Learning Through Experience: The Impact of Direct Experience on Children's Brand Awareness

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While advertising to children has been examined extensively within marketing literature, less attention has been given to other means by which children can gain awareness of products and brands within the consumer environment. This research examines the impact of direct experience on children's brand awareness. A two-study research design was undertaken whereby a total of 376 children aged between 7 and 12 years reported their direct experience with real child-oriented brands. Results indicate that direct experience does have a significant impact on children's brand awareness. In fact, direct experience was found to be a stronger predictor of children's brand awareness than other factors, such as social interaction, television exposure and age. Results of this research suggest that the provision of premiums and in-store samples may be an effective way to enhance children's awareness of brands.

Keywords: Advertising, children, brand awareness, learning, experiential

Introduction

Organizations can use an array of methods to target a child consumer, foster brand knowledge and develop purchase behaviors (Story & French 2004). Marketers rely heavily on traditional media with a high volume of television and in-store advertising undertaken to prompt either a primary purchase by the child, or a purchase request via 'pester power' (Bridges & Briesch 2006). The impact of such television and in-store advertising on children has been extensively studied within the marketing domain (Lawlor & Prothero 2008; Desrochers & Holt 2007; Mallalieu, Palon & Laczniak 2005). However, researchers are not only interested in the impact of advertising on a child's purchase behavior, but also their impact on cognitive consumer processes, such as the development of consumer awareness (Maher, Hu & Kolbe 2006; Oates, Blades & Gunter 2002; Macklin 1994).

Traditional response hierarchical models illustrate the pivotal role awareness plays in the consumer's response process (refer to Barry & Howard 1990). While consumers may not move through the cognitive, affective and behavioral (i.e., awareness-preference-purchase) stages sequentially, it must be appreciated that awareness can provide the foundation for further, more elaborate consumer processing. Whether awareness is attained prior to purchase (as suggested in hierarchical models) or as a result of purchase (or trial), which may be especially relevant for the children's market, facilitating awareness is an important consideration for marketers.

Whilst much focus has been given to the role of advertising, less attention has been given to other means by which children can gain awareness of product and brands within the consumer environment. Although the role of direct experience in children's learning has been studied within educational literature (for example, Newman 1996), little attention has been given to this concept within the marketing domain (Götze 2002). Despite this, it is evident through the myriad of premiums provided in the marketplace, that organizations perceive the potential benefits of facilitating product usage when targeting a child consumer.

This research, therefore, seeks to examine:

1. The influence that direct brand experience plays on children's brand awareness.
2. The relative importance of direct brand experience, parental brand-related interaction, peer brand-related interaction, television exposure and age on children's brand awareness.

The motivation for the research is to provide marketing theorists and practitioners with a further understanding of factors that impact children's brand awareness. In addition, given community's increasing concern regarding child-directed marketing practices (Berry 2008, Story & French 2004), the findings will also be informative for those involved with policy protection, as it is important for policy makers to have a clear understanding of all potential child marketing issues.

This paper begins with discussion of children's brand awareness, consumer learning and cognitive development. The methodology employed to collect data will then be outlined. Finally, results are presented and implications and conclusions are drawn on the research.

Children's Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is "*associated with the strength of a brand node in memory, as reflected in a consumer's ability to identify the brand under different conditions*" (Keller 2003, p.3). It is widely accepted that brand awareness contains two dimensions and is hierarchical in nature (Anderson & Bower 1974). The first dimension, brand recognition, involves a one-step cognitive process involving simple retrieval. The second dimension, brand recall, occurs when a consumer describes a brand-stimulus that is not physically present. Brand recall requires a higher level of cognitive processing, as a consumer must first search through and then retrieve the appropriate information from their long-term memory (Anderson & Bower, 1974).

McEnally and de Chernatony (1999) suggest that brand awareness indicates the establishment of an initial memory 'node' for a brand (McEnally & de Chernatony 1999). It is from this initial brand-node that consumers then associate or connect higher-order branding concepts (for example, brand personality). Brand awareness, therefore, plays a pivotal role in the brand knowledge construct. For example, an organization wishing to effectively personify a brand must first establish awareness for that brand.

Children have been found to develop an awareness of brands from a very young age. As early as six months old a child can develop mental images of a logo (Schmidt 2003), at age two brand loyalties begin to develop (MAN 2003) and by age six a child can recognise approximately 200 brands (McNeal 1999). Research has suggested that children will instinctively favor a particular brand due to the connection (or relationship) they had formed as a child (Ji 2002). Marketers, therefore, have the opportunity to build upon this foundational knowledge as children grow, learn and develop.

Children's Learning Processes

Consumer learning evolves over time. When examining consumer learning in the context of children, a consumer socialization perspective is often adopted within marketing literature

(Ward 1974; Roedder-John 1999; Dotson & Hyatt 2000). Socialization research focuses on an interaction between a learner, and specific sources termed 'socialization agents' (Gineter & White 1982). Socialization theory suggests that the norms, attitudes, motivations and behaviors of socialization agents are passed to the child learner (Churchill & Moschis 1979, p. 25). Traditional models of consumer socialization identify cognitive development, mass media exposure, parents and peers as key factors influencing consumer learning (refer to Ward 1974; Churchill & Moschis 1979).

Product or brand ownership (or usage) does not fit into the traditional theory of consumer socialization. While numerous researchers have illustrated the important role that consumer socialization can play in facilitating a child's learning (Ward 1974; Dotson & Hyatt 2000), a question is raised as to whether the age old expression 'experience is the best teacher?' holds true when considering children's brand awareness.

Learning can occur in many different ways. A general definition of learning is therefore difficult to establish (Lefrançois 2006; Houston 1986). Seel and Strittmatter (1989) state that learning refers to "*every alteration of knowledge and can be interpreted as a consequence of changing or transforming the state of existing knowledge*" (p. 37). While Lefrançois (2006) suggests that learning is "*what happens to the organism (human or non-human) as a result of experience*" (p. 6). It is, therefore, suggested that learning refers to an alteration in knowledge, which can occur as a result of experience.

While limited in number, previous studies have identified that direct usage or ownership of a product or brand can have a significant impact on a child's ability to recognize a brand's logo (Götze 2002). This improvement in children's brand recognition is said to occur as experience promotes memory (Hoch & Deighton 1989) with information gained from first-hand experience being more vivid and concrete (Hoch & Deighton 1989). This research will extend upon Götze's (2002) study examining the two dimensions of brand awareness: recognition and recall.

Cognitive Development Theory

Research has shown that age is an important factor in shaping the brand knowledge of children (Götze 2002; Oates, Blades & Gunter 2002; Wyckham & Collins-Dodd 1997; Henke 1995). The influence of age has been attributed primarily to the cognitive development of children.

Probably the most cited framework for characterizing changes in cognitive abilities is Piaget's theory of cognitive development. This theory proposes four distinct stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor intelligence (newborn to 1½ - 2 years of age), preoperational thought (1½ - 2 to 6 - 7 years of age), concrete operations (6 - 7 to 11 - 12 years of age) and formal operations (11 - 12 years through to adulthood) (Ault 1977).

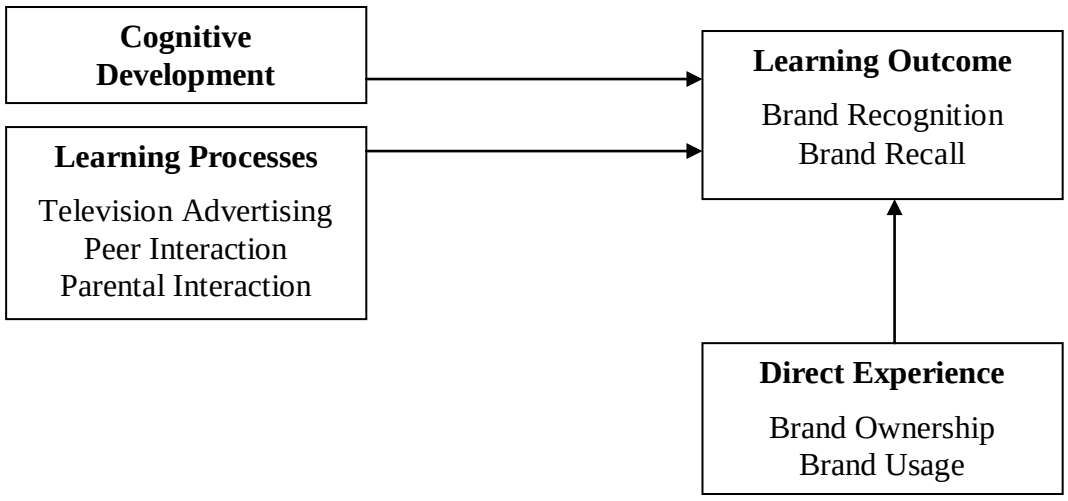
The sensorimotor intelligence stage is characterized by children's behavior being primarily motor-skill oriented. Children do not yet think conceptually, however, cognitive development has begun (Ault 1977). The preoperational thought stage is characterized by the development of language and rapid conceptual development. It features children who are developing symbolic thought but are still perceptually bound and tend to focus on a single dimension (Roedder-John 1999). In the following stage, concrete operations, children develop the ability to apply logical thought to concrete problems. Children within the concrete operations stage

can consider and relate several dimensions of stimuli (Ault 1977). Finally, during the formal-operations stage, children's cognitive structures reach their greatest level of development to "*more adult like thought patterns*" (Roedder-John 1999, p.185). Children within the formal operations stage are able to apply logic to all classes of problems (Ault 1977).

A criticism of Piaget's theory is that "*Piaget's cognitive structures indicate limits on children's capacity to process information but they do not explain how or why children process information within these limits*" (Roedder 1981, p.144-145). Roedder (1981) suggests that the information processing approach (IPA) provides a more complete explanation as to the storage and retrieval mechanisms underlying age differences in children's learning. With this research focusing on children's brand recognition and recall the IPA's focus on information storage and retrieval is therefore particularly relevant.

Roedder (1981) defines the IPA framework in terms of the allocation of processing effort to central and incidental learning. Roedder (1981) developed three cognitive categories that distinguish between mechanisms that underlie age differences in learning. The first category, limited processors (6 years and under) have not yet acquired efficient storage or retrieval skills (for example, rehearsal, categorization, visualization and mnemonics) and such deficiencies cannot be corrected by prompts (Valkenburg & Buijzen 2005). Limited processors therefore cannot accurately complete tasks associated with information storage and retrieval (for example, recall tasks). Cued processors (6 – 9/10 years) exhibit storage and retrieval skills; however, these skills tend to be evoked by the use of appropriate cues (e.g., retrieval cues, such as a picture of a zoo to retrieve the name of an animal). Strategic processors (10/11 years and beyond) have been found to spontaneously employ storage and retrieval strategies and are able to suppress the processing of incidental information to ensure greater retention of central content. Taking into consideration both the impact of traditional consumer socialization variables and the potential role of direct experience, the following model was developed for this research (please refer to Figure 2).

Figure 2: Factors that influence children's brand awareness



Method

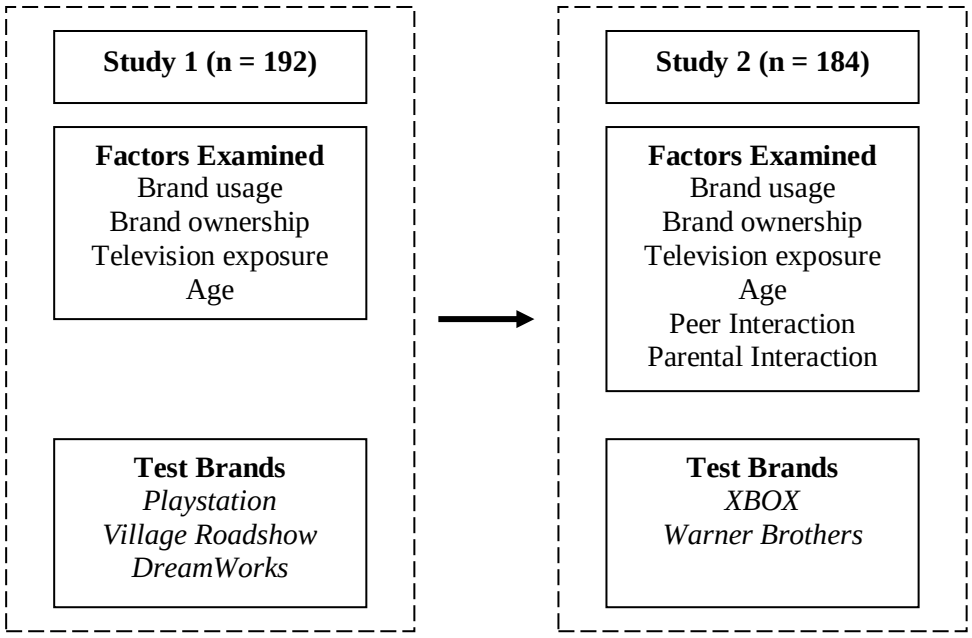
A survey instrument was developed for completion by child-respondents 7 to 12 years of age. The survey instrument was first pre-tested with two children from the target population to clarify issues associated with wording and instructions. The questionnaire was designed to be visually appealing and included simple language and reference periods to aid recall and understanding (Borgers & Hox 2001).

A two-study research design was implemented. Study 1 examined children's brand awareness, direct brand experience, and television exposure patterns. Study 2 extended Study 1 examining not only children's brand awareness, direct brand experience, and television exposure but also social brand-related interaction with parents and peers.

First, five child-appropriate brands were selected for this research. Three brands were selected for inclusion in Study 1 and two brands were selected for Study 2. Test brands were chosen via a content analysis of child-directed advertising (television, Internet, magazines) with selected brands representing varying degrees of exposure during the content analysis period (frequent through to seldom).

With the realization that many children are turning to electronic sources for their entertainment needs (Bulik 2009), entertainment products, specifically gaming and video production brands were selected. The broad product category represented was identified as toys/entertainment (*Playstation*, *Village Roadshow*, *DreamWorks*, *XBOX* and *Warner Brothers*). These brands were deemed acceptable as their brand logo did not feature a brand signature (to cue brand recall). The absence of a brand signature enabled the brands to be presented without alteration. Figure 2 illustrates the research design implemented.

Figure 2: Research design implemented



Measures

Measures of brand awareness, direct experience and television exposure were the same across Study 1 and Study 2. The following outlines the measures employed in the research.

Brand Awareness. This research measured the two dimensions of brand awareness: *brand recognition* and *brand recall*. Respondents were presented with test brands in logo form (full colour, 5 X 5 cm) and asked 'Have you seen this before' (dichotomous yes/no) and 'What is its name?' (open-response).

Direct Experience. Both brand ownership and brand usage were measured in this research. When presented with the test brands, respondents were asked 'Do you own something with this on it?' (dichotomous yes/no) and 'Have you used something with this on it?' (dichotomous yes/no).

Television Exposure. Exposure to television was measured by asking respondents to report how many television shows they normally watch 'in the morning, before school', 'in the afternoon, after school but before dinner' and 'in the evening, after dinner up until you went to bed'. The term 'shows' rather than 'hours' was used as the pre-test indicated that participants may have some difficulty in understanding and remembering how many hours of television they had watched (similar to Harrison 2000). Reference periods (such as, morning, before school) were also included to aid children's recall (Borgers & Hox 2001). An index of *television exposure* was constructed, whereby responses to each advertising exposure item were summed to create a measure of total 'shows' watched (as per Unger, Schuster, Zogg, Dent & Stacy 2003; Harrison 2000).

Peer and Parental Brand-related Interaction. Likert-type scales were used with objective anchor points (5 = more than once a day, 4 = once a day, 3 = once a week, 2 = once a month, 1 = rarely/never). For the purposes of this study with children, measures of *peer influence* and *parental influence* were simplified and evaluated by responses to the following brand-specific questions: How often do you talk to your friends about this, How often do you use this with your friends and How often do you talk to your mum or dad about this. Across the three brands, co-efficient *Alpha* ranged from 0.739 – 0.909 for *peer influence* and 0.766 – 0.893 for *parental influence* indicating strong scale reliability.

Sample

Cognitive development can have a major impact on a child's learning and memory (Roedder 1981). Cognitive development will therefore have an impact on children's understanding, and ability to complete research materials. Theorists have suggested that children six years of age and under have not yet acquired the skills required for tasks associated with information storage and retrieval, for example, recall tasks (Roedder 1981). As this research focused on brand awareness, the ability to use information retrieval strategies was pivotal to the respondent's successful completion of research materials. To enhance data accuracy this study limited its focus to children over six years of age.

For Study 1, after gaining permission from school principals, 707 information sheets and consent forms were sent home with students enrolled in years 3, 4 and 5 at six government schools located in a major city on the Australian eastern seaboard. The researcher administered the questionnaires to those children who obtained parental consent, during class

time in the presence of a teacher. A total of 192 contacts were obtained, with all 192 children completing the questionnaire, equating to an approximate participation rate of 27%. The sample consisted of children aged between eight and 11 years with a mean age of 9.6 years. Of the total sample 40.6% were male and 52.6% were female.

A total of 1318 students enrolled in years 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 at six government schools were approached to participate in Study 2. A total of 226 consent forms were returned, with 184 children participating in the study, equating to an approximate participation rate of 14%. The total sample was comprised of children aged between 7 and 12 years of age with a mean age of 9.8 years. 45.1% were male and 50.5% were female.

Results

Children's Direct Experience and Brand Awareness

Children 7 to 12 years of age were found to have a high level of awareness of the selected test brands; please refer to Table 1. Results indicated that over 80 percent of children in the sample recognized all test brands and over 90 percent recognized three of the five test brands. While there is a lack of variation within this data, these high recognition scores were desired giving weight to the brand usage and ownership results reported by the sample. It is suggested that children who can not recognize a brand can not accurately report whether they own, or have used the brand previously.

When considering brand recall, greater variation was evident. *Village Roadshow* received the lowest level of recall with only 1.6 percent of children correctly recalling the brand name, while *XBOX* achieved the highest level of recall with almost 80 percent of children naming the brand correctly. As expected, brand awareness was found to be hierarchical in nature, whereby brand recall was found to be lower than brand recognition (Singh & Rothschild 1983).

Table 1: Brand awareness and direct experience: children 7 to 12 years of age (%)

Test Brand		Brand Recognition	Brand Recall	Brand Usage	Brand Ownership
Playstation	Study 1	87.0	71.0	69.4	53.4
DreamWorks	Study 1	96.9	52.8	60.6	47.2
Village Roadshow	Study 1	96.4	1.6	49.7	34.7
XBOX	Study 2	88.0	79.9	71.2	37.6
Warner Brothers	Study 2	98.9	62.0	66.5	63.4

When considering product experience, variation was evident in the results for both brand usage and brand ownership. Reported brand usage and ownership was also found to be less than brand recognition, as expected. The variation, and logical consistency evident within the

data suggests that the sample were reporting their actual behavior rather than providing a random, non-thought out response.

When examining the results, *Warner Brothers* was found to be the most owned brand with over half of the children in the sample reporting owning an item displaying the *Warner Brothers* logo. With respect to brand usage, *XBOX* and *Playstation* were the most used with 71.2 percent and 69.4 percent of the sample indicating that they had used these gaming brands respectively.

To evaluate the impact on age on brand usage and brand ownership a series of Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to identify whether there was a significant mean difference in age for those who do, and do not, own or use the selected branded products. As shown in Table 2, a significant mean age difference ($p > 0.05$) was not found for either ownership or usage for *Playstation*, *Dreamworks* and *Village Roadshow.* Significant results were obtained for both *XBOX* and *Warner Brothers.* In all instances, those who own, or had used the branded product were older than those who had not.

Table 2: Age differences in children's direct brand experience (mean age in years)

Test Brand	Usage		Ownership	
	Have not used	**Have used**	**Do not own**	**Do own**
Playstation	9.6	9.7	9.6	9.7
DreamWorks	9.5	9.6	9.5	9.8
Village Roadshow	9.6	9.6	9.6	9.7
XBOX	**8.8****	**9.4****	9.4	9.9
Warner Brothers	**8.9****	**10.0****	**9.1***	**10.0***

* = $p < 0.05$ ** = $p < 0.01$

The Impact of Direct experience on Children's Brand Awareness

To examine the association between brand awareness (dichotomous variable) and direct experience (dichotomous variable) a series of cross-tabs were conducted. *Phi* (Φ) was used as the measure of association for the true dichotomies (2x2) formed by the data. Table 3 presents the results of the analysis and as shown, significant results were obtained for both brand usage and brand ownership across the two dimensions of brand awareness. Results for *Village Roadshow* were not computed for brand recall as very few participants were able to correctly name the brand (n = 3). Overall, results indicate that those who use or own a brand have higher levels of awareness (recognition and recall) for that brand when compared to those who do not. While significant results were obtained for both brand usage and brand ownership it is worthwhile to note that marginally stronger associations were identified for brand usage than brand ownership across all five test brands.

Table 3: Association between children's brand awareness and direct experience (Φ)

Test Brand	Brand Recognition		Brand Recall	
	Usage	Ownership	Usage	Ownership
Playstation	**0.58****	**0.39****	**0.49****	**0.29****
DreamWorks	**0.22****	**0.17****	**0.32****	**0.33****
Village Roadshow	**0.20****	**0.14***	-	-
XBOX	**0.51****	**0.22****	**0.41****	**0.13***
Warner Brothers	**0.15***	**0.14***	**0.24****	**0.23****

* = $p < 0.05$ ** = $p < 0.01$

The Relative Importance of Direct Experience, Television Advertising, Social Interaction and Age on Children's Brand Awareness

To further investigate factors which impact children's brand awareness four logistic regression models were run. Due to lack of variation present in the data for brand recognition across all test brands, and brand recall for *Village Roadshow* logistic regression models were not computed for these variables.

For all models constructed, brand recall was selected as the dependent variable. Brand ownership and brand usage, as well as traditional consumer socialization variables including television exposure, peer brand-related interaction, parent-related interaction and age were included as predictor variables. Please note that social interaction was not measured for *Playstation* or *DreamWorks*. Table 4 presents the results of the analysis.

As shown in Table 4, all logistic models were found to be significant ($p < 0.05$), with predictor variables accounting for at least 20 percent of the variation in the dependent variable, brand recall.

Table 4: Predicting Children's Brand Recall - Logistic Regression Models (β exp)

	Playstation	DreamWorks	XBOX	Warner Brothers
Nagelkerke R^2	0.36	0.21	0.28	0.20
Predictors:				
Brand ownership	0.61	**2.79***	1.13	**2.59***
Brand usage	**16.63****	2.47	**11.41****	2.22
Television exposure	1.07	1.15	1.04	1.02
Peer interaction	-	-	1.32	0.98
Parent interaction	-	-	0.95	**1.45***
Age	1.65	1.61	**1.54***	**1.60***
Constant	0.07**	0.21**	0.04**	0.11**

* = $p < 0.05$ ** = $p < 0.01$

The logistic regression models constructed clearly show the important role brand ownership and brand usage play on children's brand awareness. In all models, direct experience variables (ownership and usage) were found to be the strongest predictors of children's brand recall. For *Playstation* and *XBOX* the likelihood of brand recall is shown to improve by the odds 16.6 and 11.4 respectively, when a child has used the brand. For *DreamWorks* and *Warner Brothers*, while not as strong, results indicate that the odds of recall are said to improve when a child owns the branded product. While age and parental interaction (*Warner Brothers*) were found to be significant predictors of brand recall, television advertising and peer interaction did not achieve significant results. In all models, direct experience variables were found to be stronger predictors of children's brand recall than traditional consumer socialization variables.

It is interesting to note the relative importance placed on brand ownership and brand usage for varying product types. Results indicate that brand usage plays an important role in developing children awareness of 'interactive', branded products, for example, gaming consoles. In contrast, for products that involve more 'passive' consumer involvement, brand ownership plays a more dominant role when compared to brand usage. It is suggested that this difference may reflect the level of on-going brand exposure during direct experience. For example, whilst using a gaming console brand exposure continues throughout the usage period (for example, on the physical gaming unit and associated equipment, controller). When considering entertainment brands, although brand information is presented on product packaging, only brief exposure occurs during product usage, such as a brand image being displayed at the beginning and end of a movie. It is therefore, suggested that such entertainments brands will require the opportunity for greater exposure, achieved through ownership.

Practical Implications of the Research

Results lend support to previous research and provide further evidence for the important role direct experience plays in promoting children's brand awareness (Götze, 2002). In fact, direct experience was shown to be significantly more important in predicting children brand recall than traditional marketing media channels, such as television.

Results of this research illustrate an important issue for both marketing practitioners and policy protection. First, the results of this study suggest that premiums and sampling may be an effective means by which marketers can directly communicate with children. Through sampling, an organisation may be able to increase children's awareness of their products and brands. For interactive products, or products that clearly display brand information, it is evident that usage is a significantly more important factor than ownership. It is therefore suggested that the provision of in-store samples can engage the child consumer, dramatically improving their associated consumer knowledge. If creating awareness is a key goal of the organisation, promoting product usage may be an appropriate strategy for such products.

For passive products, or products that provide limited brand information, results suggest that organisations need to focus on achieving brand ownership. It is proposed that for less interactive products, consumers require on-going exposure to build brand awareness. While brand usage remains an important factor, brand ownership plays a more dominant role for this product type. It is suggested that media or 'take-home' premiums should be employed by those organisations wishing to establish awareness, for passive, non-interactive products.

Results of this research also provide a valuable insight for policy protection issues. There has been increasing concern over child-directed marketing with particular attention being given to the role of advertising to children (Berry, 2008). While limited, this research provides an initial insight into children's consumer-related knowledge. Results suggest that other factors, such as direct experience, may play a more dominant role in influencing children's marketplace knowledge when compared to advertising. It may be important for policy makers to also focus on other techniques employed by today's marketers to target young consumers.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

This research provided an initial understanding of the impact of direct brand experience on children's brand awareness. The provision of samples and premiums is a clear practical implication of this research. While the notion of child-oriented sampling has been extensively examined within marketing literature, a particular focus on food sampling and fast food premiums is clearly evident (for example: Jones, Wiese & Fabrianesi 2008; Pettigrew & Roberts 2006). Child-oriented sampling and premiums, however, are often used by marketers external to the food industry (for example toy, beauty and electronic industries).

While the context in which children have obtained experience with the products examined in this research is unknown, results of this research clearly indicate that 'experience *is* the best teacher'. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this research was undertaken in the context of child-oriented entertainment brands and it is suggested that future research should consider a greater variety of brands and product categories. A further limitation of this study is the use of self-reports to measure children's direct experience. The use of parental reports in conjunction with child-reports would provide greater confidence in the results obtained. It is suggested that future research should undertake a true experimental design, controlling for and manipulating brand-experience levels. It is also important to highlight that this research focused on the initial cognitive stage of awareness. Future research may aim to explore the influence of direct experience on a child's affective and behavioral consumer processes.

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