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Television advertising to young children: An exploratory study

ABSTRACT

Children are becoming increasingly important as a focus for marketing strategies as a result of not only their increased purchasing power, but also because of the influence they exert on parental purchasing decisions. Currently, little is known about how children view television advertising messages directed at them, or the advertising formats that appeal to them. The purpose of this research was therefore to discover how young children view television adverts directed specifically at them. Data was collected by making use of eight focus groups. The findings suggest inter alia that separate messages must be formulated for boys and girls, that messages must contain a cleverly told story, and that the message must be relevant to them.

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INTRODUCTION

Children are becoming increasingly important as a focus for marketing strategies as a result of not only their purchasing power, but also because of the influence they exert on parental purchasing decisions (Macklin, 1994:154; Beatty, 1999:1 and Curran, 1999: 1). In Europe, for example, the pocket money of children under 12 years of age is growing faster than the rate of inflation (Stewart-Allen, 1999:10), thus making them an attractive market segment. Childrens' increased purchasing power is largely influenced by the changes that are taking place within the family structure and society, affording them greater independence, especially financially, than before (Rindfleisch, Burroughs & Denton, 1997:312).

Many children have some disposable income, making them an important market for various products and services. In addition, children who spend time shopping with their parents are continually exposed to many different products and brands (Rust, 1993). It is thus important for advertisers to create awareness of their brand among these children, as consumer patterns that are learned as children are also likely to influence their consumer behaviour as adults. One study among 40 000 college students found, for example that 62% of students continue to buy the brands with which they grew up (Guber & Berry, 1993:134). Another survey reported that 10-year-olds could name more brands of beer than names of American presidents, thereby demonstrating the power of advertising to this group (Hobbs, 1998:1).

Children are increasingly influencing the buying decisions of adults. One study found that children influence as much as 40% of their parents' purchases, and 65% of parents ask their children's opinion about products purchased for the whole family. Parents are also increasingly asking their children for advice on products not specifically for children, such as cars, computers, vacations and clothes (Beatty, 1999:1).

Children are also a meaningful consumer segment as a result of the independent purchases that they make. In the mid 1990s, for example, American parents had spent over \$155 billion on children, and American children between the ages of four and 12 had disposable income of \$17 billion dollars (Vaccaro & Slanemyr, 1998:153).

Research (Laitner, 1994: 29) has shown that children derive great satisfaction from being able to make their own purchases. These children often experiment with different brands, retailers and products, the result of which can have a lasting effect on future purchasing decisions.

Children are often referred to as the "marketer's dream" as a result of the influence the media has on them (Bierbaum, 1995:40). This is because children lack the scepticism

with which adults evaluate advertising claims. However, children, still have distinct preferences with regard to advertising approaches to which they are likely to respond favourably. Guber & Berry (1993:126-146) offer the following general guidelines when using television advertising directed at children:

- Tell a compelling story in a straightforward way.
- Children are easily distracted, so advertisements must be simple with a singular theme.
- Themes employing fun and happiness are used regularly, and are more likely to be successful, followed by affiliation or a sense of being part of a group.
- Children respond more favourably to children older than them in commercials, and less favourably to children younger than them.
- Children respond better to entertaining advertisements, or advertisements portraying new experiences.
- Children like to view advertisements over and over again. Advertisements must therefore contain sufficient detail for the children to discover "something new" every time they view them.
- Advertisements directed at children must be loud, fast and colourful.
- Children must be shown to be in control in advertisements directed at them.
- Advertisements must address the interests and concerns of children.
- Children respond well to images of families in advertisements.
- Sport holds a universal appeal among boys and girls.
- Children like to see role-models they can emulate or aspire to whom they can. However, avoid showing the perfect child, as this may not work well.

A qualitative study by GfK Danmark A/S (2000) conducted among 5-11-year-olds and their parents to investigate television advertising targeted at this group found the following:

- Children generally understand the purpose of advertising and become more and more critical of commercials as they grow older.
- Most of the children could distinguish between television programmes and television commercials. Only the youngest ones (under 7-8 years old) were uncertain about the differences.
- The children viewed commercials as an opportunity to "pause". At home, they get up to do something else, change their sitting position, talk to each other or just watch the screen somewhat less attentively.
- In general, the children in the study were very thorough - they remembered things well and were capable of understanding even complex stories. The parents, on the other hand, were not good at remembering details, and in terms of their expectations of the appearance of products, the children were often more accurate than their parents, if the commercial had described the detail precisely.
- The commercial's story was very important to children up to 9-10 years old. These

children showed a strong need to understand the story in order to reproduce it in dialogue with others. The story was less important to the older children (over 9-10 years old). For these children, the focus was more on an interest or "special effects". Commercials must therefore stimulate their curiosity; they can even be a bit strange and incomprehensible.

- Novelties seemed to capture the children's attention. This included "real" novelties, novelties within an existing product category or series, new versions of television commercials and new advertising elements.
- Barrier-transcending story elements created attention and involvement among both adults and children. Commercials that went a little beyond the norm seemed provocative. They were often perceived positively, if they were done with a little humour. Provided that children can identify with the situation, such commercials can be very powerful.
- Children under the age of 8-9 years did not understand ambiguities, subtlety and irony. The younger children perceived what they saw and heard - they had not yet learned to "decode" advertising messages properly.
- The children's identification with the product, the actors and story was important for attention, involvement and understanding of the commercials. Children did not necessarily identify with "real children" only – they were quite capable of identifying with puppets, cartoons, animals, etc.
- The perception of credibility was closely connected to the children's and their parents' prior knowledge about products or product categories and the manufacturer or advertiser.
- Harmony between picture, sound and text promoted comprehension and acceptance among both children and adults. If there was any divergence between them, the visual image was, as a general rule, found to be the most dominant factor for the creation of the children's expectations and thus their experience of the product.
- Product-specific details were very important for the creation of the children's expectations, and all the children expected that these were correctly displayed in commercials.
- Generally, both children and adults decoded the commercials correctly.
- Expectations about the size of products were derived from. prior references - a known product or a known product category, the actors in the commercial, a child's hand, etc. In general, it was difficult for both children and adults to achieve the correct size expectation (the children were better at toys).
- The fulfilment of the expectations created by television commercials was extremely important, especially for the children. What marketers show in the commercial must be fulfilled in reality.

While most marketers realize that children are an attractive audience to target, some believe that advertising directed at children could be harmful or that advertising to

children is inherently unfair (Hoek and Laurence, 1998; Anonymous, 2000a; Anonymous, 2000b). They argue that children do not relate to television in the same way as adults, that children are especially vulnerable to advertising, that advertising sometimes results in conflict, that children typically request products they find desirable without realizing the financial consequences of their requests, that many toys that are advertised promote violent play, that children between eight and 10 can be made anxious by advertisements, that children can be misled or deceived by techniques (size, shape, speed, performance) used to display products to the best advantage, that advertising influences teenagers to smoke and drink, and that advertising can promote an unrealistic image of how people look. Because of this, the American Academy of Pediatrics has condemned television advertisements directed at children (Vaccaro & Slanemyr, 1998:155); and some European countries, including Sweden, Norway, Poland, Denmark, Greece and Belgium, have either banned television advertising to children under 12 years old or are considering it (Stewart-Allen, 1999:10).

Despite the obvious ethical questions raised about the possible negative effects of advertising on children, children remain a lucrative market. In the United States, for example, advertising directed at children reached \$1 billion for the first time in 1998 (McClellan & Tedesco, 1999:20). Furthermore, advertising seems to be very effective in influencing children's purchasing behaviour, as the GfK (2000) report states: "Let there be no doubt that advertising directed to children works. The manufacturers know it, the parents know it and the children express it".

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research (Jernigan, 1997) has shown that the spending power of young children has increased in recent years. This is because most children have some disposable income available to them in the form of allowances, monetary gifts given to them on special occasions, and even money that they earn themselves. Discovering how they spend this money, and the various influences on their purchasing behaviour hold many opportunities for the marketer.

However one of the challenges is that very little is known about the preference formation and buying behaviour of children (Hite, 1995:186 and Griffiths & Chandler, 1998). This is in spite of the fact that the number and frequency of television advertisements targeting children increased by 15-20% per year between 1994 and 1999 (Stewart-Allen, 1999:10). Research on the decision-making skills and pre-decision search behaviour of children is thus important, although it is beyond the scope of this study.

Children are far more aware of trends in consumer preferences today. Thus, forging their identity through certain clothing preferences is far more prevalent among young

children than it was in the past (Levin, 1994:28). Their loyalty to certain brands is obvious, and some brands are clearly considered trendy by children. Discovering why a particular brand is considered trendy is, therefore, important. More important for the marketers is knowing how to create the idea in the mind of a child that their product is trendy.

As children rarely save large amounts and have a relatively small disposable income, they will often ask their parents to make larger purchases for them. In addition to this, children exert a large influence on their parents' decisions regarding not only purchases for the home, such as furniture and new technology, but also decisions on cars and family holidays (Anonymous, 1995:42). The influence that children have on their parents creates many opportunities for research to be conducted so as to discover how to advertise not only products that are aimed at children, but also products for which adults are the primary target. Ideally, such advertising has to appeal to the children. Currently, little is known about how children view advertising messages directed at them, or about the formats that appeal to them. This is in spite of the fact that children are exposed to thousands of advertising messages annually. In the United States, for example, the American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that children are exposed to 20 000 commercials every year (Anonymous, 2000c:2).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the research was to discover how young children, between the ages of 8 and 12*, view television advertisements directed specifically at them. The specific objectives included:

- to discover how young children respond to different advertising formats;
- to discover to what extent boys and girls respond differently to television advertisements;
- to discover to what extent young children understand the advertising messages directed at them;
- to investigate the strength of the opinions of young children, i.e. how easily do they change their opinions about an advertisement; and
- to present guidelines with regard to advertising to young children.

*It was decided to concentrate on this age category as it was thought they were old enough to articulate their views and opinions fairly well.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Special considerations

The best way to discover a child's opinion of an advertisement directed at him or her is by conducting research using children as respondents. This poses various challenges. Fitzgerald (1993:s-2) claims for example, that "by the time they (children) reach school going age, boys and girls are as different as night and day". For this reason, and to avoid intimidation by the other sex, boys and girls were researched separately.

Research by Carey, Zhao, Chiaramonte & Eden (1997:13) shows that children have a very limited concentration span. It was therefore decided to use focus groups that were very visual and participative in nature. In addition, each focus group had a relatively short duration, and the focus groups were limited to fewer than seven children each, to facilitate participation by all.

Children are not familiar with intricacies such as research objectives, research methodology, advertising objectives, advertising strategies etc. Therefore, the researcher had to bring the research procedures and objectives to a level understandable to children, without insulting their intelligence. Simple and unambiguous language and short sentences were therefore used to avoid confusion.

Focus groups

The nature of the research problem suggested the use of either in-depth interviews or focus groups. The latter was decided upon as it was felt that the interactions between participants would spark new thought, because the subject matter was not considered sensitive, and because there were time constraints on the data collection period. It was also relatively easy to assemble a large number of participants in a single location (Dillon, Madden & Firtle (1994:125).

Eight focus groups were conducted in total, half of which were held in Gauteng and half in the Western Cape. Four schools were selected, and two focus groups were held at each school. The schools were selected on a convenience basis, and included a dual-medium rural school, a multiracial English private school and an English and an Afrikaans urban government school. Participants were selected on a random basis from each school, finally totalling 50 respondents. Separate focus groups were held for boys and girls. The focus groups were conducted on the school premises during school hours, so that the children could participate in the study without requiring signed parental consent forms.

Focus group content

An “ad test” is generally used by specific advertisers to determine the target audience’s responses to various commercials for their product or brand, and/or that of their competitors. This method is very effective when the advertiser wishes to establish how the target audience responds to the commercial, especially when the commercial is viewed with that of other related or even competing advertisements.

The purpose of this research is not to establish the target audience’s responses to a specific commercial; the “ad test” was merely used to test children’s responses to various advertising formats, to get an indication of the types of advertising to which children in this age category are likely to respond favourably. As children have a relatively limited concentration span, the duration of the “ad test” had to be limited to ensure their cooperation. This meant that many other applicable commercials had to be excluded from the “ad test”, even though their inclusion could have provided valuable insights. Each of the commercials finally included was specifically chosen to discover which advertising approach is most likely to be successful with children in this age group. The four advertisements included the “Jelly Tots” advertisement, the “Scone Mix” advertisement, the “Fanta” advertisement, and the “Pringles” advertisement. A brief overview of the nature of these advertisements and the main reasons why these advertisements were selected are shown in table 1.

Once the participants in each focus group were shown all four commercials in the “ad test”, they were asked which of the commercials they remembered seeing on television to establish how familiar they were with the commercials. The participants were then asked choose the commercial they liked the most and those they liked least, and then to discuss the reasons for their choices.

Each commercial was then shown to the participants individually, allowing them time to discuss the commercial before viewing the next commercial. The participants were encouraged not only to comment on what they felt the commercial’s message was, but also whether or not they had understood the commercial. The participants were then asked to comment on the aspects of the commercial that they liked the most, and those they disliked or would change. The final aspect of each commercial’s discussion related to the credibility or believability of the product and its advertising message.

TABLE 1: NATURE OF INCLUDED ADVERTISEMENTS AND REASONS FOR INCLUDING THEM IN THE "AD TEST"

ADVERTISEMENT	NATURE OF ADVERTISEMENT AND REASONS FOR INCLUSION
Jelly Tots	<p>This commercial makes use of bright colours and clever computer animation, in which young children (a boy and a girl) are shrunk and transported to a fantasy land of jelly tots. There is no narration during the commercial, as the entire story is told through a catchy jingle.</p> <p>This commercial was selected because it should not only appeal to both boys and girls, but also because the children in this age group are slightly older than the actual target audience for the commercial. The purpose was thus to establish whether or not this commercial still appeals to these children.</p>
Scone Mix	<p>This is a humorous slice-of-life commercial that depicts a situation in which an entire extended family arrives for tea. While the mother in the commercial prepares herself, the daughter prepares the scones. The story is told by using a voice-over narration.</p> <p>This commercial was chosen especially for its appeal to young girls, while also testing the boys' response to the commercial and the format used, even though the product has little relevance and appeal to them.</p>
Fanta	<p>This commercial depicts a young soccer player in Italy who is attempting, in front of a crowd of spectators, to keep the soccer ball in the air, without the use of his hands. When buying a "Fanta" he almost drops the ball, which is then saved by the shop assistant.</p> <p>Although the product is relevant to both boys and girls, the soccer theme generally does not appeal to young girls. This commercial was thus included in the ad test not only for its appeal to young boys, but also to determine what the young girls' reaction would be to the commercial, and consequently the product advertised.</p>

Pringles	<p>This commercial has no real story, but consists of a set of abstract images of young people (although not children) having a good time. Although there is music in the commercial, there are no lyrics or narration except for the slogan "once you pop, you can't stop."</p> <p>This commercial was chosen for the appeal of the product and the advertisement to both adults and children as well as to both genders. Because the format used in this commercial is very different to that of commercials usually specifically aimed at children, the purpose is to test young children's responses to this format.</p>
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FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

At this point, it should be noted that interpersonal influences were apparent throughout the various focus groups, as individuals who initially responded to a question would change their minds the moment they realised the majority of the other participants had a different point of view. Only a small portion of the respondents would still maintain their initial opinions even if the majority of the other participants were not in agreement with them.

As expected, the findings of the four male and the four female focus groups were very different. There were, however, also many similarities between the responses given by the female participants and the male participants in the different focus groups, even though these children were from different geographical areas. The following sections separately present the findings of the "ad tests" conducted with the male and female participants.

FEMALE RESPONDENTS' "AD TEST" DISCUSSION

Favourite commercial

When asked to select the commercial that they like the most, all the female participants in two of the focus groups felt that they preferred the 'Scone Mix' commercial, whereas all the participants in the third focus group felt that they preferred the 'Jelly Tots' commercial. The fourth focus group also showed similar preferences, since half of the participants in that focus group felt that they also preferred the 'Scone Mix' commercial, whereas the other half of the participants chose the 'Jelly Tots' commercial as their

favourite.

The reason given for their selection was that the participants felt that both of these commercials told a story, while still being applicable to them. Without using academic terminology, these participants indicated that they understood that they were the target audience for these two commercials.

Least preferred commercial

When asked to select the commercial that they liked the least, all the female participants in all four of focus groups agreed that they neither understood nor liked the 'Fanta' commercial. Even though they felt that they might still purchase the product, they made it clear that such a purchase would in no way be related to the advertising of the product.

The 'Jelly Tots' commercial

Because the majority of the female participants really liked this commercial, they were very positive in their discussion of the commercial. They felt that they not only understood the advertising message, but the majority of the participants also correctly verbalized their understanding of the message.

The aspects of this commercial that the participants liked the most included the use of bright colours and the jingle. They also liked the animated characters used, and especially the man made from of jelly tots. There were no aspects of the commercial that these participants felt they would like to see changed.

The participants were also able to distinguish between the real and the animated characters used in the commercial. In addition, even though they realized that the commercial cannot be taken too literally because of its appeal to their sense of fantasy, the participants did not feel that the use of fantasy undermined the credibility of the product or the believability of the commercial.

The 'Scone Mix' commercial

This commercial was also evaluated very favourably, and the female participants felt that they clearly understood the advertising message. The participants all enjoyed the use of humor, and felt that the aspect of the commercial they were most fond of was the frantic preparation the mother underwent in getting dressed and applying make-up as well as the calm manner in which the daughter prepared the scones.

There were no aspects of the commercial that they disliked, and the participants all felt that the message was very believable. Several of the girls also spontaneously commented that they would like to ask their mother to buy the product for them.

The 'Fanta' commercial

The girls did not respond favourably to this commercial, as they indicated that the subject of the commercial, soccer, was in no way applicable to them. The majority of the girls also indicated that they did not understand the advertising message. They were therefore not able to comment on the believability of the commercial.

The aspects of the commercial they disliked the most were the use of only men in the commercial, the soccer theme as well as the use of Italy as the setting for the commercial. The participants also felt that the commercial lacked a clear story, and disliked the fact that the only narration was that of counting in Italian, which is also numerically printed on the screen.

The 'Pringles' commercial

The majority of the female participants were indifferent to this commercial. Although the majority of the participants interpreted the advertising message incorrectly, they were nevertheless satisfied that they understood the advertising message.

Because of their agreement with the slogan "once you pop, you can't stop", which is the only narration in the commercial, they felt that the advertising message, as they interpreted it, was very believable.

The female participants had very few comments to make about the commercial, even though they rated the product highly. The aspect of the commercial that they particularly liked was the use of the roller-blading scene in the commercial, as this is probably the scene to which they are best able to relate.

MALE PARTICIPANTS' "AD TEST" DISCUSSION

These focus groups had exactly the same format used for the focus groups using females as participants. The boys all recalled having seen each of the four commercials shown to them, with the exception of the 'Scone Mix' commercial, which a small minority of the boys did not recall. The most plausible explanation for not having seen this commercial before is that of perceptual selection. Because the subject matter of the 'Scone Mix' commercial is of such a nature that it has little relevance to the majority of the male participants, the advertising message was not able to penetrate their perceptual

screens.

Favourite commercial

The majority of the boys in two of the four focus groups indicated that they preferred the 'Fanta' commercial, and the majority of the male participants in the third focus group selected the 'Pringles' commercial as their favourite. A few of the participants in each of these three focus groups felt that they preferred the 'Scone Mix' commercial.

The participants in the fourth focus group all had different preferences in terms of the commercial they liked best. Some of the boys felt that they preferred the 'Fanta' commercial, whereas others felt that the 'Scone Mix' and the 'Pringles' commercials were their favourites.

The boys were generally not only able to express their opinions clearly, but they also showed a greater tendency to stick to their initial selection, even if the rest of the participants did not agree with their selection. The boys were, however, not able to express the reasons for their opinions to the same extent as the female participants in the other four focus groups.

Least preferred commercial

All the male participants in all four groups conducted agreed that they liked the 'Jelly Tots' commercial the least. The reason given for this choice ranged from the fact that they felt that this commercial was 'for young children and girls' to the fact that they disliked the use of fantasy, which substantially influenced the extent to which they believed the advertising message.

The 'Jelly Tots' commercial

As mentioned, the boys did not respond favourably to this commercial or its advertising message. The male participants, although they felt that they understood the advertising message, all commented on the fact that they felt that the message was 'stupid' and not very believable.

Besides disliking the overall commercial, there were no specific aspects of the commercial that they felt needed changing. In addition, many of the boys felt that they liked the use of bright colours and the animated characters, even though the commercial held little appeal for them.

The 'Scone Mix' commercial

Although this commercial was not selected by the majority of the male participants as their favourite commercial, they still responded very favourably to the use of humour in the commercial. The boys felt that they understood the advertising message, and they believed the advertising claims.

The male participants were also unable to make any suggestions on any aspects of the commercial that they would like to see changed, and the only aspect of the commercial that they liked, and felt that they could relate to, was the use of humor in the commercial.

Even though the male participants enjoyed the commercial for its entertainment value, none of the participants felt that they would purchase the product, or influence their parents to purchase the product for the family.

The 'Fanta' commercial

The boys responded very favourably to this commercial, because they related well to the soccer theme used in the commercial. These participants, unlike the female participants, understood the advertising message, and felt that the advertising in no way harmed the believability of the commercial or the credibility of the product advertised.

The aspect of the commercial that these male participants preferred was that of the assistance the shopkeeper gives the soccer player, although they felt that they were unable to relate to the Italian setting. They also mentioned that they would prefer the use of English in the commercial, rather than Italian which they did not understand.

The 'Pringles' commercial

The majority of the male participants responded very favourably to this commercial, but some of the participants admitted that their response was partly as a result of their liking of the product being advertised, rather than the actual format used in the commercial.

The male participants also interpreted the advertising message to be the slogan, and consequently felt that the commercial was very believable. Similar to the female participants, the aspect of the commercial that they liked the best was the roller-blading scene. They also mentioned that they liked the scene in which an entire chip is consumed in one bite!

CONCLUSIONS

From the above findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- All the respondents in each of the focus groups conducted were influenced, to some extent, by both the presence of the moderator and their peers. Although this is true for most focus groups, the influences were perceived to be far stronger than usual. This leads to the conclusion that interpersonal influences on consumer behaviour are particularly relevant to children in this age category.
- It was also apparent that girls, although being better able to express the reasons for their opinions, are more likely to change their opinions to conform to the group's general opinion and beliefs.
- Because some of the participants did not recall seeing some of the commercials advertising products of no relevance to them on television, it is concluded that perception, motivation and needs play an important role in their ability to recall such commercials, and in their responses to such advertising messages.
- There is much evidence to support the notion that different approaches should be used when advertising either to girls or to boys.
- All the participants responded favourably to the use of humour in commercials and to commercials telling a story.
- Both male and female participants responded most favourably to commercials advertising not only products of relevance to them, but also making use of a theme to which they are able to relate.
- Both male and female participants reported enjoying the use of animation and bright colours in a commercial, although the theme of the animation must be relevant to them.
- Although both male and female participants enjoy similar formats for commercials, the subject matter presented and the theme used are most likely to influence their response to the commercial.
- Children are clearly very attentive to most advertising, as they find it not only informative, but also entertaining.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations may be useful when advertising to children between the ages of 8 and 12:

- The most effective way of reaching both male and female audiences is to target them separately.
- The most effective commercials aimed at this age group make use of a cleverly told story, with the inclusion of humour, if possible.
- Whether using cartoon characters, animation or actors and actresses to convey the advertising message, the theme of the story told must be of relevance to the target

audience.

- Before embarking on any advertising campaign, the advertiser should first conduct thorough market research, as the young children in this study showed a keen awareness of consumer trends. These trends have a tendency to change frequently.

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