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*Child Targeted TV Advertising and its influence on the Child- Parent Purchase
Relationship:
An Exploration of Pester-power*

Abstract

Since the 1970s an argument has raged over the influence child targeted advertising has on its young audiences (Lawlor & Prothero 2003). An area of particular interest is the effect of child targeted advertising on the parent-child purchase relationship, commonly referred to as '**pester-power**'. In recent years, harnessing its power has become a Holy Grail for those who believe it to be the key to parent's purse strings (Harding 2004). Industry spending on advertising to children has significantly increased in the past decade, from \$100 million in 1990 to more than \$2 billion in 2000 (www.media-awareness.ca). This paper outlines preliminary data exploring TV advertising and its effects on the parent child purchase relationship.

Introduction: Advertising to Children Some Themes

Four recurring themes are noticeable in the extant literature on 'Advertising to Children' Jarlbro, (2002). These can be summarised as follows:

1. Children's ability to recognise advertising, i.e. at what age children can distinguish advertising from other programme content;
2. Children's grasp of intent behind advertising, i.e. at what age children develops such powers of perception;
3. The influence advertising exerts on children's and their family's patterns of consumption, i.e. 'pester-power' and its perceived potential; and
4. How advertising as an influence compares to other influences, such as family and friends.

Key Literature

At present, much of the existing research into children and advertising is regarded-rightly or wrongly-as flawed and tainted (Campaign, 2002). According to Salmark (2002), 'research results inevitably depended on who asked the questions.' The debate about advertising to children involves social attitudes and vested interests. Advertisers, for example, are concerned about the future of their own industry and have an obvious interest in protecting their members against additional controls and bans on their activities (Young, de Bruin & Eagle 2003).

From legal and regulatory codes of practice, advertisers must not actively encourage children to make a nuisance of themselves to parents or advise them to ask their parents to purchase products (Dresden, Barnard & Silkin 2003). It is not the infringement of such codes that has led to accusations that advertising fuels pester-power, it is the growing perception, among the general public that it is the visibility, colour and intensity of advertising that evokes the 'must have' philosophy in children (Dresden et al 2003). Yet, according to a poll carried out for *Marketing*, 'less than half the adults think there should be a ban of food and drink advertising to children' (Kleinman 2002).

Goldstein (1994) indicated the flaws in the assumption underlying the very existence of pester-power by suggesting that instead of advertisements being the major influence on children's tastes and demands, it is actually peer influence that creates desire, leading to selective viewing of advertisements and more considered requests. Quinlan (2002) notes that pester-power can be about the environment children are brought up in, as much as the

advertising they are exposed to. Pester-power doesn't just come from children - they are being influenced by their parents and the environment, and from a marketing and advertising viewpoint. Such an opinion is consistent with Furnham's (2000) conclusions that there is 'no respectable intellectual argument for the view that advertising alone creates false wants and parental conflicts.'

Powell (2003) suggests that children are becoming a powerful influence when it comes to making household purchases, and at the heart of this influence is the issue of 'pester-power' or the 'nag factor' (see also Stanley 2003). The argument is that by advertising to children, companies are encouraging the children to nag their parents into buying something that is not good for them, they don't need, or the parent cannot afford. If children were not exposed to advertising, it implies, they would not pester their parents to buy certain products (Spungin, 2004). The behavioural effects of advertising on children have been considered in terms of the child's propensity to pose a purchase request to parents (Robertson & Rossiter 1974; Ward & Wackman 1972).

Preliminary Methodology

With such obvious disparity of world views when it comes to pester-power, it is therefore crucial to identify where public feeling and scientific fact diverge (Young et al 2003). The current working paper is an attempt to further inform the debate on TV advertising and its effects on the parent-child purchase relationship. A sample of seven parents (Four moms and 3 dads) who have ten children between them ranging in ages from four to fourteen years of age were interviewed. Analysis of data indicates a number of dominant themes through the parents' discourse.

Thematic Analysis of Results

Theme 1- TV Advertising versus Peers

Younger children, particularly those aged eight and under, are more influenced by TV advertising than their older counterparts whose major influence concerns their peers. This finding concurs with that of Goldstein (1994). When questioned where the child receives the information, in order to make the purchase request, the parents answered as follows;

Mom 2 *"I think my daughter (4) is more influenced by the TV and my son (10) by friends."*

Mom 3 *"I find my son (8) is influenced by friends, his peers."*

Dad 2 *"Yeah that's my son (10). I think the older kids; make up their minds by being influenced by their friends."*

Theme 2-Immediacy versus Reminder

Younger children (aged 8 and under) make purchase requests directly after the TV advertisement has been viewed, while with older children's request is typically made in a reminder capacity. When questioned on the timing of the purchase requests, the answers from all respondents were again quite similar. Interestingly the respondents noted that it depended on the product being advertised. These findings suggest there are two main categories of advertised products which children predominantly request; food and toys.

Mom 2 *"Generally for toys (4 year old) after they have seen the advertisement, with regards to food, (10 year old) they may remind you when you are going shopping."*

Mom 1 *“Yeah, don’t forget to get that box of Rice Krispies, the one with the gift.”(10 year old)*

The current research also uncovered the ability of the child to recall the products and brands which have been advertised and targeted at them.

Mom 1 *“If they’re not going shopping with you, they’ll remind you ‘don’t forget to get me....”*

Mom 2 *“Not necessarily in the supermarket but usually they can remind you...”*

Dad 3 *“I remember last week, there was one particular magazine and my son (8) saw the ad, when the ad finished, my son said “Dad, that’s a really nice magazine”. Then we went shopping this week and the first thing he said, “Dad, can we get that magazine?.”*

Theme 3-The Behavioural Decline

The research exposed behavioural patterns, which commence with a verbal request, followed by repeated requests, thus ‘pestering’ or ‘nagging’, which then may deteriorate into physical displays of unruly behaviour, which then may escalate into ‘feral’ behaviour. When questioned regarding ‘how’ the children made the purchase request, the respondents again were in agreement. Firstly, in relation to the initial purchase request, the behaviour appears quite rational.

Mom 4 *“I want that”. “Will you get me that?”*

Alternatively the parent feels ‘sweet talked’ into making an unplanned purchase.

Mom 3 *“Will you bring me home a surprise because I ate all my dinner this week.”*

Mom 4 *“It’s ‘sweet talking’.”*

Mom 1: *“They all do it.”*

Mom 2 *“Saying no is not enough; you have to give them an explanation as to why you are saying no.”*

When asked what behaviour is exhibited when the request is not made, responses included:

Mom 4: *“They walk around with a grumpy head on them”*

Mom3: *“Did you ever have a child create a scandal in a supermarket and everybody’s looking at you?”*

Such behaviour seems quite benign until, when further questioned, it became apparent, how badly the behaviour may deteriorate.

Mom 2: *“Scandalous behaviour”*

Mom 3 *“Feral behaviour”*

Dad 3 *“I saw one boy in the fountain in a shopping centre, he jumped in. He wanted to buy something and his mother wouldn’t give in, so he jumped straight in!”*

Mom 4 *“Some mothers will give in just to shut them up. A stamp here or a scream there and they will buy it.”*

Mom 1 *“They all throw tantrums.”*

Theme 4- The Target Parent

During the interview, the mothers unanimously agreed they are the main targets for ‘pestering’. The reasons suggested for this occurrence, were related to child care and domestic responsibilities.

Mom 1: *“A mother spends more time with the kids.”*

Mom 1 & 2: *“The mother does most of the shopping.”*

Conclusions and Further Research

Younger children are more influenced by TV advertising than their older siblings whose primary influence seems to be their peers. Younger children make purchase requests directly after the advertisement has been viewed, while with older children the request is typically made in a reminder capacity. There are definitive escalating patterns of child behaviour (pestering, nagging) which are intended to directly influence the purchasing activities of parents and predominantly the mother. The future development of this research agenda will include further exploration of pester-power from children’s perspectives, including exploration of potential gender differences in pestering strategies. Wider parental and advertising industry perspectives will also be examined.

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