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## **The Established and Potential Mediating Variables in the Child's Understanding of Advertising Intent : Towards a Research Agenda**

*This paper aims to explore in detail the issue of advertising intent, with particular reference to the child. The literature review examines the importance of age and cognitive and social development in this field and considers whether or not children can distinguish between television programming and advertising. What the literature review illustrates is that research studies thus far have conflicting viewpoints on these areas. Within the research to date, there are also a number of important issues which do not seem to be addressed. Most notably, there is little research which considers the impact of advertising upon children, from the child's perspective. This paper thus proposes an exploratory framework which aims to consider the established and potential mediating variables in the child's understanding of advertising intent.*

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### **Introduction**

In the year 2000, American children aged twelve years and under spent \$27.9 billion of their own income whilst also influencing approximately \$249 billion of their parent's finances (Oldenburg 2000). The same source suggests that in 1990, a ten year old boy received an average weekly allowance of \$8.50 a week whilst ten years later, in 2000, the equivalent average weekly allowance was \$16.90. Meanwhile, in Europe, one estimate places the annual cash flow of European children at circa £23 billion (Kid Power Exchange 2000).

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It is not at all surprising therefore to consider that since the sixties, advertisers and their agencies have recognised the importance of and courted a very lucrative child market. As advertising has sought to woo the young consumer, so too, both industry and academic interests have conducted substantial research which addresses the impact of advertising on children. A key dimension to this research has been a focus on the child's understanding of advertising intent. In essence, such research has sought to establish whether children, specifically those aged twelve years and under, understand the commercial perspective of the advertiser. It is interesting to note that in the vast majority of cases, advertising intent has been defined in terms of a commercial or selling intent. Specifically, the popular explanation of intent focuses on the 'informational' and/or 'persuasive' purposes of advertising (see Ward 1972; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977; Gaines and Esserman 1981; Blosser and Roberts 1985; Macklin 1987).

This paper seeks to challenge the consensus view of 'intent' by arguing that whilst the objectives of selling and persuasion are key advertising goals, they may only partially represent the child's perspective on advertising. Much of the research in this area has emphasised the child's commercial consumption of advertising. This begs the question as to whether it is sufficient to consider that the child only views advertising as a purchasing catalyst. For instance, the 'uses and gratifications' perspective recognises that the advertising recipient may use advertising for purposes other than marketing (O'Donohoe 1994). The authors contend that by regarding advertising as primarily having an informational/selling objective, there is a danger of over-relying on the linear sequential models of communication which prioritised the sender's objectives to the frequent detriment of the receiver's understanding and decoding of advertising, or indeed considering the meaning behind advertising, from the child's perspective.

This paper seeks to re-visit the studies of the seventies and eighties which overwhelmingly focused on the child's understanding of advertising in terms of the selling/persuasion rationale. The child's ability to distinguish between programming and advertising is examined whilst the research to date examining advertising intent is explored. It becomes obvious that in the vast majority of cases, advertising intent is examined from the advertiser's perspective, namely to inform and/or to persuade. A framework is proposed with a view to illustrating how future research might embrace the child's understanding of advertising's *raison d'être*. It is suggested that children may perceive the intent of advertising in a different manner to the advertiser and as such, the framework would allow researchers to consider the unintentional effects of advertising, as seen from the point of view of the child.

## Advertising's Impact on Children - The Extent of the Research to Date

Kinsey (1987) documents that a relatively small body of research addressing advertising and children, has been collected by industry practitioners and in the incidence of such research, it has tended to focus on individual advertising campaigns. She also argues that most of the research on advertising to children has originated in the United States and has been collected by US governments and academics who have focused on US respondents. Furthermore, the focus of this research has been the influence of television advertising on children.

Correspondingly, there is a growing body of European research concerning advertising to children (see Preston 2000, 1999; Young 2000; Bergler 1999) whilst there is a relatively recent surge in research hailing from Asia (see Chan (2000) for a discussion of advertising to children in a Hong Kong context and McNeal and Ji (1999) for an overview of the Chinese situation). It is particularly interesting to consider Chinese research because with the development of a 'one-child' family planning policy, the child in question is increasingly becoming the central focus for both parents and grand-parents, (Chan 2000). This has implications for the child's influence on family purchasing behaviour as well as for consumer socialisation.

There are a number of key elements or facets to the research addressing advertising and children. Indeed, it is worthy of note that the majority of research studies in this area were conducted in the seventies and eighties. The research to date has focused on the child's ability to **differentiate between advertising and programming** (Hoy, Young and Mowen 1986; Robertson and Rossiter 1974) and the child's facility for **understanding advertising's intent** (Blosser and Roberts 1985; Levin, Petros and Petrella 1982). Other studies have examined the **influence of advertising** on children and these may be considered under the headings of **cognitive effects** (see Rossiter 1979; Rossiter and Robertson 1974; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977) and **attitudinal effects** (Preston 2000; Riecken and Yavas 1990; Rossiter 1979). Finally, the impact of advertising can also be considered according to its impact on the child's **behaviour** (Goldberg 1990; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977; Robertson and Rossiter 1974). Other areas of note in the literature include the **unintentional effects** of advertising whereby advertising may unintentionally attract the child's attention to adult-targeted products such as alcohol (see Grube and Wallack 1994).

A suggested starting point in the discussion on children's understanding of advertising intent is the child's ability to recognise the perspective of another party, in this case, the advertiser. An inherent assumption within the debate on children's development is that children of different ages will differ

according to cognitive and social abilities. Indeed, it is argued that children within the same age group can also differ with regard to their maturity in these areas. The following sections will address the importance of the child's age with regard to his/her cognitive and social development in general.

### **The Importance of Age and Cognitive Development**

The requirement for advertisers to actively discern between children of varying ages was highlighted nearly three decades ago by Rubin (1974) who pointed out that many advertisements at that time, were targeting the very wide span of two to eleven year olds, assuming that all were able to understand these messages. His concern reflected a growing debate at that time amongst cognitive developmental thinkers who contended that all children journey through different stages of cognition and that the child's level of cognitive development correspondingly impacted upon his/her ability to assimilate and understand commercial information. It is widely accepted that the thinker most associated with cognitive development is the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget (Chan 2000; Pawlowski, Badzinski and Mitchell 1998; Rubin 1974) and that his thinking has had a large impact on the study of age-related issues concerning advertising to children.

Piaget (1952) proposed that children progress through four stages or sequential steps of development. Each stage conforms to a given age group but may vary according to the child's intelligence, cultural background and social class. Of the four phases, it is argued that stages three and four, the Concrete Operations and Formal Operations stages respectively are the most illuminating when considering children's understanding of advertising. The Concrete Operations stage refers to children aged seven to eleven years. Piaget offers that from seven years of age, the child begins to reason logically and is able to conceptualise his/her ideas clearly and coherently. The Formal Operations stage encompasses children aged between eleven and fifteen years. Piaget contends that a child within the age group is now able to think abstractly and to conceptualise. He/she is also able to consider and weigh up different arguments.

Essentially Piaget's framework considers that at each stage, children pay attention to those stimuli that are meaningful to them, they learn what they are ready to learn and they screen out other information (Rubin 1974). A key element of the research in this area has been the consensus that older and younger children differ in their comprehension of advertising intent (Moore and Lutz 2000) and Piaget's framework helps to inform this conclusion. Of particular interest is the suggestion (if the framework is applied in an advertising context) that the child's understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising emerges in the concrete operational stage, namely from the age of

seven years onward. It is at this stage that children move beyond accepting advertising at face value and become more evaluative concerning advertising messages. From a cognitive development perspective, this has important implications for researchers who are seeking to explore the child's ability to distinguish between advertising and television programming, and indeed the child's facility for considering the meaning behind advertising.

Roedder (1981) suggests that a key element to understanding age-related issues in children's receptivity to advertising is to consider their information-processing abilities. Roedder alludes to the concept of the short-term memory (STM) where incoming information from an advertisement is entered. The STM has a limited facility to retain information and can only hold this information in the short term. From an advertiser's perspective, the objective is to store this information in the long-term memory (LTM). Roedder contends that as children grow older, they become more sophisticated at processing information and also learn to control their learning. She proceeds to identify three types of 'processors', namely categories of children who are distinguished by their ability to process information at different ages.

The '**limited processor**' refers to a child aged eight years and younger who has not yet developed efficient information processing abilities. In other words, this child does not use storage and retrieval strategies to improve learning and has a greater facility for short-term memory. The '**cued processor**' is typically an eight to twelve year old who has an ability to retrieve information in response to a prompt. Moore and Lutz (2000) contend that such children do not have a tendency towards critical thinking. The '**strategic processor**' refers to children aged twelve years and older who have developed and employ the ability to store and retrieve information. The cognitive development literature would therefore suggest that children of twelve years and under (limited and cued processors) do not tend to have the capacity to react critically to external prompts such as advertising.

Interestingly, Roedder (1981) alludes to an ethical issue by arguing that limited processing children need to be protected by regulation that controls the amount of commercial information to which they are exposed. Her argument is that children aged eight years and under are unable to process information efficiently.

Therefore, a common theme in Piaget's (1952) and Roedder's (1981) perspectives on cognitive development is that the child's ability to recognise persuasive intent and the development of his/her critical facilities concerning advertising do not emerge until approximately seven to eight years. Thus, the cognitive development literature could be interpreted as proposing that it is from approximately this age that the child begins to develop an awareness and understanding that another body or interest,

namely the advertiser, is seeking to influence his/her attitudes and behaviour towards the brand being advertised.

### **The Importance of Age - Social Development**

Apart from being able to process incoming information, another key element to understanding advertising is the facility to recognise the sender's agenda. To this end, Roedder John (1999) alludes to the concept of social development. She posits that social perspective taking refers to one's ability to recognise the perspectives of other people and that one's impression formation is linked to the social facets of products and consumption. In essence, therefore, the images that we have of products and what it means to consume them, may be strongly linked to other people's opinions, attitudes and behaviours concerning those products. From the perspective of children and their perceptions of products and how they are advertised, Roedder John suggests that it is important to consider the age of the child and how it impacts upon their ability to understand social perspectives. One helpful contribution is that of Selman (1980) who identifies five age groups of children and how each group differs with regard to the relative importance they give to social perspectives.

The first three stages in Selman's categorisation are of particular interest in an advertising context. The first stage or the **ego-centric** stage refers to children of three to six years. These children are unaware of what other people think and the only perspective they hold is their own. The second stage is the **social information role taking** stage (age six - eight years) in which children realise that others may hold a different perspective to their own but such children do not as yet have the facility for considering this viewpoint. This facility develops in the third stage of **self-reflective role taking** (aged eight to ten years) where the children in question are able to recognise and ponder another person's viewpoint.

Selman's categorisation is useful in explaining the behaviour and interaction of children with socialisation agents such as parents and peers. For example, a frequent supermarket scene is that of a young child becoming upset and angry with a parent for not acceding to their product request. According to Selman, the child aged three to six years is unable to understand any viewpoint other than its own. Therefore, a parent's concern about, say sugary products, simply has no meaning for that child. Similarly, for young people aged twelve to fifteen years, interaction with the peer group may help to identify which products are 'cool' and are accepted by that social system. It is interesting to reflect on the implications of Selman's framework for children's understanding of advertising intent. His argument would suggest that children aged six years and under are unable to

understand a viewpoint other than their own, and therefore this would call into question the child's ability to understand the advertiser's intent. According to Selman, this ability does not emerge until the age of eight to ten years. This was supported in a study by Blosser and Roberts (1985) who contended that the ability to recognise advertising intent tends to occur between eight and nine years.

Therefore, Selman (1980) suggests that the child's ability to discern persuasive intent in advertising does not occur until the age of eight. It is interesting to note that whilst his attention was given to social development, the critical ages of seven and eight years were also propounded by Piaget (1970) and Roedder (1981) in their explanations of cognitive development. Therefore, the cognitive and social development literature would appear to agree on an approximate age of seven to eight years as being critical to the child's ability to recognise and evaluate the perspective of the advertiser.

### **Can Children Distinguish between Television Programmes and Advertising?**

A child's ability to differentiate between a programme and an advertisement is an area on which the literature is strongly divided. Researchers who have focused on samples of children aged less than five years have been unable to agree as to whether this age group can make the distinction. The extent to which the various studies differ in their views on this issue is highlighted as follows. An early study by Wartella and Ettema (1974) focused on under threes and argued that their sample was *able* to distinguish between an advertisement and a programme. Levin, Petros and Petrella (1982) supported this argument and posited that the under-fives were advertising-aware and that the 'clues' to which they responded were the visual and aural aspects to the advertisement.

Butter, Popovich, Stackhouse and Garner (1981) used an experimental approach with children aged four and five years. The sample was asked to watch a television programme called *Captain Kangaroo* during which four 30 second advertisements were interspersed throughout the programme. The children were asked to identify to the researcher when a commercial appeared. 70% of the four-year-old children and 90% of the five-year-old children were able to identify all four advertisements. Interestingly, when asked to differentiate between a commercial and the *Captain Kangaroo* show, 90% of the four year-old children were unable to explain the difference.

This is important because it reflects the findings of other researchers (Ward 1972) that where younger children are able to differentiate between a programme and an advertisement, they are often unable to explain the difference. In the words of Butter et al (1981) : "young children may know

they are watching something different than a program but do not know that the intent of what they are watching is to invite purchase of a product or service". (Page 56).

In contrast, Young (1990) concluded that his sample of children aged between five and seven years could not make the distinction and identified advertisements 53% of the time compared to being able to identify programmes some 70% of the time. So too, Kunkel and Roberts (1991) argued in their research that under fives were *not able* to distinguish an advertisement from a programme. An earlier study by Rubin (1974) sought to apply Piaget's organising framework by focusing on children in Stages II (two to seven year olds), Stage III (roughly seven to ten years) and Stage IV (eleven to fifteen years). He asserted that young children (Stage II) were unable to differentiate between a cartoon and an animated advertisement.

A Danish study by Hansen (1997) suggested that young children sampled in this study had difficulty in making this distinction. Specifically, the sample comprised girls aged five and six years and boys aged six and seven years. Hansen argued that this difficulty was exacerbated where the advertisements appeared in a commercial break during the programme as opposed to a commercial break between different programmes. The contention was that for many children, the end of each programme was a clear-cut cue to initiate other activities such as channel-hopping or leaving the room for some reason, an example being to visit the bathroom.

Table 1 illustrates the key elements of the above studies with a view to illustrating the discrepancies in terms of each study's ability to draw conclusions concerning the child's ability to distinguish between television programmes and advertisements.

**Table 1. Children's Ability to Distinguish between Programmes and Advertisements**

Authors	Respondents' Age	Ability to Distinguish
Wartella & Ettema (1974)	Under three years	Yes
Rubin (1974)	Two - seven years	No
Butter et al (1981)	Four - five years	Yes
Gaines & Esserman (1981)	Five years plus	Yes
Levin, Petros & Petrella (1982)	Under five years	Yes
Young (1990)	Five-seven years	No
Kunkel & Roberts (1991)	Under five years	No
Hansen (1997)	Five-seven years	Difficulties
Preston (2000)	Five years plus	Yes

A critical element to this debate is the extent to which the child, having differentiated between an advertisement and a programme, is able to explain or justify the difference. It was noted above that in Butter et al's (1981) study, the children who arrived at a differentiation, were unable to explain why an advertisement was different to a programme. Similarly, in Levin, Petros and Petrella's (1982) study, the children made this distinction on the basis of peripheral prompts such as visual and aural differences. In contrast, Wartella and Ettema's (1974) contended that children under three years were able to discern between different television advertisements but the authors did not indicate the child's understanding as to why there was a difference.

Bandyopadhyay, Kindra and Sharp (2001) contend that there are several clues which are available to children which assist them in the distinction being discussed. They posit that children recognise the difference in sound, content and length, attention-arousing devices, levels of repetition and the overall difference in genre between an advertisement and a programme. It is important to emphasise that in light of the above studies, that children may be able to react to and use simple perceptual cues to help them recognise an advertisement, but this still does not address their deeper understanding of advertising.

Therefore, a review of the literature indicates that agreement has not been reached amongst a large group of researchers concerning children's ability to distinguish between advertising and programmes. It is suggested that such a facility emerges as the child grows older. With regards to a specific age, some authors argue that it is very difficult to definitively conclude that that children aged under six years can effectively distinguish between a programme and an advertisement (Roedder 1981; Roedder, Sternthal and Calder 1983). Again, it is interesting to ponder the possible reasons which might explain the lack of agreement in the studies above concerning the child's ability to make the distinction in question. One answer may be found in the cognitive and social literature whereby the age of seven years onwards was deemed to be critical to the child's ability to understand a different perspective, i.e. that of the advertiser. The child's facility for understanding the advertiser's intent or perspective is examined in the following section.

### **Advertising Intent - The Research to Date**

In examining children's understanding of advertising, a key concept is that of advertising intent. Martin (1997) suggests that there are two elements to advertising intent - to what extent do children understand the phenomenon of an advertisement and secondly, do children understand the advertiser's rationale for using this form of communication? Indeed apart from the researcher's objective in constructing a picture of the child's understanding

of advertising, there is arguably an ethical element to this discussion. The importance of being able to answer Martin's two questions lies in the argument that if children do not understand the commercial purpose of advertising, then it can be suggested that advertising to this audience is therefore unfair and/or misleading. One argument holds that the child's credulity and innocence places him/her at a disadvantage, relative to adults, with regard to the ability to ward off the persuasive appeals of advertisers (Gunter and Furnham 1998).

There is a large body of literature addressing the child's understanding of advertising intent and a common theme is that intent is assumed to mean a selling or commercial purpose. For example, Preston (2000) suggests that the intent or objective behind advertising to children is to inform them about products they can purchase or else have purchased for them. So too, advertising's intent is deemed to be that of selling by Ward, Wackman and Wartella (1977); Donohue, Henke and Donohue, (1980); Gaines and Esserman (1981); Macklin (1985).

In an earlier study, Robertson and Rossiter (1974) sought to broaden the debate by expanding on the concept of intent. They attributed two types of intent to advertising – assistive and persuasive. Assistive intent refers to those advertisements which assist the recipient by offering information whereas persuasive intent refers to those advertisements which seek to encourage the recipient to purchase. In addition, a later contribution from Blosser and Roberts (1985) sought to broaden the definition of advertising intent beyond that of persuasion in a marketing sense. These authors offered five types of advertising intent – information, teaching, entertainment, selling and persuasion.

Table 2 illustrates how the majority of researchers in this field have placed heavy emphasis on the persuasive/selling intent of advertising.

Whilst the persuasive/selling aspect to advertising is a relevant and substantial area of focus, the fact remains that in the vast majority of cases, the researcher in question adopts the advertiser's perspective and focuses on whether the children sampled are able to recognise this perspective. Signorelli (1991) sounds a warning bell in this respect by suggesting that even when a child recognises that advertisements seek to encourage purchase, the child may still not fully understand the persuasive nature of advertising. Indeed, Dell Clark (1999) draws attention to one extreme research approach to exploring children's understanding of advertising. This perspective holds that a child misunderstands the intent of an advertisement if he/she does not interpret that advertisement in the way in which the advertiser encoded it and the adult researcher subsequently assumes.

**Table 2 : Studies of Advertising Intent**

Authors	Type of Intent	Measurement of Intent	Age of child
Ward (1972)	Persuasive/ selling	Verbal	5-12 years
Robertson & Rossiter (1974)	Informational/ assistive	Verbal	1 <sup>st</sup> / 5 <sup>th</sup> grade
Ward, Wackman & Wartella (1977)	Persuasive/ selling	Verbal	kindergarten
Donohue, Henke & Donohue (1980)	Persuasive/ selling	Non-verbal	2-6
Butter et al (1981)	Persuasive/ selling	Verbal	4-5 years
Gaines & Esserman (1981)	Persuasive/ selling	Verbal	4 yrs
Blosser & Roberts (1985)	Persuasive/ selling	Verbal	4-11 years
Macklin (1985)	Persuasive/ selling	Non-verbal	3-5 yrs
Macklin (1987)	Informational/ assistive	Non-verbal	pre-school

Source : adapted from Martin (1987)

### **A Different Perspective on Advertising Intent**

The advertiser's purpose may be one of information and persuasion but this is in itself, only one perspective. In this regard, Young (1990: Page 191) contends that there is a prevalence of "conceptual confusion" in that many studies view advertising as having one type of 'intent'. Preston (1999) reflects the concern raised elsewhere by Tybout and Artz (1994) who argue that there is an onus on advertising researchers to examine the impact of advertising on consumers over and beyond a marketing focus.

This sentiment reflected an earlier perspective in a key article by Lannon and Cooper (1983) in which they suggested that people's relationship with advertising might be bigger and indeed different to the standard argument. In other words, they suggested that rather than just posing the traditional question "what does advertising do to people?", it is more insightful to ask "what do people do with advertising?" This approach was taken in a study exploring the advertising uses amongst young people aged 18-24 years (O'Donohoe 1994). The respondents were invited to discuss their experiences of advertising in their own words and the findings indicated that the informants in this study were consuming advertising for reasons and rewards over and beyond the advertiser's marketing purposes.

Hence, in respect of children's understanding of advertising intent, it is argued that in addition to exploring the traditional response (advertising exists to sell) to the question (what is advertising there for?), it may be as valuable to focus on other possible reasons as to why advertising exists. In the eyes of the child, advertising may have a different or another remit or intent. One recalls the writings of O'Guinn and Faber (1991) who suggested that the advertising recipient might use advertising in a way other than the sender intended. For example, O'Donohoe (1994) has posited that advertising may be used as a social resource by young adults as well as being a source of entertainment. In this respect, she suggests that young adults play games with advertising, rather than reacting in the way in which the sender (advertiser) intended.

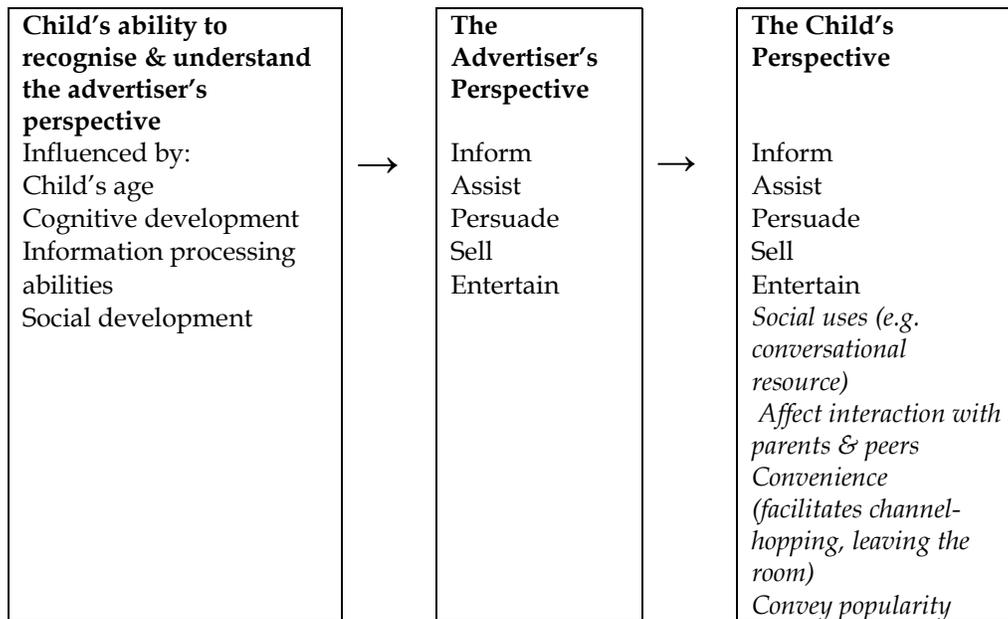
Blosser and Roberts (1985) argue that at the very least, an adult's comprehension of advertising is based upon recognition that (1) the source may have a different agenda to the receiver, (2) the source is seeking to persuade, (3) persuasive messages carry bias, (4) biased messages need to be interpreted differently to other messages and (5) the adult will have a resource of skills and experience from which to draw in an information processing situation. The question arises as to the extent to which children have the above capacities to react to advertising which is being developed, created and researched by adult interests.

To this end, the authors suggest that a fuller and richer picture of children's understanding can be gained by moving out of the traditional mindset which holds that children perceive advertising as existing to inform, persuade and sell. These are the advertiser's objectives as identified in the literature - what of the child's perspective?

It is with this in mind that the authors propose the following framework (Figure 1) to consider when researching the child's understanding of advertising intent. The first two boxes represent the main themes as reflected in the literature. With regard to the first box, it was argued above that a child's age is critical to his/her ability to recognise and understand the advertiser's perspective. The cognitive and social development literature appear to be in agreement that the child's facility for identifying and evaluating another person's perspective emerges around the approximate age of seven to eight years.

Again, the second box reflects the emphasis in the literature on the advertiser's objectives or intent, as identified by the literature (see Table 2 above). The third box outlines the advertiser's objectives, as reflected in the literature but also seeks to introduce a more holistic perspective on how children might use advertising. The use of italics seeks to indicate those perceptions of advertising which the child may hold. These have been referred to in passing in some studies but have not, as yet, received any in-

depth examination. If we are to understand how children perceive advertising, it is argued that it may be useful to consider the italicised, possible objectives which advertising may have, according to the child. This is by no means, an exhaustive list nor has it been empirically tested by the authors. In contrast, the italicised terms have been suggested by the literature and the overall aim of this study is to consider the child's consumption of advertising holistically, rather than solely in its commercial role.



**Figure 1 : A Framework for Considering the Established & Potential Mediating Variables in the Child's Understanding of Advertising Intent**

Whilst, very few studies have directly taken the following approach, there appears to be some justification for pursuing the non-commercial and meaning-based avenue of thought vis-à-vis advertising intent. For example, in Meyer, Donohue and Henke's (1978) study of black children, advertising was found to raise the children's expectations of being liked and accepted by their peers as a result of eating at McDonalds. In this way, the children appear to perceive the advertised McDonalds experience as a socially accepted and welcomed activity and a resulting reward was increased social acceptance. Therefore, the objective (arguably unintentional) of advertising from the child's perspective, might be to illustrate how eating in McDonalds promises enhanced social interaction. In another study, Hansen (1997) suggested that children view one purpose of a commercial break as an

opportunity to do other things such as channel-hopping or visiting the bathroom.

A Scottish study of ten and eleven year old children focused on their perceptions of advertising (Preston 2000). The research indicated that this age-group was quite cynical towards advertising to the point of feeling that many advertisements were misleading. For example, the children noted the use of special effects in advertisements for breakfast cereals, confectionery and toys. Comments were made about the size of the product - in many cases, the product appeared to be much bigger and more powerful in advertising compared to the product reality. Advertisements for soft drinks, cheese products and clothing were identified as suggesting that the consumer of these products was more likely to be popular with his/her peers and to have more friends as a result of consuming the advertised product. This salutary study suggests a certain cynicism and perception of manipulation on the part of the children who were sampled.

An examination of the literature above has suggested that there is a lack of European research which considers the child's understanding of advertising intent in the context of the child as active processor in the communication process. The literature has not appeared to focus on the rationale for advertising, as seen from the child's perspective. Consequently, for the purposes of contextualising this question, one could surmise that children view advertising as having many objectives, some more important than others. These objectives could be to sell a product, to persuade certain children that a product suits them and their lifestyle, to inform, to entertain, to develop relationships with important figures in their lives such as celebrities, to engender parent-child interaction or disputes, or to act as a conversational opening.

As suggested above in studies by Meyer, Donohue and Henke (1978) and Preston (2000), there is an emerging question in the literature as to whether children hold a different perspective on advertising when compared to that of the advertiser. At one level, this audience may recognise a selling or persuasion objective, but at another level, other reasons for advertising's presence may be detected by the child and it is these issues which are worthy of exploration in future research.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined the body of research which has accumulated, mostly in the decades of the seventies and eighties, concerning children's understanding of advertising intent. A review of the literature addressing children's cognitive and social development would tend to suggest that an approximate age of seven to eight years is crucial in terms of an emerging ability on the

part of the child to discern and evaluate the advertiser's persuasive intent. Reference was also made to the literature's overwhelming emphasis on advertising as having a persuasive and selling intent. Based on the limitations of existing research to date, the authors propose a framework which seeks to explore the established and potential mediating variables in the child's understanding of advertising intent.

Children's understanding of advertising intent has proved to be a much-travelled road in the literature in terms of the substantial amount of research scrutiny given to this area. However, researchers have tended to travel in one direction by placing great emphasis on the child's understanding of the advertiser's perspective. There is another, far less-travelled road which points towards the following research question - what is the rationale for advertising, according to the child? It is this area which the authors aim to explore empirically in the future.

Finally, in discussing the role of advertising, Meyer, Donohue and Henke (1978) eloquently summarise the difficulty in isolating advertising effects thus:

"Only the very brave or the very ignorant can say what exactly advertising does in the marketplace".

This statement can be viewed as either a warning or a challenge in the discussion concerning children's understanding of advertising intent. Whichever way we interpret the message, it is argued that in order to understand more fully the impact which advertising has on children, researchers need to begin to more fully explore what advertising means to children.

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