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Children's TV Commercials: A Review of Research

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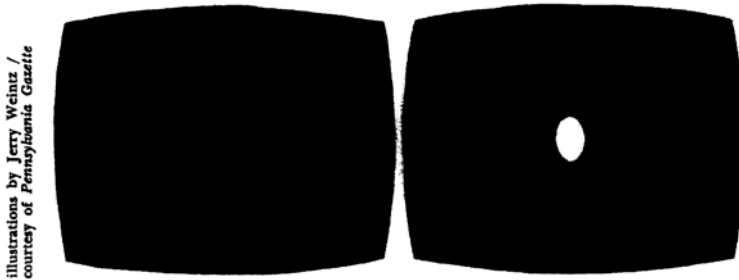
Research on TV ads and their effects on children lags behind more "prestigious" areas of investigation.

Television advertising aimed at children has come under criticism.^{15,37} Marketers have been accused of manipulating children by feeding them distorted and false information and by taking undue advantage of their inability to identify the "puffery" in advertising.¹¹ Advertisers are charged with using children as "surrogate salesmen" to pressure their parents into buying the product and thus perhaps causing serious conflicts between parents and children.⁹ Critics have pointed to the poor eating habits encouraged by TV ads, and have even linked children's exposure to advertisements of drugs and patent medicine to their drug abuse in later life.³⁷

The advertising industry has responded to these criticisms by ignoring the controversy, arguing with the critics, shifting the blame to parents, insisting that television needs the revenue to support children's programs, and attaching themselves to socially desirable themes and activities in an effort to improve their images.³⁷

The controversy still looms large. However, it is being realized more and more that a reasonable solution to this problem should be based on the findings of research in this area.

The aspects of television advertising for children that have so far received the attention of researchers include the content of children's commercials, children's attention to commercials, their information processing



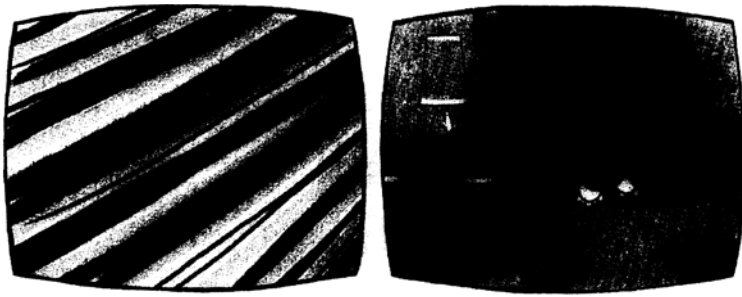
of the commercial messages, their attitudes toward TV advertising, and their attempts to influence their parents to purchase the advertised product. Most of the available data concerning the aforementioned topics are based on interviews with children or their parents.

Barcus³ studied 1,125 minutes of Saturday morning children's programming in May and June of 1971 in Boston. During this time he observed 406 commercials or an average of one commercial every 2.8 minutes. The viewed commercials had the following make-up: 73 percent had white actors only, 24 percent had mixed actors, and 3 percent had only minority group characters; 49 percent were enacted by only males, 16 percent by only females, and 35 percent by a mixed group; ads aimed at girls centered around beauty and popularity, while ads designed for boys focused on size, power, noise, and speed. Barcus also found that 24 percent of the commercials were for cereals, 22 percent for toys, 22 percent for other foods and snacks, and 20 percent for candy and sweets. He mentioned that the use of special visual techniques such as camera angles, close-ups, and animation was very apparent in these commercials.

Choate¹⁰ reported that 50 percent of all commercials aimed at children attempt to sell food; about 10 percent present vitamins, and another 30 percent are in praise of toys. Practically all the food commercials are for snack food and sweetened products, and advertisements for any wholesome foods are extremely rare.

The advertising of toys appears to be one of the major commercial efforts of television. The toy ads have been seriously criticized for the use of false claims and various other misleading techniques such as size distortions.²⁰ Lack of important information in these commercials has also been noticed: they seldom state what the toy is made of, how it works, how long it would last, what age group it is meant for, and how much it costs.³

Research dealing with children's and adults' attention to television advertisements in the home has generally employed two types of measures: Allen² and Bechtel, Achelpohl, and Akers⁵ employed mechanical devices, such as cameras attached to the TV set, to continuously record the viewers' behavior; Steiner,³⁵ Ward, Robertson, and Wackman,⁴³ and

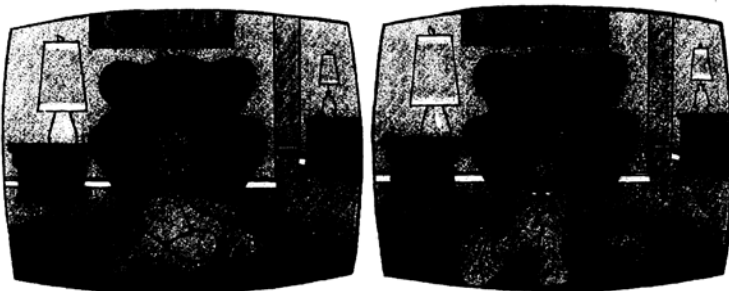


Murray³⁰ used in-home observers to obtain measures of the attention paid to commercials and programs by the audience.

These investigations generally indicate that children as well as adults pay less attention to commercials than to programs.

Ward, Levinson, and Wackman⁴⁰ recently completed a more detailed study which investigated the watching behavior of children at the commercial's onset and during the commercial exposure. Mothers, who had been trained to act as observers, watched their children during six to ten one-hour periods spread over ten days. The investigators discovered that the children in the two younger age groups (5-7 and 8-10 year olds) paid more attention to the programs than the children in the older group (11-12 year olds). At the commercial onset, the older children were more likely to make a "dislike" response ("Oh no, not another one"), while younger subjects (under 10) tended to express liking ("now watch this, this is a good one"). Increasing age had a negative effect on "full" attention but a positive effect on "partial" attention. During the commercial, viewing of television in the company of fathers or siblings was observed to increase with age; during this family viewing, talking with others at the time of commercials also seemed to increase with age. Consequently, older subjects paid less "full" attention to commercials during family viewing than the younger subjects. Attention to the commercials was seen to be at its peak at the beginning of the programs. No significant differences were discovered in the watching behavior of boys and girls.

In a subsequent investigation, Wackman and Ward,³⁶ using a similar methodology, studied the watching behavior of high, medium, and low cognitive level children. This division was based on the Piagetian system.¹⁶ The low cognitive level was the equivalent of the pre-operational stage and the high cognitive level was the equivalent of the concrete-operational stage; the medium level belonged between the two stages. As one would expect, the low-level children exhibited a high degree of stability, whereas the high cognitive level subjects showed a high degree of differentiation in their attention behavior. The medium cognitive level children fell roughly in the middle.



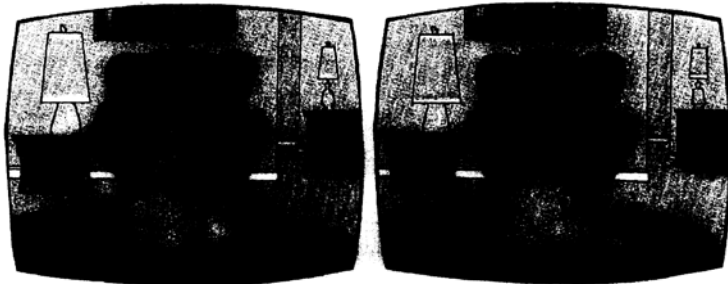
Wackman and Ward³⁶ reported some further data which indicate that, in general, nursery school subjects are less stable in their attention than kindergarten or second-grade subjects. These

results are consistent with the previous finding that younger children tend to have a shorter attention span than older children.³¹

To our knowledge, three studies have examined the modes of information processing of TV commercials by children of different ages.^{7,36,41} All of these studies employed the interview method; the children were asked questions such as "What is a TV commercial?" "Do TV commercials always tell the truth?" "How is a TV commercial different from a TV program?" etc. The researchers were looking for some developmental trends in information processing.

It has commonly been assumed by several developmental theorists that all children progress through discrete cognitive stages.^{13,14,22,33} In Blatt *et al.*'s words: "lower stages of reasoning are more concrete, literal and undifferentiated; higher stages are more complex, involve greater degrees of abstract thinking in symbol recognition and analysis, and in general show more differentiation and integration of perception and cognition".^{7, p. 452}

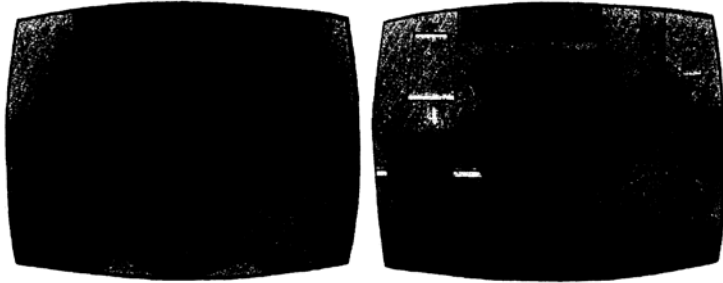
The three studies^{7,36,41} indicated an expected developmental trend in the information processing of TV commercial messages by children. Blatt *et al.* summarized the trends along four dimensions: (a) "*cognitive-affective focus* refers to the kind or quality of physical, emotional or intellectual stimuli which are most likely to appeal to (be perceived by, remembered by, or reacted to) members of advancing age groups (p. 462). Young children have a tendency to focus on concrete products that concern their momentary physical impulses (concrete/impulsive). The focus shifts to affective/symbolic elements with age and eventually to rational/thematic aspects; (b) "*mode of assimilation* refers to the ways in which children recall and use the information they receive from television advertisements" (p. 462). Small children's recall is imitative and coincidental, older children's recall is based on their responses or associations to stimuli in the ads; and still older subjects remember on the basis of a commercial's 'content' and 'purpose'; (c) "*differentiation* refers to the degree to which children can distinguish fantasy from fact, products advertised from advertisements themselves, and elements of commercials from an 'undifferentiated' to an abstracted or 'gestalted' integrated whole" (p. 463). Differentiation appears to increase with age; (d) "*level of judgment* refers to the stage of cognitive or ego development at which a child judges or is susceptible to appeal of a commercial message" (p. 464). Blatt *et al.* indicated that these levels correspond to the developmental and psychosexual stages suggested by various developmental theorists.^{13,14,21,26}



It should be noted that Blatt *et al.*'s conclusions were not based on any quantitative analysis or statistical comparisons, and were highly impressionistic. However, the study has its exploratory value and could provide important guidelines for more systematic research in the future.

A later study by Ward, Reale, and Levinson⁴¹ lent some general support to Blatt *et al.*'s impressions. It demonstrated that younger children show low awareness of the concept of commercials and often even explain them as part of the program. Older children, on the other hand, indicate greater awareness; they are conscious of the purpose to sell and of the concept of sponsorship. Complexity of recall was discovered to be positively related to age: older children more often recalled several images from commercials in a "coherent, unified sequence."

Two further studies, reported by Wackman and Ward,³⁶ were conducted to test predictions based on Piaget's theoretical discussion concerning differences in the cognitive structures of pre-operational and concreteoperational children.¹⁶ Wackman and Ward reported that "in general, younger, low cognitive level children, who are similar to Piaget's pre-operational child, give responses which clearly indicate the operation of tendencies to focus on only a few dimensions (centration), dimensions which are largely perceptual in nature (high perceptual boundedness). On the other hand, older, higher cognitive level children, who are most similar to Piaget's concrete operational child, respond in terms of more dimensions (decentration), and the dimensions they focus on tend to be less perceptual and more symbolic in nature".^{36, p. 22} The investigators also noted that the responses of the medium cognitive level children generally fell in the middle.



A few interview studies have examined children's and adolescents' attitudes toward commercials. These studies have consistently demonstrated that with increasing age the attitudes of the subjects toward TV ads tend to become more negative.^{7,29,40,42,44} For example, Blatt *et al.* indicated that while kindergarten subjects showed confusion about commercials, the second graders exhibited "concrete distrust" that was frequently based on experience with advertised products. The investigators also discovered that the fourth graders mistrusted specific commercials and their "tricky" elements, and the sixth graders showed a "global mistrust" of all commercials.

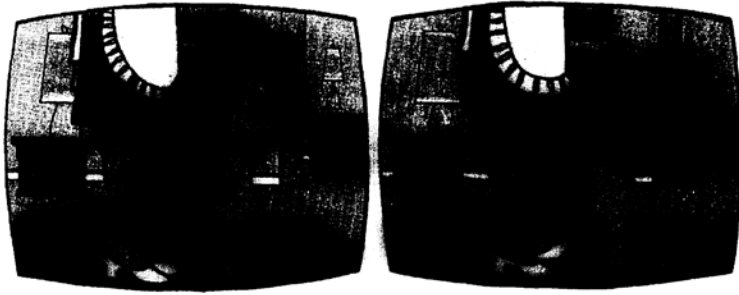
Sex differences in this area are not prominent: girls have a tendency to develop a disbelief of TV commercials at an earlier age, but this difference disappears by the time the children are approximately nine years old.²⁹

Wells⁴⁴ claimed a noticeable change in the program preference of children between five and twelve years of age: both younger boys and girls are particularly fond of cartoons; older boys prefer cowboys, soldier, and monster pictures, while older girls single out programs dealing with young doctors, young detectives, and soap operas. Surprisingly, no change in reactions to commercials was observed: "children who spurn cartoon programs as too juvenile to be worthy of their attention still react extremely positively to cartoon commercials." Furthermore, the reactions of older boys generally are very similar to those of older girls. Wells speculated that children may not be putting the same demands on commercials as on programs, because commercials may be perceived as being "apart from life, as life is defined by the program."

Wells also discovered (44) that although children are willing to go along with the "fantastic" situations, they expect adherence to the rules that would apply if those situations were *true*. For example, they do not object to the existence of Superman and his superpowers, but they are "turned off" if he does not use these powers at moments that call for them.

Ward and Robertson⁴² discovered a relationship between the attitudes toward TV commercials and certain characteristics of the subjects and their families. They found that more "materialistic" subjects have more positive attitudes than less "materialistic" ones, and also that a negative relationship exists between the social class of the adolescents and their attitude toward TV ads.

Furthermore, they noted that discussions of consumption matters in the family and mutual advice concerning such matters are related to positive attitudes toward advertising.

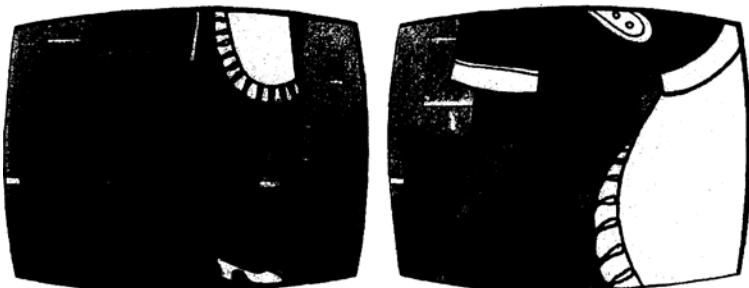


Several studies have investigated the relationships between mass-media use, parent-child interaction, and the consequent effects.^{8,18,24,28} However, limited attention has been paid to the influence of television advertising on intrafamily interaction and the subsequent purchase-related behavior of children and parents.

Yankelovich⁴⁵ and McNeal²⁹ indicated that children are influenced by commercials and that they, consequently, attempt to influence the parental buying behavior. Ward and Wackman³⁶ collected the responses of 132 mothers of 5-12 year old children to a detailed questionnaire. They discovered that mothers feel that younger children are more influenced by TV ads than older children. However, mothers had a greater tendency to yield to the requests of older children than to those of younger children. It was also noted that mothers who spent more time watching television, and those who had a positive attitude toward commercials, yielded more often to children's influence attempts. Commercials for food products relevant to children were perceived by mothers to have the strongest influence on children, and mothers were most likely to yield to requests for such products.

Ward and Wackman³⁶ commented that children's influence attempts and parental yielding may be related to the general patterns of parent-child interaction. As yet, no empirical evidence bears on this question; however, Berey and Pollay's⁶ study, though not dealing with mass-media influences, demonstrated that highly child-centered mothers bought their children's favorite cereals less often than mothers who were not as child-centered. Need for further research in this area is obvious.

Several laboratory studies have attempted to determine the effects of the race of the model on observational learning of children.^{12,25,27,32} White children, generally, have been shown to imitate white models more than black models. However, the results concerning black subjects are not unequivocal.



Little attention has been devoted to the race of models in TV commercials and its influence on children's reactions. To the writers' knowledge, only Barry and Hansen (4) have attempted to examine this issue. They discovered that "black children's stated preferences are positively influenced by the presence of a black character in a commercial" (p. 66). The study, however, contains several flaws in its methodology: the confounding effects due to prior familiarity with the brands and the commercials,

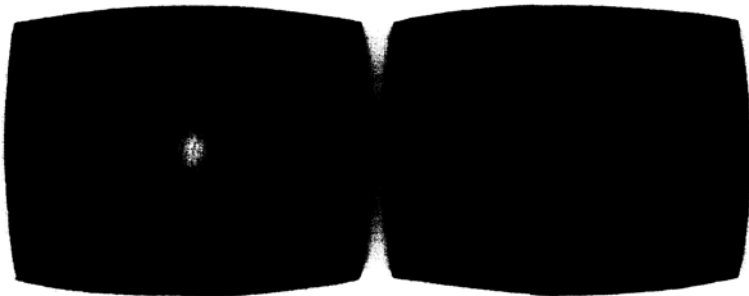
the offer of a premium with one of the brands, the presence of an animated comic figure in one of the commercials and a number of other factors cast serious doubts on the validity of the results of the study.

It is evident that compared with other aspects of television, research on the effects of TV commercials is very simplistic and cannot be wed for anything more than generating hypotheses for future research.

The need for more controlled and systematic research is obvious. The interested investigators can learn a great deal about methodology from the studies dealing with the effects of televised violence and prosocial behavior on children.

It is surprising to note that this seemingly important area has received so little attention from developmental researchers, even though it has been frequently dwelt upon by television critics. Ward³⁹ suggests three interrelated reasons for the striking lack of interest: (a) compared to the effect of televised violence, to political socialization through TV, and to the instructional uses of television, this field is not considered sufficiently respectable in academic circles; (b) many developmental researchers share the belief that research would have little impact; and (c) it might be used poorly by the policy makers.

Ward³⁷ and Feldman and Wolf¹⁵ discussed in detail the numerous changes that have been brought against the advertising industry. Several of these charges can easily be reformulated to develop testable predictions. However, many of the charges may not be independent and may in fact be manifestations of the same latent theme. Instead of testing all of them independently, it would perhaps be most reasonable, as Feldman and Wolf¹⁵ have suggested, to first identify the latent themes and then develop a set of interrelated research problems. Such research, hopefully, would not only provide guidelines for those interested in monitoring the effects of TV advertisements, but also further our understanding of children and their development.



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