virtues that provide for the full development of our humanity. The degree of ideal virtues are provided by “cultures,” emphasized by Haidt and Graham. This explains why our society agrees to moralize cigarette smoking but has not yet moralized advertising fast food toward young children despite numerous scientific studies to prove the correlation between fast food and childhood obesity. The harm is obviously there, yet where is the virtue or “moralization?” (Rozin 67) What would it take for society to start realizing and changing its ideal virtue to certain behavior? Pinker provides an excellent answer to this question: “But whether an activity flips our mental switches to the ‘moral’ setting isn’t just a matter of how much harm it does [...] People tend to align their moralization with their own lifestyles” (Pinker 35). Yes, it finally comes down to the way we live, the way we do things, and the way our society is structured. What provides the fast food industry to grow so powerful and strong is not so much because of how much revenue it makes, rather it is the consumers’ way of living and the fast-paced lifestyles structured by the society that give these fast food restaurants opportunities to exploit on young children. In short, there is a need for fast food as it is part of the way we live. It is how most children grow up in America when their parents do not have time to cook for them, and this ultimately explains why it is acceptable to advertise fast food to

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children but not acceptable to advertise cigarette to children!

Conclusion

The research has demonstrated clearly through the various views and established ethical theories that advertising fast food toward children is wrong and unethical since it will harm them in the long run. Through various tools of ethical frameworks as a mean of analysis, advertising fast food to children has shown to violate the universal moral codes, human virtue and obligations. Yet, advertising toward children remains not too much of a concern to our society in comparison to advertising cigarettes. In reality, it is not so much of how much harm it does or how unethical. Rather, it ultimately comes down to the how we, as consumers, realize the impacts and consequences of these harms and adjust our own ideal virtue toward the actions. Such adjustment would drive the final decision of moralization, as in the case of advertising cigarettes. Yet the decisions and realizations often ties with the consumers' lifestyles, the producers' power, and how the society is structured. The moralization of behaviors therefore depends on the social awareness, lifestyle, political power and social conditioning. The principle of deontology addresses the conflict of duties and responsibility of corporation, both to shareholders and consumers. While this ethical framework cannot finally answer to the conflict, it provides a ground rule for further solution to the problems. It is concluded that one needs not violate duties to one entity to fulfill the duty of the others. As for the utilitarianism approach, the paper uses the principle as a solid foundation but it is discovered that the framework needs more development. Although it explains the "greatest good for the greatest number of people," it needs to address more on the definition of "greatest good." Does it make sense to do "greatest good" in one area to cover up the "greatest evil" in other areas? Should we look at groups or corporations by the sum of their actions or should we judge them on the basis of each separate action? And finally, the principle of virtues has proved that we have the innate ideas of realizing advertising to children is wrong, yet we still do it. Our "moralization switch" does not and will not change until we start changing our lifestyles, our social awareness and the way our society is structured.

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