

Margaret-Anne Lawlor^{1a} and Andrea Prothero^b **Children's Understanding of Television Advertising Intent**

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Over the last three decades, a substantial body of research has accumulated seeking to address how exactly advertising, and in particular television advertising, influences children. Yet, given the diversity of methodologies used and the findings presented, it has been suggested that a common consensus on how exactly advertising affects children has not been reached (Gunter and Furnham 1998). This paper presents a brief overview of the literature addressing children's understanding of advertising with a view to identifying the contributions to date in this area and the accompanying gaps, omissions and under-researched perspectives. Findings are then presented from an exploratory study of eight and nine year old children with a view to providing a description of how they relate to television advertising. This qualitative study is part of an ongoing research project focusing on children of this age group.

Keywords: children, television advertising, advertising intent, cognitive development, persuasion

Introduction

There is a growing recognition in the literature, that children are not only able to receive advertising information, but at a certain age, are able to analyse it critically, to discern the advertiser's agenda and also to interact with advertising both as the advertiser intended, and indeed in their own manner (Roedder John 1999a). This paper examines the main dimensions of the research to date addressing this market grouping and seeks to identify the gaps and under-researched strands in the literature. The authors present

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findings from an exploratory study of eight and nine year old Irish children which indicate that the children in this sample are actively discerning and engaging with this form of communication. Whilst this exploratory research is part of an ongoing study, it is hoped that it may contribute to our understanding of whether and how children of this age differentiate between advertising and programming whilst also exploring their understanding of advertising intent.

The paper commences with a brief overview of the literature addressing advertising to children and the principal strands within. This is followed by a presentation of the research undertaken and a discussion of the findings.

Advertising and Children - The Research to Date

Over the last three decades, a substantial body of research has accumulated seeking to address how exactly advertising, and in particular television advertising, influences children. The **cognitive** effects of advertising on children include the level of attention given to advertisements, the child's ability to distinguish between advertisements and programmes and the child's interpretation and memory of the advertisement (Young 1990). The influence that advertising may exert on children's **attitudes** has been examined in terms of children's attitudes towards advertising (Preston 2000; Bever, Smith, Bengen and Johnston 1975; Robertson and Rossiter 1974). Furthermore, the literature has considered whether children's attitudes towards advertising affect their attitudes towards the product being advertised (Riecken and Yavas 1990).

The **behavioural** effects of advertising on children have been considered in terms of the child's propensity to pose purchase requests to parents (Robertson and Rossiter 1974; Ward and Wackman 1972) as well as the link between television advertising and the child's choice of food (Goldberg 1990; Goldberg, Gorn and Gibson 1987; Bolton 1983).

The literature has also considered the **negative outcomes** of advertising (Atkin 1978; Goldberg and Gorn 1978) whilst other areas of interest include the **effects of adult-targeted advertising** on children (Mizerski 1995; Grube 1993; Fischer, Schwartz, Richards, Goldstein and Rojas 1991).

Gaps and Disagreement in and Recency of the Research

A review of the literature would suggest that the greater portion of the research addressing advertising and children has been concentrated in North America and many of the key studies originated in the seventies and eighties. Whilst there is an increasing amount of research and commentary emanating from Europe (Preston 2000 1999; Young 2000; Bergler 1999), it is also clear

that there are fewer academic researchers involved in this area today (Bandyopadhyay, Kindra and Sharp 2001).

Indeed, it is interesting to note that within the literature, there is much debate and disagreement as to how exactly advertising affects children. This can be attributed to age-related factors in many of the research studies and also the research methodology used. With regard to age, for example, there is much debate concerning the age at which children can distinguish between advertising and programming. The research methods that have been used to better our understanding of this area have also come in for criticism (Gunter and Furnham 1998). For example, non-verbal methods such as pictures have constituted a crude means of illustrating that children aged under five years understand advertising's selling intent (Macklin 1987; Donohue, Henke and Donohue 1980). However, the use of verbal methods, in particular, open-ended questions, have yielded different results whereby it has been argued that an approximate age of nine or ten is crucial in explaining children's understanding of advertising intent. Furthermore, much of the research has generated criticism on the basis of its use of experimentation or small samples (Kinsey 1987).

Therefore, a review of the literature would suggest that whilst a large body of research has accumulated addressing our understanding of advertising and children, there still remains many unresolved areas and elements of contention. One cognitive strand which is addressed in this particular study is that of children's ability to distinguish between advertising and programming and resultingly, to discern advertising intent.

Children's Ability to Differentiate between Television Programmes and Advertising

The child's ability to distinguish between a programme and an advertisement is an area within the literature that has attracted much disagreement. For example, key studies such Rubin's (1974) study of two to seven year olds and Kunkel and Roberts' (1991) study of children under five years suggested that the children were unable to make the distinction. Conversely, Gaines and Esserman's (1981) study of children aged five years plus and Levin, Petros and Petrella's (1982) study of children aged under five years, suggested that the children were able to make this distinction.

The disagreement can be explained by considering the relative age-group studied as well as the research methodology used (e.g. non-verbal, verbal and observational). There is a strong school of thought that argues that five years is the watershed age at which children develop the facility for making the advertising/programme distinction (Preston 2000; Young 1990; Dorr 1986; Blosser and Roberts 1985). Children use a number of cues to help them

make this distinction including humour, music and the use of cartoon characters (Dorr 1986) as well the length and overall difference in genre between an advertisement and a programme (Bandyopadhyay, Kindra and Sharp 2001).

However, it has been acknowledged, that where younger children are able to indicate *how* an advertisement is different from a programme, they are often unable to explain *why* the two are different, as was the case in Butter, Popovich, Stackhouse and Gardner's (1981) study of four and five year olds.

Children's Understanding of Advertising Intent

Martin (1997) has defined advertising intent in terms of the child's understanding of an advertisement and furthermore, their comprehension of the advertiser's *raison d'être* for using advertising. In this manner, the child's understanding of advertising intent has been widely considered under the headings of informational/assistive (Macklin 1987; Robertson and Rossiter 1974) and persuasive/selling (Oates, Blades and Gunter 2002; Blosser and Roberts 1985; Macklin 1985; Donohue, Henke and Donohue 1980). The informational/assistive role refers to an advertisement's ability to give product information to the target audience (Preston 2000) whilst the persuasive/selling role refers to advertising's objective of encouraging purchase. A broadening of the definition of advertising intent was offered by Blosser and Roberts (1985) who suggested that the five objectives were information, teaching, entertainment, selling and persuasion.

It has been suggested elsewhere (Lawlor and Prothero 2002) that the two principal types of intent (informational and persuasive) represent the advertiser's agenda or perspective and that accordingly, the vast majority of research studies have sought to explore children's understanding of the advertiser's agenda. Whilst this is a very relevant area of study, it is equally argued that there is a requirement to explore what advertising means to children, in terms of illustrating their understanding of why advertising exists, over and beyond that of the advertiser's intent. Is it possible for the child to take meanings from advertising other than those intended by the advertiser?

The following sections detail the research methodology that was employed in this study and the findings that emanated from this research whereby the focus was on an exploration of eight and nine year old children's holistic understanding of advertising and advertising intent, over and beyond their understanding of the advertiser's objectives.

Research Methodology

Twenty-six children aged eight and nine years, participated in this

research which took the form of small group discussions. The research was conducted in the summer of 2002 in a school near Dublin. Specifically the group discussions comprised five groups of four children and two groups of three children. The groups were also single gender groups in line with Gunter and Furnham's (1998) observation that boys have a tendency to be more competitive in a group situation and will want to make their feelings known whereas girls tend to be more co-operative and considerate with regard to each other. The sample size was approached with due consideration to de Ruyter and Scholl's (1998) observation that qualitative research is characterised by small samples, and as was the case in this study, the objective of such research is to gain insights into a particular area as opposed to establishing "how many people share a certain opinion" (page 8).

Small group discussions were deemed appropriate with a view to exploring children's understanding of advertising's intent. Threlfall (1999) suggests that group discussions are ideal for topics that are subject to the convictions and ideas of others. Advertising is a social artefact that falls under this description in that it seeks to target groupings or audiences and also may be consumed in a social context.

The disadvantages of group discussions, especially a tendency to say what is deemed to be socially acceptable, were noted. However, a key consideration in this study was the requirement to establish rapport with the children and to do so in a familiar setting. It was felt that this could be achieved by employing small group discussions in a classroom setting.

To this end, the findings reported here are exploratory and seek to offer insights into how the eight and nine year old respondents distinguish television advertising from programming and furthermore their discernment of advertising intent.

Rationale for Age Group Selection

A sample of eight and nine year old children was chosen on the basis that the authors wished to explore the children's understanding of advertising and this required the children to be able to consider and evaluate the advertiser's perspective. The cognitive and social development literature was considered and one of the key conclusions arising from this process was that the child's understanding of the advertiser's rationale for using advertising emerges at an approximate age of seven to eight years (Roedder John 1999b; Blosser and Roberts 1985; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977). Reference was made to the contribution of Piaget's (1970) explanation of child development, and specifically the cognitive development of children aged seven to eleven years. Application of Piagetian theory would suggest that children in this age group are able to move beyond accepting advertising at face value and become more evaluative concerning advertising messages.

It is acknowledged that Piaget's framework has attracted some criticism for being too rigid and neat (Cantor and Nathanson 1996) and for underestimating the child's development within a socio-cultural context (Rutland 1986). Nevertheless, Piaget's theory of cognitive development has been acknowledged as having a major impact on the study of age-related issues concerning advertising to children (Chan 2000; Roedder John 1999b; Bijmolt, Claassen and Brus 1998; Pawlowski, Badzinski and Mitchell 1998; Rubin 1974).

A further justification for focusing on the eight and nine year old sample is found in the social development literature. Selman's (1980) contribution concerning the child's social development, explores the child's ability to understand the perspectives of other people. According to Selman's categorisation, it is not until the approximate age of eight to ten years that children begin to recognise, consider and question another person's viewpoint. This would therefore support the employment of a sample aged eight and nine years in this study.

Interview Procedures

With the agreement of the school principal, the interviews were conducted in a school classroom during school hours. Each group interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview commenced by inviting the children to talk about their television viewing practices and preferences. All of the children indicated that they watched television everyday, that is, on weekdays/schooldays and at the weekend. The amount of exposure to television ranged from fifteen minutes to two hours on a weekday. The majority of children spoke of watching approximately one hour of television per day and indicated that the amount of television watched during the week was a factor of the extent of homework assignment, parental rules and extracurricular activities such as football practice. Accordingly, more television was watched at the weekend in the absence of school and homework.

The children were invited to discuss advertisements that they had seen on television and were then asked to indicate how they differentiated between an advertisement and a programme. An area that was exhaustively discussed was their understanding as to the rationale for advertising or advertising intent. It was observed that the children spoke very knowledgeably about television advertising and programming and an analysis of the transcripts illustrated a level of sophistication and familiarity across the groups, with advertising strategy and techniques. A number of general themes/questions were introduced into each discussion such as "tell me why there are ads on television" and where the children introduced their own observations, for example, of a celebrity appearing in an advertisement, the facilitator probed

using phrases such as "tell me more about that" and "why do these people appear in ads?" A key consideration in this research was the requirement not to 'lead' the respondents but instead to encourage them to discuss their experiences of advertising in their own words.

The interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the children. The group discussions were later transcribed and content analysis was employed using a traditional cut and paste technique. A number of key themes emerged and the findings are presented according to the themes identified above.

Ability to Differentiate between Television Programmes and Advertisements

Consistent with the literature, children demonstrated their ability to differentiate between advertising and programming by referring to the relative difference in length, content and the overall difference in genre. The most identifiable cue as identified by all of the respondents was that of **length**: "*ads go on for 30 seconds and then they go off and it is different for a programme because a programme would go on for longer. You just know, if you got into it, then it would go into a break*" (female, aged 8).

This was echoed by a further reference to the length of the advertisement as well as a spoken or written reference to the **name of the programme**. In this manner, the respondents looked to the name of the programme as a means of distinguishing it: "*Ads are usually just a few seconds. Also they don't show the name at the beginning like they do in a cartoon*" (male, 8). Furthermore, another means of identifying a programme was the **list of credits** supplied at the end: "*It says at the end who is doing the acting and the voices at the end of a programme*" (male, 8).

Indeed, much discussion was given to how the television channels tend to help in this differentiation whereby a programme presenter or **continuity announcer** signifies the beginning of a commercial break: "*usually they go on the programme 'we're going to stop for an ad now'*" (male, 8). This was supported by "*On Fox Kids, they say 'it's time for whatever programme you want to watch after the break'*" (male, 8).

Another way of differentiating an advertisement from a programme was a **familiarity with the programmes**: "*I know nearly all the programmes on TV*" (female, 8).

This is consistent with Bandyopadhyay, Kindra and Sharp's (2001) contention that children recognise the difference between advertising and programming by referring to the difference in length and content, attention-arousing devices and the overall difference in genre between an advertisement and a programme.

The groups were in agreement that advertisements and programmes could be differentiated by using **different people and characters** in each. But an element of confusion can occur when the same character appears in the programme and the advertisement. One respondent spoke of such an incidence: *"Once that happened to me – I was watching a Sabrina programme and then there was a Sabrina ad"* (female, 8, referring to Sabrina, the Teenage Witch).

In the literature, Dorr (1986) suggests that a key technique for identifying between a programme and an advertisement is the use of cartoon characters. However, we are currently witnessing an increasing use of cartoon characters in both advertisements and programmes. The confusion that can arise when a character from a programme appears in a commercial break was also voiced elsewhere: *"You'd think the programme is still on"* (male, 8). However, within the same group, another respondent referred back to the peripheral identifying prompts mentioned above. He argued that if he was watching Rugrats (a cartoon) and then an advertisement appeared with the Rugrats, he would still be able to differentiate: *"because it would change scenes"* (male, 8).

Thus, the findings above would support the proposition that the increasing blurring between television programmes and advertisements which feature the same character's, makes it more difficult for the child to make the distinction. However, it is argued that the practice of duplicating the characters in programmes and advertisements can make the distinction more challenging as opposed to preventing it.

Explaining Advertising's Raison d'être

A critical element in children's ability to make this distinction is their further ability to explain the difference. For example, in Butter et al's (1981) study of four and five year old children, the sample was unable to explain or justify the difference between a programme and an advertisement. In a similar vein, Levin, Petros and Petrella's study (1982) indicated that the children (aged under five years) looked for peripheral prompts such as visual and aural differences. Thus, whilst children may be able to make the distinction, it is still important to explore their deeper understanding of what makes advertising different, apart from the surface cues.

With a view to gaining a better understanding of children's understanding of advertising in this study, they were further probed as to the *raison d'être* or intent of an advertisement. The objective was to explore their comprehension as to how advertisements and programmes constitute two different forms of communication. The respondents placed much emphasis on the **informational** nature of an advertisement: *"they let people have a bit of information about things"* (male, 8). A similar interpretation was

offered: *"they're only like information thingies"* (male, 8).

The groups referred to advertisements as not only offering information but also facilitating further learning concerning the nature of the product being advertised: *"You can learn something about a product just off an ad"* (female, 8). Also, advertisements offered information about what was available in the shops: *"they're good because normally people don't know what is coming out in the shops ... ads tell them what is in the shops"* (female, 9).

Indeed with a view to gaining a deeper insight into this area, the children were given a scenario whereby television advertisements were to be banned. They were asked to indicate where they would learn about new products in the absence of television advertising. The children mentioned other advertising media such as newspapers, cinema and outdoor-posters. A universal preference was expressed for the use of television advertising. Whilst newspapers were popularly mentioned, they were found to have faults thus: *"In the newspapers...but the [ads] don't move in the newspaper"* (male, 8). Indeed the relative opposition to a ban on television advertising was expressed thus: *"You wouldn't know the stuff to buy. If you see the stuff in the shops, say a toy, because there was no ad, you would be going "what the heck is this?"* (female, 9).

This concept of television advertising having an informational role is consistent with Preston's (2000) observation that advertising may seek to give children information about products that they can purchase or else have purchased for them.

Advertising was also seen as having a **demonstrative** role in terms of illustrating the product; *"You'd know if a product was good by looking at the ad rather than just going out and buying it"* (female, 9) and also indicating the instructions for use, say in the case of a toy or computer game: *"Say there was this cool Playstation game, if there were no ads, you wouldn't know what it would be called or what happened. But since there is ads, you know all the things to do with it and all"* (male, 8).

The children were also very aware that there are different interests involved in screening advertising and programmes in that advertising has a commercial objective whilst a television programme is something that the child would actively seek out: *"An ad would be about what is in the shop and a programme would be something you watch"* (male, 8). This would tend to suggest an awareness of advertising's commercial role. Further evidence of advertising and programming being used by different interests was provided thus: *"It says at the end who is doing the acting and the voices, at the end of a programme. At the end of ads, it always shows what the company is"* (male, 8).

Again, this is consistent with the literature's emphasis on the selling or commercial nature of advertising intent (Macklin 1985; Gaines and Esserman 1981; Ward 1972).

Advertising as Persuasion

The literature has placed strong emphasis on advertising's persuasive/selling dimension (Blosser and Roberts 1985; Macklin 1985; Gaines and Esserman 1981). The findings in this study illustrated a universal awareness on the part of the children regarding advertising's persuasive role. The groups were in agreement that advertising has a **persuasive** role in terms of encouraging purchase and described it thus: "to get people to buy the stuff" (female 9).

When probed as to how advertisers seek to achieve this, the respondents spoke of the use of celebrity endorsers in advertising such as the footballers, David Beckham and Roy Keane. It was suggested that celebrities featuring in advertising could offer image by association, whereby David Beckham would "make the drink [Pepsi] look cool" (female, 8) or that an advertisement that he appeared in would "kind of attract people and make them feel like drinking a Pepsi because David Beckham likes it" (female, 8).

In the same manner, the groups spoke knowledgeably about the use of a pop-group, S Club to promote a magazine aimed at young girls: "They're trying to sell the magazine and they're trying to get people to like it" (female, 9). When asked whether the children would be attracted to the advertised product because of the celebrity endorser, some agreement was expressed: "it's saying that we will be kind of like them because we like the drink that they drink" (female, 8).

However, it became apparent in the group discussions that the use of a celebrity endorser in an advertisement, whilst attracting their attention, would not always encourage purchase of the product: "I Like Roy Keane with the 7Up ad - but I don't drink it" (male, 8).

Continuing in this vein, the sentiment emerging from the respondents was that the use of a celebrity endorser was an object of curiosity in that viewers might be drawn to the advertisement to find out what he/she was promoting: "People pay attention to them [ads with celebrities] because they're like "oh that's Tina from S Club or Roy Keane and they say "I wonder what they're on for" (female, 9). Similarly, another respondent referred to celebrities in terms of their ability to attract attention but did not refer to that as being an incentive to purchase: "I think ads are good with famous people because it attracts people to look at the ad" (male, 8).

The respondents indicated that they were able to differentiate between the use of persuasion and manipulation in advertising. In other words, they talked about the possibility of being persuaded by an advertisement but also referred to an ability to resist any attempts to 'force' them to act in a certain manner. In a female group, reference was made to one of the singers from the pop-group, S Club who was promoting the group's official magazine: "She's just saying that if you want to be like S Club, if you want, [the magazine], you can

buy it, we're not making you buy it – they're not forcing you" (female, 8).

One of the groups referred to a Fanta (sparkling drink) advertisement incorporating an alien theme, as being a favourite but interestingly spoke of being able to enjoy an advertisement without necessarily being encouraged to buy the product: *"I think it wouldn't really encourage you to buy Fanta – it would just be like you could buy Fanta if you want. It really is an ad that you enjoy"* (female, 8).

Interestingly, the universal view expressed by the respondents was that a celebrity endorser was a positive way of attracting attention to the advertisement but that admiration for the celebrity did not always result in purchase of the product.

Advertising as a Source of Programme Funding

The literature has placed heavy emphasis on advertising intent in terms of its informational and persuasive roles. In this respect, previous studies (Macklin 1985; Donohue, Henke and Donohue 1980) have sought to establish whether children are aware of why the advertiser was targeting them. However, it can be argued that the advertiser is only one interest involved and that there may be other reasons or agendas involved in targeting children with advertising. This was found to be the case in this study where the children expressed an awareness and understanding as to why television channels sold advertising space to advertisers. When probed about the rationale for television advertising, the children showed an awareness of a perspective other than that of the advertiser: *"If there were no ads, there would be no programmes, ads make the programmes for you to watch"* (male 8). It was universally suggested that television stations sell advertising space as a means of generating finances for producing television programmes: *"To make money for the programmes"* (female, 9).

Indeed, if we observe the actual language that the children used, they spoke of a 'need' for television stations to sell advertising space; *"I'd like it [if there were no ads on television] because there would no breaks and bits cut out of the programme. But the channel needs to make money and they have to have ads"* (male, 8).

This finding is particularly interesting because it illustrates that the children are aware of another perspective on television advertising beyond that of the advertiser. Previous research has tended to focus on the children's understanding of the advertisers perspective.

Advertising as Entertainment

The literature indicates that children tend to like advertisements incorporating humour (Collins 1990). They also respond well to the use of cartoon characters, famous people, child models, animals and swift action in

advertising (Rolandelli 1989; Ross, Campbell, Wright, Huston, Rice and Turk 1984; Goldberg and Gorn 1978).

Consistent with Blosser and Roberts (1985), the children also cited an advertising objective as being to entertain. They spoke of having favourite ads: *"I'd have favourite ads and when you run outside and as soon as you hear the music you'd be like 'that's my favourite ad' [puts on a tearful voice] and I've missed it"* (female, 9).

Furthermore, one respondent referred to looking out deliberately for a particular advertisement: *"There was one ad where it was on Friends and I taped it because it [the ad] had Brad Pitt on it and I used to go 'when is it on, when is it on?'"* (female, 8).

With a view to probing into the entertainment value of advertisements, the respondents were asked what advertisements they liked to see. They were also given a scenario whereby as a group of four, they would be given unlimited resources to make an advertisement and they were required to imagine the form and content that the advertisement would take. Two universal themes emerged - these were the use of humour as well as the employment of ordinary and famous people. The latter have been discussed elsewhere in this paper under the headings of advertising as persuasion and as aspiration.

When asked to explain what constituted an entertaining advertisement, the respondents were unequivocal in their citing of humour. References were made to humorous advertisements for soft drinks such as Fanta and Pepsi, food products such as McVities biscuits and Cornetto ice-cream and adult-targeted products such as shaving lotions. One advertisement that was universally liked and imitated by the respondents was the Budweiser "Whasssup" advertisement.

Advertising as Convenience

A key theme arising in the discussion on advertising's raison d'être was that of **convenience** whereby advertisements were seen as offering the viewer a break from the programme and an opportunity to do something else. All groups agreed that the advertising break was a good opportunity to visit the bathroom or get a drink or snack. *"If there was no such thing as ads and you're on your favourite programme, and say, you're thirsty or you have to go to the toilet, then you'd go out and you'd miss the really good part of the show"* (female, 8).

Indeed, the respondents indicated that they used the commercial breaks around which to plan other activities: *"If there's this real good programme and you have to go and have your lunch ... if there were no ads, you'd miss your favourite programme"* (female, 9). Similarly, *"if there were no ads, you wouldn't be able to go for your dinner because you'd have to say to your mam 'I don't want to go because I want to watch this programme'. When the ads come on, that gives you time*

to go and have your dinner" (female, 8).

In this manner, the children suggested that commercial breaks offered them the opportunity to organise their time around the advertisements and to complete other tasks.

Advertising as Intrusion

It was interesting to note that whilst the children spoke positively of a commercial break as an opportunity to do other things, such as having a snack, it emerged that there was also a negative perception of advertising whereby it was seen as intruding on the programme being watched: "When I'm watching a programme and something really bad is happening and the ads go in front of it, I just want to know what happens and then it comes on to an ad. That's so annoying" (male, 8).

A review of the transcripts illustrated that many of the children who at one point in the discussions, had welcomed advertising as a convenience vehicle later indicated that it could also be intrusive. It could therefore be argued that children's positive or negative perceptions of advertising as offering convenience or intrusion are very much a function of whether a favourite programme is being watched, the relative excitement factor of that programme and also the variety of other stimuli that is competing for the child's attention.

Advertising as Aspiration

When further probed about advertising intent, the children spoke of advertisements as giving boys and girls of their age an opportunity for recognition and success. Advertising was perceived as being aspirational by the respondents in that it poses an attractive opportunity for children to make an appearance in advertisements. When asked if they liked to see girls and boys of their own age in advertising, the frequently cited answer was 'yes': "You think you could go into an ad one day...you could be picked anytime to go into an ad" (female, 9) and "I'd be kind of nervous but I'd like to be in an ad" (female, 8).

Indeed, the respondents appeared to perceive advertising as something to aspire to: "Sometimes I think when I see a little girl like me in the ad, I daydream and I think it would be myself in the ad" (female, 8). Continuing in this light, appearing in advertisements appeared to be perceived as an opportunity to succeed and something to aim for: "It's good because it's always usually adults in advertising and I think it's good to give children a chance" (male, 8).

It should be noted that this concept of advertising as being aspirational, in terms of appearing in an advertisement, was introduced by the respondents as opposed to being prompted or suggested by the researchers. Furthermore, whilst it was universally discussed by the girls, this sentiment was not

widely echoed by the boys.

The girls were then asked what advertisements they would like to appear in and why. One respondent referred to an advertisement for a preferred soft drink, Sunny Delight. Another respondent wished to appear in an advertisement for S Club Junior, the junior version of S Club. She indicated: *"I normally dream when S Club Junior comes on and pretend I am one of the girls...she looks so cool"* (female, 8). When probed about the attractiveness of this girl, the respondent responded: *"It's everything – her clothes, her face, her hair – I really like her hair"* (female, 8).

The groups expressed approval of using celebrities and/or ordinary people in advertisements. Interestingly, the females observed that appearing in an advertisement was a route to success available to ordinary people: *"If famous people kept going on [ads], then the ordinary people would never become famous. They'd never get their own experience or career"* (female, 8) and *"Ordinary people get a chance to be famous"* (female, 8).

Suitability of Using Children in Advertisements

A related theme that generated much discussion amongst the respondents was the use of older children as characters or actors in advertising. The literature has suggested that children tend to aspire to older children in that they want to behave and consume in a similar manner (Gunter and Furnham 1998). When asked about the suitability of using ten to thirteen year olds in advertisements, this was found to be the case with two female respondents: *"they look really tall and you'd like to look like that when you grow up"* (female, 8) and *"they're older than you and they have got a little bit of experience"* (female, 8).

However, the rest of the children were quite vehement and negative about the use of older children in advertising: *"I know boys of say, around 12 and they're really annoying"* (male, 8). This was also expressed thus: *"Older people are really bossy and they're mean"* (female, 9). When probed about this, the respondents indicated that they were basing their dislike of older role models in advertising on their real-life experiences: *"They're grumpy – like your brother"* (male, 8) and *"they're a lot like my brothers and my brothers always pick on me"* (male, 8).

The dislike of older child characters in advertisements also appeared to be modelled on the behaviour of older siblings: *"My sister gives me a pinch the odd time"* (female, 8) and *"My brother is 13 ... he does wrestling moves on me"* (female, 9). But interestingly, the respondents also indicated another reason for the unsuitability of using older children in ads as being the disparity in interests and likes between different age groups: *"I have two older brothers and I get really annoyed with them because they're always hitting me. But older boys in an ad, I wouldn't be too interested in that because they're not our age-group and*

they're not doing the things we like" (male, 8). In this manner, the respondents were demonstrating awareness of market segmentation in their recognition of children's heterogeneity. This was further illustrated thus: *"Older people than you can make it kind of look boring because they're not talking about stuff that you really like. They're actually talking about stuff for boys and girls of 10 and 11 and older"* (female, 9).

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the main strands in a substantial body of research that has accumulated in seeking to address how television advertising influences children. Much disagreement exists concerning children's interaction with advertising and this can partially be explained by the diversity in research methodologies and age-groups of the samples that were employed in these studies. In particular, the authors observed that the studies on children's understanding of advertising intent, placed heavy emphasis on the child's ability to discern the advertiser's *raison d'être* for advertising. This intent has been popularly explained under the headings of information and persuasion. Furthermore, little attention has been given to the child's perspective on advertising, over and beyond that of the advertiser's agenda.

Therefore, the aim of this exploratory study was to generate insights into how a sample of eight and nine year old Irish children discerned television advertising intent. Firstly, the findings suggest that the children sampled are able to distinguish between advertisements and television programmes by seeking out cues such as the relative length, the name of the programme, list of credits, the assistance of the continuity announcer, a familiarity with the programmes and the use of different people and characters in each. This is consistent with Dorr's (1986) observation that children refer to the characters appearing in an advertisement as a means of advertising-programming differentiation. This finding also supports that of Bandyopadhyay, Kindra and Sharp (2001) who offer that children are aware of the shorter duration of advertisements and the overall difference in genre between an advertisement and a programme.

The respondents in this study also indicated that the programme/advertisement distinction can be hampered, but not made impossible, when the same characters appear in both the programme and the advertisement.

As is consistent with the definitions of advertising intent in the literature, the respondents were very au fait with the informational and persuasive/selling nature of advertising. Interestingly, they differentiated between persuasive advertising and advertising that sought to manipulate or "force you to buy". They indicated an ability to like an advertisement

without actually being persuaded to purchase the advertised product. The respondents were also familiar with the rationale for using celebrity endorsers. This finding is of particular interest because according to Roedder (1981) and Selman (1980), whilst children aged eight to twelve years may have accumulated a large amount of general knowledge concerning advertising, they do not yet have a critical knowledge of the advertiser's reasons for employing specific advertising tactics such as celebrity endorsers. Roedder John (1999a) subsequently suggested that such knowledge of advertising tactics comes to light in the teen years. A critical awareness of the rationale for using celebrity endorsers in advertising was detected amongst the eight and nine year old respondents in this study. Future research might continue to focus on the child's understanding of and ability to reason and critique the use of advertising tactics such as celebrity endorsement.

Another noteworthy finding was the children's discernment of advertising as a source of funding for television programmes. There was a strong feeling that without advertising revenue, the television stations would not have the finances to make new programmes. This is particularly interesting because in other studies on advertising intent, the emphasis has been on the child's understanding of the advertiser's perspective (Blosser and Roberts 1985; Levin, Petros and Petrella 1982; Donohue, Henke and Donohue 1980). In this research study, the children exhibited awareness of another interest or perspective - that of the host television station. Furthermore, they exhibited an understanding as to the economic practicality of the television station selling advertising space so as to fund programming.

One key remit that advertising had for this sample was that of entertainment and the children were particularly attracted to advertisements employing humour or celebrities. A preference was also stated for ordinary people with whom the children could identify. Advertising was perceived as conveniently offering the audience an opportunity to do other things. However, in the case of a favourite programme, it was perceived as being intrusive. Another intriguing perspective on advertising was its aspirational nature in that a majority of the respondents (mostly female) indicated a wish or dream to appear in an advertisement and appeared to view it as being an opportunity for recognition and success. In this context, a further research direction would be to explore this apparently aspirational nature of advertising and the degree to which the child's attitudes towards such an advertisement coincide with or reflect his/her attitude towards the product being advertised. The literature has widely documented that as children grow older, they become more cynical and distrustful of advertising claims (Riecken and Yavas 1990; Rossiter 1979; Robertson and Rossiter 1974). It would be interesting in future research to compare and contrast (with

reference to age and gender), both this critical viewpoint and aspirational nature/yearning which advertising can induce in children.

Overall, the preliminary findings from this exploratory research suggest that the eight and nine year old children are au fait with advertising intent, as defined in the literature. However, they portrayed an awareness of advertising intent over and beyond that of the advertiser, by referring to the revenue-generating requirement of another interest – the television channel. In addition, they demonstrated that they have differing perceptions and expectations of advertising when compared with the advertiser. A review of the literature to date and the findings from this study, suggest that further research is required to explore children's understanding of advertising intent at a richer and deeper level than information and selling/persuasion.

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