

## CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

## Media and Youth Consumerism

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**Studies into the impact of advertising typically focus on three kinds of effects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. This article summarizes research into types of effect and discusses the literature on several other predictors of children's consumer behavior, including age, gender, socioeconomic level, and parent-child communication. The article ends with some information about European regulation about advertising and some suggestions for future research into children's consumer behavior. © Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2000**

## KEY WORDS:

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Despite many years of academic research, there continues to be no consensus about the way in which advertising influences children and adolescents. Some authors argue that children are critical consumers who are capable of defending themselves against the possible negative effects of advertising. They believe that advertising provides children with valuable product information which supports them in their development as consumers (1-5). Others, however, believe that advertising aimed at children has a strong negative impact on their beliefs, values, and moral judgments (6). They argue that children are more vulnerable than adults to the persuasive influences of commercials

because they still lack the cognitive skills to defend themselves against the attractive and cleverly produced advertising messages (7). They also believe that child-directed advertising causes conflict in the family, creates materialistic attitudes, encourages bad eating habits, and can make children dissatisfied (4,8,9-14).

Studies on the impact of advertising on children typically focus on three kinds of effects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (15). Cognitive effects studies focus on children's ability to distinguish commercials from television programs and their ability to understand the selling intent of advertising (16-18). Most of these studies have adopted Piaget's theory (19) of cognitive development to guide their research (20-23). Children who are at Piaget's preoperational stage (aged 2-7 years) respond differently to commercials than do those at the concrete operational stage (aged 7-12 years). It has been shown, for example, that children in the concrete operational stage are progressively more able to distinguish commercials from television programs (24,25) and show a better understanding of the persuasive intent of commercials (24-26).

Affective effects studies of advertising concentrate on children's liking of and trust in commercials (24,28-32). Those studies demonstrated that children's responses to commercials gradually become less favorable as they enter the concrete operational stage (25,27). As children get older, they increasingly display irritation and skepticism while watching commercials.

Finally, behavioral effects studies of advertising focus on the extent to which children are persuaded by advertisements. Because young children usually do not have the means to purchase products, behavioral effects are usually measured by children's preferences for products (32) or by the requests they make in response to advertised products (33). Behav-

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ioral effects studies have shown that television advertising is a major source of children's product requests (1,2,34-36) and that children who watch more television are more likely to ask for advertised products (1,7,36-38).

### *Research on Children's Consumer Behavior*

Although advertising is an important determinant of children's consumer behavior, several other factors have been shown to influence children's product preferences and purchase requests (39). It has been demonstrated, for example, that children's requests for advertised products decrease as they mature (1,14,24,26). Not only do children become more critical about and thereby less susceptible to media offerings as they mature, they also become more sensitive to peer influences (40).

Gender has also been shown to have a role in children's requests for advertised products in that boys are more persistent in their requests than are girls (14,33). Other factors that may codetermine children's consumer behavior include socioeconomic level of the family, frequency and kind of parent-child interaction, and involvement with peer groups (39). Such factors may not only exert a direct influence on children's consumer behavior; they may also enhance or inhibit the cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects of advertising (39). To investigate effects of advertising on children's consumer behavior, then, it is not enough to focus on media variables: It is also necessary to include variables in the theoretical model that have been identified as mediating variables.

Most research on children's and adolescents' consumer behavior has been conducted by marketing researchers (41). Although these researchers have gathered a wealth of knowledge about children's consumer behavior, their methods and findings are, for understandable reasons, often not accessible to the academic world. In academic circles, there has been little systematic research on the different determinants of children's consumer behavior. Many academic studies on the behavioral effects of advertising have been published, but only a few have investigated the development of consumer behavior in a wider context. Moreover, the academic studies that have focused on a broader spectrum of determinants of children's consumer behavior may now be outdated because they were conducted in the 1970s (42,43).

Since that time, there have been several changes in

the child's environmental context that call for a revitalization of academic research on children's consumer behavior. The child-rearing and communication styles of today's families have changed significantly over the past 2 decades. Until the early 1980s, child-rearing patterns were characterized by authority, obedience, and respect (44). In today's families, however, the parent-child relationship typically is not regulated by authority and command, but rather by negotiation (44). In modern families, children's opinions and participation in decision-making processes are encouraged and taken seriously. As a result, children have never been as emancipated, articulate, and market-mature as they are currently (39).

During the past decade and a half, marketers' interest in children and adolescents has grown exponentially (41,45). Today's children not only have considerable amounts of money to spend for themselves; their say in the purchase decisions of their parents also has increased tremendously. Not only do they give direction to daily household purchases such as snacks, sweets, and breakfast products, but as they get older they also directly influence their parents' choice for the restaurant, the holiday destination, and the new car (46).

Finally, children's media environment has changed dramatically in the past decade. Consumer organizations throughout the world have noted increasing commercial pressures on children (47). Children's television programs in The Netherlands, for example, have been shown to include more than 25 child-targeted television commercials per hour (48). In addition, a multitude of new marketing techniques are aimed at the child consumer. For example, the Internet is progressively used to target children and adolescents with ads for products while getting information from them that can be used for further marketing (45). Because of the wealth of persuasive messages meticulously targeted to specific child segments, children are less dependent on their parents for their learning about consumer values. Some researchers have suggested that the commercial media environment of today's children might shorten the period during which parents are the exclusive socializing force in the lives of their children.

### *European Regulations*

The increasing commercial pressure on children, together with a growing number of covert marketing practices, has resulted in specific regulations on

marketing efforts to children in most member states of the European Union. First, there are specific regulatory initiatives to protect children. With respect to television advertising, for example, all member states base their regulations concerning television commercials on the Television Without Frontiers Directive (47).

In addition to these regulations at the European level, there are many national regulations. Some European countries, such as Sweden, have introduced a total ban on television advertising directed at children under 12 years. In Greece, commercials for toys are banned until 10 p.m., and in Belgium it is forbidden to broadcast commercials during children's programs as well as during the 5 min before and after them.

In The Netherlands, the codes of conduct for child-directed advertisements are laid down in rather general terms. For example, the Dutch code states that advertising directed toward children may not mislead about price or characteristics of the product and may not use characters who have authority or trust among children owing to their appearance in radio and television programs. However, the code fails to specify how concepts such as "misleading," "authority," and "trust" should be defined and understood. The debate on children and advertising in The Netherlands is recent, because before the introduction of commercial television in 1989, child-targeted advertising was limited, certainly in comparison with other countries.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Research into children's consumer behavior typically has been based on one of two types of theoretical models of human learning: cognitive developmental and socialization. Studies based on cognitive developmental models have been interested primarily in differences in cognitive responses to advertising between older and younger children (e.g., 20,23,26). Studies conducted within the socialization perspective have attempted to explain consumer socialization as a function of environmental influences aimed at a child. These studies usually focused on the effect of a single socializing agent, mostly television advertising, on the transmission of consumer attitudes and knowledge.

Socialization studies often seemed to be guided by a simple stimulus-response perspective, which assumes that exposure to advertising directly influences children's consumer attitudes. However, a

basic assumption in modern theories of media effects is that children are active and motivated explorers of what they encounter in the media (49). Another assumption is that any media effect on children is enhanced, channeled, or mitigated by what the child makes of it (50). To understand media effects on children, then, it is crucial to gain insight into the different antecedents of children's exposure to different media. In the consumer socialization literature to date, too few attempts have been undertaken to explore the dynamic elements of child variables in the socialization process.

Future research on children's consumer behavior should try to integrate the different theoretical perspectives that have been used in previous studies. Such research should derive from more elaborated theoretical models, in which different environmental agents (e.g., media exposure, parent and peer influence, family communication patterns) and child factors (e.g., gender, developmental level, interests and tastes that motivate exposure) operate as interacting determinants of children's developing consumer behavior.

Because research on children's consumer behavior has been conducted primarily by commercial institutions, the conclusions often have been reassuring. For example, the most recent report on children and advertising commissioned by the Dutch lobby organization of advertisers, concluded that: ". . . the influence of advertising on children's attitudes to brands is relatively small; children up to the age of 10 hardly ever consider brands" (51, p. 32). Those results, based on a sample of 16 children, are diametrically opposed to those of our own study, which was released during the same period (1). Our findings, based on a sample of 250 elementary school children, revealed that 52% of the elementary school children specifically mentioned a brand name when they were asked to list their Christmas wishes.

There is a need for further empirical research to make sense of these discrepancies in findings between commercial and academic researchers and to contribute to the ongoing debate on children, advertising, and public policy in Europe and the United States.

Research also should incorporate a comparative perspective. The majority of the research on consumer socialization has been conducted in North America. It is likely that some aspects of children's consumer behavior are universal across cultures: for example, children's preferences for entertainment (50). Cross-cultural research provides invaluable opportunities for generating and further developing

theories about the effects of various socializing agents on children's consumer behavior and values.

Finally, research should incorporate a longitudinal perspective. Academic research into children's consumer behavior blossomed in the 1970s and early 1980s but soon began to disappear despite the dramatic changes in children's family and media environments. Although anecdotal observations suggest that children may now be more sophisticated than their comparison cohorts from earlier generations (52), to my knowledge there is no academic evidence to support such claims.

In summary, further research into the determinants of children's consumer behavior should be based on an integration of developmental and socialization theories. In addition, there is a need for longitudinal and cross-cultural research. Such research should, for example, investigate and compare children's commercial media environments, the nature of marketing efforts aimed at children, parental attitudes about consumer values and behavior, and family communication patterns about those values and behavior.

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