

Television Advertising to Children: An Analysis of Selected New Zealand Commercials

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Whether advertising should be directed to children and, if so, how it should be governed, has always generated debate. This article investigated three issues currently causing concern: purchase request behaviour, gender stereotyping and aggression, and compared the results to a similar study conducted in 1989. While very few of the advertisements transgressed the Advertising Standards Authority Code on Advertising to Children with respect to purchase request behaviour and aggression, evidence of gender stereotyping was more pronounced. We conclude that industry and government regulatory bodies could play a more proactive role in promulgating the Codes of Practice, enjoining acceptance of them and enforcing their provisions.

Keywords: television advertising, children, gender stereotyping, codes, ASA, ethics

Introduction

The advertising industry has targeted children as consumers for nearly three decades and the debate surrounding advertising to children has existed for nearly as long. Currently, advertisers promote a variety of products and services specifically to and through children. However, because children do not relate to television in the same way as adults, (Anderson & Levin 1976; McNeal 1987), advertisers have used a number of devices, including a rapid paced format and various special effects (Biggens 1989; Huston & Wright 1989), to gain and hold children's attention. These devices have attracted attention from both consumer groups and researchers, who have argued that they increase the range of deleterious effects advertising may have on young people. In particular, researchers have queried the relationships children draw between television and real life (Biggens 1989); the effect these relationships have on their gender role perceptions and development (Courtney & Whipple 1983); their expression of antisocial behaviour, including violence and aggression (Goldberg & Gorn 1978; McNeal 1987), and their expectation that parents should provide products advertised (Goldberg & Gorn 1978). Furthermore, some researchers claim that children are especially vulnerable to advertising, thus making it inappropriate to treat them as responsible consumers in the same way as adults are treated (Condry 1989).

The advertising industry has responded to these arguments by citing the benefits exposure to advertising may bring to children. For example, advertisers have claimed that advertising presents information that enhances children's social development, thus helping to prepare them for adulthood (Schneider 1987). Independent researchers have also argued that advertising does not rely only on negative role models or images, but instead frequently features characters opposing injustice, as well as people who display kindness, sensitivity and a concern for others (Bassett 1991).

Despite these counter-arguments, unease about the effects of advertising to children remain. In particular, researchers continue to query advertising's effect on children's purchase request behaviour, their development of stereotypes, and the extent to which they display antisocial behaviour.

Purchase Request Behaviour

Since advertising's ultimate goal is to elicit a behavioral response, it is not surprising that some researchers have identified purchase request behaviour as a natural, but problematic, response to advertising. The problem arises because children typically request products they find desirable without realising the financial consequences of their requests. Thus parents may find themselves unable or unwilling to fulfil these requests because of the hardship that may result or because they view the item as undesirable. Such refusals can result in conflicts between parent and child and, ultimately, may even undermine their relationship (Robertson 1972; McNeal 1987). Indeed, Paine (1993) argues that advertising is guilty of unethical behaviour in creating these situations of conflict: "*without child focused advertising, parents would less frequently face the necessity to choose between their children's consumer requests and their own consumer judgement*" (p680).

Gender Role Development

Because children both observe and learn from the characters portrayed in advertisements, obvious potential exists for the shaping and reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Courtney & Whipple 1983). Researchers have frequently expressed concern at statistics which show fewer women are portrayed in authority roles than men (McArthur & Resko 1971), more women than men appearing in subservient roles (Dominick & Rauch 1971), and men having both more important roles and a greater range of roles to fulfil (Macklin & Kolbe 1984). Although it would be difficult to argue that advertising's portrayal of women in subservient roles was solely responsible for limiting the aspirations of young girls, researchers have demonstrated how advertising acts conservatively to reinforce outdated images (Courtney & Whipple 1983; Pollay 1986, 1987). Thus interest groups and researchers alike question the value and necessity of advertising that presents a distorted reality, received unquestioningly by many children as real, and which effectively celebrates rather than challenges images limiting a significant proportion of the population.

Antisocial Behaviour

As noted earlier, sometimes advertising results in conflict, not only among family members, when purchase requests are denied, but also among peers. Goldberg and Gorn (1978) found that, as children's exposure to a toy commercial increased, so their desire to play with the toy in preference to friends increased. Their results also suggested that commercial exposure could make children less discriminating socially, as they preferred to play with "not so nice" friends who owned the toy than with "nice" friends who did not.

Of even greater concern that this, however, has been the posited relationship between advertising and aggression. Overall, research to date has been unable to separate television from the many variables that affect individuals and influence their behaviour. Thus, whether aggressive children watch television, or whether they become aggressive as a result of viewing has remained a contentious and unresolved issue (Bassett 1991).

In addition, as Bassett (1991) points out, violence can be defined in diverse ways because of the wide variety of contexts in which it can occur. Williams, Phillips and Travis (1985) identified three general categories of aggression: physical, psychological and verbal, but defines violence as extreme physical aggression. A New Zealand Broadcasting research team recommended a broader definition of violence that encompassed more than physical harm or

injury (Broadcasting Standards Authority 1991; Hardie 1990). Their proposed definition included recognition of the level of realism, the context in which the act occurred, and audience and community perceptions of the seriousness of the violence in that context.

While definitions of violence are formulated almost exclusively from an adult perspective, research suggests children's perceptions of violence differ considerably from those of adults (Buckingham 1987; Bassett 1991). Bassett (1991) found that children perceive violence directed at inanimate objects as very different from violence directed at humans and concluded that the closer the violence is to "reality" the more likely it is to upset children (see also Biggens 1989).

Dietz (1989) argued that a causal relationship existed between children's viewing of television violence and their subsequent behaviour. In particular, he noted children's tendency to imitate behaviours displayed by heroes or role models and argued for stricter controls on the use of violent toy characters in programmes and advertising directed to children.

Industry Self-Regulation

Consumer lobby groups, researchers and the advertising industry have continued to debate the causes and effects of these three issues. However, the lack of agreement and inconclusive research evidence have made it difficult to define legal regulations the advertising industry should abide by. Regulation of advertising to children in New Zealand has thus been administered by two groups: the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), a self-regulatory and industry funded body, and the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA), a government-funded organisation.

The ASA Code on Advertising to Children sets out a number of guidelines which, amongst other things, states that advertisements "*should not clearly portray violence or aggression*" "*should not encourage anti-social behaviour*" and "*should not [urge children] to ask their parents to buy particular products for them*". While this particular Code makes no reference to stereotyping, the ASA Code for People in Advertising specifically states "Advertisements should not encourage belief in inaccurate or outdated stereotypes in regard to the role, character and behaviour of groups of people in society."

While these codes appear far reaching, adoption of them remains voluntary and, as the various debates summarised above make clear, their interpretation by advertisers has also varied. Hoek and Sheppard's 1989 work (Hoek & Sheppard 1990) concluded that the Codes appeared generally effective, but noted that high levels of gender and ethnic stereotyping existed and recommended further monitoring. Given the increasing attention paid to the three issues detailed above, it seems timely to re-examine the effectiveness of the ASA Codes relating to children's advertising and to compare the results to Hoek and Sheppard's earlier work. This paper replicates and extends Hoek and Sheppard's 1989 study which investigated the extent to which a sample of New Zealand advertisements screened during children's television programmes conformed to provisions contained in two ASA Codes: the Code for People in Advertising and the Code for Advertising to Children.

Method

Sample

Channel Two's Saturday morning children's programmes were observed and videotaped between 6.00am and 11.00am over a six week period from 11 April to 16 May, 1992. The timing of this study varied from Hoek and Sheppard's 1989 work in two ways. First, the period of analysis was extended from one to six weeks and, second, Saturday morning broadcasts were taped since these aim more specifically at children than do the late afternoon times taped in the original study. This resulted in a total of 310 advertisements and 129 previews. Only advertisements were analysed and, after eliminating repetitions, a final sample of 148 advertisements, representing all the advertisements during this period, was used. Sixteen percent of these featured food (cereals, beverages, snacks, candy and restaurants), while 33% promoted toys, 13% music and films, and 38% other items, such as Lotto, toothpaste and clothing. The proportion of food advertisements declined to only a third of those included in the 1989 sample, possibly because the earlier work was conducted during the first week of the May school holidays, a time when families tend to eat out more, and thus when food items and restaurants are heavily promoted. The proportion of toy advertisements stayed at approximately the same level, however, large rises in the level of music and miscellaneous advertisements occurred.

Instrument and Procedure

In order to assess the degree of stereotyping and the levels of violence present in New Zealand television commercials directed at children, instruments reported in international studies were employed. Macklin and Kolbe (1984) measured gender dominance by assessing the use of male, female, or neutral characters to promote products and services. They then classified advertisements into one of three groups: male dominated, female dominated or neutral (where female and male characters were present equally, or where asexual characters, such as cartoon figures, were used). Voice-over gender was classified using the same categories (female, male and neutral). Ethnicity was gauged by classifying the dominant human characters into one of four groups: white, black, other or neutral (where members of at least two ethnic groups were present).

Character activity levels were measured using Macklin and Kolbe's (1984) 7 point scale which ranged from 1 (no movement) to 7 (very rapid movement). To measure aggression we combined Williams et al.s' (1985) categories with Hardie's (1990) recommendations. Advertisements containing aggressive acts were classified into one of four groups: psychological aggression; object aggression; verbal aggression, and physical aggression.

Results

Purchase Request Behaviour

The Code for Advertising to Children states that children should not be urged in advertisements to ask their parents to buy particular products for them. Only one advertisement in the sample contravened this guideline. A Club Noumea holiday commercial specifically urged children to "*get mum or dad to check it out*". This advertisement screened twice one Saturday morning but did not feature again during the observation period.

Gender Role Portrayals

This component of the study replicated Hoek and Sheppard's 1989 work (Hoek & Sheppard 1990) in order to assess whether gender role portrayals in advertising had changed. First, advertisements were classified as either "male" or "female" oriented when live or animated human characters were present. Neutral advertisements depicted both sexes equally in number or involved them to a similar extent in product related activities. Table 1 compares the results of this classification to Hoek and Sheppard's findings.

Table 1. Gender dominance in advertisements 1989 and 1992

Gender Dominance	1989 Results (N=69)	1992 Results (N=148)
	%	%
Male	29	26
Female	22	10
Neutral	42	39
Not Applicable ¹	7	25
Total	100	100

1 No human characters were present in advertisement; products or services only were featured.

While Hoek and Sheppard found that nearly half the advertisements observed showed both sexes equally, and neither males or females dominated, the current study's results are less favourable. The ratio of males to females has increased from 1.3:1 to 2.6:1, although the proportion of neutral advertisements remained similar. The number of advertisements displaying the product only increased dramatically from 7% to 25%, perhaps reflecting the increased popularity of cassettes, CDs and videos, which typically are promoted without human characters.

Character activity levels were assessed using Macklin and Kolbe's (1984) 7 point scale, described earlier (see Table 2).

While comparison of the results with Hoek and Sheppard's (1990) findings revealed a similar pattern among male and female characters, the level of activity had increased slightly in advertisements using human or animated characters. However, because of the increased proportion of slow paced advertisements featuring only or mainly the promoted item, the overall level of activity had declined slightly from 3.78 to 3.64, though this change was not significant.

Commercials were also classified according to whether they contained male, female, or both male and female voice-overs (see Table 3).

Table 2. Character activity levels: A comparison of 1989 and 1992 results

Gender Dominance	Male		Female		Neutral		N/A		Overall ¹	
	1989	1992	1989	1992	1989	1992	1989	1992	1989	1992
Amt. of movement										
No	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	10	2	10
Little	2	3	6	2	2	4	2	13	12	22
Slow	7	9	5	4	5	13	1	12	18	38
Moderate	7	12	2	6	9	18	-	1	18	37
Active	1	8	-	2	8	16	-	-	9	26
Considerable	3	4	-	-	3	8	-	-	6	12
Very Rapid	-	3	2	-	2	-	-	-	4	3
N	20	39	15	14	29	59	5	36	69	148
Mean rating	3.80	3.95	3.27	3.57	4.38	4.09	1.80	2.11	3.78	3.64

1 Kolmogorov-Smirnov D = 0.112, p > .05.

Table 3. Sex of voice-over: A comparison of 1989 and 1992 results

Sex	1989 Results (N=69)	1992 Results (N=148)
	%	%
Male	77	75
Female	22	16
Both	1	9
Total	100	100

$X^2 = 0.82$, d.f. 2, n.s.

As Table 3 shows, the results differ from Hoek and Sheppard's findings, though none of the variations is significant. While the number of female voice-overs has dropped, the proportion using both female and male voices has increased. However, when analysed according to the advertisements' orientation, the results revealed varying patterns (see Table 4).

Table 4. Sex of voice-over by gender dominance: A comparison of 1989 and 1992 results

Gender Dominance	Male		Female		Neutral		N/A	
	1989 ¹ %	1992 %	1989 %	1992 %	1989 %	1992 %	1989 %	1992 %
Male	95	97	60	27	90	70	40	78
Female	5	3	40	53	7	12	60	22
Both				20	3	18		
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note. 1 1989 (N = 69) 1992 (N=148)

While male oriented commercials continued to use male voice-overs almost exclusively, several changes had occurred in other categories. In 1989, 60% of female oriented advertisements had male voice-overs; the 1992 study showed this had declined to 27%. The proportion of neutral advertisements using exclusively male voice-overs had also dropped by 20%. In 1989, only the product only category made greater use of female voice-overs than it did of male voice-overs, however, the 1992 results showed a reversal had occurred.

Examination of ethnicity also revealed changes had occurred (see Table 5).

Table 5. Dominant race of models in children's advertisements: Comparison of 1989 and 1992 results

	1989 Results (n=69)	1992 Results (n=148)
	%	%
White	97	74
Black	-	2
Other	-	1
Neutral	3	23
Total	100	100

While the white dominance of 1989 was less overwhelming, nearly 75% of the sample still featured predominantly white characters. However, the fact that nearly 25% of the

advertisements contained characters from two or more ethnic groups suggests advertisers are recognising the diversity of cultures in their audiences.

Aggression

This study expanded Williams et al.'s (1985) classification of aggression to include object aggression; it also assessed the level of realism present and the context in which the aggressive act occurred. Only 3% of the advertisements were considered to contain an aggressive act, a marked improvement on Hoek and Sheppard's study which not only used a narrower definition, but found that 14% of the sample could be considered to contain an aggressive act. One instance each of psychological, object, verbal and physical aggression were detected. The psychological and object aggression examples ("Flirt Squirts" and "Splat" advertisements, respectively) contained elements of humour and fantasy which mitigated the aggression present. However, both instances of verbal and physical aggression (Toxic Crusader and Hero Quest) had less to offset the aggression, and the high frequency of the Hero Quest advertisement during the observation period is worrying, given the evidence that children tend to imitate violent heroes.

Discussion

Studies such as this one rest inevitably on the premise that advertisers have social and moral, as well as commercial, responsibilities. Only Kirkpatrick (1986) has recently disputed this, and his arguments were comprehensively and incisively refuted by Pollay (1986, 1987). The real question, therefore, is to what extent ethical considerations should temper, or even outweigh, commercial initiatives. No researcher can pretend to answer such a question; instead we can identify possible consequences of emerging or continued trends in advertising. Accordingly, these results reveal some positive developments, yet also present areas of continuing concern.

In many respects the fact that only one commercial urged purchase request behaviour may suggest the efficacy of the ASA Code. Conversely, others could argue that such obvious disregard of the Code, coupled with the apparent approval of the advertisement by the Television Commercial Approvals Bureau (TCAB) reveals a system which is not functioning as it should. However, since the offending commercial did not appear again during the monitored period, it is possible that complaints or retrospective monitoring led to its removal. Nevertheless, the fact that it appeared at all cannot but cause some concern to both proponents and critics of self-regulation.

Although conclusions about acceptable levels of gender or ethnic representation remain inherently subjective, such judgements need not be entirely random, since reference can be made to population parameters. This, in turn, enables an assessment of the extent to which advertisers accurately reflect the reality they claim to represent. Using this standard (which serves also as a benchmark in several similar studies; see Courtney and Whipple, 1983) the results reveal mixed developments. In particular, the increase in the male to female gender dominance ratio suggests advertisers have moved away from, rather than toward, the true population figures. This continued evidence of gender stereotyping suggests many advertisers are either ignorant of the ASA Code, deliberately flouting it or have insufficient creative talent to accommodate its provisions. Given the accumulating body of evidence that advertisements can and do influence how children view occupational roles and gender behaviour, (Courtney & Whipple 1983; Dominick & Rauch 1971; Macklin & Kolbe 1984;

McArthur & Resko 1971) these results are disappointing. Indeed, cynics could argue that advertisers have attempted to avoid the issue of stereotyping by producing commercials featuring non human characters or featuring the product alone.

However, while the gender dominance results revealed a move away from the population proportions, the use of male and female voice-overs showed more varied patterns. In particular, both female oriented and neutral advertisements made greater use of female voice-overs and of mixed voice-overs, although product only advertisements moved sharply against this trend. Given the research evidence regarding children's perceptions and development of authority figures, (Courtney & Whipple 1983), a more equitable balance of female and male voice-overs and a continuation of the overall movement in this direction, would appear to offer greater social benefits than the current imbalance.

Similarly, the study found a marked change in the use of different ethnic groups. Yet although the number of "multicultural" advertisements had increased dramatically to comprise nearly a quarter of the sample, the proportion of advertisements featuring only Maori or other ethnic groups was very small when compared to the proportion featuring only white characters. Again, any optimism generated by the increase must be tempered by the recognition that these figures still present only a distorted reflection of our society.

The slight overall decline in the level of activity displayed by advertisement characters paralleled a decline in the proportion of commercials featuring an aggressive act. However, while the number of aggressive acts noted had decreased, it is simultaneously of concern that aggression was detected at all. Researchers appear united that children imitate what they see, especially actions performed by people or characters they hope to emulate. Advertisers using children's heroes thus have a particular responsibility to exercise scrupulous care over how these role models behave. While the majority appear to do so, a minority could improve the standard of their monitoring.

Conclusions

The vast majority of advertisements analysed in this sample conformed to the ASA Code on Advertising to Children with respect to aggression and purchase request behaviour. While the advertisements did not flagrantly contravene the Code on People in Advertising, many appear to have employed stereotypes with insufficient consideration given to the cumulative effects these may have.

Although many environmental factors affect children's behaviour and social development, this should not diminish advertisers' responsibility to conform to both the letter and the spirit of Codes governing advertising to children. Children's impressionability makes them especially vulnerable to advertising images and messages thus providing a strong moral compunction for caution rather than commercial gain, to determine the form and content of advertisements to children.

Such caution could more easily prevail if the ASA, BSA, or both, played a more active role in promulgating the existing codes, enjoining acceptance of them, and enforcing them. Both organisations run excellent complaints services, yet this is essentially reactive. A greater range of educative measures, coupled with stricter TCAB monitoring, could do much to eliminate the specific transgressions detected here, and to align more closely the image of people presented in advertising with the reality we perceive around us.

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