

Child Consumers of Advertising: Differences across Deciles

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Abstract

This paper reports the range of opinions of children aged five to eight years with respect to television advertising. An exploratory study across the range of New Zealand school deciles investigated differences in general perceptions and experiences of advertising within an age group. (The Ministry of Education uses a decile-rating classification for New Zealand schools loosely based on socio-economic status - decile 1 lowest, decile 10 highest). The preliminary findings indicate relationships between decile groups and response to advertising. We discuss the implications of these findings and conclude with directions for future research.

Keywords: advertising, children, television, socio-economic status

Introduction

Children and adolescents are perceived as having significant spending power and it follows that marketing communicators, policy makers and researchers should try to understand the complex issues relating to children and marketing communications before they reach cognitive and emotional maturity. A large proportion of the literature is based on studies of adults. This is due in part to the practical and ethical problems of studying children, and more significantly, to the fact that adults have traditionally been the most valuable consumers.

Literature review

Historically, the marketing literature has reported many studies relating to advertising and children (see, Barling and Fullagar, 1983; Baron and Bernard, 1982; Brucks, Armstrong and Goldberg, 1988; Goldberg and Gorn, 1974; Gorn and Goldberg, 1980; Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Roedder, 1981) as policy makers have called for empirical evidence to inform decisions relating to children's television programmes and advertising (Griffin, 1976). More recent literature has started to address other aspects of children's (and adolescents') responses to marketing activities - influence in family purchase decisions (Boush, Friestad and Rose, 1994), socialisation processes in consumption (John, 1999), what they do with advertising (Ritson and Elliott, 1999) and cross-cultural differences between children as consumers (Rose, Bush and Kahle, 1998). However, the range of responses between children of the same age in the same society has not been widely reported.

Children's interactions with advertising and variations between children of *different ages* have received some attention in the literature as policy makers seek to understand where the threshold lies between childhood vulnerability and adolescent / adult savvy in order to protect the "powerless victims of ideological manipulation" (Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003, p.437). Based on the Piagetian model of age related stages of cognitive development, Roedder (1981) proposed that children under 8 years old use simple information processing strategies and are unable to comprehend the intent of advertising. A more recent approach to assessing children's knowledge of advertising suggests that the Piagetian model is outdated and that age-stage models are of little use (Pine and Veasey, 2003). Furthermore, Bartholomew and O'Donohoe (2003, p.433) suggest that "children should be viewed as active, socially and culturally situated consumers of advertising", and suggest that their interactions with advertising are more importantly "anchored in their broader life-world experiences" (p.452). Nonetheless, in general, children under eight years are thought to be most vulnerable to advertising due to their limited cognitive skills. In New Zealand they may be exposed to 10 minutes per hour of advertising during children's programming (Television Broadcasters' Council, 2001) although the under five years group are somewhat protected by an advertising ban during preschooler's

programmes (weekdays 8.30-9.30am and 2.30-3.30pm). Hence the focus of this paper is on the five to eight year age group.

It might be expected that within an age group there are variations between children who have differing experience and cognitive ability (Kunkel and Roberts, 1991). Similarly, we might expect that children's responses to advertising may vary according to their family's consumption patterns, involvement in the business world and experience of commercial matters. This echoes Buckingham's findings (1993, cited in Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003) that working class children were less likely to be critical, shrewd consumers. Within a multi-cultural society and across the socio-economic spectrum, reactions to, and engagement with, marketing communications might be diverse. This might be especially apparent when children are unable to articulate their views due to personality factors or language barriers.

One framework for understanding children's responses to advertising is the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright, 1994). Persuasion knowledge depends on the maturation of some basic cognitive skills and on peoples' accumulated experience. Acquisition of cultural 'common sense' about persuasion tactics is an on-going process (Friestad and Wright, 1995). Friestad and Wright (1995) also noted that persuasion knowledge is a type of folk-wisdom dependent not so much on the individual but on the society in which they live. Folk-wisdom evolves over time and takes into account recent experiences. Beliefs such as these are rooted within a culture and may be expected to vary according to social and ethnic differences. Societies that have had less exposure to advertising or to commerce may be more naive with respect to advertising persuasion knowledge. Some sectors of the New Zealand community, such as economic migrants' children, may fall into this category.

Children learn to *consume* advertising; at a young age children appear to treat advertising as entertainment (Bulmer, 2001) and as a significant source of information (Macklin, 1987) but become increasingly sceptical of advertising claims as they approach adolescence (Mangleburg and Bristol, 1998). However, aside from the propositional content of an ad, ethnographic studies also indicate that advertisements, in themselves, are an item for consumption (O'Donohoe, 1997; Ritson and Elliott, 1999). Consumers use the shared language of advertising as a means of common

understanding. Advertising has social currency amongst groups of children, adolescents and adults alike. Phrases are borrowed from advertising and enter the popular lexicon. Being able to knowledgeably discuss new products, new advertising campaigns / executions and to use fashionable new words is an important part of being socially adept - a kind of 'cultural cool'. Ads become tokens in young peoples' systems of social exchange (Willis, 1990, cited in Ritson and Elliott, 1995). However, the type of advertising that is most relevant to a social group may be expected to alter according to circumstances. Conversely, the likely social use of an ad may impact on the manner and extent to which it is interpreted.

This paper reports the opinions of children aged five to eight years with respect to television advertising. An exploratory study across the range of New Zealand school deciles investigated general perceptions and experiences of advertising. (The Ministry of Education uses a decile-rating classification for New Zealand schools loosely based on socio-economic status - decile one lowest, decile 10 highest). The preliminary findings indicate relationships between decile groups and response to advertising. We discuss the implications of these findings and conclude the paper with directions for future research.

Methodology

177 children aged five to eight were recruited from five schools within a large metropolitan city area. Schools were selected from a Ministry of Education decile-rating list. We chose schools to represent the spectrum of socio-economic status across deciles one, three, five, seven, and 10. Informed consent was obtained from parents. Approximately 10 children in each age group participated in a focus group discussion conducted in school rooms. Each group comprised children of the same age, usually from a single classroom. After an introduction by the researcher, children were encouraged to think about their own opinions of TV programmes and then to name their favourite "television advertisements, ads or commercials". A free-flowing discussion followed and typically incorporated an analysis of ads that they perceived as funny or they hated. They were also asked "can you think of some things you've seen advertising for?" The questions were not directed at individuals but posed for the

whole group to consider. Individuals responded only when they chose to. All sessions were recorded on audiotape and detailed notes were made by the research assistant about children's participation and reaction to questions. In some cases one child may have made several responses to a question, while others in the group made no comment at all.

Findings and Discussion

When asked general questions about television viewing, children of all ages and deciles were relatively relaxed and chatty: almost all were prepared to discuss this topic in an animated way. They were very familiar with the concept of kid's programmes and adult programmes. Children in the lowest decile school had a poorer command of English and appeared to come from Pacific nations and refugee communities such as Fijian Indians, Vietnamese etc. As expected, the mid to lower decile schools had higher levels of Maori, Pacific Island and Indian students than the highest decile schools, which had more white and new immigrant (but apparently wealthy) Asian students. Specific data about ethnicity was not collected during this study.

The youngest children, especially in lower decile schools, when asked about favourite advertisements, tended to answer in such a way as to suggest that they were not familiar with the concept of advertising as a separate identity from television programming. The decile one children, whilst interested in talking about television did not engage in discussion about advertising. Even after considerable prompting there was no dialogue. The mid and upper decile five year olds talked mostly about *programmes* they had seen or liked, not about products.

RESEARCHER: Do you have favourite TV commercials?

TRUMAN: I like Pokémon, Digimon, and Zenemon.

RESEARCHER: Have you seen some ads that you like, Justin?

JUSTIN: I watch Sticky TV

Children aged six and seven had many comments about advertisements, most at a superficial level. Interestingly, low decile children talked about food advertisements

and public service messages - for example drink driving campaigns, fire safety, and ACC home accident prevention messages.

AMANDA: It's one about a woman who is trying to get to hospital but she bangs on the steering wheel 'cos somebody, a lady had run into the back of her car. Because she had been drinking.

They also discussed adult targeted products - carpet cleaners and car paint repair products.

KALA: Um some people see an ad, like if cars get ah - the cars get a scratch, I saw that ad, where if the car gets a scratch on your car or something if their car gets a scratch on it, they can put it - they can go and buy it.

The eight year old low decile children seemed to have programme trailers top of mind and mentioned mundane items they had seen advertised, such as food and other basic household items. They were also very certain of where to buy these goods.

AMELIA: Some school stuff.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, like what?

AMELIA: Books, bags and lunchbox.

RESEARCHER: Where would you go to buy those things?

AMELIA: The Warehouse.

SALU: The Warehouse Stationery.

Children at decile level three and above vied for status amongst the group by demonstrating their knowledge of mass-produced toys that were advertised, that they had played with, had bought or had already been given. Whether or not the comments were entirely true ("my uncle is getting me a Playstation for Xmas," was an unlikely boast judging by the child's appearance), it was certainly important to be seen to be aware of what was currently being advertised and was 'hot' or 'not'. Children at the higher decile levels certainly consumed advertising in order to keep up with their peers in a social sense. The highest decile groups of seven and eight year olds reportedly had fairly strictly controlled television weekday viewing times, perhaps reflecting greater levels of after school extra-curricular activities and parental pressure to develop strong homework habits. However, their conversation was still strongly geared to showing off their advanced knowledge of new products and games, some of

which “have not even been released in New Zealand yet”. There was a sense of one-upmanship as each child struggled to outdo the last.

AARON: Lots of things, and some I’ve already got.

MATTHEW: Hot Wheels

BEN: I wanted a scooter

OLIVER: I wanted a scooter that can fold up

SIMON: Robo Riders, and I got two yesterday

At the lowest decile level, children appeared to be active readers of advertisements for products and services that they could consume (e.g. television programmes on later in the week and everyday foodstuffs) but not for other more discretionary spend items.

EDWARD: Fish and chips, and chips and a drink and a cookie.

RESEARCHER: Fish and chips and drink - do you see all that on TV?

ALL: Yes.

We hypothesise that a lack of money places many frequently advertised products beyond the reach of low decile students and may explain why they appear not to pay attention to, or engage with, the advertisements themselves. This assumption is supported by Buckingham’s (1993) ideas (cited in Bartholomew and O’Donohoe, 2003) that low decile children have less invested in being able to demonstrate advertising literacy. Finally, we recognise that the results of this pilot study might be affected by both primacy and recency effects (Belch and Belch, 2001), where the children’s top of mind responses reflected either the advertisements that appear first in a break or the most recently viewed commercials. There are other limitations in the methodology used, but inevitably, there are always practical and ethical problems with research using children, whether in groups or in a one-to-one situation.

Directions for future research

More investigation of low decile children is required across ages to investigate their apparent lack of engagement in advertising and the consequences for consumption. Larger numbers of students should be studied to verify the preliminary findings. Furthermore, comparative methodologies should be used to determine whether these

reported effects are artefacts of the method used or accurately reflect the status of the children's understanding of advertising. Future research might also investigate other geo-demographic variables (e.g. urban/rural differences, ethnicity, cultural orientation). Since cultural dislocation is more predominant in lower decile groups we also propose that future researchers consider differences in advertising literacy and reception amongst refugees and recent immigrants. Whether these factors are modified over time due to acculturation and assimilation is another area for consideration. Another comparison might usefully be made between the higher and lower decile children as they enter adolescence and adulthood. Ethnographic research might also uncover the differences between these decile groups and the social uses of advertising (see Ritson and Elliott, 1999). Furthermore, the relationship between children's social uses of advertising and subsequent consumer choices / purchase behaviour is another potentially useful avenue for researchers. Any correlation between these factors would have considerable practitioner relevance.

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