

# Effects of advertisements on children



An advertisement makes a consumer aware of available products which can then be used to influence a consumer's buying behaviour through persuasion using creative content. Advertising to children is often categorised, with food and toys being the products mainly aimed towards them. However, this category is further developing to encompass music, games and technology. Advertising towards children is a large demographic for the marketer, due to them encompassing three different marketing opportunities, they are consumers, influencers on their parent's buying behaviour and the future. McNeal (1987) suggested that the "future consumer" provides a larger marketing potential than the current consumer. Due to the marketer being able to create future brand loyal consumers, create brand knowledge and develop purchase behaviour.

The marketer seeks to target children through advertising strategies such as the internet. Also adver gaming, where a game involves an advertisement for a product. Due to the internet being an integral part of young culture, the marketer attempts to build a relationship between them and the consumer. This is completed through viral advertisements and behavioural targeting. Unlike television, the internet is unregulated and often children are left alone on the internet with no parental supervision. However, the easiest way to advertise to children is through television. Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (2011) found that children aged four to nine watched on average seventeen hours of television a week. Furthermore, Smith (2001) found that in the UK two-thirds of children have a television in their bedroom as well as their tablets and mobile phones with online catch up television.

One main concern around advertising towards children is whether it exploits them due to the advertisements aim to persuade the vulnerable. This exploitation can be referred to as the “ seducers” upon the “ innocents” as stated by Gunter, Oates and Blades (2005). Young children are unaware about the intent of advertisements as reported by Oates et al. (2003). The knowledge and understanding of advertising develops gradually and children are simply born with no knowledge and understanding “ ready to be evolved and manipulated” as stated by Furnham (2000). Therefore, it is important to establish the different ages at which children achieve a mature understanding of advertisements in order to “ protect” them.

In order for children to be able to understand and evaluate advertising Young (1990) stated they must have two processing skills. First the ability to recognise persuasive intent and secondly be able to recognise the difference between an advertisement and a programme. Piaget and Cook (1952) found that a children’s stage in cognition determines their ability to comprehend advertising. They identified four stages of development, sensorimotor (birth to two years), pre-operational (two to seven years), concrete operational (seven to eleven years) and formal operational (eleven to adulthood), with each stage characterised by certain cognitive abilities.

Distinguishing an advertisement from a programme is viewed as a vital first stage in understanding advertising as recognised by Gunter and Furnham (1998). It was suggested by Blatt, Spencer and Ward (1972) that children in the preoperational stage are able to distinguish advertisements from programs. They reported that children view advertisements as informative, truthful and entertaining and are not aware of the persuasive intent of

advertising. Furthermore, Levin, Petros, and Petrella (1982) found that children as young as three years were able to make this distinction. Which was further supported by Blosser and Roberts (1985) found that by the age of five the majority of children have developed the ability to differentiate between advertisements and programmes.

In contrast children in the concrete operational stage have been found to have developed a better understanding as they grow older and are less likely to believe the advertisements. Dorr (1986) found that it is between seven and nine years old that children begin to understand that advertisements are “trying to get people to buy something”. Smith (2001) found that as children begin to understand persuasive intent they also begin to appreciate the use of several techniques such as celebrity endorsement, choice of words, and tone of voice. Once children have reached ten years old they have developed enough understanding to appreciate the persuasive intent of advertisements as found by Bever et al. (1975). When children can understand the persuasive purpose of the advertisement, they are able to be critical and capable of resisting to change. Although, until children have developed this understanding and the adequate cognitive “defences” advertisements have a strong influence on a development and thoughts.

Nevertheless, due to children being a large demographic, the marketer takes advantage of their lack of understanding. They do this by designing marketing strategies to satisfy the needs of the children. These are then applied to their advertisements in order to target children effectively. Firstly, “pester power” meaning children harass their care givers to purchase products for them based on advertising they have seen as stated by Proctor

and Richards (2002). The marketer is aware that their advertising produces desires for different products and this has been found to lead to “pester power” within children. Parker (2001) found that parents in the UK spend more when shopping in supermarkets with their children than without. Pester power can be used over long periods of time with children forming requests and demands in advance for their birthday and Christmas. Crouch (1999) found that children had often instigated their Christmas list before October. This pestering has been found to lead to family arguments when parents are unable to afford the products or deem them as unsuitable as stated by Atkin (1978). It was reported by Adler et al (1980) that if a parent states that a toy is not appropriate, children with less viewing of advertisements were more likely to listen to their parent than children who had seen the advertisements. This is due to the advertisement enhancing the toy and persuading them it is a necessity.

Secondly, techniques such as exaggeration are used by the marketer to further persuade the consumer and enhance their products. Claims such as “the best” and “better than” can be subjective and misleading.

Bandyopadhyay, Kindra and Sharp (2001) stated that children are unable to recognise such techniques and effectively “fall” for the misleading information. Below the age of seven, children are more heavily affected by product factors and do not understand that appearances can differ from reality. Young children often believe that a product is exactly as it appears and will fail to realise that the advertisement was created to promote it in the best possible way. However, as Smith (2001) found children from the age of seven start to understand techniques therefore the use of such techniques

have to be adapted to different age groups. Martensen and Hansen (2001) reported that children from the age of eight stated advertisements “cheat” in that “things look better in the advertisement than in real life”. This inaccurate image of the product can lead to a negative attitude towards the advertisement and the product. Rossiter (1977) stated that children’s attitude in general towards advertising is negative stating “advertisements are annoying and they only state the good things and lie about the rest”. What they had seen as truthful and accurate when they were younger is now portrayed to be lying and deceptive. This attitude could further develop their image of the world. They may feel that, what and who they deem as truthful, could be lying and being deceitful making them feel untrustworthy towards others.

Additionally, the marketer develops brand awareness and use brand positioning towards children in order to develop future brand loyalty. This is often by using characters from programmes or celebrities to produce a favourable attitude and develop relationships. Brand awareness has been defined by Keller (2003) as the extent to which a consumer can recognise and is familiar with an image of a brand and the qualities associated with it. Anderson and Bower (1974) state that brand awareness can be split into two steps. First step is the cognitive process to enable brand recognition and secondly brand recall, a consumer can recall and describe the brand. Both brand recognition and recall are important when making purchase decisions. Research by Haynes et al (1993) showed that children as young as three can recognise and name brands before they can read and Schmidt (2003) found children as young as six months old can develop mental images of a logo.

Furthermore, Hite and Hite (1995) showed that children from the age of two are able to recognise branded products and would choose these over other unbranded alternatives. Children will favour certain brands and products due to the relationship they have formed as children, creating nostalgia, as found by Ji (2002). Knowing this the marketer use their advertising to develop a foundation when children are in their early stages of learning and development.

Product advertising emphasises branded products and places importance on purchasing not just a product, but a lifestyle that this product portrays, as stated by Hahlo (1999). If these products are unable to be purchased feelings of discontent and inadequacy develop. Branded advertising promotes undesirable social values, such as materialism. In addition, children are often taught to celebrate events such as Christmas in a commercial manner. Pine and Nash (2002) found that children who watched television asked for more branded presents on their Christmas list. The pressure to buy a particular brand leads to a conformity and can often pressure parents and make them feel guilty.

Furthermore, advertising has been criticised for causing health problems within children such as obesity as stated by Dalmeny et al. (2003). A large proportion of advertising aimed at children promote food or drinks. Lewis and Hill (1998) reported almost a third, of advertisements shown to children are based on unhealthy food such as sweets. Galst and White (1976) found a correlation between the recall of food advertisements, requests when shopping and what children eat. Halford et al. (2004) stated that the majority

of television advertising is directed towards children eating surgery foods such as sweets and fizzy drinks.

Overall, if children are unable to fully understand the intent of advertising they may need “protecting” from it and the techniques used. Individuals who are against advertising towards children claim that it is unethical. This is due to their lack of cognitive abilities and understanding to resist the advertising messages before the age of seven. It is said to be unethical to advertise to these children under seven until they have developed “cognitive defences”. In addition, children below the age of seven are unable to distinguish between advertising fantasy and reality in advertisements. Therefore this can distort their view on the world. The internet alone raises many ethical issue. Various internet pages are designed so children are able to avoid adult supervision and then the underage consumer is able to be pressured to purchase products. Furthermore, ethical issues arise in terms of the promotional content such as humour and violence when advertising games. What one consumer might find interesting, fun and funny may be offensive to others and be seen as unethical. However, Furnham (2000) believe that advertising has little effect upon children’s development and learning and that current regulations are sufficient. Proctor and Richards (2002) state that peer pressure, conformity and social factors are more effective and persuasive in creating the desires of a particular product than advertisements.

To reduce the effects of advertising and the ethical issues this develops, children should be educated to help them understand the aim of advertising. Furnham (2000) argued teaching children the aim of advertising was more

<https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-advertisements-on-children/>



effective than changing regulations that are in place. Children can be taught and further informed about the nature of advertising and discuss products with their parents and other family members. Teaching children can enable them to be an effective consumer at a young age. In addition, parents can help them to understand advertisements motives and the difference between fantasy and reality, thus neutralising some of the powerful messages their children are exposed to. However, relying on parents is limited due to children having their own televisions, tablets and phones. With children having their own technology parents are unable to sit with them, monitor and discuss advertisements. Though, parents are still able to teach and explain advertising intent during shopping trips or when they request products. However, this is based on the assumption that parents understand the advertising themselves and have the knowledge to teach their children.

Overall, it is unrealistic to expect marketing companies to stop their advertising to children due to their consumption power. However, they should do so ethically and be aware of their responsibility as a communicator to children. As several researchers have shown children do not begin to develop understanding until they are seven and therefore advertising should not be shown to children before this age. Although, parents have a duty to protect the vulnerable children and therefore teach their children about advertising intent.