

PARENTAL ATTITUDES TOWARD CHILDREN'S ADVERTISING:
SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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Abstract

For a decade now the Federal Trade Commission has debated the pros and cons of children's advertising. The Federal Trade Commission has considered a ban of all advertising on children's programs, a ban of any commercials of highly sugared foods, and/or a disclosure of nutritional value of such products. Ironically, however, the FTC has announced that TV ads aimed at children are no longer a target of FTC restrictions (*Wall Street Journal*, 1981). These debates have prompted a tremendous amount of research concerning children's advertising. However, the majority of this research has focused on the advertisements themselves, the children's perceptions of the advertisements, or the effects of the ads on the children. The research underlying this paper is designed to analyze parental attitudes toward children's advertising. The results indicate that parents have a negative attitude toward children's advertising, and the advertising industry might want to analyze possibilities of self-regulation, even if the FTC has decided not to make restrictions.

Background of the Study

The battle over the possible bans by the Federal Trade Commission has two very strong opinions. Proponents of the restrictions argue that children, especially preschoolers, cannot tell the difference between program material, which may have educational value, and the advertising messages themselves. Opponents argue that parents exert stronger influence on children than television does, and therefore reducing or eliminating such ads would adversely affect children's programming.

Literature on Children's Advertising

The literature on children's advertising is both diverse and plentiful. It can be categorized into four broad areas: the effect of commercials on children; the content of children's advertisements; the public policy issue; and literature concerning the interpersonal relationships in the family and commercials. Because of the focus of this study, only selected literature on the effect of commercials on children and the effect of advertising on the interpersonal relationships in the family will be reviewed.

The Effect of Commercials on Children

A conceptual framework for considering the issues and a strategy for further research is provided by Feldman and Wolf (1974). They summarized this framework for studying the effect of advertising on children into eight general categories:

1. Commercials sometimes contain the assertion that a product costs "only" a given amount. This assertion, when the amount involved is in fact considerable, plays upon the child's lack of knowledge of relative quantities of money. Such claims are often used by the child as counter-evidence against parental assertions that cost of the product is too high.
2. Commercials sometimes seem to magnify the benefits of particular toys or the size of snack foods. This encourages false

expectations in the child. When these expectations are deflated, upon purchase and use of the toy or food, the child is frustrated.

3. Commercials sometimes portray fantasy situations in which the child using a particular toy or food product is endowed with marvelous powers. This practice not only makes the child susceptible to future frustrations, but it also encourages poor reasoning as the basis for choosing a product.
4. Commercials are designed to arouse desires that would not otherwise be salient. The child is made prisoner to external forces rather than made sensitive to his or her own needs or lack of these.
5. Commercials exploit children's suggestibility.
6. Commercials often depict vanity as a reason for choosing one product or another. Such depictions teach children poor values as well as poor bases for choosing products.
7. Commercials often contain misrepresentation, exaggeration, fantasy, and deceit. As the child discovers this, he or she develops a cynicism not only toward such ads, but also toward the free enterprise system, our society, and its institutions.
8. Commercials often suggest that food products can be bought for their sugar content or for the prizes or bonuses offered in conjunction with their purchase. This interferes with attempts to educate children about the nutritive content of foods and offers irrelevant criteria for product choice.

Feldman and Wolf conclude that attention-getting procedures and puffery understood by adult viewers, may not be understood as such by children; children generally lack the cognitive skills that make such techniques understandable and transparent.

Robertson (1976) found that children's behavioral responses to commercials correlated very well with their attitudinal responses. His study has particular significance because most researchers use cognitive or attitudinal dependent measures which may or may not lead to behavioral responses. The behavioral measure used by Robertson was the number of requests made to parents for toys and games after viewing. Results indicated that there is either increased cognitive defenses against commercial persuasion or decreased interest in toy and game products as the child grows older.

In a related study Robertson and Rossiter (1977) considered the effects of children's advertising as influenced by dispositional variables (i.e. age, parental education, etc.). They found that children with high television exposure requested proportionately more toys and games than low exposure children. There was a marked reduction in requests for toys and games with increasing age. Higher parental education

revealed lower number of requests from children. Also, the researchers found a high negative correlation between television exposure and parental education. While they found high exposure provided high behavioral responses, Rossiter (1979) in a later study found that exposure to advertising does not make children more cognitively or mentally susceptible to persuasion.

In a study of low income families Gorn and Goldberg (1977) found that the urban poor children: (a) spend twice as much time viewing TV; (b) like television more than the general population; and (c) trust television more than other media. This study has implications for parent/child dynamics. Two questions left unanswered but of particular significance need further research: Specifically; (a) does the buying of products that they can ill-afford create hostility in the parent(s)? (b) does the nonpurchase of requested products create guilt in the parents?

Interpersonal Relationships in the Family

Sheikh and Molseki (1977) examined the unpleasant consequences of parental refusal to yield to children's requests for advertised products. They found that the consequences decreased with age and differed with sex. The children tended to view the parent of the opposite sex to be more benevolent than the parent of the same sex.

Ward and Caron (1975) and Robertson (1977) suggest that four areas should be of particular significance to researchers. First, consumption requests by children may strain parent-child relations. Second, this strain is probably greatest among economically disadvantaged families. Thirdly, denial may be frustrating to both parent and child. Finally, children's requests may complicate family consumption priorities, leading to guilt and resentment.

In support of the above studies Reid (1979) found that behavior should only be interpreted in relation to the people (peers and parents), situations (type of viewing) and past experiences (amount of exposure) of the child. In particular, Reid found that chronological age was not the only important key to children's consumer learning processes.

Perhaps the most integrative article published to date is provided by Resnik, Stern and Alberty (1979). This article provided the following:

1. A schematic model of a child's processing of television advertising for organizing previous research;
2. A review of the major research in the area using the model for organization and integration;
3. Suggestions of issues and broad areas for future research using the model to indicate gaps in past research efforts.

In the area of further research the authors state that, "much of the children's television research has focused on the effects of advertising on processes and behavior preceding the child's formation of an intention to buy. Too little is known about family and peer influence," This statement reflects the purpose of the present study. Specifically, this research examines parental attitudes toward children's advertising.

Objectives

Because of the need for further research in advertising on the total family, the present research has two

objectives. The first objective is to identify parental attitudes toward advertising in general. The second objective is to analyze parental attitudes toward children's advertising.

Data Collection Considerations

Subjects

The population for this study included parents with at least one child under 2 years old attending a public school in Albemarle County, Virginia. Schools having grades one to seven were randomly selected from a list of all schools in the county. Sixty children from each grade in the chosen school were randomly selected yielding a total of 480 surveys that were distributed. The children were given a manila envelope containing a pre-tested questionnaire, cover letter and a stamped envelope. Students took these materials home, their parents completed the questionnaire, and mailed it back to the researcher. This method of data collection yielded a 50.2% response rate providing a sample of 241 respondents.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was a seven-page structured questionnaire in booklet form. It was divided into three sections: television watching habits; attitudinal measures and classification data. The questionnaire was color coded to test for significant differences in either response rates or attitudes based on the school attended. Results of these tests did not suggest any significant differences in either response rate or attitude.

Attitudinal Measures

Two sets of eight Likert-type statements were generated. The first set was used to measure parents' attitudes toward advertising in general (adapted from Boyd, Westfall, and Stasch, 1977) while the second set was used to measure the parents' attitudes toward children's advertising (adapted from Feldman and Wolf, 1974). These measures were scaled on a five point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Classification Information

Table 1 contains a summary of the demographic information on the 241 respondents. The typical respondent was married, between 35 and 44 years old, had household income of over \$20,000 a year, was a college graduate, and had two children. The demographic profile of the sample matches very closely the profile of the population of Albemarle County.

The television viewing behavior of the sample is presented in **Table 2**. Most of the respondents, 88%, watched 20 hours or less of television per week. Only ten households watched no television at all. Also, presented in **Table 2** is the number of hours that respondents spent watching television with any of their children. Over 53% of the sample watched 1 to 5 hours of television with their children.

Attitudes Toward Television Advertising In General

Overall, respondents have a somewhat negative attitude toward television advertising. **Table 3** presents the statements that were used to measure the attitude toward advertising; as shown in the table, respondents indicated that commercials are not entertaining and are monotonous. These results suggest that advertisers are not very innovative in producing commercials. Responses by subjects indicated their most positive attitude to

the statement that sometimes they like TV commercials. This result appears consistent with the innovativeness objective.

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE *

Marital Status	Number	%
Married/Remarried	200	83.0
Divorced/Separated	33	13.7
Widowed	1	.4
Never Married	6	2.5
Age		
Under 25	7	2.9
25 to 29	23	9.7
30 to 34	68	28.8
35 to 44	124	52.5
45 to 54	13	5.5
Over 54	1	.4
Household Income		
Below \$10,000	23	9.9
\$10,001 to \$20,000	59	25.4
20,001 to 30,000	73	31.5
30,001 to 40,000	37	15.9
40,001 to 50,000	20	8.6
Over 50,000	20	8.6
Educational Level		
Grade School	1	.4
High School	59	25.0
College	116	49.1
Graduate School	60	25.5
Race		
Caucasian	215	90.5
Black	18	7.5
Other	6	2.5
Number of Children		
One child	40	16.8
Two children	107	45.0
Three children	56	23.5
Four or more children	35	14.7

*Numbers do not add to 241 in all cases because of missing data.

TABLE 2
TELEVISION VIEWING

Respondents Television Viewing Per Week		
Amount	Number	%
0 hours	10	4.1
1 to 5 hours	76	31.5
6 to 10 hours	64	26.6
11 to 20 hours	62	25.7
More than 20 hours	29	11.9
Television Viewing With Children Per Week		
Amount	Number	%
0 hours	22	10.0
1 to 5 hours	127	52.7
6 to 10 hours	53	22.0
11 to 20 hours	27	11.2
More than 20 hours	10	4.1

TABLE 3

ATTITUDE STATEMENTS IN GENERAL *

Statement	Median
1) I like TV commercials sometimes ^a	.71
2) Most TV commercials are fairly interesting ^a	-.87
3) Most TV commercials help people select needed products ^a	-.95
4) TV commercials do not interfere with regular programming ^a	-.95
5) Most TV commercials are entertaining ^a	-1.37
6) Most TV commercials are a waste of time ^b	.25
7) TV commercials are monotonous ^b	.85
8) TV commercials should be regulated by law ^b	-.88

* +2 to -2 scale with +2 as strongly agree and -2 as strongly disagree

^a Agreement indicates a positive attitude

^b Disagreement indicates a positive attitude

Analysis of Table 3 indicates that respondents expressed a negative attitude toward commercials by their responses to six of the eight statements. This negative attitude toward advertising by the parent coupled with a child's request to purchase an advertised product is likely to produce conflict between the parent and child. In addition, the negative attitude toward advertising by a parent and this potential conflict might lead to an even more negative attitude toward children's advertising.

Attitudes Toward Children's Advertising

Parental attitudes toward children's advertising were more negative than toward other advertising in general. Respondents indicated a negative attitude toward all eight statements as show in Table 4. Ninety-three percent of the parents indicated that children's ads do not aid them in deciding which products to purchase. Over seventy-eight percent of parents indicated that children's ads cause their children to want products that they do not approve of. Also, parents feel that watching children's ads cause their children to become more materialistic.

The highly negative attitude toward children's ads by parents is likely to strain the interpersonal relationship between parent and child. This strain, when it exists, may cause the parent to have an even more negative attitude toward the ads which could, in the future, cause the child to have negative attitudes toward all advertising.

Implications

While the FTC is no longer investigating restrictions on children's ads, it is clear that the industry in general needs to recognize that some kind of self-regulation is needed. The potential conflict between parent and child over advertised products may shape future attitudes toward advertising.

Opponents of restrictions on advertising argue that parents exert stronger influence on children than advertising. However, results of this study indicate that parents are sometimes placed in an adversary role because of children's ads. It is this potential conflict that advertisers need to be concerned about.

Advertisers to children need to ask of their commercials: Does this commercial exploit a child's suggestibility and how might it affect the interpersonal relations between parent and child? Unless the industry begins to regulate itself, the overall negative attitudes of parents toward advertising may be passed on to their children and thus, cause future generations of parents to be even more negative toward children's advertising.

TABLE 4

ATTITUDE STATEMENTS FOR CHILDREN'S ADS*

Statement	Median
The experience of watching children's ads helps children become a better decision maker. ^a	-.97
Children's ads show toys in situations which <u>can</u> be duplicated at home. ^a	-.31
Children's ads help parents identify the products that their children want most. ^a	-.25
It would be difficult for parents to decide which products to buy for their children without children's ads. ^a	-1.34
Children's ads cause children to want products that their parents do not approve of. ^b	1.05
In general, children's ads cause children to want products that their family can't afford. ^b	.87
Children's ads for sugary products cause children to resist more nutritious foods (such as vegetables). ^b	.78
Exposure to children's ads cause children to become materialistic. ^b	.90

* +2 to -2 scale with +2 as strongly agree and -2 as strongly disagree

^aAgreement indicates a positive attitude

^bDisagreement indicates a positive attitude

Suggestions For Subsequent Research

The present study suggests a number of questions that need to be answered by further analysis. Subsequent papers will investigate the degree of positive or negative attitude along each of the attitude statements, as well as, relationships between the attitude statements. In addition, relationships between the demographic measures and the attitude statements will be investigated.

Further research is needed to answer other questions that were not analyzed in this study. Do children perceive a difference between public television programming and commercial programming? Shows such as Sesame Street are brought to you by "the number six and the letter k." Do children confuse this type of sponsorship with shows that are brought to you by "Kellogg's"? Do children feel that, commercially sold but not advertised, Ernie and Bert dolls sponsor programs such as Sesame Street in the same manner that Star Wars characters bring them Saturday morning commercial cartoon shows?

Do parents feel that sponsorship of any kind creates a more materialistic child? How do parents feel about the FTC's recent cancelling of the proceedings to regulate children's advertising? Will the negative attitude of present parents toward children's advertising

be passed to future parents? These are several of the many questions that researchers need to answer about children's advertising.

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