

Malaysian children's attitudes towards television advertising

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What do children in Malaysia think about television advertising, and how does it affect their purchasing? These are some of the questions answered in this fascinating study by Ghani and Zain.

THE PURPOSE OF this study was to examine Malaysian children's attitudes towards television advertising. In the competitive children's market television advertising is a critical, and sometimes the only, medium to communicate marketing messages to children. In this study we were interested in the 'communication outcome effect' following children's exposure to television advertisements. From the survey, the results showed that children's awareness of television advertising and their influence on parent purchases were significant predictors of their attitude towards television advertising. The study also identified children's preferences towards products, themes and types of television advertisements.

Introduction

The children's segment is now widely viewed by many consumer companies to be an important potential market, in terms of buying decisions and market influence. Today's kids are seen to have certain needs, together with the spending power to satisfy those needs. According to McNeal (1992), children ages between the ages of four and twelve amassed a total income of US\$31.3 billion from allowances, jobs and gifts, and spent some 92% of this amount. In fact, children's power over their own money has far-reaching influences, as noted by Ty Incorporated which introduced Beanie Babies that sell for about \$6, exactly the usual amount for a child's weekly allowance (Kotler 2000). As

a market influence, a child's 'persuasion factor' affects purchases as diverse as new cars to frozen pizzas. McNeal (1987) claimed that about 17 billion dollars worth of new cars alone are sold because of children's preferences. The minivan was created, for example, because children demanded more space.

In Malaysia, most advertising agencies now target children through their choice of ad characters, especially when advertising children's toys, foods, such as cereals (cornflakes and CocoCrunch), milk (Nestlé and Dutch Baby), fastfood (McDonald's and KFC), telecommunications (Celcom and Telekom) and cars (e.g. the Perodua company). Such examples show that marketers today understand the significance of the children's segment, and regard it as an important potential influence on the adult market, through a child's ability to influence its parents.

McNeal (1992) cited the reasons why most marketers have targeted children as consumers:

- Children hold three markets in one:
 - The primary market – they have their own money, needs and wants, and the ability and willingness to spend on the items that satisfy them.
 - The influence market – they can directly and indirectly influence others, including their parents in deciding what to buy.
 - The future market – if captured as consumers in childhood, retailers hope to retain that loyalty as children grow up.

- They have their own savings for future spending.
- Children have the freedom to spend on anything they wish, not only on food items, but also on non-food products such as toys, clothing, consumer electronic items, entertainment and hobbies.
- They may be involved in consumer decision making; in forming opinions, perceptions and preferences about outlets, such as mass merchandisers, supermarkets or even convenience stores.

These important characteristics have encouraged marketers to target children and establish a two-way relationship that can prove highly lucrative in sales terms. This point was echoed by McNeal (1992) when he commented that the US\$6 billion spent by children may not, in itself, be a huge sum to many marketers, but when viewed in terms of the possible lifetime impact on spending, it is considerable. For this reason, a high proportion of marketing activities have targeted children. One of the most important marketing strategies aimed at children is television advertising, and this is the main focus of this study.

Research statement and objectives

Quantitative research exploring the effects of television advertising on the consumer socialisation of children began with the studies of Ward in the early 1970s, largely in response to concerns that television advertising exploited children (Sherry *et al.* 1999). It is widely held that attractive advertising can have a significant and immediate effect on children's attitudes and behaviour, especially in terms of purchase

behaviour and purchase request. Children with positive attitudes towards advertising, tend to like advertisements and behave in a manner that is consistent with their professed attitudes. They frequently purchase and request the products that they have seen advertised. Conversely, where attitudes towards advertising are more negative, one would expect those children to be less impressed and would exert less effort to obtain the products they have seen advertised.

Though it is considered older children's negative attitude towards advertising is not always reflected in their buying behaviour, it nevertheless affects how much they concentrate on an ad. Less attention paid to the ad will result in less recognition of the product, a feeling of distrust towards the ad, and hence a negative attitude towards the product, which will ultimately lead to reduced sales (Evra 1990). The implications of this relationship are important to advertisers as well as to product manufacturers and parents.

Consequently, the aim of this study was to determine the significant predictors of children's attitudes towards television advertising. The main focus of this study was twofold:

- (1) To determine the effect of children's attitudes toward television advertising on their awareness of ads, their purchase behaviour, their influence on parents, and their purchase decisions regarding the product advertised. In line with Churchill (1991), children's awareness refers to how children look into or understand the facts regarding certain objects or phenomena. Children's influence on parents' purchase decisions refers to how much input the children feel they have in making major (e.g., car, refrigerator, television) and minor (e.g., DVD rental, eating out, cinema) family purchases (Sherry *et al.* 1999). Children's purchase

behaviour refers to the child's intention to act upon advertising of a product (Solomon, 1994). Throughout this study, all of these variables reflected the children's response towards advertising because in effect they explained the children's understanding of the ads.

- (2) To identify children's preferences toward products, and themes and types of television advertising.

The concept of attitude, such as children's attitudes towards advertising, is widely studied phenomena in child consumer research. Rossiter (1977) developed the standard measurement of children's attitudes toward television advertising, which has proved very useful for related research over the years. Rossiter's study included pre-tested attitude statements which reflected a range of cognitive and affective reactions towards television commercials. The findings showed a high degree of reliability in opinion of the product. This contradicts the prevalent belief among consumer researchers that attitude measurement with children is considered to have low reliability. Rossiter's scale has received substantial support for its reliability and validity when tested within the US by Bearden *et al.* (1979), Lindquist and Belonax (1979), and Reicken and Samli (1981). The continuing testing of the scale with different child segments by Pereira (1996) also received substantial support.

According to Rose *et al.* (1998), the attitude towards advertising is an important antecedent and predictor of the attitude towards the brand. Peter and Olson (1994) argued that television advertising is the most obvious form of promoting communication. Television advertising content is an important factor in the development of

young people's consumer behaviour. Through the ad, children learn about new brands and products, how to use the products, and who uses them. Children also consider the realities and beliefs about the products and will show preferences. Children may in turn communicate these opinions in terms of purchasing behaviour or ask their parents to purchase the product (McNeal & Ji 1999).

However, the communication process is most successfully executed when children understand the message given. Thus, it is imperative to know the extent to which the advertising message is understood. In addition, even if the very best creative talents are employed to design a television ad, it will be ineffective unless the child pays attention to it. Piaget's theory clarified the age-related differences in children's reactions to television advertising. Children aged ten or younger have poorly organised methods of thinking about objects or ideas. They tend to pay more attention towards the commercials but understand very little about them. They believe what they are shown and told unless experience teaches them otherwise. Thus, if adults appearing on television are sanctioning and encouraging the use of a product, then to a young child's mind, it follows that the product must be good (Martin 1997).

Younger children are also poor at making comparative judgements regarding alternative products advertised and are less aware of an advertisement's persuasive intent. For them, advertisements introduce new products and new things that they should have. Advertisements also show them the way to a better life, provide product information, and create a set of attractive images for the individual to emulate. Children also have favourable attitudes toward specific types of advertisements, especially those featuring humour. They do attend to and learn

from commercials. They remember the slogans, jingles, and brand names. Therefore, compared to older children, younger kids tend to be more easily influenced by advertising, expressing greater belief in the commercial content and making more purchase requests (Unnikrishnan and Bajpai 1996).

According to Unnikrishnan and Bajpai (1996), older children seem to recognise the persuasive intent of advertising. To older children, ads are produced by companies to convince people to buy their product. In this way companies will try to show that their product is superior to other similar products on the market. Basically, younger children's understanding of the nature of television ads appears to improve as they mature and their belief in the truthfulness of advertising tends to decline. This is parallel to Piaget's theory where children between the ages of 11–15 have the ability to think deeply about ideas, and are able to reason by assessing all the available information. As children grow older, they understand more completely the selling motive underlying television advertising, and are better able to differentiate between programmes and commercials.

These older children will have a greater understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising, believe advertising is less truthful and recall more of the commercial content. Consequently, they are better equipped to make balanced judgements about ads. As a result, some of them tend to become less attentive and therefore less responsive to commercial appeals. Their interest in advertising appears to wane, in favour of searching for information and relevance within advertising (Unnikrishnan & Bajpai 1996, Gunter & Mc Aleer 1997).

McNeal (1987) reports research indicating that older children carefully observe only around 50% of television advertising, and this

percentage declines the more ads are repeated. This is in line with maturity; as children get older, they become annoyed by commercial interruptions, and therefore may devote less attention to the advertisement. Furthermore, as previously noted, as they mature they mistrust ads more, and this combined with annoyance can easily cause children to become unfocused. According to Backe and Kommer (1995) (cited in Bergler 1999), there is a low level of advertising credibility for children aged between 11 and 13. From their survey, 36.5% of the 11 year-olds claimed that they did not believe what people said in advertisements, compared to only 6.7% who did believe what being said. As for 12 to 13 year-olds, 36.7% did not believe what people said in advertisements, compared to 8.1% who did believe what people said. So it is imperative that marketers adhere to those elements of advertising that can attract children's attention and give them satisfaction from watching the advertisement.

According to McNeal (1987), personal and stimulus factors are two of the most important attributes that can influence the quality of a child's response to television advertising. Personal factors, such as motivation to watch (whether for information or entertainment value), attitudes toward ads (positive or negative), influence of parents and peers (because of warning about commercial intent or because of family conversations that override the commercial break) and lack of knowledge about commercials, are all factors that are difficult to control. But these personal factors can be minimised if marketers and advertisers are successful in managing stimulus factors such as the content of the programme. For example, boring programmes may invite attention to entertaining commercials. On the other hand, stimulus factors such as commercial content and

product advertised will tend to create negative effects if not properly managed.

Effective advertising tends to influence purchase behaviour among children either by encouraging them principally to switch from one brand to another or to remain loyal to the one they currently buy. Advertising may also be concerned with creating markets for new brands. For the most part, possible influences of television advertising on children may indeed produce two important types of behaviour: purchases and purchase influence.

The effect of television advertising on children's purchase influence within a family varies according to the child's age and the products advertised. Children are more likely to influence their parents to purchase products that are most frequently advertised, interesting and commonly used by them, for example toys for younger children and CDs for older children. As to how parents respond to their children's purchase requests depend on the parent-child communication patterns.

Gunter and McAleer (1997) reported that there are two main views of communication within a family that actively direct a child's development: socio-orientation and concept-orientation. In a socio-oriented family, parents encourage their children to maintain a harmonious climate of personal relationships, to avoid arguments, anger and any form of controversial expression or behaviour. In many ways, this dimension encourages control and respect for authority. In a concept-oriented family, on the other hand, children are invited to express their ideas and feelings, even if they are controversial, and are encouraged to challenge the beliefs of others. In the context of consumption, socio-oriented parents maintain control and restrict their children's purchasing, concept-oriented parents encourage children to develop inde-

pendent preferences and evaluations. These two types of family may be broken down into four parental types: laissez-faire, protective, pluralistic and consensual.

Laissez-faire parents, fall into the category where neither socio- nor concept-orientation are strongly emphasised. They engage in relatively low levels of communication with their children and hence have the least influence in shaping their child's consumption patterns. Instead, friends and peer groups outside the child's home will exert more influence. As regards protective parents, they are defined as low on concept-oriented but high on socio-oriented communication. Thus, protective parents tend to limit their children's exposure to outside information such as television advertising. Pluralistic parents are high in concept-orientated communication, their children are encouraged to explore ideas and express their own opinions. Finally, consensual parents are both socio- and concept-orientated. Consensual parents tend to encourage their children to develop their own opinions but at the same time maintain parental control, and stress the importance of considering others. As a whole, protective, pluralistic and consensual parents are all actively preoccupied with their children's maturation and development of independent skills and reasoning. They also tend to be the most concerned about other aspects of socialisation and have the strongest negative attitudes towards advertising (Gunter & McAleer 1997; Rose *et al.* 1998).

The survey carried out by Rose *et al.* (1998) among mothers of three to eight year-olds in the United States and Japan revealed that, laissez-faire (low socio-, low concept-orientated) mothers had the most positive attitudes towards, and the lowest mediation of, their children's exposure to television advertising. Concept-oriented parents

(consensual and pluralistic) held more negative attitudes towards, and the highest mediation of television advertising. Overall, American mothers were distributed relatively equally across categories, whereas Japanese mothers were classified primarily as either laissez-faire or protective.

In addition to replicating Rossiter's original study, one of the purposes of our study was also to examine the effect of family socio-economic background on the measurement of children's attitudes toward advertising. The analysis across income groups revealed that children from poorer families have less well-formed attitudes than the medium-to-high income group.

Research methodology

Sampling procedure

This survey involved two Grade A Malaysian primary schools, in the Jitra town area. A total of 252 Malaysian children aged 10–12 years were selected.

The random sample method was utilised in the survey. The questionnaire was translated into the Malay language to elicit better understanding from the children. All the questionnaires distributed were collected with 100% response rate, each student who participated was presented with a token gift.

Prior to actual sampling, a pilot test was conducted. The main purpose of this test was to gauge the sensitivity of questions in the questionnaire – that is, to check there were no ambiguities. Several alterations were made, including the scale format. For the pilot test, all items were measured on a 6-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), which had unacceptable reliability levels, $\alpha = 0.28$. Thus, to proceed to the actual fieldwork, all items were measured on a 4-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

Preparation

Children's advertising responses

Ten items were used to measure children's television advertising responses. All of the questions were formed and adapted from previous literature (McNeal 1992, Gunter & McAleer 1997, Gunter & Furnham 1998). A 4-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) was used, and factor-analysed to determine the relevant dimensions, and weak items were eliminated prior to statistical analysis.

Three dimensions of children's advertising responses were realised: children's awareness of TV advertising, children's influence on parents' purchase decisions, and children's purchase behaviour. Although the children's advertising responses originally consisted of ten items, two items were removed because of insignificant item loading. The reliability assessment on the three dimensions resulted in two being selected: children's awareness with $\alpha = 0.62$ and children's influence with $\alpha = 0.66$.

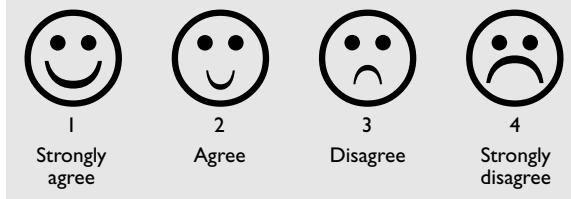
The dimension of children's purchase behaviour was rejected due to its low alpha value of $\alpha = 0.16$. This finding supported the explanation given by Gunter and Furnham (1998), that significant problems will be faced when examining the relationship between television advertising and children's values, behaviour, and consumer-related perceptions. According to Gunter and Furnham, advertising is clearly very different from other programme categories. Even if advertising produces favourable attitudes towards products, it does not automatically lead to purchase behaviour on the part of children. The relationships between attitudes and behaviour are complex and not consistent. Thus, it is difficult to suggest anything conclusive about the actual influence of advertisements on children's own purchase behaviour.

However, many previous studies have tried to provide an answer to the question of the effects of television advertising on children's purchase behaviour. In general, the type of research method employed is instrumental in the answers found. For example, experimental studies usually support the view that the effects of commercial advertising on children are considerable, whereas survey research studies have more usually reported that the effects operate ultimately at a low level. Indeed, most of the studies that fall into this latter category emphasise that television advertising is only one of many simultaneously interacting influences on children's purchase behaviour such as parents, peers, and social situations (Gunter & Furnham, 1998).

Measuring children's attitudes

In line with Rossiter's study, children's attitudes towards television advertising were measured on a 7-item scale. The selected scale focuses on the range of cognitive and affective reactions towards television advertising in terms of perceived truthfulness, potential annoying qualities,

Figure 1 The figurative scale



objectivity in describing advertised products, overall liking, perceived persuasive power, believability of characters, and trustworthiness as guidance to product purchases (Pereira 1996).

Questionnaire design

The figurative scale was used in this survey. Figure 1 illustrates the scale, where smiling and unsmiling faces act as indicators of the children's response. According to Malhotra (1993), the figurative scale proves very useful when the respondents are children. The study was entirely self-administered with some assistance for occasional questions.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study can be summarised under three main headings. The first is related to the cost involved in undertaking the research and the time constraint. The study focuses exclusively on primary school children in Jitra in the Kedah region, which is located in the northern peninsula of Malaysia. Hence the study represents only part of Kedah population. Second, although a simple random sampling method was undertaken the fact that the researcher was allowed to involve only a few classes from each school made it impossible to generalise the findings. Third, the study assumes

Table 1 7-item scale

1 Truth:	Television commercials tell the truth.
2 Annoy:	Most TV commercials are in poor taste and very annoying
3 Good only:	Television commercials tell only the good things about a product – they don't tell you the bad things
4 Like:	I like most television commercials
5 Persuade:	Television commercials try to make people buy things they don't really need
6 Believe:	You can always believe what the people in commercials say or do
7 Best:	The products advertised the most on TV are always the best products to buy

Table 2 Sample characteristics (N = 252)

	Freq.	%
Age (years)		
10	86	34.1
11	81	32.1
12	85	33.7
Gender		
Male	96	38.1
Female	156	61.9

that the children watched television advertising, and they understood the advertisements portrayed.

Research results

The sample characteristics for the 252 respondents are summarised in Table 2. As evident from the table, there is more or less equal distribution of children at each age; however the sampling resulted in more girls being included than boys. The sample reflects the profile of the future Malaysian population. The study also produced a list of children's preferences regarding types, themes, and products advertised, as illustrated in Table 3.

The internal consistency reliability of the Rossiter's scales, with $\alpha = 0.69$ was also tested with item statements as shown in Table 1.

Among the items listed in Table 1, Annoy, Good only and Persuade were reverse coded as suggested by Rossiter (1997). The findings summarised in Table 4 indicate that all but two of the inter-item correlations are significant, positive and within the range 0.10–0.60. According to Guilford–Fruchter guidelines, for a well-constructed test, item inter-correlations should be between 0.10 and 0.60 (Pereira, 1996). The present finding is an indication that

Table 3 Children's advertising preferences (N = 252)

	Freq	Ranking	%
Advertising type			
Favourite programmes/ story ads	233	1	92.5
Food ads	207	2	82.2
Non-food ads	63	3	25.0
		Freq.	%
Advertising themes			
1. Humorous ads		191	75.8
2. Ads with music, singing and voice-overs		185	73.4
3. Colourful ads		98	38.9
4. Advice characteristics		80	31.7
5. Ads that show adult and children together		67	26.6
Products			
Food:			
Fruits		213	84.5
Drinking water		140	55.6
Vegetables		117	46.4
Non-food:			
Clothes		171	67.9
Books		160	63.5

Table 4 Children's attitudes: inter-item correlations

Item	Annoy*	Good only*	Like	Persuade*	Believe	Best buy
Truth	0.22	0.10	0.24	0.16	0.17	0.15
Annoy*		0.16	0.31	0.33	0.22	0.21
Good only*			0.8	0.10	0.05	0.14
Like				0.25	0.14	0.19
Persuade*					0.24	0.19
Believe						0.25

* Reverse score

Rossiter's (1977) scale can be applied usefully among the Malaysian children to gather attitudes on television advertising.

Regression analysis was performed on the data to understand the relative contribution of the independent variables to children's attitudes towards television advertising. Based on the analysis, the most significant predictor of children's attitudes was children's awareness of TV advertising $\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.03$, rather than children's influence on parent purchases with $\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.09$. The regression model was significant at $R = 0.25$, $p = 0.00$.

Discussion

According to the results of the survey, the Malaysian children's first preference was for advertisements that relied on humour for their appeal. This was followed by advertisements that combined music, singing and voice-overs. In terms of advertising category, the most popular are those ads that relate to their favourite programmes (e.g. cartoon, and competition ads), followed by food and non-food advertisements. According to the survey, the Malaysian children are interested in buying fruit, drinking water, vegetables, clothes and books. The children's interest in the ads resulted in a variety of products being demanded. Their constant need for variety points to the reasons why the children want many different products, and also expresses their need for new experiences, sensations, and the rewarding of curiosity (McNeal 1992).

Children's product preferences are also important for marketers to ascertain what is the main focus of children's purchases. For example, do they mainly think of buying snacks and sweets, with which children are stereotypically associated? The results showed that the Malay

children's food preferences are fruit (84.5%), drinking water (55.6%), and vegetables (46.4%). And in the non-food category, these children liked to buy clothes (67.9%), followed by books (63.5%).

Reliability tests on children's attitudes towards television advertising reveal substantial support for Rossiter's scale, and thus increase confidence in its applicability. From the findings, it is clear that Rossiter's (1977) scale can be applied usefully among Malaysian children to gather attitudes on television advertising, even though the survey only covered a small area in Kedah.

The patterns of children's television advertising responses are also interesting. From the findings, the Malaysian children's awareness and influence on parent purchases are predictors of Malaysian children's attitudes towards advertising, with children's awareness being the main predictor compared to children's influence on parent purchases. The more positive their response, the more positive their attitudes towards advertising in general. As for Sherry *et al.* (1998), the regression models also failed to account for significant amounts of variance, even though the instruments from the previous research were used. This is probably because respondents personally completed the questionnaires; in prior research, parents have typically been asked to assist their children.

Conclusion

The study shows that both Malaysian children's awareness of television advertising and influence on parents' purchase decision are important predictors of children's attitudes to television advertising. Even though the influence of television advertising is not the only effect on children's purchase behaviour, it does impinge

upon consumer-related behaviours, whether in the forms of the child's own purchases or child's pestering others (especially parents) to make purchases on his or her behalf. It has been shown also that younger children and children from lower social classes are more susceptible to the influence of television advertisements (Gunter & Furnham 1998).

The findings on Malaysian children's preferences in terms of products, advertising type and themes fulfilled the second objective of this survey. The results reflected the children's socialisation as a consumer. Hence, Malaysian children's preferences towards advertising characteristics should not be ignored by advertisers. Overall, the study's finding is useful for most marketers in determining their strategy towards the Malaysian consumer. However, marketers should exercise caution because they could be criticised for stimulating demand in a market segment that can least afford to spend money.

Further to our study, it is suggested that researchers generalise the population at large in further testing the Rossiter scale to ascertain whether the same results apply to different child segments; the findings would prove immensely useful to managers, market researchers, public policy experts, and sociologists. Future research should also extend to other variables such as different nationalities. The survey would be even more interesting if it could examine the differences between children and youth across several states or cultures.

Acknowledgment

This report represents the results of the research project 'Children's attitudes towards television advertising' funded by the Universiti Utara Malaysia, research grant code S/O 10666. The

authors wish to acknowledge and thank the university for its financial support.

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