Commercial Media Literacy: What Does It Do, To Whom – and Does it Matter?

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Abstract

Commercially-sponsored media literacy initiatives aimed at educating children about the persuasive nature of advertising are evaluated against implicit theories underlying their use, criticisms of the motivation behind their implementation and effectiveness evidence. Media literacy intervention analysis should be situated more explicitly within the context of the age-related development of cognitive skills and also within the debate regarding possible negative impacts of persuasive communication. Additionally, the debate, the development of future interventions, and research into the complex combination of factors influencing dietary and lifestyle choices should incorporate evolving media forms, media convergence and the blurring of advertising, information and entertainment. Recommendations for addressing the dearth of empirical data conclude the paper.

The extant literature contains multiple definitions of media literacy, most broadly focussed (Kavoori and Mathews 2004; Considine 2002; Lewis and Jhally 1998) but generally offering variations on the following:

> *"The ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms"* (Aufderheide 1993, cited in Hobbs 1998, p.16).

Commercial media literacy is also defined in very general terms in the literature, if it is defined at all. For example, Austin and Johnson (1997a, 21) refer only to the achievement of "a greater understanding of the persuasive intent behind advertising". The assumption appears to be that both adults and children may be 'forewarned' and thus activate cognitive defences against persuasive communication (Wood and Quinn 2003; Wright, Friestad and Boush 2005). Much discussion of commercial media literacy in the literature is limited to advertising in traditional media rather than encompassing the wide range of marketing communications to which children may be potentially exposed (Buckingham 2004; Austin and Johnson 1997a and 1997b; Buckingham 1998). In this paper, the focus is on media literacy as it applies to commercial content within a range of consumer media forms including new electronic media and hybrid media that increasingly blur the borders between advertising, information and entertainment (Grigorovici and Constantin 2004; Livingstone 2004; Shrum 2004; Silverstone 2004; Rothenberg 2002).

The review of media literacy initiatives that follows is situated within the growing criticism of some facets of marketing activity, particularly marketing communication directed at children (see, for example, McLellan 2002). The marketing industry is facing increased pressure over claimed links between exposure to food advertising and a range of social problems, especially growing obesity levels (see, for example, Smith 2003; Centre for Science in the Public Interest 2002; Ludwig, Peterson, and Gortmaker 2001). While there is growing evidence that the influence of marketing on dietary and lifestyle choices is small in relation to a number of other factors (Livingstone 2005; Eagle et al. 2004), industry cannot claim that its effects are totally benign. Indeed, some marketing academics concede that "marketing is directly implicated in some preventative health-care issues" (Goldberg 1995 p. 350).

This does not imply that persuasive communication is intentionally deceptive, rather that children's relatively undeveloped cognitive skills, described by Moses and Baldwin (2005 p. 156) as akin to "immuno-deficiency", means that they are at greater risk of being misled by persuasive communication than adults. Media literacy education and training has long been proposed as a necessary intervention in order to protect consumers, especially children, from the negative impact of persuasive communication such as advertising and product placement and to enable children to make informed choices before purchasing, or requesting, products (Kennedy 2004; Rogers 2002; Armstrong and Brucks 1988). Several substantial media literacy interventions have been developed by organisations affiliated to, or with input from, the marketing industry (Concerned Children's Advertisers 2004; Media Smart 2003a).

While such interventions are claimed to be designed to encourage children to be critical of commercial messages in general, critics of the marketing industry suggest that the motivation is simply to be seen to address a problem created by the industry itself, that is, the negative social impacts to which marketing activity has contributed (Goldberg 1995). Industry-sponsored media literacy program organizers counter with claims that such programs were

developed voluntarily and have been operating for a considerable period of time. In Canada at least, media literacy interventions have operated for over fifteen years - well before issues such as childhood obesity gained prominent focus (Loblaw 2001).

By contributing media literacy education resources, the marketing industry is positioning itself as being part of the solution to these problems and thereby seeks to avoid wide restrictions or outright bans on marketing communication, particularly for food products deemed to have little nutritional value directed at children (Kleinman 2003a; Rogers 2002; Teinowitz 2001). The need to be seen to be taking positive action primarily in order to avert potential restrictions on advertising is openly acknowledged by some sectors of the industry itself (Cincotta 2005). Further, Hobbs (1998) suggests that such programs are also in the interests of media organizations that support the interventions in order to reduce criticism of the potential negative effects of the media themselves. Considine (2002) somewhat cynically suggests that there is also an element of exploitation of the issue of media literacy by all parties simply for its rhetorical value.

While the increasing amount of criticism of the tactics employed by marketers of products from which children are a substantial market would appear to indicate the need for exemplary socially responsible behavior by these organisations, there are numerous reports of some food marketers focussing on, and conducting, research among pre-schoolers (Kunkel 2005). Suspicion regarding industry's motivations in providing media literacy resources is therefore unsurprising in view of what appears to be an implicit belief by some sectors of the marketing industry that good citizenship in some areas can counter somewhat questionable behaviors in others (Geraci 2004; Cincotta 2005). The cynicism expressed by the industry's critics is further fuelled by revelations such as the contradiction between when marketers believe that it may be appropriate to market to young people and the age at which they believe children can make intelligent choices, as shown in Table 1.

Place Table 1 about here

If we accept that the existing media literacy programs do have self-interest as a major motivating factor, does this make them necessarily wrong? If they are effective, does this mean that the intervention programs can be offset against any potential harm done by marketing directed at children?

The success or otherwise of these interventions has obvious public policy implications. In order to inform debate and public policy decision-making and to help illuminate and stimulate the discussion in the area, the implicit theoretical foundations for calls for media literacy education, together with evidence for their effects and effectiveness are reviewed in relation to three separate media literacy interventions, the British and European *Media Smart* program, the Canadian *Concerned Children's Advertisers* program and the New Zealand *Willie Munchright* program. The Media Smart program is running in Britain, Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium, with more European countries expected to follow (Advertising Education Forum 2005). The paper concludes with recommendations, based on a theoretically-grounded framework, for policy makers and for marketers regarding future activity and research in this area.

Theoretical Framework

As noted earlier, media literacy overall has multiple definitions, depending on the discipline perspective of researchers. For example, it may be seen as incorporating the understanding and transmission of culture (Considine 2002); or the analysis of information control and cultural ideologies (Kavoori and Mathews 2004; Lewis and Jhally 1998). Buckingham (1998) suggests that media literacy education in general is a form of attempted protectionism. Consistent with this, Considine (2002, p. 10) notes heightened interest in media literacy programs after the American Columbine School shootings, suggesting that these programs aimed "to somehow immunise children against presumably infectious imagery and ideology". The assumption appears to be that exposure to media literacy training will help address a range of social ills.

The implicit theoretical foundation underpinning media literacy programs is inoculation theory, which regards media exposure as somewhat pathological in nature (Buckingham 1993) and suggests, as noted earlier, that it is possible to immunize people against pressures generated via media content or advertising to act in particular ways or to consume products such as tobacco (Moses and Baldwin 2005; Considine 2002). This uncritical hope is the driver of commercially-sponsored media literacy programs, as evidenced by Yates (2001, p. 2) who observes that such programs aim to make children more critical and sceptical of commercial messages and therefore likely to make "better decisions about products".

Demystifying the way in which media are constructed is unlikely to change consumers' media consumption habits, nor take away enjoyment of its consumption. Simple enjoyment is a major part of media use, yet it is surprisingly under-researched (Nabi and Krcmer 2004). Not only should the assumptions underpinning inoculation theory be empirically tested, but other theories should be considered. Many of these are not well developed. For example, disposition theory suggests that enjoyment of media often results in strong feelings, or affective disposition which may be positive or negative regarding specific characters or situations portrayed (Raney 2004). Involvement with specific media such as television programs may impact on the construction of social reality (Shrum, Wyer and O'Guinn 1998; O'Guinn and Shrum 1997). It may also impact on the perception of advertising messages within the media (Hirschman and Thompson 1997); however, the magnitude or duration of carry-over effects in regard to commercial activity either in commercial breaks or embedded within program content has not been rigorously studied.

The exact mechanism by which these effects proposed by disposition theory occur is not well understood. While Lee and Lee (1995, p.19) suggest that television can passively aid in mood elevation "as a kind of valium", Green and Brock (2000) posit a more active role via transportation theory, in which individuals using any media, including print, may be absorbed or transported into the narrative world portrayed. Preston (2004, p. 366) implicitly extends the application of disposition theory by suggesting that, while children may accept that advertisements represent "fantasies about brands", such skepticism does not prevent positive attitudes towards the brands advertised.

Media usage may play a major role in social identity formation and reinforcement (Dotson and Hyatt 1999; Harwood 1999). Ritson and Elliott (1999) extend this to suggest that not just program content but also advertising specifically may play a role in social identity through shared knowledge and interpretations. This is in spite of skepticism towards advertising per se being well documented (Calfee & Ringold 1994), including among children and adolescents (Derbaix and Percheux 2003).

The interaction between media consumer and the media itself is undoubtedly complex. Critics suggest that approaches taken by both educators and policy makers with regard to media literacy education are therefore overly simplistic (Buckingham 2004) and ignore the complex relationship consumers have with their chosen media. Further, Buckingham (2004, p.5) observes that, due to children's general development which includes experience of a variety of media forms and of the wider environment in which they live, "children develop media literacy even in the absence of explicit attempts to encourage and promote it".

What is missing in this debate is recognition that, as noted earlier, children's cognitive abilities are not yet fully developed and that children are influenced by advertising in different ways to adults (Friestad and Wright 2005; Moses and Baldwin 2005; Mallalieu, Palan and Laczniak, 2005). However, there is a substantial gap in the literature regarding the specific differences between children, adolescent and adult processing of persuasive communications and the impact that this communication may have on subsequent behavior (Wright, Friestad and Boush 2005; Boush, Friestad and Rose 1994). Further, it has long been recognized that awareness of persuasive intent does not necessarily promote the ability to resist it (O'Sullivan 2005; Brucks, Armstrong and Goldberg 1988; John 1986).

No single coherent framework exists by which the way persuasive communication is perceived at different stages of children's cognitive development can be evaluated; while Piaget's theories have provided the foundation for many prior studies, recent reviews have highlighted limitations inherent in applying the theories to activity within an increasingly complex environment (Moses and Baldwin 2005; John 1999). Recent work draws on a range of theories, including information processing (John 1999), the development of persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), and theories of the mind (Moses and Baldwin 2005). These theories provide a more operationally useful foundation upon which to base predictions of how and when children develop an understanding of the motives and biases behind persuasive communication and are able to draw on and use prior knowledge such as that gained from media literacy programs.

In order to address the question of exactly what is achieved or achievable via media literacy programs, the background of existing interventions and the explicit and implicit objectives set for the interventions are examined using inoculation theory and related theories to provide a framework for evaluating their impact on the groups seen as primary intervention targets. We then examine the available evidence on the effects and effectiveness of the two programs in the light of this theoretically-grounded framework.

Commercially-sponsored Media Literacy Interventions: Available Evidence Regarding Effects and Effectiveness

It is asserted that "children need to know when they are viewing advertisements to have any hope of guarding against them" (Moses and Baldwin 2005 p. 187); however, neither the acquisition of media literacy knowledge nor the awareness of the presence of persuasive communication of themselves equate to effective resistance (O'Sullivan 2005).

There is some evidence that specific interventions in other areas, particularly alcohol use, tobacco use, body image issues and eating disorders, can be effective in changing both perceptions and behaviors and that pre-adolescents can be successfully targeted (Gonzales et al. 2004; Irving and Berel 2001; Austin and Johnson 1997a and 1997b). The evidence is,

however, somewhat equivocal as a number of reported studies reviewed by these authors focussed on older children and / or short term rather than long term effects. Immediate effects included an understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising and a decreased perception regarding the desirability of products such as alcohol. While Austin and Johnson (1997a and 1997b) suggest that effects such as these may be long term, there is little robust evidence to support their assertions. Further, Armstrong and Brucks (1988, p.104) argue that "children under the age of 12 do not spontaneously draw on previously learned knowledge when confronted with new information" such as exposure to television advertising.

While there are wide variations in children's abilities at any specific age and also variations across socio-economic and cultural dimensions that have not been adequately explored, in general there appear to be relatively clear differences between two age groups. Children between the ages of seven and eleven need to be prompted to retrieve and use information previously gained, such as through media literacy education; they are unable to link such information to current situations without some form of reminder (Moses and Baldwin 2005; Neeley and Schumann 2004; John 1999). Children under the age of seven are unable to use prior information even when prompted; their undeveloped cognitive skills equate to a lack of effective cognitive defences (John 1999; Moses and Baldwin 2005).

Armstrong and Brucks (1988) note that, even for those whose cognitive development would allow them to retrieve prior knowledge if given a reminder of it, there is little likelihood of this occurring through the intervention of parents, given that children's media consumption environment is largely unsupervised. Muto (2004) suggests up to 85 per cent of children's viewing in multi-set households is unsupervised. Further, she notes (2004, p. 38) that 79 per cent of British children aged 10 – 15 years and 58 per cent of children aged 4 -9 years have television sets in their bedrooms. Thus, viewing is likely to occur without adult or even sibling presence.

A further complication in the analysis of message forms is widespread simultaneous media usage, particularly television and the Internet. Pilotta et al. (2004, p.289) provide the following indicators of the extent of simultaneous media usage:

- 32.7 per cent of males and 36.4 per cent of females watch television while they are on-line, with the two media becoming either foreground or background depending on the task and interest.

The way in which messages across these media may interact and reinforce each other is totally unresearched.

The existing interventions cannot be viewed as a quick fix in terms of both attitude and behavioral change and there is evidence of concern regarding variation in how interventions are integrated into school curricula as effectiveness, however superficially measured currently, appears directly related to the level of integration (Worth 2004). Extrapolating from this, it could reasonably be assumed that additional reinforcement in the home environment would add to the effectiveness. This poses two distinct problems. Firstly, there is a problem determining how this might be researched. More importantly, as noted earlier, most children consume media without parental guidance. Armstrong and Brucks (1988) caution that there is an assumption that parents themselves understand the way in which persuasive communication works, let alone possess the skills, ability and motivation to be able to discuss the issues with children.

There are a number of issues that arise: given that media literacy initiatives are voluntarily funded by industry, there is no actual requirement for them to set specific and measurable objectives – or to make any measurement data publicly available. Indeed, the question must be asked – with whom does any burden of proof lie – with industry to prove effectiveness, or with critics to prove the reverse?

In terms of available evidence regarding the effectiveness of general media literacy programs, the extant literature reports, largely uncritically, on a range of media literacy resources for school students (Junion-Metz 2004; Muto 2004) and a Google Internet search reveals that there are numerous tertiary education courses offering a range of perspectives on the subject. There is a small amount of empirical research assessing interventions in terms skills in identifying persuasive techniques (Hobbs and Frost 2003). This is primarily experimental or observational and is thus somewhat problematic in terms of validity and reliability (Livingstone 2005). Additionally, it does not provide any insights into long-term attitudinal or behavioral change that might have occurred as the result of the programs.

Armstrong and Brucks (1988, p.105) called for regulators to "work with the advertising industry to create advertising campaigns to counterbalance product communications by teaching children about advertising and 'rational' consumption behavior". In the absence of action from government and regulatory bodies, we can only applaud the initiatives that industry has taken in this regard. However, while it is laudable that some tracking research has been conducted on commercially-sponsored media literacy initiatives, the following indicates that it would be advisable for future studies to extend beyond relatively superficial measurements and to also incorporate a more holistic approach to the identification and interaction of the range of marketing communication tools with which children interact.

The following provides a review of commercially-sponsored media literacy interventions currently in operation in various countries, specifically evaluating objectives set for the interventions and an examination of the available evidence offered regarding the impact of two of the interventions.

Concerned Children's Advertisers (CCA) is a non-profit organization of Canadian companies established in 1990 and including such flagship brand owners as Coca-Cola, McDonald's Restaurants, Kellogg's and Nestlé. For over fifteen years, CCA have provided a range of educational programs for children on topics as diverse as drug use, self-esteem, coping with bullying through to media literacy. Television public service announcements addressing each topic are aired using donated television time (Loblaw 2001). The media literacy education component "TV and Me" is supported by a range of educational resources for use in schools and by children in their own homes. It is seen as a major responsibility by the organization, with implicit links to inoculation theory being evident: "In addition to industry regulation and a responsive complaint system, we must also educate children to have the skills to become critical thinkers – able to interpret, cope with and understand the media messages they are exposed to directly and indirectly". …. "As an industry that works hard to ensure responsible marketing practices, we also feel that it is our responsibility to ensure that children are media literate and able to think critically about what they see and hear"(CCA, 2004, p. 20). While there are numerous general aims stated in CCA material, specific, measurable objectives are not provided.

CCA have commissioned several studies during the last ten years. These studies are largely reliant on measures of recall rather than on attitudinal or behavioral change. Awareness of the

CCA program is strong, with two thirds of children having heard of the program. Of these, 97 per cent had seen television commercials and 74 per cent believed that the advertisements helped them to better understand television advertising, a view supported by 50 per cent of parents (CCA 2004).

Media Smart is a U.K. originated media literacy program that focuses specifically on advertising, sharing similar objectives to the CCA in terms of increasing the ability of children to think critically about information from the media to which they are exposed (Media Smart 2003a and b). They use material similar to, and in some cases, adapted from, the CCA program and report use in some 20 per cent of British primary schools, with a target of 40per cent penetration (Muto 2004). As noted earlier, the program is being extended across a number of European countries.

The Media Smart website notes the requirement, under the Communications Act, 2003, of the Office of Communications (OFCOM), the organisation responsible for regulating the UK communications sector, for OFCOM to "promote systems to help people make informed choices about what they and their children see and hear; and have a duty to promote media literacy, working with the Department for Education and Skills, the industries and educators…." (Media Smart, 2003a p. 1).

They specifically cite Section 6.7.1 of the Act, in terms of the expectations of the outcomes of media literacy interventions, that is: "This will help people to understand the distinctions between different media services, to appraise their content critically, to use the tools which are increasingly becoming available to navigate the electronic world, and to become empowered digital citizens. It will also help children to learn how to maintain critical distinctions such as those between fact and fiction (especially in interactive environments) or between reportage and advocacy, as well as how to assess commercial messages" (Media Smart, 2003a p.1).

The above indicates an awareness of the media environment as being wider than traditional mass media, a perspective that is reinforced in their endorsement of some additional aims originating from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, with specific skills gained as a result of the Media Smart intervention including: "Awareness and assessment of commercial messages within programs (product placement, etc.) and a critical approach to advertising" (Media Smart 2003b, p.1). This latter point again indicates an acceptance of the principles of inoculation theory as a foundation for the program. As for CCA, there are a number of general aims stated in Media Smart's material. However, these statements cannot be classified as objectives as they do not specify enough detail for effects to be measured.

Media Smart has conducted studies in Britain; there does not, as yet, appear to have been comparable studies in the other European countries that have adopted the material. The studies have centred on schools in which their materials have been used. Muto (2004, p. 42) reports that response from teachers has been extremely positive, with 98 per cent of those using the material intending to use it in the future and 86 per cent of these teachers rating it "extremely valuable or very useful". A closer examination of feedback from teachers who have used the material indicates somewhat mixed results (Media Smart 2005). Much of the data indicates little more than high content recall levels. Evidence of movement beyond that does not appear promising, as the following quotes from teachers indicate:

> *"it was quite difficult for the children to grasp this"*

"the children's understanding in this area didn't really change"

"the theory was there in the resource although I'm not sure if the children got it in practice – still voting with their hearts and not their heads"

"it was good for the more able students – but the less able just became more confused"

These comments may reflect the various stages of cognitive development among the children (Moses and Baldwin 2005; Neeley and Schumann 2004; John 1999) and an expectation of a greater change in children's perceptions than their developmental stage will allow. Additionally, critics suggest that the program is not as helpful as claimed, noting that nutrition is not included, nor are "increasingly-used health-related claims made in adverts" (*Which?* 2003, p.9). This latter, somewhat dangerous, strategy appears to be an attempt "to stress whatever healthy ingredients their products contain (contains fibre), or to desperately add something they think will make their brand seem healthier (now with Vitamin C)" (Preston, 2004, p. 368), activity which, if not checked, may raise the ire of regulators. Given the earlier comments regarding the age groups at which children are able to effectively recall and apply prior knowledge gained from education such as media literacy programs, the effectiveness of extending such programs to encompass a wider range of topics would still be limited by the children's cognitive development levels.

Other initiatives exist in various markets, such as *Willy Munchright* in New Zealand. This intervention is much simpler than either the CCA or Media Smart initiatives. It comprises a series of television advertisements, aired using donated television time, featuring an animated cartoon character promoting nutrition and healthy eating to children (Andrew 2004). The character was devised by McDonalds Restaurants and has been in use in the USA since 1992. The New Zealand version contains no McDonald's identification and has audio with local accents (Drinnan 2004). No resources are provided for formal education systems such as those provided by CCA and Media Smart. There is also a complete lack of specific objectives for the program, with only very general aims cited, such as: "to provide straightforward information to young people in a cartoon form which will encourage healthy eating and actions" (Wallace 2004 quoted in NZTBC 2004).

There has been strong philosophical opposition to the program, both in terms of its apparent self-serving origins (Cincotta 2004) and the fact that the (undisclosed) originator is McDonalds, with headlines such as "Burger barons hijack obesity campaign" appearing on press releases (Green Party 2004). There has been no attempt to empirically measure the effects of the program, a point not lost on opponents who assert, without offering evidence to support their own stance, that it has had little impact and is nothing more than a public relations campaign on behalf of the food industry (Cincotta 2005).

Policy and Research Recommendations

Assuming, somewhat uncritically, that media literacy programs have potentially positive effects, at least among children aged seven and over, numerous challenges remain. Before the existing media literacy interventions are extended, or decisions made regarding the necessity for, or scope of, any future restrictions on marketing communication targeted at children, it is important to determine not only what is known, but what also needs to be

determined about the impact of existing intervention programs on children at various stages of cognitive development (Livingstone 2005). Further, Pechmann et al. 2005 suggest that some types of advertising may be more problematic than others, yet the variations in cognitive and behavioral responses across different types of advertising is another aspect of the wider persuasive communication debate that is under-researched.

The variety of message forms has expanded substantially since 1993; Hobbs and Frost (2003) note the challenges posed by new electronic media forms as opposed to traditional print or mass electronic forms such as television. For example, children appear to have high levels of access to electronic media, with some 75per cent of children aged 7 – 16 having access to the Internet (Clarke 2002) and one third of children use it each day (Kunkel 2005). Further, almost all of children's websites permit advertising, with advertising income being the main revenue source for two thirds of these sites (Moore 2004). There is concern that children may have the skills to access and navigate Internet sites, but may uncritically trust material encountered and also lack the critical skills to identify the underlying persuasive communication elements (Buckingham 2004).

Any examination of the effects of media literacy interventions needs to be considered in the context of new and evolving media forms and media convergence (Livingstone 2004; Silverstone 2004; Rothenberg 2002) and the blurring of the borders between advertising, information and entertainment (Grigorovici and Constantin 2004; Shrum 2004). In addition, a distinction should be made between overt commercials and subtle persuasive attempts embedded within program content, such as product placements (Kretchmer 2004) and 'advergames', embedded commercial messages within on-line electronic games and videogames sold through a variety of retail outlets (Lindstrom 2005; Arnold 2004). Kiousis (2002) suggests that the level of interactivity of websites is directly linked to attitudes towards the site and, by implication, it is possible that this may extend towards the products featured within it.

Given this, it is possible that mere exposure theory, originally introduced in the 1960s (Zajonc 1968), may provide a valid foundation for concerns. Mizerski (1995) cautions that there is evidence that repeated exposure to a stimulus such as an advertisement can enhance children's liking for the product featured; conversely if a product is disliked, repeated exposure is likely to increase the strength of dislike. Children may play a game a hundred or more times (Gunn, 2001); this suggests that the effects of sustained exposure to non-overt persuasive communications offers yet another avenue for detailed future study. Indeed, there is a dearth of research examining new and evolving media from the perspective of the user; McMillan (2002) suggests that existing communication theories may not provide a complete framework for understanding the uses by, and impact on, of media among all sectors of the population. Further research programs may therefore involve testing and / or extending existing theories together with the development of new theories that encapsulate the complexities of the new – and likely future - media environment.

Any research program must be based on sound theoretical foundations in order to move beyond simple descriptions of activity towards being able to explain actual behaviors – and to enable future initiatives to be developed on the basis of informed actions guided by predictive theories. To this end, a simple reliance on the implicit foundations of theories such as inoculation theory and vague, under-developed references to other theories such as disposition theory must be replaced by a rigorous testing of the principles of a range of theoretical concepts across a range of cultural situations in order to determine which theories

are most relevant and able to most effectively guide real-world implementation in increasingly diverse markets. The following research agenda is therefore proposed:

As the first step towards a greater understanding of the way combinations of media are used and their individual and cumulative impact on consumers, a study will be designed to compare the recognition, perception and behavioral impact of persuasive communication, both short and long term, across a range of media. The media examined will include new and emerging media forms in which the persuasive content is less overt than traditional media such as television (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Wright, Friestad and Boush 2005; Livingstone 2004; Kretchmer, 2004). This analysis should incorporate a range of products and services in order to identify the variations which exist between different categories (Pechmann et al. 2005).

It is envisaged that this study would commence with school-based data collection. This would involve the administration of questionnaires to determine media use and frequency, together with the perceived influence of the media, both on an individual base and in social or group settings. Small groups would then be asked to demonstrate which internet sites were visited and how often; sites would include those containing games, and participants would be asked to demonstrate the way the site content is used and to discuss their perceptions regarding the sites, the companies sponsoring the sites, and their own usage of the products featured on specific sites.

The next phase of the research program would then compare children, adolescents and adults, with volunteers being recruited to participate. This phase would enable existing theories to be tested and extended, or new theories to be developed that will facilitate the impact of persuasive communication across significant age groups to be contrasted and predicted with considerably more precision than is currently possible (Wood and Quinn 2003).

The findings obtained will then inform public policy decisions about whether there is a need for protection of vulnerable groups from intended and unintended effects of persuasive communication. If protection is deemed appropriate, the research findings will also give direction as to the type of protection that is likely to be effective (Neeley and Schumann 2004; Mizerski 1995). From this research program should also evolve a more sophisticated means of predicting the types of media literacy interventions that are most likely to be appropriate for different levels of cognitive development.

Additionally, industry cannot assume that possible negative impacts of marketing communication activity can be offset by their participation on initiatives such as media literacy programs, particularly without evidence of substantial positive effects from this activity, and thereby stave off possible restrictions on their activity (Kleinman 2003b; Rogers 2002; Teinowitz 2001). It is in the interests of industry to participate in an integrated, collaborative research program in order to systematically evaluate the wider issues this paper has identified.

Armstrong and Brucks (1988, p. 105) observed that "few advertisers have supported research to both understand how advertising affects children or to examine ways to protect the interests of child viewers". These calls were recently repeated (Friestad and Wright 2005; Moses and Baldwin 2005; Wright Friestad and Boush 2005). It is disappointing that, almost 20 years after Armstrong and Brucks called for a collaborative research agenda, little progress has been made. The academic community must also bear some of the burden of

responsibility in this regard. Kunkel (2005, p. 403) observes that "we know virtually nothing about children's ability to discriminate internet ads or recognize their persuasive intent. Perhaps that is because researchers lack confidence about the right answer to the question of what is an ad on the internet."

Failure of the industry to ensure exemplary behavior from its members and a commitment to the evaluation of the impact of an increasingly complex marketing communication environment may lead to the imposition of greater restrictions on marketing communication, as recently introduced in Ireland (Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, 2004); similar, or more severe, bans have been proposed in several other countries (Considine 2004; Jardine and Wentz 2004; Kleinman 2003a and 2003b). Livingstone (2005, p.278) notes that the absence of definite, empirical evidence regarding negative impacts from food promotion may result in future regulatory measures being based on "a judgement of probable influence".

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Table 1
Youth marketers' perceptions of significance of children's age levels (Geraci, 2004)

Significance	**Age**
Appropriate to begin marketing to young people	7
Most young people can begin to view advertising critically	9.1
Most young people can separate fantasy from reality in media and advertising	9.3
Most young people can make intelligent choices as consumers	11.7