

# Child understanding of advertising



## Introduction

The title selected for this paper is “ Critically analyse children’s knowledge and understanding of advertising.” The aim of this paper is to look at children’s understanding of the purpose and use of advertising in the marketing world by researching relevant literature surrounding this topic.

Between 1984 and 1997 advertising on children between the ages of 4-12 year olds increased from \$4. 2billion per annum to \$23. 4billion (McNeal, 1999). It is evident that children are seen by marketers as a significant market to target and a player in the purchasing decision within the family. ‘ They are an influence market, directing parents’ spending towards their own wants and needs through requests, hints and outright demands. Children as an influence market are currently responsible for around \$188 billion of parental spending annually’ (McNeal, 1999, p. 29). A number of debates occur surrounding the topic whether or not children are able to understand the persuasive marketing techniques of advertising. The model of consumer behaviour adopted for this paper places the child at the centre of the purchasing decision, having an influential role consuming information from TV advertising and other media broadcasts.

## Theoretical Framework

Consumer socialisation is a theory which dates back to 1970, a time when children became a key target market for marketing campaigns (John, 1999). The theory which was first founded by Scott Ward and later developed by scholars’ outlines the development process of children’s understandings of advertising and how it develops with age. ‘ Children aren’t born as

consumers...but they are born to be consumers' (McNeal, 1999, p. 37).

According to Ward consumer socialisation is the ' processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (Ward, 1974, p. 2). Socialisation agents include parents, peers, school and the media who are involved in the transmission of information and values from a young age. For this report I will focus on the media and advertising as a socialisation agent and how interactions with children can ensure development.

According to John (1999), ' Age-related improvements in cognitive abilities contribute to the development of consumer knowledge and decision-making skills' (John, 1999, p184). Deborah Roedder John believed from the time of birth to adolescents an extreme change and development in cognitive functioning takes place and children develop an ability to see the world through a number of perspectives not just their own. Her theory included three stages of how a child develops into a consumer, from how they think to how they act. The first stage of the theory is the perceptual stage, between the ages of three to seven. During this stage, children are aware of marketing concepts such as the terms ' brands' however they do not fully understand them. Because of this, consumer decisions are made based on limited amount of information and they only concentrate on their own perspective. The second stage, known as analytical is when the child is between the ages of seven to eleven. Children have socially matured and so their information processing increases and they begin to understand branding and marketing more. Finally in stage three, reflective stage, children who are between the ages of eleven to sixteen have a broader

understanding of advertising and the persuasive techniques used by marketers. According to John (1999), children are growing into adult consumers and their decisions and actions depend on the context and have a dual perspective.

Another theoretical framework developed by Selman (1980) which looks at how a child's ability to understand other people's perspectives develop as time goes on. The approach begins as the child is unaware of other individuals, solely concentrating on their own perspective. Moving on to understand that everyone has different opinions and begin to consider other people's point of view. Finally in the later teenage years, children begin to understand other people's perspective and can relate it to the social environment (John, 1999).

Impression formation theory describes the development period from the age of six years to twelve years when a child begins to make social comparisons (Barenboim, 1981). Below the age of six children describe people using simple, concrete terms, often physical appearances e. g. tall, boy/girl, blonde etc. (Barenboim, 1981; John, 1999). In Barenboim's first phase (6-8), known as the behavioural comparisons, children begin to include comparisons when forming opinions and impressions. In the second phase, psychological constructs stage (8-10) Barenboim explains how children's impressions are based on psychological attributes but do not contain any comparisons. Finally, in Barenboim's last phase, children begin to make comparisons on psychological attributes and begin to formulate adult like views and impressions of people (Barenboim, 1981).

In contrast to Selman's (1980) theory and John's (1999) cognitive stages, which focus on biological age, the Information Processing Theory focuses on the children's ability to store, decode and retrieve information. In this theory, children are characterised as belonging to one of three categories based on their information processing and retrieval skills; strategic processors, cued processors, and limited processors (Roedder, 1981; John 1999). Children under the age of 8 are known as limited processors. At this young age, children find it difficult storing and retrieving the marketing message and information even when prompted. Over the next four years, up to the age of twelve, children begin to mature and enhance information storage and retrieval with the aid of cues or prompts. This age bracket is known as cued processors. Finally, as the child reaches the teenage years, he or she can store and retrieve information from memory without the help of cues.

### Empirical Evidence

Over the years children have become a target market of advertising campaigns and some countries have even introduced regulation towards children's advertising (McNeal 1999). Children's ability to understand advertising and decode the marketing message behind the advertisement has remained central to debate worldwide.

Generally speaking as the child gets older, they develop and equip consumer skills such as saving, purchasing and researching. As they develop into adult consumers, they pass an age threshold and become more observant to biasness and persuasiveness in advertisements. Young children are less susceptible to advertising and the persuasive techniques it entails and

marketers see them as a vulnerable target (John, 1999; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Rozendaal et al, 2009).

One of the questions which have been centre to research surrounding this topic is to what extent children can tell the difference between TV programmes and commercials. Evidence suggests that before the child can understand what advertising it, it is important they distinguish it from other forms of media for example the television programme they are watching. However, the findings suggest there is no relationship between children's ability to differentiate between ads and programmes and understanding the purpose of advertising. In contrast however, if children are able to understand the purpose of advertising they will be able to identify the difference between programmes and commercials.

Young children are oblivious to advertisements but as they age they develop an understanding of commercial breaks and the aim of advertising campaigns shown during their favourite show (Rossiter and Robertson, 1974). Research has been carried out in order to determine the age in which children begin to understand the information behind the advertisement. Findings suggest children have the ability to understand the advertising process and the aim of selling as they get older (Rossiter and Robertson, 1974; Ward, 1974; Macklin, 1984). However, after roughly 30 years of research on children's understanding of advertising, age is still a topic of debate between scholars and the empirical evidence is still unclear.

Evidence suggests children between the ages of four to five years old cannot differentiate between advertisements and TV programmes and identifies both as a form of entertainment (John, 1999; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; <https://assignbuster.com/child-understanding-of-advertising/>

Cairns et al., 2013). As the child ages, they begin to mature and develop an ability to identify the characteristics of advertisements. This ability begins to develop from the ages of four to seven years of age. Finally, from eight years the child develops the skill to decode the persuasive message and retrieve the content from the advertisement (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006).

The findings suggest that children need to be able to identify between two separate techniques used in advertising- selling and persuasive techniques. It involves children being able to understand what tactics are used by marketers and why they are used. This development process emerges much later on in the child's life as they approach teenage years (Roberts, 1983; Friestad and Wright 1994; John 1999). Moore-Shay and Lutz (1997) conducted in-depth interviews with second class students (ages 7-8) and fifth class (ages 10-11) in order to research this area. The findings suggested that younger children associated advertisements as a source of information, to advertisements primarily as a conduit of product information, appraising commercials based on their liking of the product/service on offer in the advertisement. In contrast, older children intended to focus on the creative side of the advertisement in a more logical nature. According to John (1999), 'As they mature, children make a transition from viewers who see advertising as purely informative, entertaining, and trustworthy to ones who view advertising in a more sceptical, analytical, and discerning fashion' (John, 1999, p. 191). It is believed that if the child learns the aim of using of persuasive techniques, they will be able to develop a cognitive defence against advertising.

John (1999) stated that there is not enough evidence to prove that children's knowledge and understanding of advertising is sufficient enough to provoke a desire for certain foods or toys. Children of all ages as well as adults will be affected by advertising in some shape or form, but the strength of this effect will be based on the extent of their advertising literacy (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006).

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