

# Advertisements exploiting children

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



Are current practises of advertising to children exploitative? What restrictions should be placed on advertising to children? Up until recently, parents had been the intended target audience for advertising efforts aimed for children of young age groups. However it is now the children who have become the main focus.

The growth in advertising channels reaching children and the privatisation of children's media use have resulted in a dramatic increase in advertising directly intended for the eyes and ears of children (Wilcox et al. 2004). It is estimated that advertisers spend more than \$12 billion a year on the youth market with more than 40, 000 commercials each year. The current practises of advertising to young children definitely exploit their lack of understanding and comprehension of the aim of advertising and promotion of products.

In the early 1970's, The Federal Communications Commission originally set out to ban all advertising that was aimed at young children, however ended up settling for a more lenient proposal of limiting the amount of time advertisements were aired within children's programs and put in place certain restrictions to do with advertising practises (Wilcox et al. 2004). Studies have shown that the age range of 8-12 year olds spend \$30 billion directly and influence \$700 billion onfamilyspending each year.

This can be attributed to a relatively high extent to the fact that 46% of 5-14 year olds watch more than 20 hours of television per week with tens of thousands of TV ads shown per year (Neil 2012). Neil (2012) quotes that a child who watches 4 hours of TV per day over a 6 week holiday period would have viewed a total of 649 junkfoodads including 404 advertisements for fast foods; 135 advertisements for soft drinks; and 44 for ice cream products.

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Until quite recently, advertisers viewed children around and under the age group of 8 as off limits when it came to advertising targets.

However, industry practises have now developed and make for greater degrees of age niche advertising (Wilcox et al. 2004). Along with this growth in marketing efforts, there has become a rapid increase in the use psychological knowledge and research to effectively market products to young children. An example of this includes a study that was specifically designed to determine which strategy best induced children to nag their parents to buy the advertised product (Wilcox et al. 004). Exploitation refers to the idea of taking advantage of something you shouldn't take advantage of. In relation to ads, advertisers are taking advantage of children's lack of understanding, their innocence and their vulnerability to persuasion (Neil 2012). Young children tend to be particularly vulnerable to advertising as they do not fully understand the intent of advertisers and the process of creating an ad (Gunter, Oates & Blades 2005).

Children are not born with any knowledge of economic systems with their awareness of advertising and marketing developing only gradually later in life. Adults too can be influenced by an ad, which is the reason for ads in general, but they are able to interpret the messages in the context of the advertisers' intentions to prevent them from being exploited, unlike children (Gunter, Oates & Blades 2005). Neil (2012) states that children up to the age of 4 see ads merely as entertainment, progressing to believe advertisements provide information at ages 6-7.

At ages 7-8 they still cannot distinguish between information and intent to persuade and once they reach 10-12 years they can understand the motives

and aims of advertising but are still unable to explain sales techniques. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (2007) explain that advertisers may create advertisements that appeal to a child's cognitive abilities. Research was conducted that indicates different age groups respond differently to formal stimuli in commercial, for example colours attract younger children while message text attracts older children.

This uses leverage of children's cognitive development to entice the purchase of the product. Furthermore research on the language of advertisements, while used to promote products, may be purposefully constructed to confuse younger children at lower levels of cognitive development. Simple correlation research in the US indicates that children typically aged 2-6 years who view more television advertising request more products from their parents. This is known as pester power.

It has been found that parents are more likely to buy products when kids ask for them in the shop (nag factor). As children age, they develop the cognitive capacity to contextualise and act critically on the observations made, reducing the amount of requests for products (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2007). Children who are exposed to TV commercials for toys not only develop the initial idea for the toy but repeatedly pester their parents to buy it. This is exploitation on the parents' behalf as it often causes parent-child conflict when the parents deny their children the product (Wilcox et al. 2004). Another troubling issue relating to child advertising exploitation is in reference to food ads. Half of the advertisements in the UK directed at children concern food. There are little ads emphasising healthy eating and since the start of television advertising, the largest proportion of

ads aimed at children has always been unhealthy food products (Gunter, Oates & Blades 2005).

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (2007) detailed the New South Wales Department of Health content analysis which found that 43% of all food advertising was for high fat/ high sugar foods and 36% was for core foods (such as breads, pasta). Additionally, approximately 48% of food advertising in times defined by the study as ' children's viewing times' was for high fat/ high sugar foods. Consequently, children become confused and consider unhealthy foods to actually be healthy. Toys aren't as controversial as they don't exhibit the same health implications as do fast food ads.

However, over-playing how good a toy is, or presenting misleading information is very unethical as children cannot comprehend some messages. The writing on the screen about disclosures are usually too quick to read or even understand as an adult, let alone a young child (Gunter, Oates & Blades 2005). Wilcox et al. (2004) demonstrates the exploiting nature of advertisers when it comes to tobacco and alcohol. A variety of studies show a substantial relationship between children's viewing of these products in ads and positive attitudes toward consumption of such products.

The studies conclude that advertising of tobacco and alcohol contributes to youth smoking and drinking. Characters from movies and television programmes often attract children's attention with research indicating that the use of real life or animated characters is positively associated with memory and attitudes toward products and has the potential to confuse children as they do not realise they are getting paid for the advertisements so

it is likely it's not genuine promotion of a product (Gunter, Oates & Blades 2005). Another trick that advertisers use is on the BBC.

BBC programs are "non-commercial" but some of the programs have been specifically designed to include products directed at children to make it harder for children to recognise when they are being targeted by marketers. This shows a negative change in children's advertising. Body image is another major aspect of young children's lives as they are vulnerable to their self-image (Gunter, Oates & Blades 2005). Advertisements use attractive people to sell products which reinforce the pressures on young people to conform to the ideals of beauty that are hard or near impossible to achieve.

Marketing of dieting products therefore appeal to young children in recent times including primary school children. Currently there are regulations in place that have been implemented under the Children's Television Standards in 1990, enforced by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. These include placing limitations on the broadcast of advertisements during 'Children School Age' programs (no ad more than twice in 30 minutes) and 'Preschool Age' programs (no ads at all).

Also, no misleading or deceiving ads, no undue pressure on children to ask their parents to buy something or any unsuitable material including alcohol and cigarette ads, or demeaning/racists/sexist etc. ads (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2007). To further these regulations, many recommendations have been made. Wilcox et al (2004) suggested that while it is impossible to protect this age group from all commercial exposure, it is essential to restrict efforts made by advertisers to focus primarily, if not exclusively, on this uniquely vulnerable portion of society.

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They also state that advertising disclaimers used in ads be stated in a language that children can read and understand and be shown in both visual and audial contexts in a time length that is conducive to reading, hearing and comprehending. For example, stating “ You have to put it together” instead of “ Partial assembly required” in toy ads. Gunter, Oates and Blades (2005) point out that advertisers usually argue against any extension of regulations, claiming that very young children, even from the age of 3, have some understanding of advertising.

If this is so, it is not enough. A child’s recognition of advertisements is not the same as a child’s understanding of their persuasive intent. Some argue that rather than extending regulations, the most effective way to help children understand advertising is through their parents by informing kids of the nature of ads. However as children become more independent with access to their own TVs, parents increasingly have less control over what children watch and less opportunity to discuss advertisements that might have been seen during family viewing.

As well as the fact that parents often lack sufficient knowledge of regulators and their regulatory responsibilities. These excuses made by advertisers just show how ignorant they are in the potential harming of young children. In conclusion, advertisers know that their efforts greatly influence child audiences. Targeting children below the ages of 8 years is inherently unfair because it capitalises on younger children’s inability to sense persuasive intent in an advertisement.

Due to this, children around and below this age are exploited as they take in information placed in commercials uncritically, accepting most of the claims

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and appeals put forward as truthful, accurate and unbiased. Reference Australian Communications and Media Authority 2007, Television Advertising to Children, accessed 6/9/2012, [http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/\\_assets/main/lib310132/television\\_advertising\\_to\\_children.pdf](http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib310132/television_advertising_to_children.pdf) Gunter, B, Oates, C & Blades, M 2005, 'The Issues About Television Advertising To Children', in Advertising To Children On TV: Content, Impact, Regulation, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, pp1-13.

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