

## **Title: Pre-School Children and Marketing Communication**

### **Abstract**

Within the context of an existing body of work regarding children and marketing communications, which largely places meaningful interaction with marketing communication as out with the ability of pre school children, research has been conducted upon parents of pre-school children, nursery teachers, and pre-school children themselves within the environment of their nursery.

Parents relate their experience that typically from the age of three their children recognise television advertising and have commenced retail interactions. Nursery teachers have noted that the children under their care personally interact within the context of brands, and the children themselves via their own verbalisations provide indications that in some cases at least four year old children have an idea of advertising intent, and three year old children typically are able to recognise advertising as being distinct from programme material.

### **Introduction**

Since the 1950s-60s interest in children as consumers has been a substantial academic research area, and the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced a sizeable body of work in the field (John 1999) Research literature broadly suggests that understanding of the nature and purpose of advertising appears to develop between the age of five and ten, with seven to eight being the pivotal age where children are widely considered to become aware of the motives and methods of the advertiser (Blosser and Roberts 1985, Lawlor and Prothero 2003, Lindstrom 2004, Rieken and Yavas 1990, Martensen and Hansen 2001, Chan and McNeal 2004). Such attention has reflected children's increasing significance as consumers and consumption influencers, with initial concerns over whether younger children were psychologically equipped to deal with marketing communications. For example, Clark and Michael (2003) assert that advertising is exploitative of children under the age of eight.

A number of studies, (Adler 1980, Blosser and Roberts 1985, Butter *et al* 1981, Dorr 1986, Gaines and Esserman 1981, Palmer and McDowell 1979) have related five years of age as the earliest that children are able to distinguish between program material and advertising. Thus, initially it appeared that there was a body of evidence that pre-school children would be unable

to comprehend, or even recognise television advertising, (Gaines and Esserman (1981), Stutts, Vance and Huddleson (1981), Palmer and McNeil (1991), Werner (1989).

In contrast, a number of studies have indicated some level of understanding in pre-school children, (Wartella and Ettema (1974), Levin, Petros and Pertella (1982), Condry (1989), Donohue, Henke, and Donohue (1980).

Although the preschool age group was once, both neglected and avoided, by marketers, it is now a primary target group (Ford 2005), as corporate marketers carry out research with four year olds, they are viewed as important consumers, and consumption influencers. This research aims to provide input concerning preschool children's recognition and understanding of, and response to television advertising and wider marketing communications and preschool children's influence upon parental brand choice.

## **Methods**

Research has been conducted by interviews with twenty parents of pre-school children, interviews with four nursery teachers of these children, and stimulus led group discussions with ten pre-school children themselves within the environment of their nursery. The families involved in this research fall within a C1/C2 social categorisation and are geographically situated in the central belt of Scotland, and the children are described by the nursery in question as being of average mixed ability. Ethical approval has been gained from all relevant parties.

The nature of this research is to derive intelligence from triangulation of three data strands. Firstly interviews have been conducted with parents as conduits through which children's experiences and behaviours will be related. Secondly, a group of ten pre school children have been researched in the setting of their nursery by the field researcher, who is employed in an official capacity in the nursery, and who is a regular day-carer of the children who have taken part in the research. This research approach contains an ethnographic quality as the child respondents were merely engaging in ordinary nursery activity. While an acquiescence bias can exist in data from any source (Creswell 2007) children are considered likely to be more susceptible to such bias. The ordinary everyday-ness of this approach using familiar adults, and the supplementary perspectives of parents and nursery teachers has been designed to minimise such bias from this data strand.

Research was conducted after the children had had their afternoon nap, as this was normally the time of day that they would watch a film, or television programme. The children were separated into two groups three and four year olds and informed that they would be shown

three short videos, and that afterwards there would be a discussion on them. These videos were actually three television advertisements, which included the promotions of; Kellogg's Choco Rocks, Toys-R-U's and Milky-Way chocolate bars. These advertisements had been running around the Christmas period. Parents had been shown stills from the adverts and asked whether they had ever discussed them with their children, with a uniformly negative response, although most of the parents recognised the advertisements. Whilst therefore the children may have seen the adverts before, they had not been engaged in an explanation of them with their parents. While an acquiescence bias can exist in data from any source (Creswell 2007) children are considered likely to be more susceptible to such bias. The ordinary everyday-ness of this approach using familiar adults, and the supplementary perspectives of parents and nursery teachers has been designed to minimise such bias from this data strand. The tone of the research was as of a game wherein the children are observed having fun, and some measure of enthusiasm has been evident in the children's response to being asked about advertisements.

Thirdly interviews have been conducted with four nursery teachers in order to provide data concerning their observations about the social interactions of the children and whether and how brands and marketing play any part in ordinary day to day relations. This compliments the observations of parents as it relates to a different social environment than the home. It also provides the opportunity to compare and contrast the views of teachers and parents generating a level of consistency in adult apprehensions about the behaviour of young children.

Data from the three strands has been analysed in an iterative process of theme identification, wherein themes have been built up through repeated readings and have been used progressively to inform the analysis resulting in the conceptual groupings that follow. Thematic development has been influenced by reviewing the literature and from the characteristics of topic being studied as well as data grounded in the results.

The following themes have emerged from the data and these are discussed within the context of existing literature. The quotes that are brought forward here represent firstly parents of respondent children (P3), the number indicating the age of their child, nursery teachers (N), and the children themselves (C3), the number indicating the age of the child. Results have been organised by theme rather than by data strand as response from teachers, parents and children are combined to form a multi-perspective platform.

## **Results and Discussion**

By two years of age 90% of children are watching television in some capacity (Jones et al, 2013), and on average, Britain's children watch more than 17 hours of television a week, (Moss, 2012). Parents were asked for input here and most respondents came in at or above the national average for children generally, corresponding with the view that children, from an increasingly early age are spending more time watching television, (Barr-Anderson et al. 2011, Funk et al. 2009, and Yellowlees 2010).

One mother (P3) stated, *"Half the day, basically till mommy comes home and takes over the telly, but if he's not on the telly he's on the iPad"* (P3). *"When I put the telly on, the only reason I put it on it's because I'm cooking on a hot stove and that's keeping them out of harm's way"*

Parents were in unanimous agreement that children started to recognise television advertisements from around three years of age. A parent (P4) commented that *"...in between three and four, round about that age, she started to recognise adverts..."* and similarly (P4), *"Yes, I think a three year old, when my eldest daughter was three; I think she could've recognized adverts"* and (P3), *"He has over the last few months"* and (P4), *"Aye she knows what an advert is, because she will say"*.

During the sessions with children, it was clear that they realised that they were looking at advertisements, as some of the children clearly verbalised their knowledge of this, and the others were obviously of a like mind, going by the verbal and physical signs of agreement. For example, a succinct observation was offered by one child (C4); *I definitely really like adverts to watch...they're adverts because they just show us about things."*

Two of the children, (C4), exhibited clear understanding of advertising intent by way of a direct verbalisation to that extent.

*"Well, actually, they really want you to buy things, at shops" "They're trying to make you feel like you want to buy things"*

When we consider the implications of this word use, we have a "they" being the advertiser, having a "want" which is to say a purpose, and "trying to make you feel" that "you want to buy things" This is a perfectly respectable account of television advertising, and has been verbally expressed in a straightforward manner. The broad consensus in the literature puts the age we should expect understanding of advertising intent to be evident between the age of five and ten. This study shows that some pre-school children understand sufficiently for lucid verbalisations.

Some children suggested that advertising is simply for their amusement:

*"Yeah because if children like adverts, they'll put them into the movies, and then they can watch the adverts"* (C4) .... *"People put adverts in computers and televisions because children like to watch them"* (C4) Here a sentiment is being expressed to the extent that advertising is being provided to children because of their positive attitudes towards it, and recognition that it appears in multiple

media sources. Again there is an understanding that adverts are being provided by people, put into electronic devices by people, so that children can be shown things, as it were a service to children, and a welcome one at that.

Some opinions were expressed by the children that there was a relationship between adverts and movies.

*"Because, because, because...to let you watch movies..."* (C4) *"They make you watch movies"* (P3) *"They're things that come on DVD's, before the DVD's start..."* (C4) and there were indications that the adverts were being placed in the movies because children liked them to be there, *"...if children like the adverts they'll put them into the movies, and then they can watch the adverts..."* (C4) *"...because children like to watch them..."* (C4).

This may be of course naïve, yet if it is a generalised point one could say that advertisers place their messages in a form and media that will be liked by their intended audience.

Two of the parents (P3) however opined that they were not sure about their children's recognition of advertising intent.

*"...my child isn't aware that the adverts are trying to sell her something"...* *"I don't think he knows that they're trying to sell him something..."* *"...when she sees characters in the adverts, I do wonder if she isn't aware of the distinction so much."* This corresponds with Verharen (1991) who considers that the use of cartoon characters diminished young children's' ability to distinguish advertising.

A nursery teacher revealed that she believed that the children who are able to state the commercial intent of advertising, may be simply repeating what they have heard, and may not possess a true understanding of it:

*"They'll say that (they understand) because they've heard it said before, but they won't fully understand what it means"* Whilst this is a completely valid observation concerning pre-school children's verbalizations concerning their understanding of advertising intent, it could just as easily be a critique of the attitudes and opinions of adults who tend to acquire rather than originate their views within a paradigm of mutualism.

Parent (P4) noted that she had to explain the intent of an advertisement to her preschool child, as she had believed everything they said about products was true:

*"...I made a point of trying to explain to her that it was just because some people wanted to make some money..."*

Were a commenter upon this study to complain that pre-school children have learned from their parents, and that they are reiterating their views on what advertising is about, one would have to say that this is very much the way of it when one is three or four years old.

Many of the interviewees, both parents and nursery teachers, had some reservations about marketing to pre school aged children. *"I think there should be more playing outdoors, healthy eating marketing..."* (N). Thus products or activities which are perceived as being beneficial to pre-schoolers should be marketed to them. The issue therefore is what is being marketed, not the marketing itself. *"If it's marketing something that's healthy for them, then great...go for it..."* *"If it's promoting something positive, like eating healthily, or exercising, it's a good thing..."* (N)

By this sentiment the nursery teachers are inferring that they would anticipate that pre-school children would respond to social advertising of this sort.

A nursery teacher explained that she felt this interaction with marketing could have a detrimental affect on pre-schoolers, *"It's not healthy, neither in a physical nor mental sense." "It sends them the message that the wrong things are important in life-it suggests that the more toys, and possessions you have, the happier you will be, so they're chasing the wrong things, from a really early age"* (N) *"It's not fair because they don't understand they just see and want what they are seeing"* (P3).

Some participants of this study believe that advertising to preschool children is all part of consumer socialisation. *"I suppose it's a way for them to find out about stuff, erm and it gives them a better understanding of various toys and the way they work"* (P3) *"I suppose it's an everyday part of life, it's not as if she is going to grow up without advertising in her life"* (P4) *"I don't think there is any way of avoiding it and it would be quite a dark and dusky world if you didn't have advertising because every time you walk out the door there's advertising"* (P4).

A particularly positive interpretation of advertising to pre school children was provided by one parent (P3) *"The Kids need to understand the economics and the economics of the world, and it doesn't matter what age, because they pick up really quickly whether they are intelligent or not adverts play apart in every child's role, I doesn't matter if it's a cleaning product or a toy, I think it helps them understand what's out there" "...it's just something we have to put up with...it has made her quite greedy...the more she sees the more she wants..."*

Most of the parents had commented on how misleading the advertisements were to the children and the parents. For example, *"Some of the stuff is a total let down, she will ask for something and you will buy it and it's not what it was supposed to be and then it just lies in a box or something"* (P3) and *"The adverts should be more realistic to what you are actually getting"* (P3) This indicated that parents are feeling let down by advertising misleading children, and ultimately themselves.

A range of parental responses provide illumination of the motivational qualities of advertising to pre-schoolers, for example. *"Yes, anything that comes on, she will say she wants it"* (P3), *"She will ask for stuff or she will talk about stuff that's in an advert...she will say like if she wants some thing has caught her eye, or she will talk about a character in an advert"* (P3), *"Yep, yes he tells me what he wants"*

*just now he wants robots” (P3), “if she sees something on the TV, then you’re out and she notices it, she remembers, like she’s got a really good memory, she will say to you that was on the telly, I want that and she kinda expects it... I try to be tough, try and say no” (P4)*

Borzekowski (2001) and Taveras *et.al* (2006) have reported that preschool children are more likely to choose brands that have been advertised.

It was also noted that children were requesting products from their favourite television programs. *“If she is watching Sophia the first and an advert comes on selling a necklace and that, she knows that is Sophia the first so wants it” (P3)* The distinction between advertising and programme material may not be so clear cut and meaningful in regard to children’s response to marketing communications, as many programmes are heavily merchandised.

Connor (2006) suggests that many organizations use easily identifiable logos, in order to make them more memorable to young children. Our findings seem to indicate that this method is effective, as several participants were able to name, and recognise brands.

Children were able to recognise the Kellogg’s logo as well as stating where it would be found: *“I saw the box of chocolate rice...at the shops” “Tesco...it would’ve been at Tesco” (C3)* During the discussion of the Toys-R-U’s advertisement, the brand’s logo was frozen on the screen, and some of the children were able to read it from recognition: *“...it says Toys-R-U’s”* and were able to offer an explanation as to its significance: *“It’s a name for a toy place area” (C3) “...it’s where the princesses live.” (C3).*

A nursery teacher explained that a two year old child had recently recognised a brand logo: *“...we were having pancakes for snack, and one of the wee boys saw the packet, and piped up “oh pancakes from Asda”(N)* It was further noted that pre-schoolers will regularly mention brand names, especially supermarket chains: *“Daily, you will hear things daily”, “Down to things like shops, they’ll know different shop brands, supermarkets...places like Sainsbury’s, Tesco, Asda” (N)*

A parent noted that her child is familiar with certain restaurant brands, and logos, and can even describe what food products are offered at individual chains: *“She knows what to expect from those sorts of different branded places”, “She also always knows the specific dishes she wants” (P4).*

If it can be established that pre-schoolers are able to recognise brands, and recall brand logos from memory, it may be relevant to question whether this means they have any affect on product consumption.

Parents were asked if they ever felt pressured by their children to buy a product from an advert They all answered yes and some stated that they had felt more pressure during the Christmas

period that has just past. There has therefore been a clear indication that preschool children exert purchase pressure upon their parents, as has been noted in older children. (P3) stated *"Parents sometimes can't afford these products and put themselves in debt to buy them"* and (P3) *"As a parent you don't want them to miss out on anything, erm so you want to get them everything they want and ask for, but sometimes it can be difficult...I do feel pressured"*.

A nursery teacher suggested that young children take in information about brands when out shopping with their parents (N) *"...all getting stored in their wee brains, and when it comes on TV they recognize it"*, (N) *"lots of adverts even show images of children shopping to show them where they can get the products, so they know exactly how to acquire things,"*

One parent explained that her child will view some form of marketed product, and it will be continually ask for it in store: *"...she'll see something...and say how much she loves it, and how much wants it"* (P3) yet claimed to be resistant to such pressure.

However, a parent (P3) points out that she does not feel pressured to purchase a product, simply because her child requests it: *"I don't feel I have to get her something, just because she's seen it marketed, and wants it"* Another parent (P4) noted that when his two year old, and four year old children pester him for a product, he does not feel forced to buy it, but instead looks at it as a good opportunity to explain that they cannot have everything they want.

One parent added that peer pressure is a factor for pre-schoolers, and adds that one of her child's favourite toys was introduced to him through his nursery friends. He had not seen any other marketing for the product, but wanted it after seeing his peers with it, *"That came totally through social avenues; we never showed him any commercials."* (P4) and another parent noted that, *"They'll see their friends bringing in all these different branded products."* (P3). There are indications of innovation diffusion as a consumption driver in preschool children.

Pre-schoolers' enjoyment of television advertising appears determined by whether there are characters involved. When the Toys-R-U's advertisement was played, many of the children became excited, and appeared to be very attentive. After the advertisement had finished, many of the children could recall the characters they had seen, and one child described the outfit of a character: *"I saw pretend Princess Belle, with lovely, long hair, and a dress and, and rose on the dress, with lots of jewels"* and one of the parents revealed that her child had spoken, in detail, about the characters he had seen, in this advertisement, sometime afterwards: *"He came home from nursery talking about all these toys"* (P3). One parent explained that her child becomes excited by any familiar character. She adds that recognisable television characters impact greatly on her child's product preferences: *"If it's a character she recognises from TV, she'll get excited if she sees it, so even*

*yoghurts with Peppa Pig on them, as soon as she sees the character, she wants them...* (P3). A parent further noted, *"Like the packets of tissues with Toy Story characters on them, they're for the whole family to use, and aren't anything exciting for them, but they want them, because of the characters on the packet"* (P3).

The nursery teachers confirmed these views *"If its things that they watch on TV, like cartoon characters, and there's maybe an advert comes on involving that character, then that'll probably grab their attention"* (N) and moreover it was noted that if a child dislikes the character, it could cause them to dismiss the marketing material, and the product, completely.

Interestingly the use of characters can have a positive influence upon parental guidance, as on parent (P3) pointed out that if she wanted her children to eat a certain type of food, she may buy a product that they like the packaging of, in order to encourage them to eat it: *"...for example if they haven't eaten yoghurt in a while, and I'm trying to get them to eat some, I will buy the yoghurt pots with the characters on them..."*

A rather profound suggestion was received from a child (C3) when confronted by the Toys-R-Us Christmas Advert. The research was conducted two months after Christmas, and when asked what they thought it was about, the child commented, *"I think it maked us good again..."* a reference to the role of advertising in acquiring the requisite goodness essential for the receipt of Santa's measured generosity. Certainly research into the relationship between, in the minds of young children, the reality of Christmas advertising and the fantasy of Santa would be most interesting, yet most difficult to perform without the risk of disillusionment.

One of the nursery teachers offered her opinion, in regards to how she believed they would have differed, if the same study had been conducted a decade ago, at the start of her career, *"I can imagine there would've been quite a difference, actually.", "When I got my first job in a nursery, the children were really attached to their characters, and I suppose they probably would've known a few brands, but not to the same extent"*. She added that, she believes preschool children are now displaying a similar relationship with marketing, to that which one would expect school aged children to have, *"I see children as young as three, being as engaged with marketing, as you used to find a seven or eight year old would be"*.

## **Conclusions**

In assessing findings, some preschool children have demonstrated the ability to recognize and, in some cases, describe the commercial intent of a television advertisement. Research with

children suggested this can become apparent around the age of four, yet the parental and staff interviews imply from around three years children can identify a television advertisement. Many parents and nursery teachers view advertising to pre-school children as unethical, however some of the nursery teachers added that this was dependent on the product being marketed. Findings suggest that preschool children, possess an awareness of different commercial brands. The results of the interviews, suggested that the reason for this was, predominately, due to the influence of family members, who may have introduced them to different brands, and consulted them on purchasing decisions. Interviews with parents indicate their children's familiarity with brands, does not always translate into them dictating purchasing habits.

All research data strands herein indicate that preschool children are attracted to familiar characters. When images of these characters are included on packaging, pre-schoolers seem disposed to ask their parents to purchase these products, instead of the other available options. A study, conducted in Australia, uncovered similar results (Hebden et al. 2011). As characterisation represents a common branding mechanism for child orientated brands, it is worthwhile to pursue research in this direction particularly in light of the merchandising driven blur between advertising and programme material. One must ask whether merchandise heavy children's programmes are not in fact a form of advertising, and whether children are not quite correct in their lack of distinction therein.

Given the extreme youth of pre-school children, the plasticity of their development potential, we would strongly recommend that this subject area be developed in order to ascertain whether, as Clark and Michael (2003) posit, these young children are being exploited, and whether as John (1999) suggests they are less able to defend themselves against the pressure that advertising exerts upon their emotional and rational drives. Ultimately, if consumer society appears to be permitting marketers to communicate with very young children, and if as young as three year olds are interacting with such communications, their extreme youth should deserve that as much as possible is understood about the particulars and implications of this phenomenon.

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