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Account Overdrawn: Articulating Consumerism in Animated Media

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In this critical analysis, I explore how animation has been used to promote consumerism and how it may be used to foster resistance to hegemonic messages about the power relationships between individuals, economic institutions, and societies. First, I address the contradictions presented by media hegemony and resistance strategies in a postmodern media culture. Second, I address specific themes present in cartoons with messages that challenge the American capitalist ethos, namely themes of corporate malfeasance, individual responsibility, and the importance of charitable efforts. Finally, I suggest areas for future research into animation as an area of resistance to media hegemony, outlining how further inquiry might aid communication scholars in understanding how audiences process media messages.

Scholars have recognized the persuasive potential of animated cartoons to influence viewers' attitudes and behaviors. Researchers have examined animated messages about racial stereotypes (e.g., Dobrow & Gidney, 1998; Lehman, 2001) and gender categorizations (e.g., Baker & Raney, 2007; Dobrow & Gidney, 1998) as well as politically motivated cartoons designed to build support for war (e.g., Kornhaber, 2007; Leab, 2006) or critique its causes and outcomes (e.g., Fisch, 2000; Knapp, 1996; Kornhaber, 2007). But less research has dealt with animated messages about consumerism, an issue that pervades nearly every form of media.

Animated fare is distinct from other types of media in several important ways. Winick and Winick (1979) deemed cartoons the most universal TV format, widely popular because of their ability to meet a range of audience needs. The use of motion, basic shapes and forms, and visual repetition make it easy for viewers to pay attention to animated programs (Winick & Winick, 1979). Furthermore, Winick and Winick (1979) argued that "cartoons' speed, unexpected juxtapositions, defiance of ordinary laws of physical science, and characters facilitate operation of the primary process," meaning that viewers may process cartoons on a subconscious level unbound by the constraints of logic (p. 176). Animators and audiences represent, modify, evaluate, and mock the real world through the freedom the animated form affords (Telotte, 2012). In their analysis of the use of animated characters in public service announcements, Hatfield, Hinck, and Birkholt (2007) stressed that visual arguments layer different media (e.g., sound, movement, color, light) to convey messages, and that visual rhetorical strategies may be understood through analysis of realism, detail, abstraction, and ambiguity. Furthermore, they argued that visual arguments are powerful in that they may influence audiences to take action.

Still, cartoon animation has been somewhat stigmatized by those who define the genre too narrowly. Woodcock (2006) defended his study of the political messages in *The Simpsons* by underscoring it as a cartoon not intended for children. Chapman (2001) supplied a similar justification for analyzing the rhetoric of Chuck Jones's *Road Runner* cartoons, arguing, "There is perhaps the tendency to equate cartoon shows with child's play, even though it is quite obvious that such programming is laden with ideas and messages that are above the understanding of the average young person" (p. 40). What many researchers have failed to realize, though, is that animated content should be studied because it attracts people of all ages. According to Bruce (2001), cartoons—even those geared toward children—may overtly communicate political, social, and economic messages without attracting attention or criticism, simply because the genre has not been taken seriously. This gives animators license to subvert cultural norms in ways that other forms of media cannot execute as successfully; cartoons fly under the radar, so they can get away with more (Bruce, 2001). Children and adults may watch cartoons for different reasons and glean different meanings from them, but the widespread appeal and polysemic nature of cartoons reinforce their worth as a topic of scholarly investigation.

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Just as Wile E. Coyote thought ACME Products could provide the goods and services necessary to overcome the elusive Road Runner (Chapman, 2001), cartoons have helped groom audiences to search for corporate solutions to the eternal pursuit of happiness, security, and self-esteem. But is there "A Company that Makes Everything" we may ever need or desire? Could there be a dark double entendre in referring to audience members as consumers? Or could individuals broaden the marketplace of ideas by seeking or creating messages that challenge the capitalistic status quo? Analyzing cartoons may help scholars understand how groups define, prioritize, or challenge consumerism as a sociocultural value in the United States.

Consumerism has been addressed in a variety of animated media across several decades. For example, Belk (1987) noted the *Fox and Crow* film cartoons in the 1940s, the animated *Archie* TV series with heiress Veronica Lodge in the 1960s, and wealthy characters Uncle Scrooge McDuck and Richie Rich each appearing in animated movies and TV programs in the 1980s. In lieu of a more exhaustive discussion of consumerism in animation, I have elected to provide a close reading of some of the more accessible representations of popular animated media to provide a range of detailed illustrations of themes that pertain to how the meaning and value of consumerism are negotiated in U.S. culture. In this critical analysis, I explore how animation has been used to promote consumerism, and how programming may also be used to foster resistance to hegemonic messages about the power relationships between individuals, economic institutions, and societies. First, I address the contradictions presented by media hegemony and resistance strategies in a postmodern media culture. Second, I discuss specific themes in cartoons with messages that challenge the American capitalist ethos, namely themes of corporate malfeasance, individual responsibility, and the importance of charitable efforts. Finally, I discuss the implications and limitations of the present study, suggesting areas for future research into animation as an area of resistance to media hegemony and outlining how scholars may refine theories to better understand how audiences process media messages.

Cartoons and Consumerism

Media images are among the most influential regulators of cultural values; individual identities; and perceptions of citizenship, nationhood, and childhood (Giroux, 1999). Thus, the economic clout of media corporations to dictate the amount and type of messages available to audiences could promote hegemonic control over individuals and preserve commercial interests. Hegemony is a process by which masses are dominated not by force, but by efforts of "organized intellectuals" to win support for the rule of the dominant class (Storey, 2006, p. 50). One group could control a nation or culture by utilizing private institutions to communicate certain messages or influence behavior (Gramsci, 1973). Hegemony hinges on consensus, in that subordinate classes are made to support the cultural and political objectives of the dominant social group, thereby being subsumed into the group's power structures (Storey, 2006).

Extending Gramsci's work on hegemony, Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts (1976) explained that different groups struggle for power in the social-cultural order. They clarified that "when one culture gains ascendancy over the other, and when the subordinate culture *experiences* itself in terms prescribed by the dominant culture, then the dominant culture has also become the basis of a dominant ideology" (p. 12). However, they also argued that hegemony is not guaranteed to a specific class, nor is that power permanent. Despite the dominance of the consumerist ideology, subordinate groups or classes may challenge hegemonic perspectives by expressing their positions, negotiating and modifying meanings within the interstices of the dominant culture, or resisting the hegemonic position (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1976).

Media hegemony serves as a framework for examining mass media and power because it focuses on the role of mass media messages in effecting social and political change (Carragee, 1993). According to Altheide (1984), media hegemony refers to "the dominance of a certain way of life and thought and to the way in which that dominant concept of reality is diffused throughout the public as well as private dimensions of social life" (p. 477). Thus, media hegemony remains useful for the study of how popular media may impact the way people think about cultural values, political issues, and social structures.

Storey (2010) summarized Hall's model of televisual communication, in which representation and meaning are articulated and negotiated via processes of encoding and decoding. First, media professionals encode an event into an ideological context, framing a range of meaning via production techniques and assumptions about the audience. Once the event or message has been encoded into televisual discourse, it takes on a symbolic function with a potential for polysemic interpretation. Then the audience must decode the message, unpacking the discourse to make sense of it. This propagates a complex cycle of consumption and production (Storey, 2010). The broadcasters' professional code expresses the dominant-hegemonic position (Storey, 2010). The negotiated code may blend adaptive and oppositional responses to the dominant code (Storey, 2010), but viewers may also adopt an alternative interpretation, referred to as the oppositional code. Because of the polysemic nature of texts and the cyclical process of encoding and decoding, anti-consumerist messages may be expressed ironically via commercial media, highlighting a macro-level ideological struggle between hegemony and resistance, as well as a range of interpretations within that spectrum. So in analyzing the dialectical tensions at play in animated media related to consumerism, it is important to understand the hegemonic view that exalts consumerism as well as alternative positions regarding that cultural value.

Crothers (2010) noted the stereotype of "crass, consumerist capitalism that is at the root of most programming in American popular culture" and which is showcased in a variety of movies, music, and television shows (p. 71). But according to Shames (1997), consumerism is more than an American stereotype; wanting "more" is embedded in U.S. culture and idealized as an ethic of hungering, striving, and acquiring that leaves people unfulfilled because they are unable to attain contentment. The association of success with wealth has been called "affluenza," which refers to the idea that "people have come to value too much the acquisition of material goods, leaving those persons shallow, unhappy, burdened with debt and living in a world of rapidly depleting resources" (Harmon, 2006, p. 119).

Dunn (1986) argued that economic dynamics in the early 20th century led to cultivation of a consumer identity, which created a market for products and controlled workers by disbanding unions, instead promoting the fulfillment of individual needs and wants. In the 1940s, Harding College president George Benson and his colleagues developed a series of animated shorts that promoted economic success and consumerism as patriotic American values imperative for resisting the threat of communism and winning the Cold War (Honsa, 2012). Inculcating people to view themselves as consumers also has been a primary goal of advertisers, who were able to reach wider audiences through audiovisual media such as television.

Rushkoff (1999) argued that advertisers plant seeds of brand identification as part of a long-term strategy to boost sales, cultivating infants and toddlers into future consumers by targeting them with an array of merchandise emblazoned with trademarked cartoon characters.

Parenti (1992) claimed marketing researchers have conducted tightly guarded experiments with children to determine the best ways to exploit children's gullibility and that corporations have infiltrated classrooms via teaching aids pushing their own agendas and promoting private enterprise. If left unchecked, the increasing influence of private corporations over education could be detrimental to the democratic underpinning of the United States in that businesses would redefine citizenship in terms of consumption, replace civic values with commercial values, and preserve private spaces at the expense of noncommodified public spheres (Giroux, 1999; Klein, 1999). Americans would be taught to define themselves as consumers, failing to criticize corporate ties to government and military institutions (Giroux, 1999) and equating patriotism with shopping and taking vacations to Disneyland (Spigel, 2007).

Shames (1997) argued that although consumerism has been a part of U.S. culture for generations, "the 1980s raised the clamor for more to new heights of shrillness, insistence, and general obnoxiousness" because people began to fear that the economic frontier was diminishing and that there would not be enough material comfort to feed their insatiable wants (p. 37). Parenti (1992) highlighted two 1980s cartoons that exalted consumerist values. *Goldie Gold and Action Jack* centered on "'the world's richest girl' and the reporter who worked for her newspaper, 'The Gold Street Journal'" (Parenti, 1992, p. 166). The show was followed by *The Richie Rich/Scooby Doo Show*, which focused on a rich boy and his dog, Dollar (Parenti, 1992).

In a particularly transparent illustration of transmitting consumer values, the animated show *Jem* centered on music company CEO Jerrica Benton and her pop star alter ego (Lenburg, 1999). After uttering the words, "Showtime, Synergy!" to a holographic computer interface, Jerrica would become Jem, who would sing about "glamour and glitter, fashion and fame," as indicated by the show's theme song. According to Crothers (2010):

> Synergy describes the vertical and horizontal integration of entertainment companies and the products they market. For example, when the same company that produces a performer's album also owns a venue like a radio station on which to play and thus market the album, synergy is said to exist. Synergy is enhanced when the company can also place the song on a popular television program it produces or make it the theme song for a movie it has financed. Multiple marketing outlets reach different audiences to hopefully increase sales. (p. 108)

This exemplifies the blurring between entertainment media and advertising that have propagated consumerist values across a range of animated messages. During the 1980s, companies such as Marvel and Hasbro produced *Jem* and other cartoons (e.g., *Care Bears*, *Cabbage Patch Kids*, *Garbage Pail Kids*, *Transformers*, and *G.I. Joe* among others) to target younger audiences and increase sales of product tie-ins such as dolls or trading cards (Birdwell, 2001; Stone, 2009).

Because so many product-based cartoons were being aired at the expense of educational programming, outraged interest groups pushed Congress to pass the Children's Television Act of 1988 (Parenti, 1992), which the Federal Communications Commission began enforcing in 1991 (Ramsey, 2006). These rules placed restrictions on the amount and type of advertising that could target children and applied not only to direct ads but also to messages that used TV characters to promote products (Ramsey, 2006). These ads were most prevalent during children's programming but also appeared during sports, sitcoms, dramas, talk shows, and music videos, so viewers of all ages were likely to have seen them (Callcott & Lee, 1994).

Some worried such ads would encourage children to develop a general desire to buy products (Ramsey, 2006). *Peanuts* and *Looney Tunes* characters, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, the Pink Panther, and Bart Simpson gained visibility in the 1990s as product pitchmen (Callcott & Lee, 1994). When the FCC mandated in 1996 that broadcast networks provide educational programming for children, most shows offered prosocial lessons rather than traditionally academic messages (Jordan, 2004). This was due to pressures from merchandisers, advertisers, and global market appeal that dictated that educational shows needed to be profitable to be considered successful (Jordan, 2004).

Today, Hasbro is selling the movie rights to many of its 1980s cartoons based on toys, provoking nostalgia among adults who have fond memories of the programs and who are now old enough to make purchasing decisions, as well as introducing the characters and products to a new generation of kids. The company recently licensed the G. I. Joe and Transformers franchises for feature-length films. Hasbro also teamed with Discovery Communications on a channel designed to promote toys such as G.I. Joe and My Little Pony, competing with Disney and Nickelodeon for their share of the kids' market and their parents' dollars (Stelter, 2009).

Resisting Hegemony: A Postmodern Paradox

Although a wealth of examples exist regarding the use of animation to convey hegemonic messages about capitalism, greed, materialism, or private industry, little scholarly attention has been paid to cartoons that critique consumerism. Critical theorists studying hegemony have often overemphasized the dominating forces while discounting individuals and viewpoints that resist capitalist messages and even threaten hegemonic control (Dunn, 1986). Therefore, researchers must go beyond traditional perspectives of TV viewers as passive consumers of hegemonic messages in their critiques of consumer culture by not only describing attempts to control audiences but also considering other forces that might mitigate hegemony (Dunn, 1986).

For example, political and technological shifts spurred South Korean animators to begin making short films in the 1990s as an outlet for their individual creativity, independent of government or commercial interests (Kim, 2006). Many of the filmmakers had been part of a 1980s realist art movement opposing imperialist capitalism and dictatorship (Kim, 2006). The independent filmmakers used animation as a platform to discuss social issues such as environmental destruction, political oppression, and economic inequality (Kim, 2006). The development of the personal computer aided their stylistic innovations (Kim, 2006), much as advanced software programs and the Internet have provided opportunities for "grassroots, cultural-jamming animations" in the U.S. and around the world (Raiti, 2007, p. 155). Such animated strategies are part of a larger effort to subvert the role of media in promoting consumerism. Barber (2007) listed some of *Adbusters*' magazine- and Web-based campaigns, including the annual "Buy Nothing Day" after Thanksgiving, "TV Turnoff" week each April, and "a Media Carta declaration of consumer rights, including a right to media access" (p. 284).

A postmodern stance toward media hegemony and resistance to consumerist messages must recognize the interdependence of societal systems and individual choices. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1986) explained that media and economic systems overlap to achieve certain goals. One goal is to reinforce free enterprise values. Another goal is to maintain the flow of informational and persuasive interactions between producers, sellers, and consumers. A third goal is to manage conflicts within the economic system, as between management and labor or with regulatory agencies. Media organizations that facilitate the achievement of these goals benefit from increased ad revenue, technological advances that enhance competitive advantages, and opportunities for expansion via access to financial resources and international trade (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1986). Individuals, in turn, depend on media to learn how to cope with economic problems and make decisions as consumers (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1986).

The researchers noted, though, that "by controlling what information is and is not delivered and how that information is presented, the media can play a large role in limiting the range of interpretations that audiences are able to make" (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1986, p. 88). Thus, media hegemony may support a status quo that provides for a certain amount of benefit and efficiency among systems and individuals. But ensuring the interests of all parties are consistently and evenly met sometimes depends on scrutiny of the communication links between systems and challenges to the messages exchanged among them.

Rather than ignoring the complexities of globalization and consumerism or falsely claiming to exist apart from them, *The Simpsons* represents the postmodern paradox of critiquing hegemonic messages of consumption while understanding the show's own complicity in reinforcing capitalist values (Steeves, 2005). A multitude of characters in the animated world of Springfield exist primarily to expose how firmly entrenched corporations are in the Simpsons' universe, both on and off the show. Along with corporate drones Jim Hope and Lindsey Naegle, beer spokesperson Duffman and cigarette company PR exec Jack Laramie represent the obnoxiousness, duplicity, and callousness of corporations (Turner, 2004). The show's creators even got Rupert Murdoch, the owner of the Fox Network (which airs *The Simpsons*) to make a guest appearance in which he proclaims himself a billionaire tyrant (Turner, 2004).

In addition to the show's own product tie-ins, animated characters from *The Simpsons* serve as pitchmen for other products in the real world. Krusty the Clown, the irascible host of a children's TV program in fictional Springfield, is known for endorsing a variety of poorly made products on *The Simpsons*. So his generic endorsement of "this product" on the Butterfinger BBs package—coupled with the image of a laughing Bart Simpson—mock the consumer's decision to buy the candy and the overall inauthenticity of celebrity testimonials while unabashedly acknowledging the show's own role in profiting from the transaction (Steeves, 2005). Similarly, the animated and comically dim-witted patriarch Homer Simpson ridiculed theater-goers watching the feature-length *Simpsons Movie* (Brooks, Groening, & Silverman, 2007) for buying tickets to something they could have seen at home for free. Furthermore, the creators of *The Simpsons* invited Banksy, a U.K. graffiti artist, to design an episode's title sequence ("Banksy," 2010). Viewers see images of downtrodden South Korean animators working on *Simpsons* episodes in a sweatshop where children navigate through hazardous chemicals, skulls, and rats; kittens are shredded to stuff Bart Simpson dolls; and unicorns are used for punching DVDs. The result was an acknowledgement of outsourcing and of the Fox network's involvement in abuses often associated with global commodity chains.

Not all animated content is so ironic, however. Though not a cartoon per se, the film *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) featured 3-D computer-generated imagery and created controversy because of audiences' multiple interpretations of its themes. Viewers praised and criticized the story about a corporation procuring minerals from the planet Pandora against the native inhabitants' wishes. While some applauded the film for its condemnation of racist, imperialist, and environmentally exploitative politics, others called it a disparagement of U.S. involvement in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Vietnam (Landesman, 2010). Boaz (2010) argued that conservative critics misconstrued the film as anti-capitalist because *Avatar* highlighted the sanctity of "property rights, the foundation of the free market and indeed of civilization" (p. 19).

These interpretations of the film's message underscore the postmodern contradictions of animated media messages that promote resistance to consumerism while simultaneously taking advantage of it. After all, Fox, the studio which backed *Avatar*, recruited several companies to promote the film by showing trailers in stores, giving away merchandise, and running contests with free vacation prizes (Quilter, 2009). Medved (2010) stated that the makers of *Avatar* took a risk in characterizing corporations as greedy and destructive because doing so denigrates the system that sustains it and risks a loss of profit from movie-goers who support free market economics. Given that the film broke box office records and garnered Oscar attention, the risk paid off. *Avatar* demonstrated that overt critiques of consumerism may still obtain financing for widespread distribution to mass audiences.

Rushkoff (1999) explained that media practitioners must create messages that appeal to at least one of three types of consumers. First, "Traditionalists" are consumers who trust the persuasive messages they receive from advertisers and politicians. They tend to be emotional, dedicated, and easily manipulated. Second, "sophisticated" consumers believe they are aware of media manipulation techniques, so advertisers craft messages that reward them for their ironic sense of detachment by appealing to them as media-savvy individuals. For instance, Geiger, Bruning, and Harwood (2001) found that younger adult viewers who enjoy discussing niche programming such as animation delight in critiquing the shortcomings of a show and appreciate messages presented in a humorous context. Third, "New Simpletons" avoid sales jargon and spectacle in favor of straightforward explanations of what products they should buy (Rushkoff, 1999). Therefore, animated characters are often recruited to endorse brands because advertisers believe the characters will appeal to one of these consumer types (Rushkoff, 1999).

Postmodern advertisements make use of multireferential symbols in ways that are designed to capture the attention of the postmodern consumer, who is exposed to a variety of competing persuasive messages (Rumbo, 2002). But in turn, postmodern consumers derive their own—often oppositional—meanings in media messages and select from the array of products available to construct "multiple, situation-specific self-images" (Rumbo, 2002, p. 131). So in trying to appeal to "sophisticated" consumers or to appeal to an individual's particular psychology, marketers may capitalize on criticisms of consumerism and turn them into reasons for buying things (Rumbo, 2002). Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine cartoons that argue against the wealth of messages that support consumerism. The following examples provide some of the clearest available messages of counterhegemonic discourse in animated media.

Categorizing Messages of Counterhegemony

Because there are so many hegemonic media messages promoting consumerism, Parenti (1992) worried television would teach kids to equate success with wealth, power, and selfishness. But it is important to recognize that alternative viewpoints do exist in animated media. Cartoons that challenge the dominant ideology of consumerism may present children and adults with additional messages to inform their views on identity, citizenship, and cultural definitions of success, perhaps generating a more balanced dialogue about ethics and values.

Reid and Rotfeld (1981) reported that less than half of the commercials on Saturday morning television could be classified as informative, negating industry groups' claims that their ads would help children make informed purchasing decisions. But Buijzen (2007) found that teaching children about the persuasive intent of advertising increased their skepticism of commercials' claims, and evaluative interventions caused children to view commercials negatively. Given that animated entertainment programs and advertising have been conflated for so many years, such results could inform educational efforts regarding children's general media literacy skills. Teachers and government officials could provide teaching aids that challenge those presented by corporate public relations kits offered in the classroom as supplements to lesson plans. Thus, adults who are aware of anti-consumerism messages in animated cartoons may help educate children to avoid a consumerist mentality.

A critical analysis of several animated cartoons with prominently featured anti-consumerism messages reveals three primary themes: (1) pointing out acts of corporate malfeasance; (2) reinforcing the need for individual responsibility; and (3) highlighting the importance of charitable efforts. These cartoons illustrate patterns that are apparent across a variety of animated media, which serve as sites for articulation of meaning and reflect a struggle over the cultural value (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1976; Storey, 2010) of consumerism.

Corporate malfeasance

One of the most prevalent themes in the counterhegemonic cartoons analyzed in this article is the issue of corporate malfeasance. Anti-consumerist or anti-corporate activist groups often frame their adversaries as "evil" elites. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) described this in their analysis of consumer activists, noting that: "Many compared their anticorporate struggle to the biblical tale of David and Goliath. The largest, most visible companies in any category were frequently classified by our informants as labor rights abusers, monopolistic threats to competition, and/or cultural imperialists" (p. 697). Therefore, as would logically be expected, anti-consumerism messages in animated cartoons frequently depict corporations and CEOs as corrupt, manipulative, ungrateful, and greedy.

Corporate malfeasance is sometimes personified in an animated billionaire whose wealth has been procured through unethical and/or exploitative means. In *The Simpsons*, this character is Mr. C. Montgomery Burns. As owner of the town's nuclear power plant, he is the wealthiest man in Springfield. But as Woodcock (2006) noted, Mr. Burns is not civic-minded, having polluted the local environment, abused his employees, and criticized the sun for providing free energy. The 1990s animated series *Tiny Toon Adventures* (Lenburg, 1999) featured a similarly disagreeable character, Montana Max, whose wealth came from environmentally reckless corporations. Although both characters go by the stereotypical rich person's moniker "Monty," Mr. Burns most pointedly reminds viewers that corporations may preach magnanimity while taking advantage of consumers' trust. According to Turner (2004):

> [Mr. Burns is] the ogre behind the warm, friendly corporate mask, his vow to club the consumers who made him rich and feast on their bones a stark counterweight to all those corporate giants—no less callous than old Monty, no less calculating—who tell us they love us so very very much in the TV ads that run between *Simpsons* segments. (p. 153)

One of the primary villains on the PBS Kids Go! program *WordGirl* is Mr. Big, whose weapon of choice is mind-control. He has attempted to sabotage business opponents and relied upon spectacle and gibberish to manipulate competition in his favor (Zelevansky & SanAngelo, 2008). In "Big's Big Bounce" (Raddatz & SanAngelo, 2009a) Mr. Big says he owns everything he has ever wanted except the trampoline he has dreamed of since childhood. So he volunteers as the Special Troop Leader of the Woodview Elementary Fair City Scouts to win the one being offered as a prize for selling the most granola bars. Mr. Big inspires the scouts with a speech:

> You are not selling average, boring, run-of-the-mill granola bars. *You*, my fellow Fair City Scouts, are selling *dreams*! Tempting, delicious, granola-filled dreams! If someone orders one granola bar, ask, "Why not five?" If they order five, ask, "Why not 15?" You're not going door to door. You're going soul to soul, sale to sale. Eye contact. Firm handshake. Sell the crunch!

This soliloquy reflects a comprehensive strategy of branding, which "in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence" (Klein, 1999, p. 21). The superhero WordGirl, also known as Becky Botsford, sells granola bars to her father, who cries, "Salvation!" before eating them all. After the troop boosts its sales by 500% and wins the trampoline, Mr. Big steals it. But WordGirl reminds him there are consequences to his actions, and he is arrested and sentenced to community service.

As part of another scheme to bilk people out of their money, Mr. Big manufactures a lip-synching pop star named Tiny Big (Samek & SanAngelo, 2009b). He explains that "pop stars are the most powerful people in the world, even more powerful than the evilest businessmen. They can use their limelight to influence children to do anything, from wearing silly clothes to spending all of their parents' money." The cartoon conveys an anti-consumerist message with this episode, specifically when Becky has to remind her father that he cannot afford the "high-def" Tiny Big washing machine and that the singer's popularity is merely a passing fad.

Corporate exploitation of children is also exemplified in the Disney film, *Wall-E* (Morris & Stanton, 2008). The BuyNLarge corporation, which has taken over Earth with stores, gas stations, transit companies, media outlets, and a variety of products, has rendered the planet uninhabitable. So humans have been biding their time on a BNL Cruise spaceship called the *Axiom*, waiting for BNL to clean up its mess. On the ship, children are placed in AllDay Care, with droning robot nannies teaching them the BNL alphabet: "A is for *Axiom*, your home sweet home. B is for BuyNLarge, your very best friend…." This example highlights corporations' interest in indoctrinating people with the ideology of consumption at the earliest age possible. Preston and White (2004) argued that corporations have also tried to commodify kids themselves, marketing their preferences, lifestyles, traits, and even their parents, as consumer niches in order to attract advertisers. Networks with children's programming such as Fox, Disney, and Nickelodeon attract advertising dollars by describing their viewers as a demographic with the power to persuade their parents into making purchases (Preston & White, 2004).

Corporations in animated cartoons enhance their profit-making abilities by exploiting linkages to government and media as well. According to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1986), "Corporations need public support, and decision-maker cooperation can be activated by convincing people via media messages of the validity of the corporation's position in struggles with federal agencies, environmentalists, [and] tax authorities" (p. 81). The connections between businesses, government, and media might also include messages originating from corporate lobby groups, think tanks, or private government contractors. Several of these connections are explored and critiqued in animated cartoons.

The CEO of BuyNLarge, Shelby Forthright, is depicted in *Wall-E* on a platform that resembles the White House briefing room, except the U.S. presidential seal has been replaced by the BNL logo, and the outline of the White House in the background is instead depicted as a BNL superstore. A photo of Forthright on the cover of the "BuyNLarge Times" shows him raising the fingers on both of his hands in the "V for Victory" gesture made famous by former U.S. president Richard M. Nixon. The accompanying headline reads, "Too Much Trash!!! Earth Covered. BNL CEO Declares Global Emergency." Viewers of the film may associate this animated imagery with Nixon telling the American people, "I am not a crook," during a press conference about the Watergate scandal.

The BBC's *Secret Show*, broadcast in the U.S. on the Nicktoons network, also addresses the links between private corporations, government, and media. The show chronicles the heroic efforts of Victor and Anita, intelligence agents for U.Z.Z. In the episode, "World Savers" (Ingham, Tran, & Collingwood, 2007), the agents face competition from a private defense contractor called World Savers, Inc., whose agents outdo U.Z.Z. in putting down menacing robots. These agents take advantage of news coverage to advertise products. The leader of U.Z.Z. denounces the World Saver selling tactics as "despicable profiteering from the world's security." Anita infiltrates World Savers, Inc., where she discovers the robot invasion had been faked by the company and the rival agents were actors. To celebrate being the world's only world-defending organization again, U.Z.Z. releases a series of commemorative figurines of Victor and Anita. Thus, the postmodern cartoon denounces the military-industrial complex but acknowledges the inability to sever the relationship between the two institutions.

Many anti-consumerist animated cartoons depict corporate villains as unfairly exploiting media outlets to dupe audiences, make money, and seize control for selfish gain. Granny May, a deceptively genial villain on *WordGirl*, attempts to sell a strength-enhancing elixir by staging phony product demonstrations (Banville & SanAngelo, 2008). When WordGirl discovers the elixir is made of nothing more than orange juice and spray cheese, Granny imprisons her and rushes off to her next elixir sale, which will be televised on the *P. M. Dinnertime Evening News Show*. Granny May departs in typical cartoon corporate villain form, smugly remarking, "… Once it's on television, the entire city will want my spritzer! I'll make millions!"

Several of the cartoons that point out the influence of corporate interests over media simultaneously remind audiences that media also have the potential to expose the machinations of corporate criminals and power-hungry individuals. When *WordGirl*'s Mr. Big decides to run for mayor in "Mr. Big's Big Plan" (Nicoll, SanAngelo, & Fukuda, 2008), he is unable to use mind-control devices during a political debate and instead promises everyone whatever they want. He installs a giant TV downtown, but WordGirl uses it to expose his scheme.

In another episode of *WordGirl*, "Banned on the Run," Mr. Big uses a mind-control device to manipulate the Mayor into wagering control of the city during a plastic-cup throwing contest. Having seized power of local government, Mr. Big bans WordGirl from the city and prohibits any negative news coverage about himself (Fleckenstein & SanAngelo, 2008). He also enacts arbitrary laws before planning to steal the city's money. WordGirl avoids exile by operating as her alter ego, Becky Botsford, and takes the place of her reporter friend, Scoops, who has been relegated to making up positive stories about Mr. Big. Becky questions Mr. Big's planning skills and conveys her skepticism of his ability to serve as Mayor. Her interview results in Mr. Big's full confession. The episode's moral is that when news media do not challenge corporate players and their agendas, individuals must think critically and demand accountability.

Cartoons that deal with the theme of corporate malfeasance highlight important parallels between the greed of CEOs and the unchecked impulses of consumers. Consumers are subjected to long-term, sophisticated branding strategies and mired in a complex web of private, government, and media interests. But despite systemic influences over consumerist values, cartoons have also underscored the significance of individual accountability.

Individual responsibility

Part of thinking independently involves resisting the hegemonic messages that promote materialism and equate the accumulation of wealth and property with self-worth. Therefore, anti-consumerist cartoons not only present negative images of consumerism run amok but also describe the practical perils of individual greed and fiscal irresponsibility. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) stated that to anti-consumerism activist movements, "consumers seem incapable or disinclined to reflect on their own consumer behaviors from a systemic point of view and to insert social and moral criteria into their purchase decisions" (p. 698). Therefore, counterhegemonic messages in many cartoons highlight consumers' complicity in perpetuating the consumerist ideology to raise viewers' consciousness about the impact of their choices.

Comedy Central's *South Park* alluded to retail giant Wal-Mart as a wicked corporation in "Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes" (Parker, 2004), but in the episode, evil mega marts are shown to be monsters of our own making. The dark tale begins with the store's grand opening on the site of a former pond, the loss of which does not seem to faze the townspeople, who are more excited by the abundance of items that will soon be available to them. They praise Wall-Mart's employment of senior citizens and physically impaired individuals and marvel at the low prices of the merchandise. Soon, though, the residents find themselves addicted to shopping for things they do not particularly need, irrationally drawn to the store in the middle of the night. Wall-Mart displaces local businesses, leading to unemployment and the devastation of Main Street.

Despite their efforts, the people cannot seem to stop rationalizing their decision to frequent the store they despise. When the adults debate how best to extricate themselves from the power the Wall-Mart holds over them, Kyle yells: "All you have to do is not shop at Wall-Mart anymore! If you want it to go away, all it takes is a little self-control and personal responsibility." The corporation is portrayed as a malevolent force; the employees, manager, executives at corporate headquarters, and even the company's creator are powerless against the behemoth. The company president laments: "Union leaders, nature activists, even the best fair trade lawyers have tried to stop the Wall-Mart, and now … they are Wall-Mart shoppers, all." Eventually, the kids destroy the heart of the Wall-Mart, which is a mirror, symbolizing the unbridled desire of the consumer. Jubilant at having vanquished Wall-Mart, the people of South Park decide to shop at smaller stores even if they have to pay a little more. But they fail to realize that it is their ceaseless shopping that turns the small stores into monstrous corporations. While explicitly referencing large retail chains such as Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Target, the episode underscores the role of the consumer in feeding the retail beast.

Wall-E portrays consumers as lazy, overweight, and ignorant of their surroundings. In a space-age lampoon of bored commuters, the characters recline in motorized hoverchairs, chatting via videoconference about virtual pastimes, and slurping beverages from enormous BNL cups. They are immersed in a mélange of advertising; BNL billboards advise them to "Live their Dreams," by consuming material goods, and ironically tempt them to "Buy Now, Pay Later." If the irony is lost on the obtuse characters, attentive viewers may understand the subtext.

When the captain of the *Axiom* learns that the BNL CEO has given up on trying to restore Earth so humans may return, he determines the message is outdated. Ignoring the CEO's order to "Just stay the course" —a phrase designed to mimic former President George W. Bush's instructions to the American people to maintain the status quo during times of military conflict and economic uncertainty—the captain yells that everyone has been doing nothing for 700 years. Rather than merely surviving, he boldly states, he wants to live by making his own decisions. He asserts his authority as captain of the ship that had been controlled by robots and other automated systems and tries to correct the course of humanity. The moral of the film, then, is a lesson in how the dominant corporate ideology is maintained only because of individual acquiescence. If people can recognize hegemonic messages about consumerism, the film advises, people may investigate alternative ideas, alter their behavior, and improve their lives.

Hegemonic messages that reinforce consumerism also engender a sense of competition in individuals, so resisting the lure of materialism means that people must reinvent social norms. The theme of individuals engaged in unfulfilling consumerist competition is reinforced in another episode of *WordGirl*. District Attorney Sally Botsford (WordGirl/Becky's mother) and the Mayor fall victim to a scheme perpetrated by Seymour Orlando Smooth, the host of a new game show called "Answer All My Questions and Win Stuff" (Ferraiolo & SanAngelo, 2009). Viewers of the game show fill out contest entry forms to win a place on the show and spin the Wheel of Wonderful Stuff, vying to take home worthless prizes such as a lifetime supply of air. However, WordGirl exposes Smooth's plan to rob the contestants when she reveals that the forms were printed in disappearing ink, enabling Smooth to make it look as though the contestants had authorized him to withdraw all the money from their bank accounts.

Measuring one's worth against society's definitions of material success may leave consumers feeling inadequate, but counterhegemonic messages remind viewers that self-worth consists of more than keeping up with the Joneses. When Guy Rich, "an evil businessman who has swindled customers out of millions of dollars," arrives on an episode of *WordGirl*, he boasts of his 150-room mansion and mini-golf course (Samek & SanAngelo, 2009a). Mr. Big, jealous that he is no longer the richest villain in town, brainwashes the others to steal for him so he can build a bigger course. WordGirl visits Rich, only to find out that his "mansion" is a façade attached to a modest residence. Rich laments: "Everywhere you look, it's a contest to see who has the biggest car or the most colossal TV. It's hard for a normal guy like me…. I'm just a regular old guy with a regular old job." WorldGirl finally gets Guy Rich and Mr. Big to admit to one another that neither of them has as much money as they had claimed.

The cartoon also calls upon individuals to think critically about their purchasing decisions rather than giving in to hegemonic messages in advertising and other media. Mr. Big markets Walk-and-Talk WordGirl dolls that mispronounce words and provide incorrect definitions in "Mr. Big's Dolls and Dollars" (Raddatz & SanAngelo, 2009b). Thanks to mind-control devices planted within the dolls, people become enthralled with the dolls as well as WordGirl play sets, toothbrush protectors, tree shakers, remote-controlled pickle jars, and limited edition gold-plated back scratchers. Upset that her secret identity has been co-opted to line Mr. Big's pockets, Becky questions her parents on why they are spending money on frivolous items. She presses her father to examine his motives, asking, "Do you need it or just want it, Dad? I mean, shouldn't we be spending our money on more important things, like, I don't know, food?" Upon discovering Mr. Big's unethical persuasive methods, WordGirl not only gets people to stop buying the dolls and accessories but also blocks Mr. Big's attempt to purchase City Hall by urging the customers to demand a full refund.

In addition to resisting the lure of excess consumption, some cartoons attempt to teach viewers that individuals need to be responsible for their own decisions and budget wisely for necessities and avoid debt. Mr. Big himself runs short of cash in "WordGirl Makes a Mistake" (Samek, Goldberg, Bishop, & SanAngelo, 2009) after he buys a rocket ship and a mind-control device. He hires Todd, a handyman, to build a cage to keep WordGirl from thwarting his attempt to install the mind-control device on the moon. But Todd helps WordGirl escape because Mr. Big's extravagant purchases have left him unable to pay Todd the money he owes.

In "Ch-ch-ch-change Day," Becky (a.k.a. WordGirl) considers whether to save her money for a bike or keep her money where she can see it and be tempted to spend it (Downie & SanAngelo, 2009). Ultimately, she follows the advice of her father, who urges her to take part in Loose Change Day at the National National Bank, an event designed "to teach young people how saving a little bit of money can add up to a lot of money over time." With a postmodern take on the lesson of delaying the gratification of materialistic impulses, everyone who deposits their money receives their choice of a free WordGirl purse or keychain.

These types of counterhegemonic messages in cartoons convey that individuals must resist equating their self-worth with material accumulation; consciously assess their buying habits and reactions to persuasive messages; and budget for long-term security rather than splurging on passing trends and acquisitive whims.

Charitable efforts

Several animated cartoons convey a message of sharing wealth rather than seeking to claim it for oneself. This theme goes beyond reminding individuals to be mindful of their own budgets and purchases. Rather, cartoons about charitable efforts encourage the distribution of resources to assist those in need as well as the power of collaborative efforts. Values such as charity, generosity, and unselfishness are not threatening to corporate conglomerations in the context of animated holiday specials that teach that it is better to give than to receive. The viewing, sale, and merchandising of such cartoons generate publicity and funds that may be used to benefit and spread awareness of a particular cause or outreach effort.

For example, the creators of *VeggieTales*, a Gospel-themed animated show, made a Christmas video encouraging people to donate to people in need. A portion of proceeds from sales of *Saint Nicholas: A Story of Joyful Giving* went to Operation Christmas Child, which distributes gifts, letters, and brochures explaining the meaning of Christmas to children in 130 countries (Grossman, 2009). Donations were matched by Family Christian Stores, which sold the video, and the film's production company allowed customers who purchased the video to choose another *VeggieTales* video to give to someone else (Grossman, 2009). Singer Amy Grant performed the theme song, providing a radio tie-in, and the songwriters also penned a gift book, donating some of the money they earned during a book-signing tour (Grossman, 2009).

How the Grinch Stole Christmas! (Jones & Geisel, 1966) also reinforces the idea that Christmas is not about receiving gifts as much as it is about giving to others. The heart of the misanthropic Grinch grows after he realizes that depriving the Whos of their decorations, food, and presents did not ruin their holiday. He decides the joy of Christmas does not come from a store but from fellowship with family and community. The Grinch returns the things he had stolen from the Whos, and in turn, the Whos include him in their circle of song and dance.

Some anti-consumerist cartoons highlight the importance of charity efforts or community improvement regardless of the season. In a video-on-demand offering of the *Berenstain Bears*, PBS Sprout introduced the "Get the Gimmies" (Pertsch, Hurst, & Faria, 2003) episode with a message about the Great Tuck-In, an effort to collect donated pajamas for children. In this way, the network tied an animated message about the importance of involvement with charitable efforts to an opportunity for viewers to partake in such a project.

In the episode, Brother and Sister embarrass their parents by whining for treats at the store. Mama admonishes them, but the children throw a tantrum to make their parents buy them something. Ashamed at themselves for giving in, Mama and Papa lecture their children on greed and giving. Still, when their grandparents visit, Brother and Sister Bear demand gifts. Papa punishes them, and the kids hear their grandpa reminiscing about how Papa had thrown a similar tantrum as a child but learned his lesson when he decided to give his toy truck to a boy from a poor family. Brother and Sister apologize and decide to donate their toys to a children's hospital.

Part of the Playhouse Disney lineup, *Handy Manny* centers on a carpenter and his anthropomorphic tools. When Marion the Librarian asks Manny to build a bench for the children's reading room, Manny and the tools notice the poor condition of the books. So they decide to donate the books Manny's grandmother had read to him as a child. A neighbor named Sherman explains that "Donating is when you give something of yours to help someone else" (Rabb & Bastien, 2009) and plants flowers around the senior center, using soil and seeds donated by Kelly, owner of the local hardware store. Manny helps Sherman by building planters for the flowers, and Sherman recruits his friends to donate their books to the library. In this episode, the characters presented anti-consumerism messages in the form of individual responsibility, the power of community ties, and reuse of belongings rather than discarding them.

Many of the cartoons discussed here present multiple examples that challenge consumerism. The characters, plots, and dialogue demonstrate how overlapping themes (i.e, corporate malfeasance, individual responsibility, charitable efforts) may be presented in a single episode. A more thorough content analysis of animation may reveal further insights into how children and adults may process anti-consumerism messages or even revisit earlier cartoons that reinforced the consumerist ideology to unpack meanings with a more postmodern sensibility. That may involve recognition that animated media often owe their existence and popularity to consumerism. Even *WordGirl*, which airs on public television, is tied to merchandising via the PBS Web site (http://www.shop.pbskids.org/). Producers of noncommercial children's educational programs have suggested that merchandising is a vital source of revenue in the absence of advertising (Jordan, 2004). Researchers should continue this investigation of anti-consumerism messages and perpetuate a dialogue about how U.S. audiences may respond to counterhegemonic discourse in media in light of such apparent contradictions.

Implications

In this analysis, I have attempted to initiate a discussion of the ways consumerism is reinforced and challenged in animated media. To that end, this study sheds light on the pervasive consumerist philosophy that undergirds the U.S. media system. It also directs scholarly attention to mediated efforts to resist hegemonic messages, as well as the challenges and contradictions involved in raising awareness about these ideas among viewers. Such research is a necessary part of educating viewers, purposefully interacting with media via negotiation of meaning and even creation of content, and ultimately, shaping culture. Future researchers may undertake qualitative and quantitative content analyses to codify the genre more exhaustively. However, the broad approach I have used here was intended to expand intellectual parameters about what animation may be and what it might convey.

Nevertheless, a limitation of this research endeavor is the impossibility of including all relevant content while at the same time trying to recognize animation as a versatile and incisive form of communication and critique. Even narrowing the swath of mass media to animation presents a great deal of variety in terms of content, genre, and technique. I have addressed animation in myriad forms, media, and platforms to craft a more inclusive treatment of the postmodern contradictions of hegemony and resistance to messages about consumerism.

I have used the phrase “animated cartoon” to distinguish audiovisual animation from printed cartoons, such as those that appear in printed newspapers or magazines. However, the modern environment of media convergence means that a character appearing in a printed cartoon may come to life in a televised or cinematic iteration of the narrative, and characters from shows and films may appear in advertisements or public service announcements. Technological advances have allowed animators to combine traditional animation techniques with computer-generated images, blending animation and live action, or employing a variety of styles and tools. For instance, cel animation, stop-motion, and motion- or performance-capture technology, are just a few techniques that fit into the category of animation. Animated programs may be geared toward different audiences, so variations exist as to the forms of resistance to consumerism that might manifest in media geared toward children compared to content intended specifically for adults or across different cultural, political, or artistic contexts. Again, I have merely attempted to explore an area of media that is worthy of additional scholarly attention. Future researchers may elect to define a specific type of animation, genre, or text for more granular analysis.

Dunn (1986) noted that television and other media reinforce consumerism as a necessary and proper way of life. But because these media combine several forms of content and seek to appeal to wide audiences, viewers must negotiate a “variety of images, messages, and moods which are inherently inconsistent, discordant, or contradictory” (Dunn, 1986, p. 56). Thus, media messages that challenge the consumerist ideology reside alongside content that advances consumerism. Indeed, even the animated messages that cleverly parody or censure consumerist societal structures must recognize that they owe their existence to capitalist mechanisms (i.e., commercial media, corporate sponsorship, or merchandising).

This analysis was intended as an introduction to the topic of how animation as a form of media might be used to challenge hegemonic messages of consumerism found in so many cartoons. However, more research is needed in this area, both in tracing the historical role of animation in advertising, entertainment, education, and politics as well as testing current uses and effects on audiences. Researchers should utilize quantitative and qualitative methodologies to determine the nature of underlying messages in cartoons and their impact on adult, teen, and child audiences. Communication theories such as uses and gratifications, social learning, and cultivation may prove especially useful in such studies.

The uses and gratifications perspective (Rubin, 2002), could help researchers understand media effects from a more user-centered point of view. Adults and children may watch animated cartoons for different purposes and with different effects. Either group may watch cartoons to satisfy motives such as passing time, entertainment, escape, or information-seeking. But they might also glean alternative meanings from cartoons intended for a different audience or experience unintended consequences of exposure to animated cartoons. For instance, a parent might notice anti-consumerist themes in a program designed to develop children's literacy skills, as might occur in the case of *WordGirl*. But Ramsey (2006) observed that unsupervised children may be attracted to *South Park*, *Family Guy*, or Comedy Central's *Adult Swim* programming, which are not intended for younger audiences.

U&G researchers could also examine audience activity. Selectivity processes could play a part in determining whether media messages influence people's attitudes (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1986) and even brand loyalty (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006), so researchers of anti-consumerism messages in cartoons should examine attention cues and allocation to determine effects on viewers. For instance, the contrast of animated characters in commercials that were different than those in a TV program was linked to increased product recognition and positive evaluation of the product by young children (Hoy, Young, & Mowen, 1986). Rushkoff (1996) noted concerns about attention spans of children immersed in rapidly edited visual media such as TV or hyperlinked environments. Refining the concept of attention could allow U&G researchers to better comprehend active and passive learning of animated messages related to consumerism by expanding insights into instrumental versus ritualized use of media (Rubin & Perse, 1987; Ruggiero, 2000). Krugman and Hartley (1970) argued that viewers learn passively when they attend to TV programs in a calm state. But as researchers compare televised cartoons with those on the Internet, innovations in animation techniques as well as increased interactivity with online characters could result in differences in how users perceive animated messages.

Scholars should also investigate animated cartoons with anti-consumerist messages to better understand the teaching potential of cartoons to serve as behavioral models. Baker and Raney (2007) used social learning theory (Bandura, 2002) for their content analysis of gender stereotypes of superheroes in animated cartoons. Researchers should build on such findings to determine if stereotypes encourage children to mimic actions depicted in the cartoons. Regarding consumerism in particular, viewer identification with popular superheroes could encourage kids (or adults) to buy related merchandise (Rushkoff, 1996). Peters and Blumberg (2002) investigated whether younger viewers were capable of moral reasoning, focusing on violent acts perpetrated by "good" or "evil" cartoon characters. Similar rationales may be adopted for applying social learning theory to viewers' evaluations of corporations and consumers in cartoons because these portrayals may influence how people view materialism as a social value, capitalism as an economic system, or purchasing as an individual choice.

In addition to the U&G perspective and social learning theory, scholars should also consider cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002) to gauge the long-term effects of messages that support consumerism. Although cultivation has been used to discuss the effects of cartoon violence (e.g. Peters & Blumberg, 2002), Harmon (2006) argued that cultivation theory could not support the contention that heavier TV viewing could cause people to become more materialistic. But his secondary analysis of European and World Values survey data did not account for differences in TV content across nations. That is, if U.S. culture is built on the idea of capitalism and other free enterprise values, media exposure in the U.S. could be linked to different effects than might result in other countries with different media systems or different cultural values. Therefore, scholars of media and consumerism who utilize cultivation theory as a framework must consider intercultural variations in content.

Conclusion

Animated messages that challenge the hegemonic discourse of consumerism provide an important educational tool for navigating postmodern media. As Rushkoff (1999) noted:

> …Television programs like *Beavis and Butt-head* and *The Simpsons* were deconstructing the rest of the mediaspace for our children. With Bart as their role model, the generation growing up in the last decade has maintained a guarded relationship to the media and marketing techniques that have fooled their parents. While his dad, Homer, was suckered by every beer promotion, Bart struggled to maintain his skateboarder's aloofness and dexterity. Through Bart, our kids learned to remain moving targets. (p.6)

Adults who watch cartoons that challenge consumerist ideology may learn to be media savvy in a similar fashion, which is vital if cartoons are to convey *caveat emptor* messages successfully.

Although hegemonic consumerist messages are pervasive, animators, practitioners, and scholars may help individuals to develop media literacy skills, enabling them to evaluate product claims and larger cultural effects of advertising (Rumbo, 2002). Therefore, researchers of anti-consumerist messages in animated cartoons may shed light on hegemonic messages and foster discourse that informs individual choices and government policies, or at least promotes more mindful viewing for both children and adults. Appreciating cartoons from a postmodern perspective will allow viewers of all ages to re-evaluate their roles as consumers of material goods and services, as well as of media.

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