

About one-quarter of these Montreal children's requests to Santa were for things they'd seen on TV.

Gift Decisions by Kids and Parents

Andre Caron and Scott Ward

Consumer groups, government officials, and marketers have debated the possibly deleterious effects of television advertising on pre-teenage children. While the issues are complex, perhaps the single fact with which all the involved parties can agree is that research is needed as a basis for valid and effective government or industry regulation.

One major issue concerns children's ability to process information in television advertising. Critics imply that a wide range of techniques in television commercials renders children unable to effectively process information—that is, to fairly evaluate information about products and brands and to make decisions based on this information. Younger children, and perhaps especially children from disadvantaged family backgrounds, are thought to be particularly limited in their information-processing abilities and, consequently, maybe more "vulnerable" to advertising's persuasive influences.

Defenders of advertising to children, on the other hand, imply that even if children make poor consumer choices due to

their limited ability to process information in advertising, such consequences are rarely lasting. They may even be beneficial, since children will be less likely to repeat the error.

A related issue concerns the effects of television advertising on family life—for example, does television advertising cause children to influence their parents to buy various products for them? And are some families (especially low-income families) less able to cope effectively with these influence attempts than other kinds of families?

Previous research has shown that the frequency of children's in-family purchase influence attempts varies with the child's age and with the particular product. Children are more likely to influence their parents to purchase products which are frequently consumed by them (e.g., breakfast cereal) and which are of particular interest to them (e.g., toys for

younger children, records for older children). The frequency of children's purchase influence attempts generally decreases among older children, but parental acceding to such attempts increases with age. A modest correlation (.18, $p < .05$) has been found between frequency of children's asking for products and patterns of intra-family conflict (Ward and Wackman, 1972).

It is not possible to isolate effectively the singular influence of television advertising on children's attempts to influence parental purchasing, since the products children most want are those which are most advertised. However, it is possible to examine differences in these patterns of intra-family influence among families in different social classes—a question not addressed in previous research.

Pilot Study

This reports initial analyses of an extensive research project. The study examines certain aspects of the relative influences of mass media and interpersonal

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sources on children's product desires and parental decision-making regarding their children's product desires. In the study, these desires were explored in the setting of children expressing their wants for Christmas gifts, expressed to mothers or in a letter to Santa. An attempt was made to trace children's desires for Christmas gifts from the initial idea to influencing parents to purchase the product, to parental responses—initial verbal response (e.g., "yes," "no," "maybe") and ultimate behavioral response (buying or not).

The various relationships investigated in the overall study are displayed in Figure 1.

Methodology

Data were gathered from a total of 84 mother-child pairs from an initial ran-

dom sample of third graders ($n = 54$) and fifth graders ($n = 52$) in Montreal. Samples were drawn from two different socioeconomic areas: middle-class (average family income \$9,000) and upper-class (average family income \$14,500). Essentially we were interested in understanding where children get ideas for things they request, what kinds of things they request, and what kind of reception their request is likely to get inside the family.

The procedures were as follows: Approximately four weeks before Christmas, children were asked to write a letter to Santa, telling him what they wanted for Christmas. Information sources were ascertained by asking children to tell where they got the idea for each gift they requested of Santa. Meanwhile, mothers were trained to unobtrusively record each Christmas gift request during a seven-day period and to note their verbal response (if any) to the child. Also during this period we conducted a content analysis of television commercials directed to children in these age groups. Following the Christmas vacation, we ascertained the specific gifts which children received.

Findings

Mothers registered a total of 360 requests during the seven-day period. From letters to Santa written outside the home, we tabulated requests made exclusively to Santa (total requests = 677). By comparing letters to Santa with requests to mothers, we found 117 common requests made both to mothers and to Santa.

Children requested much the same kinds of items (to Santa, parents, or both) regardless of age or social class. Most requested were non-interactive toys (23 per cent of all requests). These are toys such as dolls, models, etc., which children normally play with alone, or at least do not require others in order to enjoy them. Second most requested were sports items (18 per cent), followed by competition toys (e.g., slot-racing sets, 14 per cent) and clothing (13 per cent).

Regarding information sources about

the gifts requested, children most often cited television as the source of gift ideas, closely followed by friends (Table 1). Minor variations to these patterns were observed by social class and by sex, but older children were considerably more likely to cite television as the idea source and considerably less likely to cite friends than were younger children. Older children were also more likely to cite catalogs. These findings suggested that older children have learned to use a variety of mass media as sources of product ideas. This age-related finding was similar to patterns found for kindergarten, third, and fifth grade children when they were asked how they would find out about new products (Ward and Wackman, 1973).

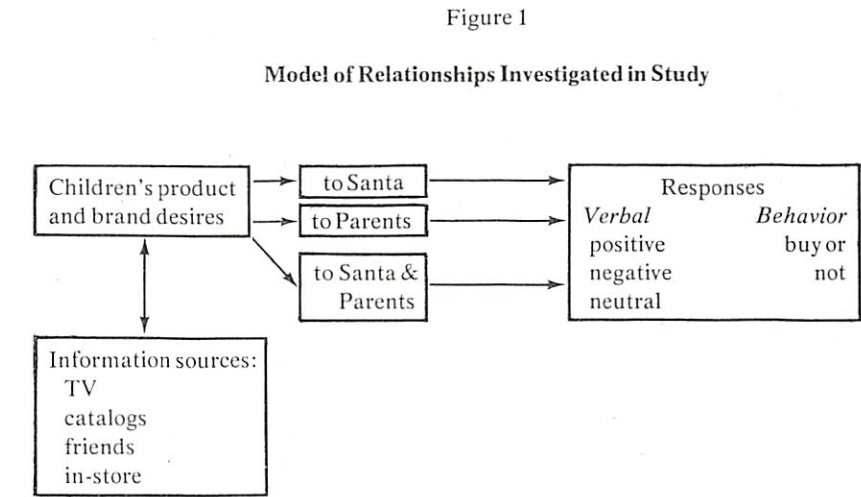
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Gift Requests. Data in Table 2 show that younger children asked for more gifts than older children; however, their conversion rate (i.e., receiving specifically-requested gifts) was not as high as that for older children. More important were the social class differences. Middle-class children requested more gifts than upper-class children, and they directed more requests to Santa only than did upper-class children. Middle-class children in the sample fantasized more than upper-class children, or were perhaps more intimidated at the prospect of directing purchase influence attempts at their parents: they preferred to cast their lot with Santa instead. On the other hand, they received more gifts, requested or not, although the conversion rate of requests to gifts was very similar in both economic groups (all proportions considered).

Types of Gift Requests. Data in Table 3 show significant differences in the type of gifts requested by children of different social class groups. Middle-class children prefer non-interactive toys, followed by sport items; upper-class children request more competition games, toys, clothing, and sport items. Our data also showed significant age differences ($p < .008$) with younger children requesting overall more non-interactive toys (27 per cent), and older children preferring more sport items (20.7 per cent). Sex differences were not found to be significant.

Parents' Responses to Requests. When children asked for specific items as Christmas gifts, parents most often responded verbally in neutral terms (e.g., "we'll see"). This finding was reasonably consistent, regardless of the specific item asked for, although requests for clothing, books, and records were somewhat more likely to elicit positive verbal responses. Data in Table 4 show few age differences, although middle-class parents were slightly more likely to respond negatively than were upper-class parents. Differences in the total number of requests (middle-class requesting more) might be explained by the fact that upper-class



children received more positive responses and less negative ones.

Total Gifts Received Whether or Not Requested by the Child. In terms of gifts received, data in Table 5 indicate that both groups (middle- and upper-class) receive mostly what they requested—that is, non-interactive toys for the middle-class children and competition games/toys for the upper-class children. Percentages of items requested are repeated from Table 3 to compare kinds of gifts received and frequency of requests for each gift item.

Significant differences for age ($p < .01$) show younger children received mostly non-interactive toys (23 per cent) and competition games/toys (15.4 per cent), while older children receive more creative games/toys (21 per cent) and clothing (17 per cent). Not unexpectedly, girls received different items than did boys; clothing (17.4 per cent) and "other" (i.e., jewelry, musical instruments, etc.) were most likely to be given to girls; non-interactive toys (19 per cent) and competition games/toys (17.1 per cent) received in

Table 1
Sources of Gift Ideas*

Information Source	Total	Grade		Middle- Upper- Class Class		Sex	
		3	5			M	F
Television	27%	23%	31%	26%	27%	28%	25%
Catalog	19	14	24	17	21	22	15
Store	22	21	22	24	18	15	29
Friends	26	34	17	27	24	27	24
Other	7	8	6	6	10	8	7
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	n = (320)	(172)	(148)	(186)	(134)	(180)	(140)

*Cell entries are percentages of all requests cited in letter to Santa, in response to the question: "Where did you get the idea that you wanted (each item requested?)"

most part by boys. Further data analysis indicates that approximately 50 per cent of the gifts received had not been explicitly requested either in the letter to Santa Claus or to the parents. The majority of these unsolicited gifts were of the following nature: creative games/toys (22.9 per cent), competition games (17 per cent), others (16.6 per cent), and clothing (14.8 per cent). No significant differences were found for social class or for age; differences for sex ($p < .004$) were similar to those previously indicated.

Fulfillment of Gift Requests. Data in Table 6 show the percentage of requests which were and were not fulfilled. For example, 28 per cent of middle-class children's requests were fulfilled (i.e., the specific gift requested was received); thus, 72 per cent were not. The percentage of specific gift requests that were received is somewhat higher for upper-class children. For both groups of children, requests made to both Santa and parents ("common requests" in Table 6) were most likely to be fulfilled. This finding probably reflects the intensity of children's desires. That is, there may have been qualitative differences in the requests of children, and the more intense desires may have been reflected in the child's asking both Santa and his parents for the particular item.

Table 2

Summary of Mean Number of Gift Requests, Receipts, and Proportion of Requests to Parents, and/or Santa, by Social Class and Grade

	Middle Class		Upper Class	
	<i>n</i> =45	<i>n</i> =39	Grade 3	Grade 5
Total Requests (mean)	8.7	7.3	8.5	7.5
Gifts Received (mean)	5.7	4.7	5.0	5.5
Requested (Santa or Parent) and Received (mean)	2.7	2.5	2.6	2.6
Received Without Requesting (Mean)	3.0	2.2	2.4	2.9
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% Requests to Parents Only	32%	41%	38%	34%
% Requests to Santa Only	54	37	48	45
% Requests to Santa and Parents	14	22	14	21

Table 3

Total Requests by Type of Gift and by Social Class

Types of Items	Middle-Class		Upper-Class	
	%	<i>n</i> =	%	<i>n</i> =
Non-interactive Toys	27.4	(107)	15.7	(45)
Creative Games/Toys	10.5	(41)	9.4	(27)
Competition Games/Toys	10.2	(40)	18.5	(53)
Sport Item	18.9	(74)	17.5	(50)
Clothing	10.0	(39)	17.5	(50)
Books & Records	7.4	(29)	9.4	(27)
Others	15.6	(61)	11.9	(34)
Total	100.0	(391)	100.0	(286)

$\chi^2 = 28.13$ d.f.=6, $p < .001$

Data in Table 7 examine patterns of parental yielding to children's purchase influence attempts by item requested and by social class. Middle-class families are shown to be somewhat more likely to yield to requests for non-interactive toys; however, upper-class parents are more likely to yield to requests for sports items, clothing, books, and records, and slightly more likely to yield to requests for creative games. Again, the context of these data should be kept in mind: while middle-class children made more requests, they

were more likely to get "neutral" verbal reactions from their parents and slightly less likely to get positive reactions when compared to upper-class children. In any case, the proportion yielding is quite similar for the two social class groups.

Conclusion

Interpretations of these data are highly speculative, as the sample was small. However, this study could be a prototype for larger-scale work, which would permit more definitive conclusions about the relative influences of mass media advertising on children and how children's desires for

Table 4

Parents' Verbal Responses to Children's Overt Gift Requests

	Grade		Social Class	
	3	5	Middle	Upper
Positive	32%	32%	29	35%
Negative	19	21	22	18
Neutral	48	47	48	47
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	100%	100%	100%	100%
	<i>n</i> =(182)	(160)	(170)	(172)
	$\chi^2 = n.s.$		$\chi^2 = n.s.$	

Table 5
Total Gifts Requested and Total Received (Requested or Not)*
by Type of Gift and by Social Class

Type of Items	Middle [n=45]				Upper [n=39]			
	Requested		Received Requested or Not		Requested		Received Requested or Not	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Non-interactive Toys	27.4	(107)	21.5	(55)	15.7	(45)	11.4	(21)
Creative Games/Toys	10.5	(41)	18.4	(47)	9.4	(27)	15.3	(28)
Competition Games/ Toys	10.2	(40)	10.5	(27)	18.5	(53)	22.3	(41)
Sport Items	18.9	(74)	11.7	(30)	17.5	(50)	13.0	(24)
Clothing	10.0	(39)	14.1	(36)	17.5	(50)	15.8	(29)
Books & Records	7.4	(29)	6.6	(17)	9.4	(27)	9.2	(17)
Others	15.6	(61)	17.2	(44)	11.9	(34)	13.0	(24)
Total	100	(391)	100	(256)	100	(286)	100	(184)

* $\chi^2 = 18.93$ d.f. = 6 p < .0043

Table 6

Percentages of Gift Requests Fulfilled by Parents, by Recipients of Gift Request, Social Class, and Grade

Recipients of Gift Request	Social Class		Grade	
	Middle	Upper	3	5
Parents				
Only	28%*	34%	33%	30%
Common	51	52	53	50
Santa				
Only	27	23	21	32
Total	31	34	30	35
N=	(120)	(97)	(110)	(107)

*Should be read: "Among middle-class children, 28% of specific gift requests made to parents were fulfilled—the specifically requested item was received."

advertised products are handled in the family environment.

The data do suggest that the family environment is indeed a mediator of television advertising's effects. In fact, the differences in children's product desires and parent's patterns of respond-

ing to requests for particular types of toys may reflect fundamental value orientations of parents and children. Middle-class children exhibited less interest in competition toys than did upper-class children; parents of upper-class children were more likely to buy competition toys

for their children. While care must be taken in interpreting the data on this point, it seems reasonable to conclude that both middle- and upper-class children were exposed to roughly the same level of advertising for competition games/toys. However, the two groups of children

Table 7

Purchase Requests and Parental Acceding by Gift Items and Social Class

Items	Middle Class					Upper Class				
	Asked		Asked and Received		% Acceding	Asked		Asked and Received		% Acceding
	%	n	%	n		%	n	%	n	
Non-Interactive Toys	27.4*	107	33.3	40	37.3	15.7	45	11.3	11	24.4
Creative Games/Toys	10.5	41	11.7	14	34.1	9.4	27	10.3	10	37.0
Competition Games/Toys	10.2	40	9.2	11	27.5	12.5	63	19.6	19	30.2
Sport Items	18.9	74	15.0	18	24.3	17.5	50	16.5	16	32.0
Clothing	10.0	39	10.8	13	33.3	17.5	50	19.6	19	38.0
Books & Records	7.4	29	5.0	6	20.7	9.4	27	9.3	9	33.3
Others	15.6	61	15.0	18	29.5	11.9	34	13.4	13	38.2
Total	100.0	391	100.0	120	30.6	100.0	286	100.0	97	33.9

*To be read: "Of all gifts children requested, 27.4% of requests were for non-interactive toys. Of all gift requests which were fulfilled, 33.3% were requests for non-interactive toys. Of all requests for non-interactive toys, parents acceded 37.3% of the time."

were apparently differentially interested in receiving them, perhaps reflecting different value orientations already formed by third and fifth grade.

The fact that parents mediate gift requests, regardless of social class, is seen in the data. For example, middle-class parents are less likely to respond to requests for sporting goods than are parents of upper-class children. This may reflect high cost, or it may reflect the fact that middle-class children may already possess many sporting goods items. In any case, middle- and upper-class parents selectively yield to purchase requests. Also reflective of different family environments are the different numbers of requests. Middle-class children did indeed make more gift requests than upper-class children. A number of explanations could be advanced for this finding—e.g., norms in upper-class homes mediate against frequent asking for products; upper-class children receive more positive responses

to their requests, so the need to repeat them is not great.

A final, highly suggestive finding in the study is that children cite a variety of sources for gift (product) ideas. It is particularly interesting to note that fifth grade children are more likely to cite television as a source of gift ideas than are third grade children. This finding is consistent with larger scale research (Ward and Wackman, 1973), and it suggests that older children learn to use television as a source of product information. Younger children are more bound to their perceptual environment, and are more likely to find out about products by actually seeing them in stores.

Some further analyses will be done on these data in an effort to relate content of commercials—including stylistic variables—and patterns of interpersonal relationships, as determined by sociometric data, to children's product desires and subsequent parental behavior.

Aside from the small sample sizes, an obviously limiting factor is that the differences between our age and social class groupings are not large. The income variations are not that great, and neither are the age differences. High proportions of third and fifth graders are probably in the concrete operational stage of development, although at different ends of the developmental continuum. Consequently, our age-related differences are not great.

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