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In a world dominated by a consumerist ideology, children are constantly being exposed to a range of advertising and marketing messages, with communications not necessarily targeted at them having similar influence over their attitudes and behaviour, as those that are directed at them. Recent research suggests that exposure to a range of marketing messages, such as advertising, branding, sponsorships and sales promotions, may have a profound effect on children's behaviour, and, in some cases, actually harm children's ability to make rational and sensible choices. Retail clothing advertising targeted at adults, for example, has been linked to early, inappropriate sexualisation of childhood, while fast food and soft drink marketing has been implicated in increasing children's obesity rates. Consumer psychologists have been asking if it is possible to protect children from the harmful effects of marketing communications, particularly when methods being used to measure these effects may not be appropriate or wide-ranging enough to measure children's implicit (or unconscious) attitudes, and their affect on behaviour. If this is the case, then, three popular corporate defences of marketing to children – parental responsibility, cognitive understanding, and consumer socialisation – become much harder to sustain. In this light, policy makers, marketers, and the general community, have a responsibility to be more cautious when developing marketing communication campaigns that children will be exposed to.
Advertising and its Effect on Children’s Attitudes: ‘... At Least, Do No Harm’

Paul Harrison

Introduction

The role of advertising, and the issue of children's exposure to marketing communications, is an ongoing source of debate amongst policy makers, advocacy groups, and business. Among the strongest defenders of marketing to children are businesses whose direct or indirect customers are children, as well as the advertising industry that makes advertising for children, and the industry lobby groups and peak bodies that wage public relations campaigns on behalf of the interests of the industry. In addition, government members also defend advertising to children. Even some parents defend advertising to children, suggesting that their own children are well protected by them from advertising because they are able to stop them watching TV, view the Internet, or glance at a billboard. Even some children defend advertising – they like it, they learn from it, and anyway, why shouldn’t they see ads – after all, everyone else does.

In summary, these debates tend to centre on children’s understanding of the persuasive intent of adverts, and their capacity to employ logical skills to bear on the content of the marketing message. What has been neglected in these discussions, though, is acknowledgement that marketing messages can also influence children’s implicit attitudes towards products. Recent research has suggested that implicit attitudes have a stronger influence over behaviour than previously thought, and, therefore, it can be argued that repeated marketing to children will have psychological and behavioural effects that are beyond the control of children and parents alike. If this is correct, then, it is highly probable that three popular corporate defences – parental responsibility, cognitive understanding, and consumer socialisation – become much harder to sustain.
The Three Popular Defences

In the 'parental responsibility' defence, the argument presented suggests that because advertising is legal and permitted, parents should be responsible for preventing children from viewing inappropriate advertising. This argument is often reinforced with a general statement along the lines of 'we don't want to create a 'nanny state', and parents should be left alone to look after their children however they like'. This is the essence of the argument presented by former Minister for Health, Tony Abbott, when he was asked on ABC Radio Adelaide in 2005 about whether governments have a role to play in regulating advertising to children, 'Look, ads don't make people fat. What makes people fat is the food that goes into their mouths... and if parents are worried that their kids are getting fat, then they can do something about it by taking the soft drink out of the fridge, by taking fast food off the menu... These are the things that we ought to do about fat kids, rather than thinking that there is some magic bullet by banning advertising.'

The second defence, 'cognitive understanding', tends to approach the argument by looking at

TABLE 1: EXPLORING THE DEndefences

The following table examines the defences and the arguments if we consider implicit attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEFENCE STRUCTURE</th>
<th>PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The statement</td>
<td>It is really the fault of parents if they let their children see ads because they should exercise responsibility to protect their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The key</td>
<td>Someone else is responsible, not the advertising or the advertiser. Parents really should face up to the reality and responsibility of parenting in a media culture. Mostly the parents get the blame with this argument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The argument</td>
<td>It's up to the parents to make sure that children don't do things that parents don't want them to. If parents exercised their responsibilities properly then children wouldn't be watching inappropriate ads, listening to inappropriate ads, seeing billboards and posters from the car. Parents would be taking action to prevent it, or they would make sure that their children were properly trained from the earliest age, to know what was going on in advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The implications</td>
<td>Parents are being 'bad parents' if they let their children do things they shouldn't; parents need to lift their game; children need to be better managed and supervised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But what about implicit attitudes?</td>
<td>Parents can influence their children's behaviour and explicit attitudes through education and discussion, but this may not have any effect on implicit attitudes. With more advertising, and more sophisticated advertising to children, it's getting much harder for parents to influence their children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
children and suggesting that they are smart enough to know what's going on. Children know what ads do – that they try to persuade them; and they have, or can develop, the skills that will allow them to critically evaluate ads, and make decisions about what they mean. Many of the media examinations of this issue ask children about this issue and, generally, children seem to be able to provide a pretty rational overview of the role of advertising. Often, kids will say that they know that ads are trying to make them buy something, but the marketing does not suck them in.

The third defence, ‘consumer understanding’, says that advertising is part of modern life and experiencing ads allows children to prepare for their life in an appropriate way. With other potentially harmful activities, such as crossing the road, children learn predominantly through observation of key role models, and, therefore, exposure to marketing messages will help them to understand the world.

These apparently reasonable and persuasive defences of advertising to children, however, may not necessarily hold in the light of recent research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVE UNDERSTANDING</th>
<th>CONSUMER SOCIALISATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children are smart – they know ads try to persuade them.</td>
<td>As they develop, children quickly learn to understand what's going on in an ad and can critically assess it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While some children may be too young to understand advertising, by the time they're seven or eight (according to some research), children can understand advertising and its effects, and, therefore, it is acceptable to advertise to children.</td>
<td>If children were not exposed to advertising from an early age, they would not be protected from becoming naïve consumers – they wouldn't have the opportunity to develop their analytic skills and would be disadvantaged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See above.</td>
<td>As part of living in a modern consumer world, children need to learn to make consumer judgments for themselves. The only way they can do this is by exposure to advertising from which they learn how to consume effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The argument leaves open what to do about advertising to children who are under seven – this could be addressed, as in the current regulatory environment, by restricting advertising in programs that are likely to be watched by children of a certain age. However, it leaves unaddressed the issue of advertising in unregulated media or on multiple media platforms, product placement in children's programs, such as films, and so on.</td>
<td>This argument does not consider the role of implicit attitudes, and assumes that consumption, in general, is a good thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposing a child to advertising from an early age may lead to the uncontrollable development of implicit attitudes. These implicit attitudes may be beyond parental influence and contradict both the parent's and the child's own beliefs. This could lead to uncontrolled or unwanted consumption by the child.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Role of Implicit Attitudes

In psychology, an attitude is defined as a pattern of thinking that will typically be reflected in a person's behaviour. Researchers have identified two kinds of attitude, an explicit attitude and an implicit attitude. There are some important differences between them. With an explicit attitude, you can think about it, reflect on it, and make a decision about whether you think it's truthful or not. If you decide that it's not true, or after a time you reach that conclusion, then you can make a decision not to believe in it, and subsequently attempt to change behaviour associated with that attitude.

Much of the industry and academic research into attitudes requires that people provide ratings on their attitudes toward products. In reality, though, these ratings rely on people talking only about their explicit (or conscious) attitudes, and tend to be based on what Boston College Professor of Consumer Psychology, Arch Woodside (2006, p. 257), refers to as 'naïve subjective personal introspection'. This approach also misses some other key issues, because measuring explicit attitudes relies on three assumptions about a person's response to a questionnaire:

1. It assumes that the person has an opinion or attitude about the product, brand, or idea (such as in political polling);
2. It assumes that the person is aware of, and has introspective access to, that attitude, and,
3. It assumes that the person is willing to share this attitude accurately.

So already, we can see some holes in how we currently assess a person's attitude, and subsequently use this information about their attitudes to make assumptions about consumer behaviour. To top this off, other research suggests that people actually infer these attitudes from observations of their own behaviour, their current thoughts and feelings, their current mood, and the nature of the social context, rather than any genuine capacity to know what their real attitudes are.

Implicit (or unconscious) attitudes add another, even more complicated, dimension to this picture – because they're out of conscious reach, you aren't able to retrieve them, reflect on them, or put them into a propositional format. We form these implicit attitudes over long periods, and multiple exposures to all sorts of communications, and we are usually not aware that we are forming them. And because of that, they're difficult, if not impossible, to manage or shift, because you're not really aware that you have them. If you are under stress, or are subjected to some other form of ego depletion, then these kinds of attitudes are more likely to influence you without you even being aware of what's going on.

Studies are showing that these implicit attitudes have a strong influence on our behavior. Our implicit attitudes are closely related to spontaneous behaviour, and our explicit attitudes are related to deliberate choices that we make. Marketers use this knowledge to get you to make irrational choices that you wouldn't make under normal circumstances. A good example is the sensory overload that goes on in clothing shops – loud music, bright lights, not much room to move – all of these elements are designed to place you under stress, and hopefully create an environment where you buy something that you might not really want (although there are a whole range of other factors such as reciprocity and scarcity that might also be contributing to your decision).
In 2004, researchers at Warsaw and Washington Universities measured people’s implicit attitudes towards two leading yoghurt brands (Danone and Bakoma), two fast-food outlets (McDonald’s and fish and chip shops), and two brands of soft drink (Coke and Pepsi). In all three cases, they found that implicit attitudes had a strong effect on behaviour. Similarly, measurement of implicit attitudes towards McDonald’s versus fish and chip shops, and Coke versus Pepsi found, again, significantly stronger positive implicit attitudes towards the explicitly preferred and behaviourally endorsed product (Maison, Greenwald, and Bruin 2004). This research also found that implicit attitudes made a contribution to the prediction of consumer behaviour over-and-above that provided by explicit attitudes. Further research found that this contribution is greater for behaviour that takes place without the benefit of attentional resources. In other words, when consumers thought about what they would buy, their explicit attitudes were good predictors of their behaviour. But when they weren’t thinking much about their purchase, it was their implicit attitudes that best predicted their behaviour.

Research by Hoffman, Raunch, and Gawronski (2007) found that when people were in a relaxed state, and able to think clearly, their consumption of confectionary (e.g., chocolate) fell into line with their explicit standards for dietary restraint, i.e., they ate what they said they would, which tended to be healthy food. However, when they were placed under stress, or were tired and put under pressure, it was their implicit attitudes that best predicted confectionary consumption. What this suggests is that we will seek ‘comfort’ food when we aren’t feeling good, even when we know it isn’t good for us and when we wouldn’t normally eat it.

All this suggests that as in control and aware of our attitudes as we think we are, if we accept that children are even less cognitively resourced – because in addition to the information that adults are constantly taking in, they are also constantly grappling with new ideas and concepts – then children are at serious risk from all sorts of marketing communications, whether they are ‘targeted’ at them, or not.

Do Attitudes Matter When a Child Sees Marketing Messages?

There is currently very little work looking at children’s implicit attitudes. So far, no one has specifically explored the effect of children’s implicit consumer attitudes on behaviour, although a study by Pine and Veasey (2003) that examined children’s understanding of positive bias in marketing measures, suggested that advertising targeted at children (and also that which is not) did influence children’s implicit attitudes towards advertised products, and consumption in general. Similarly, a study by Rudman (2004) suggested that children’s early (even preverbal) experiences influenced attitudes, such as cultural biases, and cognitive consistency principles. What this means is that implicit attitudes in children are developing from an early age, and are influencing their choices and behaviour.

Advertising to children, then, seems likely to result in the development of implicit consumer attitudes that are: uncontrollable in their formation; highly resistant to change through reflection or reason by the self or others; and powerful contributors to consumer choice, particularly in ‘hour[s] of weakness’. Children will be exposed to advertising, whether targeted to them or not, and, as such, are likely to form implicit attitudes about consumption. In particular, the effect of advertising on children’s attitudes and behaviour is likely to emerge gradually, as well as the ability of children to articulate their understanding of marketing messages. »
Despite the absence of developmental research, from the existing literature with adults, it is arguable that children's implicit consumer attitudes will share the same important features. First, implicit attitudes will not necessarily be accessible to introspection or conscious report. Where a child's implicit attitude diverges from his/her explicit one, the conflicting implicit attitude will likely be inaccessible to the child, parents, teachers or marketing researchers via introspection or traditional self-report measures. Second, a child generally will not be able to reflect on, and reject or change, an implicit attitude that is not endorsed by her explicit values. Third, under conditions of low cognitive resources or time pressure, it is his/her implicit attitudes that will best predict his/her consumer preferences. It is worth noting that many social cognitive researchers suggest that the vast majority of our behaviour is triggered and guided by implicit processes (e.g., Bargh and Chartrand 1999). Indeed, given that children's attentional and reflective resources are likely both to be more easily depleted and less likely to be deployed than adults (e.g., John 1999), it could even be predicted that implicit attitudes may predict consumer preferences even in cognitively ideal choice environments.

What Should We Do?

‘The conceptions of childhood will long remain latent in the mind, to reappear in every hour of weakness, when the tension of reason is relaxed, and the power of old associations is supreme’ (Lecky 1891; cited in Wilson et al. 2000).

Society accepts that it has a responsibility to protect children1. In relation to the development of attitudes, and their effect on behaviour, corporations and governments need to recognise that children will not have the cognitive resources of (most) adults and, therefore, will not interpret and 'understand' advertising messages in the ways that adults do. Similarly, a rational interpretation of memory that assumes we have unfettered and coherent access to our memories, has been shown to be flawed on many occasions (Hyman, Husband, and Billings 1994; Woodside 2006). Therefore, the argument that as adults we can reflect on what had an effect on our behaviour as children, can be argued to be somewhat weakened in light of our understanding of implicit attitudes.

There are laws and agencies that govern the protection of children. Marketing to children has some restrictions placed on it – some of which are legislated, while others are self-regulated. The Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA), for example, has a code of practice that encourages advertisers to develop and maintain a high sense of social responsibility. In some countries, advertising to children is even more restricted, through bans on when and where advertisements are shown. In Canada, for example, advertising directed to children is allowed for a maximum of two minutes per half hour in and adjacent to programs designated as having an overall family/adult audience appeal. In Sweden and Norway, advertising is banned during children's television viewing times (although children still have access to cable television stations).

Critics argue that these bans have had mixed results, however, Dibb and Lobstein (2005) found a link between junk food advertising to children and the risk of being overweight, based on data from the USA, Australia, and eight European countries. In addition, according to research conducted by the European Association for the Study of Obesity (2002), the proportion of children who are overweight has increased around the world, but the increase seems to have been slower in countries with limits on junk food marketing. Putting aside the issue that much of the research into the effectiveness of bans has been focused predominantly on the relation between advertising junk food and

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1 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, states that children should 'be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that [they] can fully assume [their] responsibilities within the community', while the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child of 1924 and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the General Assembly on 20 November 1959 affirms that nation-states 'need to extend particular care to children', over and above that provided to ordinary citizens.
obesity, this paper does not seek to present an argument that all advertising that children might be exposed to should be banned.

An important issue here, though, is that legislation and codes of ethics fail to take into account the role that the implicit attitudes of children play in consumption – and also fails to consider incidental exposure, i.e., advertising not specifically targeted at children. In this, there is a strong message for policy makers, advertisers, and everyone involved in advertising that children may be exposed to. Policy makers need to review marketing regulations for children to take into account explicit and implicit attitudes. Parents need to consider the effects of marketing on their children from a very early age, and that the regulatory framework, and even education, may not offer sufficient protection. Finally, marketers need to address their social responsibilities, and recognise the positive role that they should play in protecting vulnerable children. In effect, anyone involved in marketing should be adopting the foundation of research ethics, from Hippocrates, The Epidemics, of ‘...at least, do no harm', when designing any marketing communications that children may be exposed to.

References


Dibb S., Lobstein T., (2005), 'Evidence of a Possible Link between Obesogenic Food Advertising and Child Overweight,' Obesity Reviews, 6, 203-208.


If you would like further information about the issues raised in this paper, or a full reference list, please contact the author. DBR

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