

**“make sure that our children get a childhood”: *the impact of television and television advertising on children***

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## Introduction

In 2010, only months before becoming the British Prime Minister, David Cameron spoke out against the growing commercial influences on children stating:

*“...you do your best as parents but there is a lot of pester power going on... What we are saying is that you can't cut children off from the commercial world, of course you can't, but we should be able to help parents more in terms of trying to make sure that our children get a childhood and that they are not subject to unnecessary and inappropriate commercialisation...”*<sup>1</sup>

This short paper will examine the impact of television and television advertising on today's youth. The need for such a review is paramount given that the methods by which children and young adults are influenced are with each day multiplying and becoming ever more inventive. One of the unconscious difficulties faced by parents today is that they often lack a clear understanding of the ways in which their children are being influenced and so lack the ability to make an informed choice regarding what is best for their children. The key difficulty, therefore, is not necessarily one of content material, though much modern content is certainly offensive to human dignity, but that parents are not

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cameron-condemns-inappropriate-sexualisation-of-children-1903287.html> [Accessed 21st April 2011]

empowered with the necessary knowledge and understanding needed for deciphering the dangers and traps posed by the virtual world to their children. Such knowledge is incredibly valuable and greatly needed to facilitate the righteous transition of a child entering into adulthood. Professor Ira Lapidus, a magnificent anthropologist and observer of Muslim culture, insightfully observed that Islamic adulthood:

*'...is presented in scripture and in the traditional religious literatures in terms of an ideal inner harmony and harmony between the individual and the world. This goal, however, is not a static ideal, rigidly applied, nor is it exclusive of valid human possibilities in Islam. Muslims are well aware that the struggle to approximate the ideal makes up the course of spiritual development. The ideal may never be attained, but it defines the direction in which a Muslim life proceeds... in Islam trust in God and humility open the way to the inward healing and outward responsibility which is "on the way" to adulthood.'*<sup>2</sup>

The cultivation of spirituality and development of man's outward responsibility, here mentioned by Professor Lapidus, are ideals which are unfortunately at odds with many of today's commercial dark forces that are shaping the minds and

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<sup>2</sup> Lapidus, *Adulthood in Islam*, pg. 107; In this essay Professor Lapidus offers an insightful examination of the characteristics which mark a Muslim's transition from childhood to adulthood.

perceptions of young people. To know and understand these dangers must surely be counted as a duty upon each Muslim parent. Just as it is a must that parents take action if they see their children being encircled by a pack of wolves. Dr. Aric Sigman, a biologist engaged in increasing parental awareness of the biological affects of the media on humans, clearly sets out the current difficulties as follows:

*'Watching television, irrespective of the content, is increasingly associated with unfavourable biological and cognitive changes. These alterations occur at viewing levels far below the populations norm. Given the populations sheer exposure time to this environmental factor it is more than puzzling to consider how little awareness and action has resulted.'*<sup>3</sup>

The reader should note that it is not the objective of the author to encourage parents to completely remove television from their children's lives, although some might feel compelled to do so, but rather to offer parents a broader understanding of the direct and peripheral dangers of what can be very beneficial educational and social tools.

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<sup>3</sup> Sigman, *Visual Voodoo*, pg.16.

## Islamic Belief: inner and outward purity

In his Magnus opus ‘*Iḥyā’ Ulūm al-Dīn*’, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī wrote:

*“You will never arrive at fulfilling the commands of God, my dear student, unless you watch over your heart and your members every single movement from morning to night. God most high is aware of your secret being; He observes your inner and your outer man. . . . Let your endeavour be that your master may not see you where he forbade you to be and may not miss you where he commanded you to be. You will not manage to do this, however, unless you plan out your time and order your activities from morning to evening. From the moment you wake from sleep until the time when you return to your bed be diligent in performing the commands God most high lays upon you.”<sup>4</sup>*

One of the magnificent observations of the Qur’ān is that the physical body of man is held by the soul as a kind of trust. And so each part of the body is provided with certain rights which must not be abused. It is not permissible, for example, to pollute one’s heart with lustful desires. Similarly, the physical body parts of a human are not to be used for the purpose of committing fornication or adultery. We are also told that any body part which has had its rights contravened will act as a witness to that contravention on the Day of Judgement.

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<sup>4</sup> Lapidus, *Adulthood in Islam*, pg. 104.

This is set out in the Qur'ān when Almighty God stated:

*"...when their tongues and their hands and their feet will bear witness against them as to what they used to do." (Holy Qur'ān, 24:25)*

And in another place Almighty God has similarly stated:

*"...their ears and their eyes and their skins will bear witness against them as to what they had been doing. And they will say to their skins: Why bear ye witness against us? They will say: Allāh has made us to speak as He has made everything else to speak. And He it is Who created you the first time, and unto Him have you been brought back. And you did not fear while committing sins that your ears and your eyes and your skins would bear witness against you, nay, you thought that even Allāh did not know much of what you used to do." (Holy Qur'ān, 41:21-23)*

The Qur'ān and hadith literature further explain that the spiritual and physical well-being of man are intricately related. In many instances man's desires, strengths, and weaknesses will determine how the body acts or reacts to the influences around it. Similarly, the urges of the body will influence the state of one's soul. A lack of balance in man's spiritual activities will be reflected in the physical movements and developments of his or her body. If, for example, an

individual loses his self-restraint and allows his appetite to overcome him, he will slowly move towards obesity.

And this, my brothers and sisters is life; so be under no illusion, temptation exists and will cause us and our children to become lesser people if we do not work hard to become righteous. Righteousness or *taqwa* is a quality which can only be realized through adherence to the teachings of the Qur'ān and example of the Holy Prophet (*ṣal Allāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*). Expounding upon this phenomenon, Haḍrat Mirza Ghulām Aḥmad (*'alayhi al-salām*) wrote:

*'The movements of the soul follow the movements of the body. If the body is drawn in a particular direction the soul automatically follows it. It is, therefore, a function of the Book of God to direct itself to the natural state of man: that is why the Holy Quran pays so much attention to the reform of the natural state of man and gives directions with regard to everyone of his actions, his language, weeping, speaking, keeping silent, marrying, remaining single, walking, stopping, physical cleanliness, bathing, submitting to a discipline in health and in illness etc. It affirms that man's physical condition affects his spiritual condition deeply.'*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Aḥmad, Mirza Ghulām, *The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, pp.15-16.

## Watching Television

Each and every Muslim is aware that television can have a harmful effect on children. Most parents will openly accept that if allowed, television quickly becomes almost a third parent to children. And so the scene of children sat mesmerised in front of the television watching the latest cartoons or movies is, as put by Dr. Sigman, *'the industrialized world's main pastime.'*<sup>6</sup>

On a basic level, too much of anything, including television, naturally causes an imbalance in other areas of human living. But are we really aware of just how much we all watch the television on average and its impact? A study in 2004 came back with the staggering figure that by the time the average Briton has reached 75 years of age he or she will have watched more than 12 years of television. Furthermore, that an average six year old will have spent in the region of one year in front of the screen and children aged 11 to 15 years spend more than half of their waking lives (53 hours per week) enjoying their favourite television shows.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately it appears that parents simply are not doing enough to

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<sup>6</sup> Sigman, *Visual Voodoo*, pg.12.

<sup>7</sup> IBID; This study was conducted by the "British Market Research Bureau (BMRB)" and published under the title: *Increasing Screen Time is Leading to Inactivity of 11-15s.*

protect their children from excessive viewing. A separate study found that 36% of all children aged 0 – 6 years have a television in their bedrooms leading them to spend on average 15% more time in front of the screen than those without televisions in their rooms. The survey also found that more than 75% of all 4 – 6 year olds can independently switch a television on, play a DVD, change the channel, and consciously choose or request which channel and program they want to watch.<sup>8</sup>

The associated problems with extensive television viewing should also be of great concern to parents. A study of 2500 children published in the American journal "Pediatrics" found that 10% of 7 year olds surveyed had developed attention problems. The report found that the brunt of the problems occurred in children aged 1-3 years and concluded that parents should combat this by limiting the time their children spent watching television.<sup>9</sup> The earlier mentioned BMRB study also found that 45% of boys and 28% of girls aged 0 – 6 years imitated aggressive behaviour, such as kicking and hitting, which they had viewed on television. In the year 2000 a joint statement was issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent

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<sup>8</sup> Rideout, *Zero to Six*, pp.15-16.

<sup>9</sup> Christakis, D. A. Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attention Problems in Children. *Pediatrics*, (2004) 113, pp.708-713.

Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association stating that thirty years of research and more than one thousand studies led them to the conclusion that “...*viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values, and behavior, particularly in children.*”<sup>10</sup>

The “Handbook of Child Psychology”, published in 2006, assessed the results of a number of leading studies and works on the behavioral problems in children resulting from watching television. One of the more shocking findings was that meta-analyses conducted indicated that viewing violent scenes on television accounted for 10% of the variance in child aggression which: ‘*approximately equals the magnitude of effect of cigarette smoking on lung cancer.*’ The studies reviewed also confirmed that there exists a significant link between television violence and aggressive behaviour in children. The results surprisingly found that aggressive behaviour occurred in children despite the fact that: ‘...*self selection factors, such as parental supervision and socioeconomic status, are controlled...*’ Furthermore, that a test in Chicago wherein 450 boys and girls were followed for a period of fifteen years found that, ‘*childhood exposure to television violence predicted a composite adult aggression score that*

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<sup>10</sup> The Sexualization of Childhood, pp.9-10.

*included self-ratings, ratings by others, and crime records, even when early parenting, parent aggression, and socioeconomic status were controlled.*<sup>11</sup>

Children's television advertising has been the cause of much controversy over recent decades. The first thing that a parent must understand is the enormous commercial value (\$£\$£) of their children to retailers. In 2003 there were in the region of 52 million children aged under thirteen years in the USA alone who commanded a yearly personal spending power of around \$28.5 billion. The same children were found to have spent \$188 billion of their parents money yearly with the figure rising to half a trillion dollars when added to the \$300 billion parents spend on their children each year.<sup>12</sup> Given the enormous market share that children both command and influence, it is no wonder that advertising companies spend allot of money, time, and effort to target your children. Advertisers view children as an expanding market which they cannot afford to ignore and so investment in children is future investment as children will one day become adults and form the main consumer body. Retailers therefore compete with one another to generate brand loyalty amongst children. It should also come as no surprise that for this very reason the average child views up to 40,000

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<sup>11</sup> Ed. Eisenberg, N., *Handbook of Child Psychology*, vol. 3, pg.746.

<sup>12</sup> *Advertising Societies*, pg.134.

television advertisements each year!<sup>13</sup> Commenting on the importance of children to commerce, Frith and Mueller wrote that:

*'Any company that fails to target children will soon find itself at a competitive disadvantage. Manufacturers are well aware that establishing loyalty early on ensures a market for their brands in the future. And the definition of "early" just keeps getting younger and younger. Researchers have shown that by the time they are six months old, babies who have watched commercial television have already begun to recognize corporate logos. By the time they are three years old, most children are already making specific requests for brand-name products (Burns, 1999). Board books featuring products like M&M's and Cheerios are being created to appeal to toddlers. At Chuck E. Cheese, the child-themed pizza restaurant with a dancing mouse as its spokesperson, marketing director Richard Huston notes, "we're trying to influence kids as early as we can, maybe 2." At Saatchi & Saatchi, a New York advertising agency, the 80 members of its Kid Connection division aim to implant awareness of the brand—namely General Mills, the division's biggest client—in preschoolers. By the time they reach age 10, the average child has memorized as many as 400 brand names. James B. Twitchell, professor at the University of Florida and author of the book ADCULT USA, notes, "These people have not*

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<sup>13</sup> IBID, pg.20.

*bought cars. They have not chosen the kind of toothpaste they will use. This audience is Valhalla. It is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow” (Schwartz, 1998, p. 12). Brand loyalty means big profits for companies, who estimate that each future consumer is worth \$100,000 to the company. Today, advertisers spend more than \$2 billion annually advertising to children, over 20 times more than was spent just 10 years ago (O’Crowley, 2000). Advertising to children has been and continues to be one of the most controversial topics in advertising discourse.’<sup>14</sup>*

A factor which parents should keep in mind is that studies have revealed that children, particularly those aged 0 – 5 years, are increasingly vulnerable when confronted with television advertising. A key factor in this is that they are not able to distinguish between ordinary television content and adverts, seeing both as one in the same. And so their minds cannot yet comprehend that the advert is designed to persuade them to purchase or pester their parents to purchase the product being advertised. When children surveyed were asked to retell the content or story of a program they were watching they incorporated the advert into the wider story narrative. This effect is compounded by a practice known as “host selling” in which advertisements include the same, or similar, characters which are found in the programme they are watching. The effect of

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<sup>14</sup> IBID, 135.

this is to strengthen a child's belief that the advertisement and main programme content are a single narrative and build up brand loyalty.<sup>15</sup>

One of the reasons that advertising companies are way ahead of parents is because they think as children do whereas parents often do not. By way of example, the next time you watch an advert listen out for the exaggerated claims that a particular product makes its beneficiary the "strongest person" in the world or charges them with "super powers". Commenting on this, Dr. Ronda Scantlin, an expert in children and the media, writes:

*'Children often do not understand that claims may be exaggerated and that products are not as dazzling and exciting as they appear on television. The production techniques or formal features (e.g., audiovisual special effects, type of music, quick cuts) used in children's advertisements contribute to these perceptions. Special effects are largely holistic and designed to create moods, images, and impressions rather than to convey accurate information about products.'*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kunkel, D. *Children and Host-Selling Television Commercials*. *Communication Research*, 15:1 (1988) pp.71-92; Although Host Selling has been reduced considerably by the enactment of legislation in various countries, it remains a problem which has been transferred from the television to the internet which is far less regulated on this matter. For a more in-depth analysis of this see: Calvert, S. *Future Faces of Selling to Children*.

[http://cdmc.georgetown.edu/papers/future\\_faces\\_of\\_selling\\_to\\_children.pdf](http://cdmc.georgetown.edu/papers/future_faces_of_selling_to_children.pdf) [Accessed 05/05/11].

<sup>16</sup> *Encyclopedia of Children*, vol.3, pg.27.

Another important strategy adopted by advertisers is to sometimes market a film to a young age group whilst at the same time marketing a more violent associated product to an older age group. The two are clearly distinct yet the advertising campaigns are the same and so perhaps encourage the younger age group to purchase the game. Commenting on a study conducted in 2004, Dr. Scantlin writes:

*'The commission also noted several examples of cross-marketing of entertainment media products with different ratings, labels, and intended audiences. An example of this is placing a movie trailer for The Matrix movie (rated R) within a video game (rated T). The intended audiences for these media products are different, but the marketing message is strategically placed to expose a younger audience to potentially inappropriate entertainment content.'*<sup>17</sup>

The same survey also conducted a test to see how many adolescents under the age of 17 were successful in purchasing R-rated DVDs, M-rated computer games, and explicit content music CDs. It found that 83% were sold CD's, 81% DVDs, and 69% the computer games.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> IBID, pg.28;

<sup>18</sup> IBID

Unfortunately the facts surrounding television and advertising only become more worrying the deeper one delves. Various studies have found that television viewing adversely affects the attention and cognitive functions of children. Studies have also found that television content has played a real and significant part in also encouraging obesity, smoking, drinking, and the growth of other "sin products."<sup>19</sup>

### Eating Disorders

Television and advertising have been found to impact the physical human form by increasing body dissatisfaction whilst simultaneously promoting unhealthy eating. Dr. Sigman points out that the average model seen in advertising was only 8% thinner than the average lady on the street twenty-five years ago.<sup>20</sup> Compare that to today's situation in which the difference is 23%.<sup>21</sup> Dr. Sigman also cites a series of reliable studies which drew the following conclusions:

1. Almost half of all girls aged 3 – 6 years complained about being worried that they were fat;
2. The use of diet pills amongst teenagers aged 15 – 17 years doubled in just

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<sup>19</sup> See the array of studies looked at by Dr. Sigman in his papers: "*Visual Voodoo*" and "*A Source of Thinspiration*."

<sup>20</sup> Sigman, *A Source of Thinspiration*, pg.1.

<sup>21</sup> IBID

five years;

3. Over the past decade the number of young girls admitted to hospital with anorexia in England has increased by more than 80%; and
4. Television is a *'causal risk factor for body dissatisfaction, negative effect, and eating pathology.'*<sup>22</sup>

Writing about the possible health impact of television on its viewers, Frith and Mueller reported that a study by consumer International, a watchdog based in London, found that:

*'...95 percent of the ads on British TV aimed at children were for foods that are high in fat, high in sugar, or high in salt... Similarly, a study published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health found that during 42 hours of children's programming, more than 60 percent of foods advertised were high in fats, sugar, or both. Nearly 15 percent of the ads were for fast-food meals. Snack foods were shown in 76 percent of the ads and, none too surprisingly, there were no ads for low-cost foods such as bread, rice, pasta, potatoes, carrots, or leafy vegetables (Wilson, Quigley and Mansoor, 1999). Further, as soft drink ads have increased, milk consumption has plummeted, leading to a*

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<sup>22</sup> IBID, pp.1-6.

*calcium deficiency in some children.*<sup>23</sup>

Studies have also found that children aged 2 – 12 years are more adversely affected by food advertising on television than teenagers. The most common problems found were that children in this age group are more likely to purchase unhealthy food and go to restaurants famed for serving unhealthy food. Many children who watch excessive TV, and that appears to be the majority, are in the habit of eating unhealthy food whilst sat watching the television. Perhaps most worrying was that advertising was found to have negatively shaped children's philosophies and wider opinions regarding healthy foods and eating.<sup>24</sup> A later peer-reviewed study concluded: *'there is strong evidence that exposure to TV advertising is positively correlated with adiposity (fatness) for both children and teens.'*<sup>25</sup> An extensive peer-reviewed survey conducted by the American Medical Association in 2006 found that the more children watched television the less they knew about which foods and drinks were healthier.<sup>26</sup>

In 2001 the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended that it

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<sup>23</sup> Frith & Mueller, *Advertising and Societies*, pg.135.

<sup>24</sup> Dixon, H. G., Scully, M. L. & Wakefield, M. A. *The effects of television advertisements for junk food versus nutritious food on children's food attitudes and preferences.* Social Science and Medicine, 65:7 (2007), pp. 1311-1323.

<sup>25</sup> *Encyclopedia of Children*, pg.350.

<sup>26</sup> Institute of Medicine, *Food Marketing to Children and Youth*, pg.254.

would be far more beneficial for children if they watched no television for the first two years of their lives and instead were encouraged to partake in activities such as reading, singing, playing, and talking which all promote brain development.<sup>27</sup>

It would also be beneficial for children if parents encourage them to watch programmes and read books which promote healthy eating. In doing so parents should be careful as to which books they purchase as *advertisers* are also in the habit of designing children's books in such a way that they encourage further brand loyalty and a desire in children to purchase associated products.

### "Sin Products"

In his article "Advertising's Impact on Morality in Society: Influencing Habits and Desires of Consumers" Professor Andrew Gustafson has written about the way in which advertising promotes what are termed as "sin products." These are products such as cigarettes, alcohol, gambling, and the like. This type of advertising packages these and similar products in such a way that the consumer might not purchase them for their intended purpose, but because of an associated attraction such as trendiness, fashion, or an attached promotion. For example, many people begin to drink alcohol because they perceive it to be cool. Commenting on this Professor Gustafson writes:

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<sup>27</sup> AAP. *Children, Adolescents, and Television*. pp.423-426.

*'...it is clear that advertising does promote overall consumption of sin products, and that it does this by increasing desire for these products... there are sin products like pornography and gambling which people may take up as adults. If casinos did not advertise, they would have customers, but certainly not as many as they do when they advertise themselves as a family fun center, or as a wonderful place to get cheap buffets or cheap rooms. These sorts of promotions draw in customers who might not otherwise be customers, and once in the casino, it is much more likely that they will gamble, while if they had never set foot in a casino, they likely would never have considered it. Certainly Internet advertisements for pornography have lured in many who otherwise would not have sought out such sites on their own. Advertising makes certain forms of behaviour more accessible, more visible, and in some degree more socially acceptable. The more that society tolerates public sin products in the media (through advertising), the less likely it will be that people will feel social pressure to not partake in such activities.'*<sup>28</sup>

Gustafson makes the additional point that as well as enticing younger people to take up drinking or smoking, advertising also encourages older people who already drink and smoke to increase their consumption of these products.

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<sup>28</sup> Gustafson, *Morality*, pg.215.

Children are by no means excluded from the advertising of “sin products.” An executive from a tobacco company was once quoted as saying:

*“Nobody is stupid enough to put it in writing, or even in words, but there is always the presumption that your marketing approach should contain some element of market expansion, and market expansion in this industry means two things —kids and women.”*<sup>29</sup>

This type of advertising is particularly misleading because it attracts children to purchase product on the basis of their style and glamour without making them aware of the dangers, sometimes mortal dangers, attached to the consumption of that product.

Consuming alcohol, an act strictly forbidden in Islam, is a major problem in the world today with more than 17,000 adolescents dying each year in the USA alone as a result of alcohol related road accidents. Television advertising plays a massive role in encouraging young people to drink with the average person viewing more than a million acts of drinking by the time they are just 18 years old. Advertisers place a lot of emphasis on portraying alcohol as a product which is fashionable and consumed by the most glamorous and idolized people in society; and that alcohol, success, wealth, and a relationship with a beautiful partner are

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<sup>29</sup> IBID, pg.216.

all interlinked. This type of advertising technique adopts a similar approach to what we have seen with food products, inducing positive attitudes which leave the consumer oblivious of the risks attached to the product. This effect is bolstered by gimmicky advertisements which create child-friendly characters and slogans designed to desensitise children as to the dangers attached to alcohol consumption. Professor Elizabeth Perse offers the example of Budweiser's advertising agencies which: *'produced clever commercials that have created popular icons, such as the Budweiser frogs, annual events such as the "Bud Bowl," and catch phrases ("Whassup?")'* <sup>30</sup> She goes on to conclude: *'Adolescents who enjoy advertisements are likely to drink earlier. Adolescents are likely to notice and like alcohol advertisements because they promote an attractive, adult lifestyle that adolescents find desirable and relevant to their needs to feel more adult. Thus, attention to alcohol advertising appears to stimulate a predisposition to drink.'* <sup>31</sup>

Smoking is also one of the most harmful and profitable "sin products" advertised to date. The key issue with smoking is that it is the causal factor for an enormous number of deaths each day. It should not come as any surprise that one common view is that tobacco companies specifically target children as the

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<sup>30</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Children*, pg.24.

<sup>31</sup> IBID

great "expanding market", with their advertising campaigns. The "National Cancer Institute" of the USA went so far as to state that this is precisely what the tobacco companies have been doing! The Institute also held that a major motivator was the fact that tobacco companies are aware that the majority of smokers take up smoking in their youth and very few do so as adults.<sup>32</sup> While much has been done over recent years to put in place legislation to curb tobacco advertising, there is significant research which suggests that the prevalence of smoking in television programmes builds a child's desire for the product and also increases peer pressure in schools as cigarettes are made to appear more and more popular. Commenting on a study of adolescents over a seven year period, Professor Perse writes: *'...interesting, however, is the connection between awareness of advertising and the belief that smoking had social value (e.g., increased attractiveness, maturity, popularity, and independence). The researchers concluded that tobacco advertising leads to adolescent smoking because it increases smoking's social value for adolescents.'*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> IBID; This is backed up by the U.S. Department of Health which found that 50% of smokers took up smoking by the age of 13 and 90% by the age of 18 years.

<sup>33</sup> IBID, pg.25.

## The Sexualisation of Children

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of television, indeed all modern commercialism, to human dignity and fundamental Islamic values is the ever growing sexualisation of children. We unfortunately live in a world wherein almost every commercial product originally designed only for adults is now also marketed to children. A world in which our seven year old daughters can walk into most stores and purchase hot pants, padded bras, high heels, and full makeup sets; and if they don't – well, they simply aren't beautiful – are they? <sup>34</sup> When this is the advertising strategy aimed towards our seven year olds, what chance do teenagers have of undergoing any kind of innocent and natural transition from childhood into adulthood!

In 2008 one of the largest retailers in the UK, Tesco, was the cause of much controversy when it launched its "bust-booster" for seven to eight year old girls. Describing the "bust-booster", a fashion lecturer commented: *"The bra is modelled on a plunge style — it has a very low bridge connecting the cups. It means the shape and position is lower to expose the breast tissue."* All this

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.metro.co.uk/news/142773-tescos-booster-bra-for-7-year-olds> [Accessed on 21st April 2011]; Children not fully satisfied can accessorise by picking up a couple of the many children's bikinis and thongs sold on the high street. The more affluent five to twelve year olds could even pop into a store like La Senza which launched a full underwear range designed specifically for girls in their age group. If they can get their minds beyond the weekend of fun ahead, they might remember that they have primary school on Monday morning and pick up some tasteful playboy rulers and pencil cases also found on the high street!

volume for a seven year old!

Advertising children as sexual objects is by no means new to our screens. In the book "The Sexualization of Childhood" Professor Gail Dines, an outspoken critic of this phenomenon, offers the following insight into the use of children as sexual objects in advertising, stating:

*'One of the pioneers of this type of advertising was Calvin Klein, who in the early 1980s used 15-year-old Brooke Shields in ads for his jeans with the famous tagline "Do you wanna know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing." In the mid-1990s Klein ratcheted up the imagery by using mostly underage teenagers in poses that looked so much like actual child pornography that the Justice Department started to investigate him for possible violation of the law. Klein escaped prosecution, only to come back a few years later with ads for his children's underwear line that featured prepubescent boys and girls wearing only underwear. This time Klein was forced to pull his ads almost overnight due to public outcry. Around the same time, a 17-year-old Britney Spears released a debut single called "Baby, One More Time" which became an instant international success. In the accompanying video, Spears sports a schoolgirl image with braided hair, socks, and a school uniform with a*

*knotted shirt that revealed a bare midriff as she writhes around asking her ex-boyfriend [...]. Spears later went on to employ Gregory Dark, a long-time porn director whose films include [...] and [...] to direct her videos.'*<sup>35</sup>

A report conducted in 2007 by the American Psychological Association (APA) unsurprisingly found that women, and not men, are often the ones objectified on the screen. Perhaps the most far reaching finding was that female beauty idols were being created for children who were so well groomed, digitally enhanced, and built up that their physical beauty was unrealistic and beyond the reach of the consumer; affectively saying that the holy grail of beauty really did not exist!<sup>36</sup> In the ground-breaking book "Marketing Madness" Drs Michael Jacobsen and Lauri Mazur conceptualised the modern television and advertising "it-girl" using Naomi Wolf's mythical "Iron Maiden." They very powerfully described her as follows:

*'In her 1991 book The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf compares the contemporary ideal of beauty to the Iron Maiden, a medieval torture device that encloses its victims in a spike-lined box painted with a woman's image. Like the Iron Maiden, the beauty ideal enforces conformity to a*

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<sup>35</sup> *Sexualization of Childhood*, pg.122 (Parts of the quotation, though factually accurate, have been removed and replaced with [...] as the author felt they were too explicit.)

<sup>36</sup> IBID, pg.13.

*single, rigid shape. And both cause suffering-even death-in their victims.*

*The current Iron Maiden smiles at us from the pages of Vogue magazine.*

*She's a seventeen-year old professional model, weighing just 120 pounds on a willowy 5'10" frame. Her eyes are deep violet-blue, her teeth pearly white . She has no wrinkles, blemishes or even pores, for that matter. As media critic Jean Kilbourne observes in Still Killing us Softly, her groundbreaking film about women in advertising, "The ideal cannot be achieved; it is inhuman in its flawlessness. And it is the only standard of beauty and worth for women in this culture.'*<sup>37</sup>

Another grave issue regarding the sexualisation of our children relates to the expansion and investment of the pornography industry. This is an industry so powerful and in-demand that it is ten times bigger than Hollywood with a net worth of \$97 billion. And it is certainly not decreasing with the astonishing figure of one video being produced every thirty-nine minutes in the USA alone.<sup>38</sup>

As advertising, music videos, and television programmes become more and more salacious in their adult content, so too is the pornography industry looking for new and inventive ways to become more extreme; it knows that failure to move with the times will cause it to lose its value as there will be no distinction

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<sup>37</sup> Jacobsen & Mazur. *Marketing Madness*, pg. 75.

<sup>38</sup> *Sexualization of Childhood*, pg.10.

between its content and that of ordinary television. The situation is becoming increasingly damaging given that pornography is no longer restricted to pay-per view, but available on open-source file sharing websites which are as free and accessible to children as "youtube." Many in fact are more accessible than "youtube" which at least requires users to login and confirm their age before watching violent or explicit material.

The imagery and fantasy of children as sexual objects is by no means an area the industry treats as hands off, quite the opposite. In 2002 the "Free Speech Coalition", a coalition lobbying on behalf of the pornography industry, succeeded in re-establishing that in the USA virtual sexual scenes involving children are permitted provided that the actors were not children themselves. As observed by Professor Dines this made way for the pornography industry to, *'...use either computer-generated images of children or realporn performers who, although they are 18 and over, are childified to look much younger.'*

Professor Matthew Ezzell, a sociologist specialising in this subject area, has categorised the effects of the pornography industry on children in three areas, namely:

1. the explicit sexualisation of children and childhood;

2. child sexual abuse; and

3. children's exposure to and consumption of pornography.<sup>39</sup>

While the first two categories amount to serious criminal acts, Professor Ezzell points out that it is the third category which is the most far reaching. As has been a consistent feature of the figures surrounding the impact of commercialisation and children, the facts surrounding children's exposure to pornography are eye-openers. Professor Ezzell reports that in the USA 34% of children aged 10 to 17 years had unwanted exposure to pornography. Furthermore, that 90% of boys and 70% of girls aged 13 and 14 years accessed pornography at least once over the previous year with a staggering 35% of boys admitting they had accessed pornography so many times that they lost count. Professor Ezzell adds that the thirst for pornography is then carried on into adulthood with a reported 87% of men and 31% of women in their late teens to early twenties accessing pornography regularly. He concludes with the sobering statement:

*'This is our reality check: the overwhelming majority of boys are exposed to pornography, and most of them will become active consumers.*

*Pornography is a core component of boys' sex and sexuality education, a rite of passage in masculine socialization. We should ask: what are they*

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<sup>39</sup> Olfman, *The Sexualization of Childhood*, pg.11.

*learning?’*<sup>40</sup>

In 2006 the APA published the now infamous report “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.” The report brought to light the findings of numerous studies conducted on the subject. One of its findings was that girls who were exposed to sexual imagery and scenes on television were more likely to experience, *‘body dissatisfaction, depression, and lower self-esteem.’* Furthermore, that exposure to such television content adversely impacts young girls’ school studies and social structure. This is because they come to view beauty and not education as the key to power and success, and also accept and reject friends on the basis of vanity or the “cultural norm” rather than traditional qualities such as kindness, trust and love etc. A major area of concern is the impact of the sexualisation and objectifying of women upon the male perception of sexual harassment and violence perpetrated against women. It was found that the stereotypes of women created and propagated by television and the media were related to sexual violence and extreme sexist beliefs. More specifically that: *‘women and men exposed to sexually objectifying images of women from mainstream media (e.g., R-rated films, magazine advertisements, music videos) were found to be significantly more accepting of rape myths, sexual harassment, sex role stereotypes, interpersonal violence, and adversarial sexual beliefs about*

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<sup>40</sup> IBID, pg.12.

*relationships than were those in control conditions.*' The growing concern is that with increasing sexualisation and objectifying of children's attitudes towards sexual relations involving children and the portrayal of younger and younger children as sexual objects on our screens will become more and more acceptable to society. <sup>41</sup>

In various places the Qur'ān clearly identifies that men in particular should keep their sexual desire in check as it has the potential to become one of his greatest weaknesses if left free to run wild. The emotions of a Muslim teenager, particularly teenaged boys, are susceptible and vulnerable to temptations if their energy is not channelled into more beneficial pastures. This is more so given that Muslims are forbidden from committing any kind of intimate sexual act before marriage. Parents should therefore be particularly careful with the television content and access they permit their children. They should also be under no illusion that there are quite scrupulous, profit driven individuals spending huge resources and time to devise ways to sexualize their children. Muslim parents must remain vigilant as issues relating to the sexualisation of children often cause problems and even lead to divorce in some marriages because of their previous experience.

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<sup>41</sup> American Psychological Association, *APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*, pp.34-35.

## Empowerment, Not Denial

This review has only touched upon some of the important issues of a subject area which hundreds of books and studies are dedicated to. It is hoped that what has been covered is convincing enough to awaken Ahmadi parents to some of the dangers and influences that are, or have the potential to, affect their children's lives and futures. Parents are therefore advised to now go out and research the facts for themselves. Ignorance of modern technology and media techniques can simply not form any kind of defence for parents any longer. Much of this study has focused on the pitfalls of television and advertising, but it would be unfair to level all of the blame upon scrupulous advertisers and television moguls. Parents must themselves accept ample responsibility in this matter and ensure that their children are safe from the ill effects of television, advertising, and the targeted sexualisation of children. It is, after all, parents who are ultimately responsible for the food consumption, consumer purchasing, and television intake of their children. It is worth remembering, that a Muslim despises hypocrisy and does not teach righteousness with the right hand whilst simultaneously consuming filth with the left hand. Parents should not take the moral high ground on the issues discussed above whilst they themselves delve into excessive consumerism, watch programmes with salacious and inappropriate content (and yes, that does mean EastEnders, Desperate

Housewives and Jab We Met) and surrender themselves to vanity! Your existence has to be worth more than that; you must aim for a higher ideal.

As has been discussed, disproportionate television viewing is harmful regardless of the content. However, when you do choose to watch television try your very best to mould your family likes and dislikes in such a way that you prefer to watch beneficial and educational channels like MTA, documentary channels, and cookery channels etc (whatever interests you, has some benefit, and is halāl). Try to choose cartoons which are not shallow, but contain wise and virtuous moral lessons which help to shape your children into wise and brave young men and women. Do not be afraid to switch the television off and engage in other family activities or encourage your children to learn a skill like woodcraft, sewing, building etc. Know that when you persuade your children to balance television, in fact all of the media outlets they are hooked to, with other social / hobby-based activities you are in fact forcing them to increase their thought process and become more creative-minded.

A fantastic study was conducted by German psychologists who convinced a nursery to lock away all of their toys for three months. The children came to nursery every day only to be confronted with tables, chairs, and blankets. The

results were quite phenomenal. By the second day the children realised that they not only had imaginations, but, perhaps for the first time in their young lives, that they had amazing and limitless imaginations. The report found that they became, *'excited about the thought of making their own fun, building dens and putting on shows.'* And that: *"the children concentrate better, integrate better into groups and communicate better than the children who didn't take part."*<sup>42</sup>

It is fitting that we should close with the advice of Haḍrat Mirza Ghulām Aḥmad (*'alayhi al-salām*) who wrote:

*'It should be remembered that a godly person does not belong to the world, that is why the world hates him. He belongs to heaven and is bestowed heavenly bounties. A man of the world is given worldly bounties, and a man of heaven is bestowed heavenly bounties.'*<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Frith & Mueller, *Advertising and Societies*, pp.137-137.

<sup>43</sup> Aḥmad, Mirza Ghulam, *The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, pg. 142.

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