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CHILDREN AND TELEVISION ADVERTISING: A COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Summary

While the population growth rate in Ireland appears at least temporarily to have ground to a halt, the fact remains that this country will have to cherish and cater for a singularly sizeable children's market for the next decade. This article begins with a qualitative examination of Irish advertising houses' views on their respective outputs and target groups. Central to the process of communicating with the children's market is the need to fully appreciate its heterogeneity. Psychologically speaking, the 'children's market' is a misnomer.

To this end, a series of questions are administered to a sample of Dublin children to ascertain whether their responses on advertising related topics reflect their respective developmental levels. The authors contend that successful campaigns targeted at these developmental sub-sections of the children's market are contingent upon an understanding of their stages of cognitive growth. A range of Irish television commercials are then shown to the children to determine which advertisements register the highest recall rates. Content analysis of the advertisements recalled discloses salient features which may be utilised in tailoring advertising content to a particular age group's developmental level.

The authors also ask whether children's liking for an advertisement is determined by a liking for the product featured in that advertisement. Finally they attempt to draw some conclusions on how sceptical children are of the claims advanced in television commercials.

Researching the children's market is far from child's play. In Ireland, the sheer size and relative proportion of children — a third of the population is under fourteen — seem to make such research imperative however fraught with difficulties. Children are direct consumers of a vast array of products, influencers of a growing number of family product decisions, and actual purchasers of a smaller though expanding number of products.

Considering these developments, the paucity of both academic and commercial research devoted to children in the last decade is quite remarkable. Most Consumer Behaviour texts relegate children somewhat uneasily to a quasi-appendix status at the end of a chapter on family decision-making. In a similar vein, many marketing and advertising executives are reluctant to contemplate child-centred research either because of an overly glib conviction that children are simply mini adult consumers or because of ethical fears of utilising children for research purposes supposedly with a view to their ultimate exploitation. This reluctance is not justified; children are a qualitatively distinct kind of consumer and not diluted adults and ethical considerations should condition rather than preclude advertising and consumer research on them.

This article focuses in particular on advertising for four to fourteen year olds on Irish national television. The topic of children and advertising has given rise to a substantial corpus of published material.¹ Scott Ward who has contributed extensively to this literature suggests three useful subdivisions into which such literature may be divided.² First, commercial watching behaviour — What levels of attention do children pay to these advertisements? Do they engage in alternative activities during these advertisements? Second, cognitive development correlations — What features in advertisements affect children the most? To what extent, if any, do children use the information learned from such advertisements? Can they differentiate fact from fantasy in commercials? At which stage of cognitive development do children assimilate the advertisements to which they are exposed? Ward's third subdivision concerns the impact of advertisements on children's behaviour towards others — Do they attempt to influence parental purchasing for example? A fourth subdivision, the ethical domain, might well be added to Ward's initial three. This refers to the burgeoning research on the highly sensitive issues of child vulnerability and persuasibility. In Ireland these issues have taken on a cyclic and seasonal prominence, surfacing primarily in the popular media during the extensive pre-Christmas toy campaigns. However, this article is concerned mainly with the second area mentioned above. It has two specific objectives in this connection.

- To determine the relationship between children's responses to advertisements on Irish television and their level of cognitive development.
- To determine the salient features in terms of copy and imagery in Irish television commercials which are most appealing to children.

Television Advertisements for Children in Ireland

Prior to conducting research with children, the authors conducted a series of unstructured interviews with account executives responsible for

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'children's products'. Account executives were chosen in preference to marketing executives because the majority of the advertisements used in this research have little or no localised Irish marketing input. Developed mainly in the United Kingdom, the principal Irish contribution to these advertisements is confined to budgeting and scheduling. 75% of the Irish advertising houses handling the accounts for child-related products were interviewed.

The overall finding of these interviews was a vacuum in terms of developed advertising strategy for a minimally understood target group. In the absence of a thorough-going localised research, a certain re-definition appeared to have taken place, the result of a combination of intuition, the exigency 'to cover all angles', and acute sensitivity to ethical ramifications. The re-defined target group is now mothers *with* children with attendant consequences for advertising content and scheduling. The hope would appear to be that advertisements featuring mothers with children will kill two target birds with the one stone and, at the same time, preempt the rumblings of ethical trouble shooters. Indeed, ethical considerations were the most common unprompted reason cited by the advertising executives for this shift in focus.

All agreed that television was the single most effective medium for advertising to the children's market. 90% of Irish homes possess a television set.³ While some of them can receive up to nine channels between satellite, British, and the two national channels, many are still restricted to these two national channels alone, RTE 1 and RTE 2. So, since all television sets in Ireland receive at least the two national channels and since all the account executives handling the children's advertisements on these channels would be accessible to the authors, the advertisements used in this research were confined to a range of children's advertisements broadcast nationwide by RTE. All products featured had nationwide distribution and were drawn from the food, light beverages, cereal and toy product areas.

Despite increased demand for advertising space during 'children's viewing time', the actual time allocated for such advertising blocks is decreasing; print-outs for RTE 1 and RTE 2 show that on Saturday mornings — a high point for children's viewing — there is only one commercial block per hour. These scheduling constrictions, the consequent rise in cost, and the mounting ethical pressures all point to the need for sustained research into the content and overall impact of the advertisements viewed by Irish children.

Methodology

A video presentation was compiled consisting of two cartoons and a short children's documentary with a block of five advertisements shown after each. The fifteen advertisements in all included three for adult products, one in each block, to serve as controls. All of them had been screened on what was considered a typical week-end on Irish television in April 1987 and represent the totality of child related advertisements broadcast on the week-end in question by the national network.

Before any children were shown this video presentation, a content analysis was performed on all fifteen advertisements. A slightly modified version of Cattin and Jain's method of analysis was utilised.⁴ Three experts, a child psychologist, an advertising executive, and a marketing manager were asked to content analyse the advertisements. In effect, each expert performed a checklist for the presence or absence of four classes of variables in each advertisement. The first class of variables sought were informative variables, e.g. does the advertisement include information on price or availability? The second were non-informative variables, e.g. does the advertisement make use of peer pressure, utilise a central figure, or centre around a story? The third and fourth classes of variables referred to the nature of the participants and the environment in which the advertisement was set respectively. If two or more experts ticked any of these variables it was deemed present. The purpose of this content analysis was to provide a reference point by which children's subsequent

preferences for particular advertisements could be adjudged. Knowing that an advertisement preferred by children possessed a particular variable disclosed in the content analysis might lead to interesting conclusions later.

The procedure adopted to ascertain the respondents' views on the video presentation was a modified version of that developed by Ward *et al*⁵. During the first two weeks of July 1987, three groups of twenty children between the ages of four and fourteen were drawn from Dublin City summer schools. Two of the groups came from middle to upper socio-economic areas, the third from a lower socio-economic area. Thirty five were boys, twenty five girls. Since the first objective of the research was to relate children's perceptions and judgements of advertisements to their level of cognitive development, age parameters of four and fourteen were chosen; this age span covers the three principal levels of development in Piagetian psychology.

Each group of twenty children was shown the video presentation during ordinary summer school hours. A bonus of this procedure was that videos were already a regular feature of summer school programmes. A panel of judges comprising the authors, a psychologist and a speech therapist observed each group's behaviour while viewing the video. The following day each group of twenty children was subdivided into five groups of four; each foursome belonged to the same age group. A semistructured questionnaire was then administered to each child. As language complexity has been found to bedevil research on children and advertising, preliminary research was conducted on a group of four to six year olds to ascertain problems of vocabulary and comprehension.⁶

When the final draft of the questionnaire was being administered a tape recorder was used ensuring that each child answered every question and that the first respondent to answer each question was rotated to minimise dominance within the group. Using the tape recorder after each interview, the three judges coded the answer given by each child. The child was asked sixteen questions in all, spanning varying levels of specificity, from "what is a television advertisements?" to "can you remember the song from any advertisement?" The questions fell into three categories. First, general questions on what constitutes an advertisement and the difference between an advertisement and a programme. Second, questions as to which advertisements they like or dislike and the reason why. Third, their reactions to the advertisements on the video presentation. The data analysis will follow this threefold format.

A television advertisement is clearly a complex stimulus and it was hoped that the response of children to such a stimulus would indicate their level of cognitive development; this applies equally to general and specific questions. For example, a low level response would be recorded if the child was unaware of the selling motive when asked the general question "why are advertisements shown on television?". A clear recognition of selling and the profit seeking motive indicated a high level of cognitive development — likewise with responses to specific questions such as "can you tell me what happens in your favourite advertisement?". Unidimensional, single image recall for example "I like the traffic light in the *Lucozade* advertisement", indicated a low level response, whereas a child mentioning several images in a unified, coherent sequence would constitute a high level respondent.

The framework used to grade the level of the children's responses in this research derives from the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget. Previous research by Bever, Smith, Bergen, and Johnson,⁷ Roedder and Whitney,⁸ Goldberg and Gorn⁹ attest to the appropriateness and validity of employing Piagetian developmental categories in classifying children's perceptions, explanations, and judgements of television advertising. Piaget held that children progress through discrete stages in the way they perceive and think as they grow up. These stages, with some further precision added by Nash,¹⁰ may be summarised as follows:

Sensorimotor

Lasting from birth up to two years, at the end of which, object permanence is achieved; out of sight does not necessarily mean out of mind. The capacity for language is beginning to show itself. The child's behaviour is mediated by sets of behavioural patterns rather than by thought, hence this stage is of little interest to advertisers.

Concrete Operations

This stage, lasting from two to eleven years marks the transition from a very literal perceptual ability to a more developed capacity for abstract thought. Nash has subdivided this stage in three. Relevant age groupings are approximate in nature.

- (a) Pre-operational thought: Here the child (2-5 years) focuses on single dimensions of the situations that confront them. Symbolic functions appear in thought and play, and deferred imitation emerges — the drawing room suite becomes the train travelled in last week.
- (b) Intuitive thought: The distinction between what the child (5-7 years) perceives and reasons is still blurred. If he/she perceives a ball of modelling clay rolled into a snake there is difficulty in grasping mentally that the same mass of clay is involved throughout.
- (c) Concrete thought: Between 7 and 11 years there is an increasing trend towards logical thought: objects become classified into concepts and generalisations between which relations are perceived. Situations are grasped in a multi-dimensional fashion.

Formal Operations

Logical abstract thought becomes possible from 11 years upwards. Cognitive maturity is achieved and the child is enabled to reason by hypothesis.

ANALYSIS

The SPSSX computer package was used to analyse the coded responses of each child, serving to verify trends and substantiate qualitative observations. Cross-tabulations were performed to analyse the data by age and by sex. There were indications that further research utilising a larger sample would yield additional interesting results, for example, a simultaneous age by sex cross-tabulation. Results showed no variations in the overall replies of children from differing socio-economic areas. Analysis of findings is presented according to the three principal divisions in the questionnaire.

Reactions to Advertising in General

The first question put in this section asked "what is an advertisement?" Low awareness was typified by such answers as "you see them every day on television" and "the *Smarties* advertisement". Intermediate awareness was used to categorise such answers as "it's a break to give the programme a rest". A typical high awareness response was "advertisements tell you about what you can buy in town, about types of toys and prices". Table 1 summarises the findings.

It is worth noting that the high proportion of under six year olds who could not explain, later spoke readily of their favourite advertisement showing their focus on particular advertisements and inability to abstract the general concept "advertisement"; for some it may also denote the absence of verbal wherewithall to express such a concept.

A further question in this section asked "why are advertisements shown?" The three levels of awareness were typified by the following responses: "advertisements are for *Rice Krispies*" (low), "they remind you to buy something" (medium), and ". . . to make money. Someone makes the advertisement and you buy the product. Then the person who made the advertisement has the money to pay the television" (high). Percentages for each level were as follows: *no explanation* 16.7%; *low awareness* 40.0%; *medium awareness* 26.6%; *high awareness* 16.7%. In contrast with the previous question, this more complex question resulted in at least some low awareness responses in each of the five age groups although the same overall diagonal swing found in Table 1 was still in evidence.

Table 1
Awareness of "What is an Advertisement" by Age
Years

	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-11	12-13	Total	Total %	Males %	Females %
<i>Cannot Explain</i>	5	4	2			11	18.36	23	12
<i>Low Awareness</i>	7	6	6	2		21	35.0	34	36
<i>Medium Awareness</i>		2	4	6	1	13	21.7	14	32
<i>High Awareness</i>				4	11	15	25	29	20
Total						60	100	100	100

The next question in this section sought to ascertain the children's capacity to distinguish an advertisement from a programme: this, it was hoped, would indicate their level of concept development. Table 2 analyses the results by age.

Table 2
Ability to Differentiate by Age
Years

	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-11	12-13	Total	%
<i>No Explanation</i>	5	1				6	10
<i>Low Awareness</i>	7	10	9	3	3	32	53
<i>High Awareness</i>		1	3	9	9	22	37

This somewhat sophisticated question had the effect of polarising responses. Low awareness responses, "advertisements are shorter", seem to have had a cut-off point at eight years where high awareness responses began, "advertisements try to sell you something but programmes are just for entertainment". No medium awareness responses were recorded. Cross-tabulations by sex for the questions in this section revealed considerable variations. There tended to be a preponderance of boys over girls in the extreme levels, that is, in the *no explanation* and *high awareness* levels. Findings from this first section support the view that these children exhibit different levels of concept development in their perception of television stimuli; the tabular data for each question revealed a diagonal swing from left to right in support of the age-developmental level correlation.

Reactions to Specific Advertisements

This section of the questionnaire required respondents to choose specific advertisements they like/dislike and to explain the reasons behind their choice. Children could and did cite advertisements from the previous day's video presentation although they were very much in the minority. Analysis of comments on these presentation advertisements is deferred to the third section of the analysis. Children were first encouraged to mention as many advertisements as possible. Table 3 illustrates the number and percentage of mentions of favourite advertisements cross-tabulated by product category.

Table 3
Categorisation of Favourite Advertisements Mentioned

	Total	%
No Answer	4	6.7
Soft Drink	11	18.3
Cereals	16	26.8
Food*	16	26.8
Household Products	4	6.4
Toys	5	8.3
Beer	4	6.7
Total	60	100

*Food denoted all edibles other than cereals and included confectionery and fast food outlets.

Some interesting features lie behind this tabular data. Many children's favourite advertisement was for a product which they neither purchased nor consumed; in some satellite channel advertisements, the promoted product was not even available in Ireland. Others selected advertisements for brands they had never tried although familiar with the product area. A somewhat surprising if isolated phenomenon in this question was where a *Diet-Pepsi* advertisement was described in minute detail but ascribed to *Coca-Cola*, the market leader in Ireland. The children generally felt that advertisements on the satellite channels were more entertaining, a sentiment typified by the remarks of one twelve year old, "The advertisements are much better on Sky and Super Channels than the boring advertisements on R.T.E. . . . The worst ones are when they just show you a picture".

When asked the specific reasons for their choice of advertisement some surprising factors emerged. Reasons were divided into four: entertainment, aesthetic, liking for the product advertised, and 'other'. With the exception of the four to five year group, entertainment was the predominant reason for all age groups. The central point thus emerging from this question is that liking for a product is *not* a major determinant of liking for an advertisement; for young Irish viewers entertainment value seems to be what counts. The sole exception to the entertainment preference was the four to five year group for whom aesthetic reasons were dominant. Advertisements targeted at this group are likely to succeed best by highlighting the stimulus to be attended to through the use of such techniques as animation, colour and personification. Sex differences were not found to discriminate advertisement preference.

The interviewers probed the celebrity endorsement technique which had been employed on a number of the advertisements chosen. Children from the lower socio-economic groups voiced substantially stronger preferences for this advertising format than their middle/upper class counterparts. Within this lower socio-economic group, boys expressed a particular liking for advertisements featuring sports celebrities.

Advertisements the children disliked were then sought. The first feature noticed here was the high percentages in the two lower age groups unable to cite any example—83% among 4-5 year olds, 42% among 6-7 year olds. The opposite applied to the older groups where examples abounded due to their more advanced critical powers. The reasons for their dislike displayed remarkable heterogeneity ranging from "just don't like it" to "I hate all advertisements with girls in them". No children mentioned dislike for the product as a reason for disliking the advertisement.

This second section concluded with a question designed to gauge both levels of information processing and recall complexity by asking what

happened in their favourite advertisement. The results afforded ample confirmation that the children processed and recalled the advertisement content according to their level of cognitive development. Low recall ability was prominent among 4-5 and 6-7 year olds. Typical of their pre-operational stage, they tended to focus on a single perceptual feature of the advertisement, "the three funny men on the *Rice Krispies* advertisement". The 8-11 year group exhibited medium recall characteristic of their concrete thought stage displaying levels of syncretism, a tendency to link ideas and images into a somewhat confused whole; events were mentioned one after another without any overall relation between them being perceived. Most of the 12-14 group showed all the characteristics of the formal operations stage. Complete sequences were remembered, advertising copy was quoted verbatim, and multiple dimensions of advertisements were used in their evaluations. Table 4 illustrates the findings.

Table 4
Level of Complexity of Recall by Age

	Years					Total	%
	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-11	12-13		
<i>Low Ability</i>	12	8	4	—	—	24	40
<i>Medium Ability</i>	—	4	8	8	—	20	33.3
<i>High Ability</i>	—	—	—	4	12	16	26.7
<i>Total</i>						60	100

Reactions to the Video Presentation

This final section of the analysis dealt specifically with the advertisements featured on the video presentation. Of the fifteen advertisements included in this presentation only eight were recalled in the interviews twenty four hours later; unaided recall technique had been used. The most recalled advertisement, Kellogg's *Rice Krispies*, was remembered by only 17% of the entire sample. This low recall rate had been anticipated in view of the time lapse between the video and the interview; nonetheless, this was deemed preferable to interviewing immediately after viewing which would have placed over-emphasis on the advertisements in the presentation. Of the eight advertisements recalled, six were for children's products, two for adults' products.

The next step was to look at the content analysis performed three months earlier by the panel of experts. Specifically, the content analysis for the eight advertisements recalled by the children was examined. Most of these advertisements were found to possess the same set of features isolated by the experts in their earlier content analysis. These features may be summarised as follows.

Definition

Successful advertisements clearly define and establish the existence of the product. Psychologically, this is the most primitive level at which advertising works but with children, especially young children, it is vital. If something is clearly seen to exist by the younger child, it is thereby deemed worthy of notice. All of the advertisements showed the brand name in print as well as narrating it. This is consistent with Langbourne's findings that hunger to learn names is best satiated by constant unequivocal labelling.¹²

Association

This is a further general feature whereby the product and the advertisement are associated with other products, activities or people in the child's awareness. This feature presupposes a modicum of abstract thinking. Association was most prevalent in advertisements recalled by the older age groups. Essentially this feature illustrates how the child does not

rely on perceptual cues alone but rather integrates the advertisement into his or her real world experience. By way of illustration, five of the advertisements recalled included children, a factor which clearly facilitated such integration.

Personification

This successful feature was found present in two formats. In the first instance, the product itself was personified directly, for example, *Weetabix* biscuits were portrayed as boys or girls. Alternatively, some derivative personification assumed a central role in the advertisement for example, Mr. Snap, Crackle and Pop in a *Rice Krispies* advertisement or Ronald McDonald (*McDonald's*). Anthropomorphism clearly succeeds; when children were asked to describe advertisements recalled, these personifications were cited by *all* respondents regardless of age.

Storyline

A definite theme or story enhanced recall. Adventures, fantasies and humorous sketches succeeded in dramatising the salience of the product advertised. The thirty second commercial seems to cater best for such a storyline format.

Fictitious Characterisation

Advertisements which portrayed some interaction between human beings and fictitious characters achieved high recall rates. It is thought that such advertisements confront the child with a novel stimulus; the child does not expect to see real life figures and animated figures together. Perhaps this feature explains the inclusion of a household product advertisement among the eight recalled, *Mr. Proper*.

Animation

Four of the eight advertisements recalled used this technique. It basically amounts to the children perceiving the advertisement as a miniature cartoon. In the first section of the questionnaire the question, "what do you remember on the video presentation?", brought the answer "cartoons" from the majority of children. Total animation is an expensive technique, however, the cost can be minimised by using part-animation and part reality.

Music

All of advertisements recalled used music and all but two used a jingle of some description. These techniques provide children with a specific perceptual cue helping them encode and process stimuli.

Truthfulness of Advertisements

By way of rounding off the questionnaire it was decided to probe respondents' perception of the truthfulness of advertising. Table 5 summarises the findings.

As was expected, the younger pre-operational groups tended to accept advertisements literally. They appeared to have one overall scheme or category into which *all* television stimuli, programmes and advertisements, are slotted. Their responses are obviously coloured by the fact that such

Table 5
Belief in the Truthfulness of Advertisements

	Years					Total	%	Boys	Girls
	4-5	6-7	8-9	10-11	12-13				
<i>Sometimes</i>	4	5	2	2	1	14	23.4	7	7
<i>No Belief</i>	3	5	6	10	11	35	58.3	22	13
<i>Believed</i>	5	2	4			11	18.3	6	5
Total						60	100	35	25

abstract concepts as truth and falsehood are incompletely understood if at all. The inability of children at this stage to generalise or reason inductively was displayed even by those among them who distrusted advertisements. They tended to reason transductively from one advertisement they considered false to the next. 58% of all the children interviewed felt that advertisements definitely do not tell the truth.

However, scepticism increased markedly as one moved up the age spectrum. Older children do not consider advertisements in isolation; most of them seem to match advertising claims against their own experiences as purchasers or consumers. The two older groups cited the profit motive extensively as the basis for their distrust while the nascent distrust of the 7-8 year olds seemed to stem from the more elemental discovery that many of the advertising world's images are not found in reality.

Two overall observations warrant particular mention. Table 5 shows a marked difference between boys' and girls' levels of distrust; boys were more dubious than girls. The authors were unable to advance any explanation for this phenomenon although it was paralleled by greater vociferousness on the part of boys during most interviews. The second observation concerned parents. It had been expected that the views articulated by parents to their offspring to counter advertising impact would have received more explicit mention giving rise to the "Dad says ads aren't true" type response. However, only two children out of the entire sample forwarded such interpersonal reasons as the basis of their distrust of advertising. Two possible explanations seemed possible to account for this. First, parental views may have been present without being explicitly attributed to them for fear of ridicule from their peers although this was considered unlikely to be the case for the two younger age groups. Second, parental admonitions on advertising may be seasonal in character centering mainly on the pre-Christmas period.

Conclusion

The Irish children's market is sizeable in its own right and those wishing to address it should do so with a clear understanding and appreciation of its differentiating characteristics. The first section of this research confirmed this distinctness by highlighting the modes of response of a sample of Dublin children to a series of questions on the nature of advertising. Their modes of response disclosed relatively discrete sub-segments within this market based on different perceptual, judgemental and recall abilities. Strong correlations were noted between the abilities of these sub-segments and the stages of cognitive development proposed by Piaget.

Advertisements for younger age segments 4-6 years should ideally incorporate high degrees of perceptual vividness and definition. The 7-10 year segment can cope with increasing symbolic imagery, judge advertising affectively—whether it is silly, funny, boring—and tend not to view advertisements in isolation but in relation to their own life experience. Thematic content is important for the senior group who exhibit multi-dimensional recall tempered by a healthy, embedded scepticism.

In the qualitative interviews with account executives it had become apparent that many were either uninformed or unable to capitalise on the strategic benefits and target precision afforded by such a developmental approach to children's advertising. A range of features, isolated through content analysis, were found to be effective in translating these developmental stages into appealing advertising copy. And "appealing advertising" was shown by the sample to be seminal to the entire marketing communication process. Making children's advertising 'work' is clearly a multi-faceted endeavour. However, one pivotal feature of this endeavour, confirmed in the research, is the necessity to entertain and to do this in a manner that dovetails with children's cognitive development levels.

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