
**THE ROLE OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING IN INFLUENCING CONSUMER
SOCIALISATION OF CHILDREN: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS.**

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper delineated the task of television advertising in children's consumer behaviour formation and incorporated the mediating roles of age, culture and some other relevant variables in their response to advertising messages. The study categorised the outcome of the influence of advertising on children into cognitive, affective and behavioural effects and equally recognized various mediating factors that temper, either positively or negatively, the effect of promotion on children's consumer socialisation. The paper concluded that the potency of advertising in shaping children as consumers is never in doubt and recommended that given that children are good at imitating their parents' and peers' consumption behaviour, advertisers should adopt modelling learning mechanism to enhance the effectiveness of their messages.

Keywords: Television advertising, consumer socialisation, shaping children

INTRODUCTION

The term *pester power* has recently gained currency in consumer behaviour discourse. It is the children's aptitude to influence their parents' purchasing decision either by way of nagging or pestering. A definition of the term by the Oxford Dictionaries seems to be apt in the context of this work: 'the ability of children to pressurize their parents into buying them products, especially items advertised in the media' (www.oxforddictionaries.com). The definition portends that children are accountable for a good measure of marketplace activity. As children's 'expertise' required to perform in the marketplace is most probably not congenitally acquired, Solomon (2011) asked a pertinent question as regards children's knowledge, skills, and attitudes germane to their performing in the marketplace: 'how do they know what they like and want?' (p. 466). The answer to that question could be found in consumer socialisation of children.

Before delving into consumer socialisation of children, it is important to have a contextual

conceptualisation of the term children. The term children and adolescent are often used interchangeably in the studies involving children's roles in family decision-making. In line with Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary (1995:192) the term children has two meanings; the first refers to a young human who is yet to attain adulthood while the second is used to depict a daughter or son of any age. The term adolescent also is used to delineate a human with age range of 10 to 18 years old (Gentry and Campbell, 2002). In the context of this work, children is used for human of age under 18 years while the discussion would incorporate the mediating roles of age, culture and some other relevant variables in their response to advertising messages.

1.0 CONSUMER SOCIALISATION OF CHILDREN

It is progressively being acknowledged in the various studies on consumer socialisation that consumption-related skills are valuable for children to effectively manage market information, get primed to buying decisions and actually react to marketing stimuli (Clark et al., 2001; Mangleburg and Bristol, 1998). A lot of studies have been conducted on the relationship between socialisation influences and acquisition of consumption-related skills amongst children (Singh et al., 2003; Shim, 1996; Moschis, 1981). John (1999:183) reports that new research work in the 1960s gave impetus to study on children as consumers that flourished and attained prominence in the field of marketing since the mid-1970s. Ward (1974) made a spirited argument for exploring youths and their socialisation into end user role and described consumer socialisation as 'process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace' (p. 2). His definition provided direction to new group of researchers and evolving field of research concerning children as consumers. Ward's idea still resonates as Schiffman and Kanuk (2010:323) just made little modification of Ward's definition of the concept in their work: 'the process by which children acquire the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences necessary to function as consumers'. Even in their recent book, Avery et al. (2013) did not introduce any revolution to the early definition of consumer socialisation. They defined it as 'acquisition of knowledge, preferences, and skills to function in the marketplace' (p.360).

In order to be able to ascertain the manifestations of consumer socialisation in children, Avery et al. (2013:360) posit that it occurs when children have learnt or acquired one or more of the following:

1. Awareness of various products and of their role in solving their personal needs and problems;
2. Knowledge about the marketplace (e.g., what is available where) and about various product features;
3. Skills in judging the utility of various product features;
4. Preference among alternative brands and products;

5. Skills in making 'smart decisions', such as making price and product comparisons, discounting advertising and salesperson claims, and evaluating trade-offs across options (including the option 'to buy or not to buy').

McNeal (1992) reports that children of 7 to 12 years of age were discovered to acquire strong brand preferences and also children who cannot hitherto read are found to be capable to identify brand symbols such as the Tony the Tiger mascot for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes and McDonald's arches. In the same vein, Avery et al. (2013) are of the view that kindergarten and school children have had more experience with the marketplace than with writing or arithmetic.

John (1999: 201) points out that consumer socialisation go beyond the possession of competences and education connected to the consumer role. Also embraced is the acquiring and acceptance of motivations and tenets relating to consumption behaviours. She adds that while a diversity of motives and values could be conveyed, consumer researchers' attention remained on unfavourable effects of the socialisation process, such as emphasis toward materialism, conspicuous consumption and nonrational impulse-oriented consumption. In another angle, Schiffman and Kanuk (2010) hint that parents use consumer socialisation as an instrument to shape further facets of the socialisation process. For instance, 'parents often employ the promise or incentive of physical benefits as a tool to control a child's conduct as a parent could compensate a child with a gift when the child does something to pleasing' (p.325).

2.0 ADVERTISING AND CONSUMER SOCIALISATION OF CHILDREN

Consumer socialisation is a product of many socialisation agents and television advertising is one of the major players. Advertisements to children became common with the dawn and extensive acceptance of television and increased exponentially with the emergence of cable television, which enabled advertisers to acquire whole stations of child-oriented programming and advertising (APA 2004). Notwithstanding several years of scholarly investigation, there remains no agreement about the manner in which advertising impacts children (Valkenburg, 2000). Some writers contend that children are analytical consumers who are competent of protecting themselves against any probable undesirable outcomes of advertising. The proponents consider that advertising offers children a lot of precious product knowledge which sustains children's evolution as consumers (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2000; Hite and Eck, 1987). Others, conversely, think that advertising targeted at children produces a strong adverse effect on their moral judgements, values and beliefs (e.g. Gardner and Sheppard, 1989, cited in Valkenburg, 2000: 52). This group contend that children are more susceptible than adults to the swaying impacts of commercials since 'they still lack the cognitive skills to protect themselves against the appealing and cunningly constructed advertising messages' (e.g. Valkenburg, 2000: 52). Reports

on the influence of advertising on children usually centre on the following outcome categories: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Rossiter, 1979: 50).

3.1 COGNITIVE EFFECTS

This type of studies centres on children's aptitude to differentiate advertisements from television programmes and their ability to recognise the marketing aim of advertising (Valkenburg, 2000). Majority of researchers engaged in these studies adopt theory of cognitive development by Piaget (1965) to guide their investigations which show that children acquire the ability to regularly differentiate the persuasive intention of advertising just by 7-8 years (e.g. Mehta et al., 2010). Based on theories of information processing, Roedder (1981) cited in Mehta et al. (2010) explained incremental growth of capacities for storing and retrieving information by children, such as evaluating persuasion motives and quality of products. Children routinely view advertisements analytically as from age of 12 years and above: younger ones focus more on perceptual (peripheral) components of commercials like sound, imagery and colour, and elder ones concentrate more on informational (central) features of commercials.

The notion that youths are more vulnerable to inducement forces of advertising than elder ones has been disputed by discoveries that youths of 7-16 years exhibited greater persuading effects than younger ones of 2-6 years (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006 cited in Mehta et al., 2010). In their study of Australian children, Mehta et al., (2010:49) concluded that 'the children proved mature levels of advertising literacy by expression of glitches such as impacts on children's health and well-being and family conflict and deception'. The children further showed themselves as sentient beings having the ability to react, respond and cogitate on the knowledge of advertising (p.50). Children's memory for commercials is essential so as to enable them to identify brands in stores or recall the brand name while making purchase request. Results of two tests revealed that 'the use of a visual advertising retrieval cues, a green frog as the brand character, enhanced memory performance and brand evaluations' (Macklin, 1994:291)

Nairn and Fine (2008) cited in Mehta et al., (2010) expanded the scope of the contentions outside cognition and skills, and based on contemporary results from neuroscience and psychology, to suggest 'marketing methods correlating constructive expressions to product exposure, leading to consumers acquiring preferences for those products in unconscious and non-rational ways' (p.450). They differentiate implicit (unconscious) processes from explicit (cognitive) processes and recommend that explicitly held attitudes are weaker predictors of behaviour than implicit attitudes. Consequently, they rebuff age-based cognitive development as a standard for judging the ethics of advertising, and contend that issues concerning 'fairness' of advertising should lie on children's ability to withstand implicit persuasion.

3.2 AFFECTIVE EFFECTS

Affective effects inquiries of advertising focus on children's predilection for plus faith in advertisements (e.g. Valkenburg, 2000; Mitchell, 1986). Raman (1988) reports that children have been identified by advertisers as the most attentive audience. They do not mentally switch off while viewing ads on television unlike most adults (Kakpor and Verma, 2005). They react to virtually all ads regardless of whether the product relate to them or not (Dotson and Hyatt, 2000; Nadkarni, 1987). Packard (1981) hint that with their ever increasing pester power, advertisers strive to get them recognise company and brand names, even if such companies do not sell children's products.

Seiter (1993) cited in Saraf (2012:26) reports that promotion targeted to youths dodges every appeal to rational, highlighting rather that advertisements are for amusement as opposed to offering any real consumer information. The mainly generic swaying approach used in advertising to youths is by associating the product with fun and happiness, and not by providing any factual product-related information. He concluded that most children within 8-10 years possess a positive attitude for advertisements (p.26). However, reactions to advertisements by children increasingly turn out to be less favourable as they move into the concrete operational phase of their lives (Barling and Fullgar, 1983). Durkin (1997) cited in Buijzen and Valkenburg (2000: 458) declare that children do not only grow more analytical concerning advertisements and, thus less vulnerable to them in their middle childhood years, they too become more susceptible to peer influences. As they grow older, they progressively exhibit scepticism and irritation while watching commercials (Valkenburg, 2000).

3.3 BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS

Studies on behavioural results of advertising concentrate on the degree to which children are induced by commercials (Valkenburg, 2000). Behavioural effects are typically assessed by the requests children put up in response to advertised products or their product preferences since they do not possess the funds to purchase products. Buijzen and Valkenburg (2000) report that notwithstanding methodological nuances, both the field and laboratory experiments have produced numeral coherent findings, one of which is that television viewing is a key source of children's gift ideas (e.g. Frideres, 1973; Robertson and Rossiter, 1977). In the same vein, Goldberg (1990) cited in Buijzen and Valkenburg (2000) affirms that the more children watch television, the more they are prone to ask for the advertised products. APA (2004:6) confirms this in relation to tobacco and alcohol ads in which children found attractive such commercials as Joe Carmel and Budweiser frog, developed high brand awareness and positive attitudes towards their consumption. Saraf (2012:26) echoes that children even resort to 'nag factor' to influence

purchase of promoted products and that the nag factor works and makes people variety seek that product which is last advertised.

4.0 MEDIATING FACTORS

Various mediating factors temper, either positively or negatively, the effect of promotion on children's socialisation. Children of different developmental stages differ in their attention and susceptibility to various environmental forces, such as parents and peers, culture and urban-rural setting that influence their consumer behaviour and values (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001).

Collectivist culture and one characterised by high power distance index as in Malaysia renders even the so called pester power impotent as children are expected to be obedient and not encouraged to air their personal opinion. Children that deviate are often deemed to have bad character (Hofstede, 1997 cited in Othman et al. 2013:134).

Parents as the primary socialisation agent serve as role model to their children (Avery et al., 2013). Othman et al.'s (2013) study show that the degrees of interest the parents show in TV ads correlate with the interest of children in such ads. And to a large extent, children's exposure to TV ads is regulated by parents' control of their TV-viewing. Moreover, parents who co-view television with their children teach them the audio-visual techniques of TV ads and explain the reality. Such children get more interested in the cognitive aspects – get the product information to know the distinguishing features of the various products and their buying response being shaped by the product information (Othman et al., 2013).

Kara (2008) declares that the environment moderates children's development in consumer socialisation. His study of the urban-rural difference in consumer insights of advertising and brand among Chinese children reveal that urban participants were more cynical about advertising than their rural counterparts.

5.0 CONCLUSION

To their parents, children are a joy, to their grandparents, a delight and to the nations, a hope for the future. However, they are an important target market that adds up to mega billions to the advertisers, marketers and media. McNeal (1987) excerpted by Center for Media Literacy (2011) reports that 'parents intensely wish to groom their offspring for later life or independence...Being a consumer is one of these skills'. The Center further echoes that there are no signs those parents are going to do something to lower the consumption powers of their children (Center for Media Literacy, 2011).

The potency of advertising in shaping children as consumers is never in doubt. Consequently, advertisers roll their sleeves up as they know that children potentially represent the greatest profitable market for various companies. They constitute a market of influential that cause many billions of dollars of purchases among their parents.

Existing as consumers is a right for the children while existing as an advertiser is a license. Advertisers and relevant regulatory authorities should therefore see it as utmost responsibility to protect children's vulnerability.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the mini-literature review conducted on the impact of advertising on the consumer socialisation of children, the following recommendations are made:

- Given that children are good at imitating their parents' and peers' consumption behaviour, it is suggested that advertisers adopt modelling learning mechanism to enhance the effectiveness of their messages. John (1999) is of the view that in their teens, children are prone to look to their mates for models of acceptable consumption behaviour. Moreover, Rummel et al. (2000) report that younger children usually react positively to advertisements using a spokesperson who appears to match a parental role.
- In the light of the outcome of study on the content analysis of commercials to Chinese and US children (Ji and McNeal, 2001), the advice is for advertisers to take cognisance of differences in children's social, economic and cultural circumstances in the development of their advertisements. The study proved that Chinese children's advertisements mirrored traditional cultural ideals and its social and economic development levels (p.89).
- Based on research finding that almost children approximately below 8 years do not understand the persuasive goal of advertising, incline to take advertising information as accurate, truthful and unbiased due to their want of capability to realistically evaluate commercial appeals and claims, regulatory agencies should drive policies to protect the children

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