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# Understanding the Past and Preparing for Tomorrow: Children and Adolescent Consumer Behavior Insights from Research in Our Field

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**ABSTRACT** Our special issue on young consumers introduces readers to a research area that has been part of the consumer behavior field for over 50 years. We provide an overview of topics and findings from past to present that have appeared in marketing and consumer journals. We also identify current research issues and gaps and invite readers to contribute to the field. Throughout our discussion, we introduce the 10 articles in this special issue, whose topics include neuroscience insights into youth risk behaviors, the effects of social media on youth, social activism among young people, strategies for encouraging them to eat healthier food, parenting strategies and youth smoking, how gambling advertising affects youth, their need for marketplace literacy, and the importance of studying the lived experiences of youth in poverty. These articles include empirical findings and identify opportunities for future research that can positively impact the lives of children and adolescents.

Within the marketing discipline, the field of children and adolescent consumer behavior began to emerge in the 1960s with the publication of several articles on topics such as youth brand loyalty and their influence on family purchasing. Interest in the area increased in the 1970s, sparked by public policy debates about the fairness of advertising to children and possible negative outcomes. As the field matured, research expanded to a broader set of topics including how young people become socialized as consumers, how cognitive, environmental and social factors affect young consumers' learning and behavior, and how to reduce their consumption of risky products such as tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy foods.

In this special issue of JACR entitled "Children and Adolescent Consumer Behavior: Foundations and New Research Directions," we introduce readers to a wide variety of research conducted by consumer researchers on important and timely topics related to young consumers in the marketplace. In this introductory article, because readers may not be familiar with the research area, we provide a historical over-

view of it, by reviewing articles published in marketing and consumer research journals. Then, we identify pressing new issues on child and adolescent consumer behavior that require attention from consumer researchers as well. In this introductory article, we also discuss the ten articles we have selected for our special issue on youth.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF RESEARCH ON CHILD AND ADOLESCENT CONSUMERS

In this historical overview section, we provide a summary of how research on child and adolescent consumers in our field has developed over time in our marketing and consumer journals. We identify the main issues that have captured the attention of consumer researchers over the last 50 years, from 1970 to the present. From its inception, our field has addressed topics related to child and adolescent well-being. Our field has studied whether marketing is harmful to young people in terms of misleading them or encouraging poor consumption choices, and we have investigated strategies for promoting healthier choices. Furthermore, we have addressed

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how consumer knowledge and values develop from early childhood through adolescence, and what factors, such as parents and media, can influence this development and improve outcomes.

### ***1970–1980: Television Advertising***

In the early 1970s, social scientists engaged in a large-scale effort to examine the effects of media on children coordinated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The major focus was on studying the effects of televised violence on children and adolescents, but television advertising was studied as well. Researchers examined issues regarding the fairness of advertising to children, who were viewed as having little knowledge of advertising and its persuasive intent. Also of interest was the extent to which television advertising influenced consumption patterns among children and adolescents.

Survey studies revealed that young children under the age of 8 have little understanding of the persuasive nature of advertising, viewing it as informative, truthful and entertaining (Blatt, Spencer, and Ward 1972). By the age of 7–8 years, children understand the persuasive intent of advertising and recognize its biases and deception (Robertson and Rossiter 1974). Similar findings led to the conclusion that young children under the age of 8 have little in the way of “cognitive defenses” against advertising, making them vulnerable to being unfairly persuaded.

Accumulating evidence of children’s vulnerability to television advertising gave rise to calls for government intervention. In 1978, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) proposed trade rule regulations to (1) ban all television advertising to young children under the age of 8, and (2) ban television advertising for sugary food products to children under the age of 12 (Federal Trade Commission 1978). To justify such bans, researchers sought to directly correlate measures of children’s advertising exposure to their unhealthy food consumption. Obtaining accurate data on advertising exposure proved difficult, and soon researchers turned to experimental methods. It was found that a single television advertisement was sufficient to increase children’s preference for the advertised product (Goldberg and Gorn 1974) including highly sugared foods (Goldberg, Gorn, and Gibson 1978). These findings supported the FTC position that eliminating advertising from children’s television programming would reduce the consumption of heavily sugared foods and encourage children to choose healthier options. But, due to various pressures, the FTC dropped its proposed regulations about advertising to children.

Today, research themes stemming from these early years continue to garner interest from researchers, such as how to enhance youth’s marketplace literacy. In an article in this special issue, “Educating for Adolescent Well-being: Is it Time for Marketplace Literacy?” Boland, Grier, and Connell (2024) propose marketplace literacy as an important educational goal for young people. Although specific domains of literacy, such as digital literacy and health literacy, have received attention, the authors argue that the integrative approach offered by marketplace literacy education can provide more generalized benefits. They propose that early adolescence (ages 12–18) is an especially opportune time to introduce marketing concepts, and that doing so would make adolescents more savvy consumers and also wiser social media influencers.

### ***1980–1995: Consumer Socialization and Learning***

Early consumer researchers also studied how young people develop knowledge about the marketplace and are socialized as consumers. At first, in the 1970s, they used surveys to describe aspects of children’s knowledge, for instance, how many brands they knew and what sources of information they used to learn about products (Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977). In the 1980s, researchers attended more to theory, incorporating concepts from child and adolescent psychology, social and cognitive psychology and decision making.

Much of this research focused on age differences in young people’s marketplace knowledge and skills. Researchers continued to be interested in age differences in young consumers’ knowledge of advertising, especially their knowledge of specific advertising tactics (e.g., humor, celebrities) and their understanding of advertiser motivations for using the tactics (e.g., attract attention). Findings showed that knowledge about specific advertising tactics is still developing among middle school students, ages 11–14 (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994). Furthermore, youth (e.g., 9–10 year-olds) may not automatically use their training in advertising knowledge when later viewing advertising (Brucks, Armstrong, and Goldberg 1988).

Researchers during this period also studied youth’s recognition of consumption symbolism. Products and brands are valued not only for their functional features but also as symbols that allow consumers to express themselves and communicate who they are. In the early 1980s, researchers began to chart age-related developments in the recognition of consumption symbolism. Findings revealed that children begin to make inferences about people based on the products they own by second grade (ages 7–8) and, as they grow older, these

inferences become more consistent and more closely resemble those of adults (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982).

Another research topic during this period was how young people learn to be consumers, for instance, how they learn to shop. Although young people are observers and participants in shopping from an early age, researchers found that the ability to generalize from these experiences to form a script about how to purchase or return a product is limited among 4–5 year-olds, is clearly evident among 6–7 year-olds, and is more fully realized among 9–10 year-olds (John and Whitney 1986).

Decision-making skills were also studied. Findings showed that children become more astute product decision makers as they grow older, use more attribute information, use it more consistently, and focus on more relevant attributes. When given information about multiple attributes of several products, kindergartners (5–6 year-olds) are inconsistent in considering this information in forming preferences, whereas older students (10–14 year-olds) consider at least one important attribute consistently (Capon and Kuhn 1980). Moreover, in complex choice environments, older children (10–11 year-olds, or older) are more efficient in gathering information before making a choice, and are better able to shift to less demanding choice strategies than are younger children (e.g., 7–8 year-olds; Gregan-Paxton and John 1997).

Another line of research during this period examined the influence of parents and the family environment in consumer socialization. Researchers introduced conceptual frameworks that characterized different parental styles (Carlson and Grossbart 1988) and family communication patterns (Moschis 1985). For example, Carlson and Grossbart (1988) studied five parenting styles. Both authoritarian and rigid controlling parents enforce rules in a strict way and value conformity. Permissive parents encourage verbal expression, are more nurturing, and are the least strict. Authoritative parents are nurturing and encourage expression like permissive parents but prefer strict discipline like authoritarian parents. Neglecting parents are lowest in nurturing and avoid communication and rule enforcement. Researchers found that authoritative parents have more consumer goals for their children and more actively communicate with their children about consumer topics. Permissive parents show similar patterns, but to a lesser extent. Neglecting parents are detached from these matters, as are authoritarian parents who avoid such interactions with their children and have few socialization goals.

To this day, studies continue on how parents affect their children's consumer socialization and consumption deci-

sions. In an article in this special issue, "Differential Effects of Parental Psychological Control on Boys' versus Girls' Smoking Development," Yang (2024) examines how combinations of parental styles affect youth cigarette smoking. Yang analyzes data from youths followed from ages 10 through 17. The youth reported their smoking and their parents' parenting methods. The findings show that when parents exert psychological control over their children, i.e., coercion, their children's self-esteem is lower and smoking initiation higher, especially among girls. However, if these parents also exert behavioral control meaning they monitor their children and enforce rules, the negative effects of their coercion on the children's self-esteem and smoking initiation are weaker. Likewise if the parents are coercive but also nurturing, the effects offset each other, weakening the harm to their children.

### *1995–2010: The Dark Side of Consumption*

Concerns about youth cigarette smoking first gained momentum in the 1990s, coming to a head with the famous "Joe Camel" case. In 1997, the FTC charged R. J. Reynolds with promoting their Camel brand of cigarettes to youngsters through a popular advertising campaign featuring a cool-looking cartoon character named Joe Camel. Researchers in medical schools and health sciences had led research on tobacco use, but consumer researchers joined them in the 1990s to study (1) the effects of cigarette marketing on adolescent attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to cigarette smoking; and (2) the effectiveness of anti-smoking messages and educational interventions in reducing positive beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding cigarette smoking.

Findings confirmed causal links between cigarette marketing and adolescents' smoking beliefs, intentions and behaviors. Of particular interest was the finding that adolescents are more responsive to cigarette advertising than adults, with the association between market shares and advertising expenditures for cigarette brands being about three times larger for adolescents (Pollay et al. 1996). Seeing cigarette advertising is compounded by seeing peers smoking, as the latter is viewed as confirmatory evidence that smoking provides social benefits (Pechmann and Knight 2002). Less overt promotions, such as scenes of smoking in movies, also enhance perceptions of smokers and increase the intention to smoke among adolescents (Pechmann and Shih 1999). Even television episodes intending to be anti-smoking can inadvertently elevate adolescents' smoking intentions if pro-smoking sentiment is included to be balanced (Pechmann and Wang 2010).

However, anti-smoking messages and educational interventions can reduce youth's positive beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding cigarette smoking, although not all anti-smoking efforts are equally successful. Messages conveying that cigarette smoking poses a risk of social disapproval are quite effective in decreasing adolescents' intention to smoke, but messages emphasizing the long-term health risks of cigarette smoking are not effective (Pechmann et al. 2003). Relatedly, graphic warnings about the long-term dangers of cigarette smoking on cigarette packages are ineffective at deterring adolescent smoking; while increasing risk perceptions and eliciting fear, they do not directly impact adolescents' smoking intentions (Andrews et al. 2014).

A related but smaller body of research on alcohol consumption also uncovered ways to reduce adolescent risky consumption. In the 1990s, concerns about the impact of new alcohol offerings such as sweet- and fruit-flavored wine coolers and malt liquor beverages on adolescent drinking sparked interest in ways to reduce their alcohol consumption. Once again, researchers were able to identify promising educational interventions; for example, it was found that a media literacy program focused on teaching adolescents about techniques used in alcohol advertising and strategies for countering them can lower their intention to drink alcohol (Goldberg et al. 2006).

A final research theme during this period was age-related development of materialism. For many years, critics of marketing to youth had charged that it promotes an unhealthy desire for material goods as a means of achieving happiness, success, and self-fulfillment, resulting in materialistic values. In the 2000s, researchers began to examine the development of materialism more closely, focusing on how and why it develops as children and adolescents grow older. Findings showed that materialism increases from middle childhood (8–9 year-olds) to early adolescence (12–13 year-olds), followed by a decrease from early to late adolescence (16–18 year-olds). An inverse pattern occurs for self-esteem; it decreases from middle childhood to early adolescence, and then rebounds from early to late adolescence (Chaplin and John 2007). Researchers also examined parental influence on materialism. Studies showed that parents who provide social support to their adolescents enhance their self-esteem and thereby decrease their materialism (Chaplin and John 2010). In contrast, parents who use material goods as rewards and punishments for their children precipitate higher levels of materialism even in adulthood (Richins and Chaplin 2015). Moreover, parental conflict and divorce, which increase family stress, are also linked

to higher materialism in youth (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997).

Consumer researchers continue to explore the dark side of youth consumption. In an article in this special issue, "Neurodevelopmental Theories of Adolescent Decision Making: Overview and Implications for Consumer Behavior," Beard, Venkatraman, and Chein (2024) explain the neuroscience bases for dark-side youth consumption: heightened reward sensitivity, greater tolerance for ambiguous outcomes, more reliance on decision heuristics, and heightened reactivity to social stimuli. The researchers also identify different neuroscience models. As adolescent cognitive control can sometimes be adult-like, dual and triadic process models explain when and why cognitive control succumbs to impulsivity. Social- and value-based models focus on youth's social reactivity, while a life-span model stresses that adolescence is a time of positive learning derailed mostly by individual differences.

#### ***2010–Present: Encouraging Healthy Food Consumption***

Starting in about 2010, rising concerns about youth obesity and the need to encourage healthier eating spurred initial consumer research on these topics. A large-scale review of research on advertising and marketing to young people had already concluded that exposure to unhealthy food advertisements leads them to choose less healthy food options (Institute of Medicine 2006). Consumer researchers now asked: How can we encourage healthier food consumption among young people? They found that elementary and middle school children (5–13 year-olds) can be incentivized through healthy-eating pledges and competitions (Raju, Rajagopal, and Gilbride 2010), while preschoolers (3–4 year-olds) can be incentivized by pairing healthy foods with toys (McAlister and Cornwell 2012). Healthier food choices also increase when children's health knowledge is activated prior to choice (Campbell, et al. 2016) and when children make snack choices for a week versus daily (Echelbarger, Maimaran, and Gelman 2020).

Researchers have also examined the hedonic aspects of eating. Exposing adolescents to a delicious cookie scent prior to food selection can lead them to purchase less unhealthy food items compared to no scent or a non-indulgent scent (Biswas and Szocs 2019). Because exposure to an indulgent food scent induces pleasure, it can lower subsequent desire for indulgent food. A similar effect can be obtained by encouraging children to imagine the taste, smell, and texture of several delicious foods prior to making food choices (Cornil and Chandon 2016). In contrast, emphasizing the health



benefits (instead of the tastiness) of food options can lead children to consume less of a healthy food option (Maimaran and Fishbach 2014). Nostalgia from childhood has also been found to influence unhealthy eating (Connell, Brucks, and Nielsen 2014). If consumers see extensive advertising for unhealthy foods as children, i.e., younger than age 13, as adults they rate these foods as healthier and have warm feelings about them.

Today's consumer researchers continue to study youth food choices and the role of parents. Parents who hold the lay belief that healthy food = poor taste have been found to use extrinsic rewards to bribe their children to eat healthier, which counterproductively leads to unhealthier eating and higher body mass indices in their children (Briers et al. 2023). Parents and especially mothers who choose a healthy food option for their children often choose an unhealthy food option for themselves in anticipation of sharing if their children reject the unhealthy option (Wight et al. 2023), putting both child and parent at risk. The solution is to serve healthy food that is tasty.

In our special issue, we include two articles on youth and food. Echelbarger and Maimaran (2024) provide "Leveraging the Social World: A Recipe for Moving the Study of Children and Food Forward." This article summarizes 30 years of research on youth and food into four main areas: advertising, priming, framing, and incentives. Based on their review, the authors identify research gaps that require attention. They call for more work on youth's social world of food, considering both in-person social interactions involving food and online interactions related to food, for example, with social media influencers. They also call for new research methods.

The second article on food in our special issue is Lim et al. (2024): "Mindful about Munching: Solving Math Problems before Lunch Leads Children to Make Healthier Food Choices in School Cafeterias." The authors test a new way to encourage mindful food choices among youth. They find that having adolescents engage in a cognitively stimulating task, for example, solving a math problem before choosing food for lunch, causes them to choose fewer and healthier items. The authors conclude that engaging in a cognitively stimulating task can activate a mindful approach to food choice and discuss how schools can implement the intervention.

#### **NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON CHILD AND ADOLESCENT CONSUMERS**

What most characterizes today's world is change; thus, consumer researchers should recognize and embrace change in their choice of research topics and methods. In this section,

we identify new topics related to youth consumption that researchers should address including social media, new drugs like flavored nicotine vapes and cannabis, gaming and gambling, mental and sexual well-being, the new face of poverty, multiculturalism, and artificial intelligence. Several articles in this special issue address these important topics, as we will also discuss.

#### ***Youth and Social Media***

Children are using social media and looking at device screens more than ever. Recent research by Common Sense Media (2022) finds that, on average, tweens (ages 8–12) spend 5 hours and 33 minutes daily on screens, while teens (ages 13–18) spend 8 hours and 39 minutes daily. Also concerning is the surge in social media use among tweens (ages 8–12) on platforms that ostensibly require users to be 13+ years old, such as Instagram and Snapchat (Common Sense Media 2022). Social media use poses risks of cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, privacy violations, safety issues, and addiction. A recent survey of parents (C. S. Mott Children's Hospital 2023) found that youth social media and device use, screen time, and internet safety are top parental concerns. Yet the main federal regulation that protects young people online, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), enacted in 1998, has not been revised since 2013 (Federal Trade Commission 2013). It protects the privacy of children under the age of 13 by requiring parental consent for the collection or use of any personal information about them.

Given the escalating increases in youth's online presence and screen time, more research is needed. Andrews, Walker, and Kees (2020) found that an educational intervention can teach children to use their own cognitive defenses to safeguard their online privacy. However, studies should examine parental communication strategies to educate children, and whether and how to give parents more control over their children's privacy settings. Further research is also needed on "sharenting" (Verswijvel et al. 2019) when parents inadvertently violate their children's privacy by sharing pictures, videos, and updates about them with family and friends. "Kidinfluencers" or social media influencers who are themselves youths require research attention as well. A recent study shows US children who are 11–13 years old follow on average 4 kidinfluencers and purchase products they promote (Rasmussen, Riggs, and Sauermilch 2022).

Two articles in this special issue address social media and youth well-being. A review article is provided by Fumagalli, Shrum, and Lowrey (2024), "The Effects of Social Media

Consumption on Adolescent Psychological Well-Being.” The authors conclude that while meta-analyses have found weak overall relationships between screen time and youth well-being, moderation and nonlinearity were not adequately considered. Moderation analyses indicate that for young girls (11–13 year-olds), higher screen time is nearly always detrimental, with a similar but weaker pattern for mid-teen boys (14–15 year-olds). After that, a J-shaped curve is found indicating initial benefits to increasing screen time, followed by a just-right or “Goldilocks” level, with screen time beyond that detrimental.

Our other social media article in this special issue is from practitioner-academics who work with the Search Institute to promote online environments for youth that promote their social development. In “Facilitating Relationship-Building Online for Positive Adolescent Development,” Uhalde, Ross, and Houlberg (2024) identify five characteristics of digital environments that will help youth create beneficial online relationships and thus should be used by websites and social media. Based on research in positive psychology, online environments should express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities.

#### ***A New Youth Drug: Flavored Nicotine Vapes (E-Cigarettes)***

Young people have dramatically reduced their use of cigarettes but have turned instead to nicotine vapes (e-cigarettes). Twelfth grader (17–18 year-old) cigarette use in the past 30 days, which peaked in the late 1990s at around 35%, has declined to 4% (Monitoring the Future 2022); but now 20.7% vape nicotine. In addition to teens, young adults are making the switch, reporting 30-day use rates of 9.0% for cigarettes versus 16.1% for nicotine vapes. Older adults still prefer cigarettes at 10.4% versus 1.9% for nicotine vapes. Thus, it appears the introduction of nicotine vapes has largely kept young people smoking rather than helping older people quit.

Nicotine vaping’s rise in popularity among young people has been attributed to several factors including its attractive sweet and fruity flavors, slick product packaging, lack of virtually any odor or second-hand smoke, and healthier image. The JUUL brand started the trend (Huang et al. 2019), but now other flavored vape brands are taking over (Morean et al. 2020). The US FDA (2020) has now banned flavored vapes, but enforcement has been inadequate. As discussed in the historic section above, there has been extensive research on demand-side issues, for example, why youth smoke and their attraction to sweet and fruit flavors. Consumer researchers should also attend to supply-side issues, for example, how

youth gain access to drugs they cannot legally purchase despite the required identification checks and age gating. Consumer researchers should also look into smokefree generation initiatives that would ban tobacco sales to everyone born after a certain year (UK Department of Health and Social Care 2023).

#### ***Another New Youth Drug: Cannabis (Marijuana)***

The marketplace for cannabis (marijuana) has changed even more dramatically than for nicotine, despite the continued ban on cannabis sales in the United States and many other countries. As of 2023, Canada, Uruguay, and 24 US states including populous ones like California and New York (but not Texas or Florida) have legalized recreational cannabis, Colorado going first in 2012. In legal US states, over one-quarter of 16–20 year-olds report regular cannabis use (i.e., every week or day); and overall 28.4% use it as flower in a bong or joint, 19.4% vape it, 10.6% buy concentrate, which they heat and inhale, and 6.8% consume it as an edible (Hammond et al. 2022). Youth use rates are strikingly similar in illegal US states. Surveys of school-age students show slightly lower use rates but still substantial, with 30-day cannabis use at 20.2% and cannabis vape use at 14.8% among twelfth graders (17–18 year-olds) (Monitoring the Future 2022).

Legal retail cannabis sales are monitored by state health departments, and by research firms like Headset that collect point-of-sale data by price, SKU or item, and often buyer age, providing invaluable consumer research data (Smart et al. 2017). Recent research shows that cannabis THC potency is increasing for flower, vapor pen and concentrate (Davenport 2021), products that most appeal to young people. Concentrate can have a potency of 70%+ THC (Daniulaityte et al. 2017) and high potency is associated with increased risk of cannabis use disorder and psychosis (Petrilli et al. 2022). Also, cannabis is often marketed with youth-appealing sweet and fruit flavors, food names, or even brand names (e.g., Zkittlez aka Skittles).

Virtually all cannabis research has been done in public health, so consumer behavior questions abound. What marketing tactics are being used to attract young adult buyers or those who are underage? What products, product characteristics, and promotions appeal to young people of different ages and why? What is the impact of a sweet or fruit flavor in the product name, even if the product taste does not match the flavor name, as is common with cannabis? How do underage buyers get access to cannabis and how effective is age-gating on websites and age-checking at retailers and upon delivery? Consumer researchers should seek answers.

### ***Youth and Gaming and Gambling***

More than 90% of US children ages 3 years or older play video games (Alanko 2023), and some will eventually suffer from gaming disorder, which has quite recently been added to the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization 2021). This disorder is characterized by a pattern of persistent gaming behavior that is primarily conducted online and is manifested by impaired control over gaming frequency, intensity, and termination; prioritizing gaming over other activities; and continued gaming despite negative consequences. The consequences of excessive gaming for young people include poor sleep quality (Weaver et al., 2010), depression and anxiety (Coyne et al. 2020), and increased aggressive and reduced prosocial behaviors (Ferguson 2015).

Consumer researchers have rarely studied gaming especially among children. But one study of 9–10 year-olds (Hang and Auty 2011) found that when a brand sponsored an online game (e.g., Nike), or even more when so the brand became an interactive part of the game, children were more likely to recall and choose that brand. Recently, researchers have begun to study youth exposure to gambling advertising, particularly in the context of online gaming (Thomas et al., 2023). Many online games, especially those that are free to play, have advertisements, including those related to gambling. Thus, consumer researchers should examine how gaming, and the marketing messages embedded in the games including gambling advertisements, affect youth's social and cognitive development and consumption decisions. Additional studies are needed to understand the role of parents in shaping youth's gaming and gambling habits which, in turn, can affect youth's engagement in other important extracurricular and curricular activities. The impact of gaming and gambling on young people's mental health, including potential addiction, should also be studied.

Our special issue has an article on youth exposure to gambling advertisements. "Priming Young Minds: The Appeal of Gambling Advertising to Children and Young" by Rossi and Nairn (2024) calls into question the UK Committee of Advertising Practice's governing assumption that gambling advertising is not likely to appeal strongly to young people. The researchers find that gambling advertising on X (formerly called Twitter) is actually more appealing to youth (11–17 year-olds) and younger adults (18–24 year-olds) than older adults (25–78 year-olds). Also, young people experience mostly positive emotions when seeing gambling advertising, while adults experience mostly negative emotions. Combined with research showing that adolescence is characterized by

impulsivity and risk taking (Cauuffman and Steinberg 2000), the findings indicate gambling advertising may encourage underage youth to gamble.

### ***Youth and Mental and Sexual Well-Being***

Many adolescents struggle with mental health issues due to inherent neurological vulnerabilities combined with social and academic pressures; for instance, 22% of adolescent deaths in the United States are from suicide (Pechmann, Catlin and Zhang 2019). Depression among adolescents increased from 8.1% in 2009 to 15.8% in 2019 (Wilson and Dumornay 2022) and worsened further during the COVID pandemic (Bell et al 2023). Certain youth subgroups suffer more; for example, 11.7% of high school students identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), and they experience more victimization and suicidal thoughts than heterosexual students (Johns et al. 2020). Teen pregnancy is another concern, as the pregnancy rate among girls who are ages 15–19 is about 4% (Pechmann, Catlin, and Zhang 2019). With the US Supreme Court now opining that women lack a constitutional right to reproductive self-determination, teen couples and especially girls face elevated health and mental health risks from pregnancy and its complications.

On the positive side, researchers have identified numerous factors that contribute to adolescent health and well-being. For example, nearly 9 in 10 of US boys and girls participate in extracurricular activities such as organized sports, and 6 in 10 participate in religious activities (Pechmann, Catlin, and Zhang 2019). Regular exercise, positive recreational activities, and healthy eating can help young people cope with stress and other challenges. Youth-targeted social marketing messages can help to safeguard their well-being. Youth activism, where groups of youth work together to right social wrongs, enhance their feelings of control and well-being.

In this special issue, in "We're on the Rise: How Social Movements Support Youth Well-Being," Bublitz et al. (2024) discuss how youth engagement in social activism can improve well-being. The authors first introduce a novel method for studying youth by partnering with them and giving them seats at the research table. Then the authors present a framework that youth themselves helped to devise, identifying best practices for youth activism in social movements and showing how this enhances their personal well-being, as well as the collective well-being of the activist groups to which they belong. Parents, teachers, coaches, and other adults who work with youth can use these best practices to encourage and support them.



### *Youth and the New Face of Poverty*

The extent of youth poverty in the United States is staggering; one in six youth aged 17 or younger live in poverty nationwide, with this figure increasing to one in four in states such as Mississippi, West Virginia, and Louisiana (Benson 2023). To address the hardships of poverty, the federal government has a Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to prevent hunger in pregnant and post-partum women, infants, and children aged 1–4 years; and half the total individuals falling in these groups are impoverished and eligible for WIC (US Department of Agriculture 2023). The more wide-reaching antipoverty program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, services about 20% of US children 17 or younger, or 14.4 million children out of the total child population of 73.3 million (Institute for Family Studies 2023). A study utilizing the California Healthy Kids Survey reported that 59% of California high schoolers received free or reduced-price school meals due to low family incomes, and these students reported lower identification with their school communities, which is a problematic signal (Davis and Pechmann 2023).

Despite the state of poverty among youth, consumer researchers have had little to say about their lives, consumption, or socialization. A rare study of youth in poverty finds that, from about age 11, they are more materialistic than other youth due to lower self-esteem (Chaplin, Hill, and John 2014). How can their self-esteem be bolstered? There are many other pressing questions. When families struggle with poverty, how often are the youth food deprived, how does this manifest, and how does it affect their lives? What percent of qualified youth receive free or reduced-price meals at school, SNAP food, or charity like Toys for Tots or used clothing, and how do they feel about being charity recipients? A recent study of university food bank users finds they can sometimes feel treated unjustly causing dissatisfaction, and it calls for improvements in donation service designs (North and Pechmann 2024).

In Hill and Mady's (2024) article in this special issue, "Impoverished Children and Consumption Adequacy," the authors stress the need for more research in this area and also better research methods. They provide an overview of the state of poverty among youth, highlighting its multidimensional nature, characterized by deprivation in virtually all consumer domains including food, clothing, shelter, housing and household goods, and education. Then they identify five areas for future research, all related to the lived experience of childhood poverty, including the role of poverty in family de-

cision making and the impact of alternative living environments such as foster homes and orphanages.

### *Youth and Multiculturalism*

The United States is increasingly multicultural, due largely to the growth in Hispanic and Latino families and children (Menchaca et al. 2023). White non-Hispanic consumers account for 60.8% of the 18-and-over population, but only 47.3% of those are 17 or younger. Hispanic and Latino consumers comprise 16.8% of the adult population, yet 25.7% of those are 17 or younger. The Black non-Hispanic figures are 11.7% adults, 13.2% youth. A main driver of these patterns is immigration; 45% of US Latino adults were born elsewhere (Funk and Lopez 2022), and the immigrant fertility rate is 2.18 versus 1.76 for nonimmigrants (Peri 2020).

Consumer researchers have responded to US multiculturalism by studying food marketing to people of color. They have found that food advertisements targeting Black versus White youth are more likely to promote non-nutritious food or fast food (Grier and Kumanyika 2008). Also, many Black youth report positive attitudes toward being targeted, rather than wariness (Harris et al. 2019). Black and Hispanic parents report more exposure to fast-food promotions than Whites, and their exposure relates to fast-food consumption by their children (Grier et al. 2007). When fast-food restaurants are located near by schools, low-income, urban, Black, and Latino students experience the greatest adverse effects in terms of their food consumption and weight (Grier and Davis 2013).

Consumer researchers should investigate other topics related to youth of color, including but not limited to those discussed in this special issue. Educational researchers have made critical contributions in this area, and we can too. They have found that English-Spanish bilingual students benefit from bilingual instruction; it improves their academic performance in English, Spanish and often other subjects, reducing ethnic disparities in test scores (Bialystok 2018). They have also found that Black compared to White students are more likely to be suspended or expelled, and they estimate that about 30% of the Black-White disparities in adult outcomes including college completion, food stamp use, and criminal justice infractions are attributable to earlier disparities in school discipline (Davison et al. 2022). Consumer researchers can address additional pressing issues related to youth of color if we simply turn our attention to them.

### *Youth and Artificial Intelligence*

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly entering youth's lives and will fundamentally impact them. There will, for instance, be

major employment shifts due to AI; by 2065, 65% of today's children are expected to work in digital jobs, most not yet envisioned (Perucica 2022). Thus, there is a pressing need for youth and parental education in AI to teach them to benefit from it and avoid harm. Youth may inadvertently share personal information with online AI entities or receive misinformation or harmful content from them. They may compare themselves to perfect AI-generated images harming self-esteem, as AI can create deceptively realistic images such as fashion models who attract hundreds of thousands of followers (e.g., Aitana López, Imma). The educational implications of AI are profound, as it can be used as a substitute for actual writing and learning in school. Yet it will be a struggle for parents and teachers to effectively educate and safeguard youth, as youth greatly surpass adults in AI familiarity and use, creating a troubling knowledge gap that must be filled (Common Sense Media 2023).

Global action has been initiated but more science is needed to guide it. UNICEF'S "AI for Children" project, in partnership with the World Economic Forum, is developing AI guidelines for youth data protection, privacy, and safety (UNICEF 2023). The World Economic Forum offers Smart Toys Awards to encourage educational AI-centric toys while mitigating safety and privacy risks (UNICEF 2023). Consumer researchers should aid in these efforts. They should examine how interactions with AI affect youth psychologically and behaviorally, how AI-driven social media platforms influence youth social skills and relationships, and how AI-generated information and misinformation affect youth knowledge, attitudes, decisions and behaviors. In addition, educational programs should be developed and tested for parents and youth on AI.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We are honored to edit this special issue on children and adolescent consumers. This field is steeped in history, emerging over 50 years ago to examine whether it was unfair to target television advertising to young children who had little understanding of its persuasive intent. As the field matured, researchers turned their attention to how children and adolescents were socialized into the role of consumers, and the extent to which marketing was responsible for their increased consumption of cigarettes, alcohol, and unhealthy foods. Some researchers also turned their attention to promoting positive youth consumption.

It would be difficult to identify another consumer behavior area where research has focused as much on consumer well-being than the one we celebrate with this special issue.

Concern about the well-being of young consumers is at the heart of our special issue articles, which deal with neuroscience, social media, social activism, food, gambling, smoking, parents, marketplace literacy, and poverty. We hope the ideas shared in this introductory article and in our special issue articles will ignite further and continuing interest in research with and on child and adolescent consumers. As frequent contributors to this field, we encourage others to consider how they might use their research skills and accumulated wisdom to address the important issues facing today's youth. Addressing the well-being of young people offers one of the greatest opportunities in our field for making a positive difference in the lives of consumers.

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