

2009-01-01

Advertising Connoisseurs: Children's Active Engagement with and Enjoyment of Television Advertising

Margaret-Anne Lawlor

Technological University Dublin, malawlor@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/buschmarart>



Part of the [Advertising and Promotion Management Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lawlor, M.: Advertising connoisseurs: children's active engagement with and enjoyment of television advertising. *Irish Marketing Review*, Vol. 20, no.1, pp. 23-24.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Marketing at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@tudublin.ie, arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, brian.widdis@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](#)

ADVERTISING CONNOISSEURS: CHILDREN'S ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH AND ENJOYMENT OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING

Margaret-Anne Lawlor

The literature pertaining to advertising and children has tended to focus on how advertising affects children at cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural levels. A key element of the debate has been the extent to which children understand advertising as a mode of commercial communication, and the potential associated outcomes such as advertising scepticism and pester power. This paper adopts a different approach by exploring the extent to which television advertising can constitute a resource for a child's own use and enjoyment. As part of an interpretive study of a group of Irish children aged seven to nine years which explores their relationship with advertising, this paper focuses on the specific advertising techniques to which children are attracted. It is suggested that the label of advertising connoisseurs can be applied to many of the children in this study, who, far from being passive recipients of advertising, are actively engaging with, and enjoying this form of communication.

Introduction

A key concern underlying the child-advertising debate is the extent to which children have the ability to discern, interpret and cope with advertising. A prevailing unease centres on a perception that younger children lack the guile and sophistication to address adequately the overtures of advertisers (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Chan and McNeal, 2004; Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003). In view of the above, one starting point in the discussion pertains to children's understanding of advertising. As Young (2003) points out, if children are unable to appreciate advertising intent, then the potential for advertising regulation approaches that of a necessity. However, given that Young proceeds to conclude broadly that children of approximately eight to nine years *understand* advertising's *raison d'être*, then an equally valid approach to the child-advertising relationship is to explore how children of this age *feel* towards advertising.

This paper approaches the topic by considering the extent to which children use advertising as a resource for their use and enjoyment, and the specific advertising techniques and tactics that generate such enjoyment. The literature is replete with studies indicating what children like about advertising (for example, humour, action, animated characters) and dislike about advertising (for example, excessive repetition, intrusion during a favourite programme). This paper revisits the

topic but also considers how children's attraction to such advertising techniques can facilitate various uses such as entertainment, diversion, aspiration and convenience. A further contribution of this paper is to offer a contemporary, Irish perspective in an area where the literature dates back to the nineteen seventies and eighties, and which has overwhelmingly originated in North America (Friestad and Wright, 2005; Lawlor and Prothero, 2003). The paper commences by considering children's attitudes towards advertising.

Children's Attitudes Towards Advertising

It has been suggested that attitudinal effects refer to the extent to which a child likes television advertising and views it favourably or unfavourably (Rossiter, 1979). Over the years, the literature has been in agreement that children tend to favour entertaining advertisements. For example, Goldberg and Gorn (1978) found that children tend to be attracted to up-tempo music, product close-ups, swift action and attractive child models. Elsewhere, the entertainment aspect has been found to be a function of the use of humour, cartoon characters, famous people, animals and swift action in advertisements (Rolandelli, 1989; Ross et al., 1984; Goldberg and Gorn, 1978; Ward, 1972). It has also been found that children tend to be attracted to memorable advertising catchphrases and jingles. This was evident in Bartholomew and O'Donohoe's

(2003) study of ten- to twelve-year-olds where the children were seen to hugely enjoy imitating advertising catchphrases for brands such as Budweiser.

The facility for animated characters in advertisements to engage children's attention and liking has been widely noted in the literature (for example Ward, 1972). The suggestion is that children are attracted to the entertainment aspect and also the strong visual images used in animation (Smith and Sweeney, 1984). A note of concern has been sounded by some researchers that children's liking for animated characters has translated into strong recall for adult-targeted advertising using such characters. For example, Fischer et al.'s (1991) study demonstrated that three- to six-year-old children exhibited high levels of recognition for the 'Old Joe' character used to promote Camel cigarettes.

Collins' (1990) study of nine- and ten-year-old children in Northern Ireland found that children reported humour as being their most preferred aspect of advertising. In this context, humour was deemed to be a function of the characters featuring in the advertisement or the overall plot/storyline. The second most popular characteristic was that of action in terms of action sequences, daredevil stunts and speed. The third most popular characteristic was music. Collins raises an interesting point by suggesting that these three attractions are also common to films and programmes that children tend to enjoy. Therefore, his argument is that children are drawn to advertisements for the same reasons that they are drawn to favourite films and programmes.

In an interpretive study of second grade (seven- to eight-year-olds) and fifth grade children (ten- to eleven-year-olds), Moore and Lutz (2000) interviewed thirty-eight children regarding their perceptions of advertising and advertised products. This interpretive study differed from previous studies cited above, which primarily used an experimental or questioning approach. This study found that the children actively engaged with advertising. One manifestation of this was the case whereby some children reported that they actively looked out for certain ads. Thus, children were seen to draw upon advertising for enjoyment and entertainment.

With regard to a child's age and his/her attitude to advertising, Rossiter (1979) contends that attitudes toward advertising tend to be positive among younger children (for example, first grade pupils) but that this favourable attitude tends to diminish significantly with age. In their 1974 study, Robertson and Rossiter found that the figure of 69 per cent of first grade children who liked all advertising decreased to 56 per cent when these students entered third grade, and further declined to 25 per cent by fifth grade. Hence, as children grow older, they exhibit more questioning attitudes towards advertising. The authors also proposed that children who were able to identify the persuasive intent of an advertisement were less likely to be influenced by that advertisement, because they were less trusting towards it. The contention that children become more distrustful and sceptical towards advertising as they grow older has been widely voiced in the literature (for example, Derbaix and Pecheux, 2003; Boush et al., 1994).

Another factor to consider regarding children's like or dislike for advertising is the nature of the product/service being advertised, with specific reference to food advertisements (Scammon and Christopher, 1981). For example, in a study of Hong Kong children, Chan (2000) found that children's preferred advertisements were for food, drink, toys and mobile phones. The children professed to like these advertisements because they were interesting and funny. This was deemed to be a factor of the entertaining and/or humorous storylines, use of cartoon figures and their favourite television personalities. Another reason for such positive feelings was the children's liking for the product in question.

Furthermore, with regard to advertisements that children tend to dislike, sources of annoyance include advertising repetition (Gorn and Goldberg, 1977), and the degree to which an advertisement/commercial break is perceived to interrupt a programme in progress (Gunter et al., 2002). With regard to the genre of products/services being advertised, Chan (2000) identified that children in her study disliked advertisements for supermarkets and public service announcements. Elsewhere, 'boring' or 'dull' were the reasons given for children disliking certain advertisements in Ward's (1972) study. Another aspect

disliked by children in Chan's (2000) study was the fear appeal used in advertisements warning of the negative consequences of drug-taking or unsafe behaviour in the home (for example, young children playing with fire).

Whilst age has been consistently acknowledged as a key variable influencing what children know about, and feel towards advertising, gender has not been identified by the literature as being a key variable in boys' and girls' attitudes towards advertising (Macklin, 1987; Butter et al., 1981). Indeed, in an experimental study, Bijmolt et al. (1998) deemed gender to be a negligible variable in dictating children's attitudes towards advertising. Of course, it can be reasonably inferred that where a product is gender-specific (e.g. Barbie targeting young female audiences), the opposite gender may find such an advertisement to be irrelevant.

Research Methodology

The findings presented here are derived from a larger research project undertaken by the author, to explore children's relationship with advertising. The objective of this paper is to investigate the type of advertising and specific advertising techniques to which children are attracted, thereby exploring the extent to which television advertising can constitute a resource for a child's own use and enjoyment. It was observed that the academic research on the effects of advertising on children has been mostly driven by positivistic, quantitative perspectives (cf. Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003). An interpretive approach was deemed appropriate in the present study in view of the author's desire to make sense of, and understand how children feel towards advertising.

Fifty-two boys and girls aged between seven and nine years participated in a series of focus group discussions and individual interviews with the author. The research was conducted in the setting of two Irish primary schools. Specifically, seven focus groups were conducted in the first school while twenty-six individual interviews were conducted in the second school. The rationale for employing these two qualitative methods was to explore children's attitudes towards advertising in the social context of a group discussion, and the more personal setting offered by an individual interview. There were no discernible differences in terms of age regarding the children's attitudes

towards advertising, or indeed between the opinions expressed by the children in the focus groups and interviews. A gender difference emerged in one area only in the discussions, pertaining to boys' enjoyment of action and stunts in advertising.

In keeping with the interpretive nature of this study, a number of broad topics were offered for discussion. Specifically, the children were invited to discuss their attitudes towards advertising, and to identify specific advertisements that they liked and disliked. The discussions were tape-recorded with the permission of the children except in the case of three children who declined to be recorded. The interviews were transcribed and each transcript was then coded to guide the emergent themes. This analysis yielded a large number of categories and themes and the presentation of findings below draws upon quotes and excerpts from the discussions with a view to illustrating the children's perspectives on advertising. A host of ethical standards were applied in this research, including the conduct of the research in a safe setting (i.e. the school setting) and also the securing of consent from both the children and their parents/guardians (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research, 1999; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The children's right to privacy has also been respected and their names accordingly changed in the excerpts provided below.

As indicated above, the children were invited to discuss ads that they liked and disliked. Whilst the children were largely positive towards advertising and indicated that they actively enjoyed it, there were cases where they referred to negative aspects such as excessive advertisement repetition and perceived untruthfulness in advertising. A more complete discussion of what children dislike about advertising is not included in this paper due to space constraints, and will be the subject of a further paper.

Advertising as a Source of Enjoyment

One of the most important observations within this research is that all of the children appeared to have very strong, positive attitudes towards advertising as a communication form. It was clear that advertising in general, and indeed specific advertisements, constituted a source of enjoyment for the children. They spoke of advertising as being

Table 1 What Children Like About Advertisements

Humour	Animals with human qualities
Music	Celebrity endorsers
Catchphrases	Ordinary people
Special effects	Children
Animated characters	Action and stunts

there to entertain, to make one laugh and as a form of diversion. For example, advertisements that were enjoyable were those that targeted children directly and that also involved them or drew them into the ad: 'if the ad was enjoyable, the longer it went on, you got stuck into it' (Dean, 7, interview 2).

It further became apparent that, for many children, their enjoyment of advertising was based upon the content, creative appeal and/or characters appearing within. The author has categorised the children's responses using the headings in Table 1. Each of these areas will now be addressed.

Humour

The humorous appeal of an advertisement was noted in terms of humorous special effects, such as talking and dancing objects. Thus, humour was observed to have a visual element. In this manner, one child spoke of an advertisement for Tesco where the shopping baskets were seen to be talking to each other:

I think it's funny the way that the [shopping] bags are dancing around and the trolleys and the baskets go when they get lifted up 'well they got carried away!' (Sheila, 8, interview 1)

The brand of slapstick humour was also popular, as is illustrated in the following example of a Mr Kipling advertisement:

Gary: I like – you know the one for Mr Kipling when he is playing golf and he keeps on hitting all the balls, and he hits somebody on the trolley and he [the trolley driver] falls off! [all group laugh uproariously]

Author: Why do you like that ad?

Gary: Because it's sort of a funny ad – he's hitting the ball and he misses all the time! (aged 8, group 6)

It was also observed that humour in adult advertisements was favourably received by the children in this study. One girl spoke of her favourite advertisement as being one for an alcoholic drink:

Linda: It's one for, em, I think it's Smirnoff Ice, and he has to go out and bring a few bottles back

in, and he's freezing because it's snowing and he's only in his underpants and he walks in and opens the door and says 'hello to the big dog!' [all group are nodding in recognition and laughing throughout story]

Louise: That's one of my favourite ads too. (both aged 8, group 7)

Whilst this advertisement is actually for Coors beer, it is interesting to observe the child's recall of an alcoholic brand name and the storyline of an adult-targeted advertisement. Another interesting example of humour was given in a group discussion. It was noteworthy because this advertisement employs sexual innuendo and the advertisement had been memorised in exact detail by the child in question, including every word of the conversation between the advertisement's characters:

There are these two friends together and they're both boys and one of them comes down in his underpants and t-shirt. The other guy is making a fry for him and his girlfriend and he starts saying 'you know, you've got lovely legs – I don't know why you hide them' and the other guy thinks he is talking to him and the first guy goes 'ah, don't be shy with me – come on, I think you'd look lovely in one of those little dresses' and then the other guy picks up the phone and realises that the first guy is talking to his girlfriend, not to him! [to group laughter] (Alison, 9, group 7)

At a later stage, the children were asked about ads aimed towards adults. Observe in the following excerpt how the boys gain huge enjoyment in their descriptions of various advertisements. Also, it is apparent that a snowball dynamic is at work, in that one boy's example serves to generate follow-up examples from the rest of the group:

Author: What do you think of the ads for grown-ups?

James: Some of them are good, except the ones where you see loads of ladies moving their legs and shaving their legs! [all laugh]

Keith: When you're in Sky Digital and the man puts his feet up on the table and starts shaving them! [group laughter]

James: The ads for deodorant. [whereupon, all four boys raise their arms and pretend to earnestly apply a deodorant, to gales of laughter] (all aged 8, group 1)

Music

Music emerged amongst a small number of children as a technique that could draw one's attention to an advertisement and made it more memorable: 'I like, em "You're as cold as ice" – you know with the Aquafresh? ... I like the tune. I like the song they use for it' (Sheila, 8, interview 1).

It also emerged in the group discussions that the children not only could identify the soundtracks or songs used in the advertisements, they also had memorised the tunes or the words. In the case of one group discussion, a boy described the storyline used in a Heineken advertisement (even though he refers to it as being for Carlsberg):

There's this other one for Carlsberg where the man is stuffing his hand into the bin [other boys start to sing the soundtrack for this ad – 'Quando Quando']. He picks it up [a can of beer] and it's the wrong one. He puts it back in and picks another one and gets it but it slips out of his hand! [group laugh in recognition of this ad] (James, 8, group 1)

It is interesting to observe that as James recounted this example, the other boys sang the theme song 'Quando Quando' in accompaniment to his explanation. This would suggest that, for the boys to have memorised the words and the tune, they would have had to have seen and paid attention to the advertisement on a number of occasions, or indeed listened to their friends singing the tune. In the context of the literature, Scott (1990) suggests that, whilst music can increase children's advertising recall, it tends to interact with other components of an advertisement, the underlying suggestion being that it may sometimes play an accompanying role rather than a central role in advertising.

Catchphrases

Catchphrases and slogans in advertisements were also observed to be popular with the children. In this respect, one such advertisement which was introduced by many of the children into the conversation was an ad for Jaffa Cake biscuits, in which a teacher teases her pupils by taking bites out of a Jaffa Cake ostensibly to illustrate to them the various shapes of the moon. It was observed in the group discussions that where one person recounted a given advertisement, the others would

join in the chorus or chant the catchphrase in unison:

Linda: There's an old ad I used to copy, and there was this lady with Jaffa Cakes and she was saying 'full moon, half moon and just a little moon'. [group join in chorus, gales of laughter] (aged 8, group 7)

The children were highly familiar with catchphrases of brands that targeted them, or indeed adults. In many cases, the catchphrases appeared to lend themselves to memory on the basis of their rhyming and the entertaining way in which they were articulated in a given ad. Examples of this included:

Carlsberg don't do dreams but, if they did, they'd probably be the best dreams in the world. (Louise, 8, group 7)

The Budweiser one ... he goes like 'Whassup – sitting having a Bud'. (John, 8, group 6, imitating the deep, raspy voice of the actor in the ad)

Th-e-y-r-e greaaaat! (Karl, 8, group 6) [imitating the exaggerated tone of Tony the Tiger, Kellogg's Frosties]

The children's ability to recall catchphrases reflects the findings of Scott (1990) and Wartella (1980), who contend that such auditory cues lend themselves to memory, even for children as young as four years of age. Furthermore, the children in this study appear to enjoy chanting catchphrases and acting out advertisements, thus reflecting similar findings by Bartholomew and O'Donohoe (2003) and Buckingham (1993).

In this study, it was interesting to note the large number of children who were able to recite advertising catchphrases and slogans used not only in ads targeting children (for example, Jaffa Cakes) but also in ads targeting adults (for example, Carlsberg and Budweiser). Furthermore, the extent to which such ads capture the children's attention is reinforced by their memory for the characters who voice these catchphrases. In Bartholomew and O'Donohoe's (2003) study of ten to twelve year olds, they used the phrase 'performance masters' (p. 445) to indicate children's facility for such imitation. So too, it would appear that the children in this study were 'masters' in terms of advertising imitation.

Special Effects

It emerged in the discussions that the children were highly familiar with and attracted to the use of special effects in advertisements. This theme was widespread across the discussions. Special effects were those that featured 'magic' tricks, such as inanimate objects assuming human characteristics. As mentioned above, a popular ad with the children was one for Tesco which showed inanimate objects like shopping trollies and baskets moving and talking:

The baskets that talk in the Tesco ad. (Dean, 7, interview 2)

It's the bags who are dancing [chants] 'lower prices at Tesco, lower prices at Tesco!' (Sheila, aged 8, interview 1)

Similarly, reference was made to the animated bear in a Charmin toilet tissue ad: 'when he makes a chair out of a toilet roll' (Emily, 7, interview 14). Other popular effects included the phenomenon of animals taking on human behaviour, such as talking and moving: 'The one [ad] with the cow dancing with the sheep' (Rachel, 8, interview 4).

Another example was given of an animal eating a cereal, possessing a magical ability to assume another form. Thus, Tony the Tiger (Kellogg's Frosties) was deemed to be: 'really cool, you know the way he gets some Frosties and then he turns into anything' (Alan, 8, interview 5). Indeed, the use of special effects in an advertisement was felt to involve the audience more closely. In this respect, one girl spoke of advertisements using both real people and animated characters such as Tony the Tiger:

That's actually quite good because it gets you to look at it, because you see he's doing something with them [children in the ad] and it makes you think 'is he real or is he not?' (Linda, 8, group 7)

Animated Characters

Another aspect of advertising which many of the children enjoy is the use of animated characters. Again, this theme emerged in both the group and individual interviews. The children referred to such characters by name, and so the author has chosen to categorise such responses under the heading 'animated characters'. For example, Bart and Homer Simpson and Bugs Bunny were professed in this respect.

In one group discussion, the humorous nature of two animated characters that have appeared in a number of M&M ads was given as the reason for the children liking them.

Barbara: I like cartoons. I don't really like the programmes with real people in them.

Author: Julie, how about you?

Julie: Them, because real people aren't really that funny. They [M&Ms] are funny and they're not like real people. (both aged 9, group 4)

Another child singled out the Rugrats and Bugs Bunny characters for their humour value, arguing that: 'I think those two characters are really funny...because they do all sorts of weird things' (Sheila, 8, interview 1).

Animals with Human Qualities

Another very popular advertising technique with the children was the use of animals in advertising, especially mischievous animals, such as Kellogg's Tony the Tiger. This character was deemed by the children to be 'cool', likeable and friendly, as is evidenced in the following group discussion:

Tom: I like him because he looks good. He looks cool and I like Frosties.

Author: Peter, how about you?

Peter: I like him because I like tigers and I like Frosties, and he does cool stuff on the programmes.

Author: What kind of cool stuff does he do?

Peter: Like he goes around, em, he's really good at basketball and all that.

Author: Kevin, how about you?

Kevin: Yeah, I love Frosties and I love tigers. (all aged 8, group 3)

Another child spoke of Tony the Tiger assuming human faculties such as friendliness but the child also recognised the non-realistic nature of the tiger: 'Well he's a friendly tiger but, if he was a real tiger, I'd be out of here!' (Mark, 8, interview 15). It is interesting to observe how in both cases the tiger character is being accorded human qualities (e.g. his 'coolness') and also human talents (i.e. playing basketball).

Overall, a universally popular feature in advertising with the children in this study was the use of animals in advertising, and this is in line with the literature (for example, Gunter and Furnham, 1998; Rolandelli, 1989). However, the 'animals in advertising' theme is expanded upon in this

research study in that it indicates that the children are particularly drawn to animals that have the appearance or outward guise of human beings as seen above.

Celebrity Endorsers

The celebrities who were popular with the children tended to fall under the categories of popular culture (e.g. pop music) and sport (e.g. football). The children identified celebrities from the world of music such as Robbie Williams, Kylie Minogue and Britney Spears. Footballers such as David Beckham and Roy Keane were also commonly mentioned.

The popularity of footballers as celebrity endorsers was evident in the following discussion:

Author: What are your favourite ads?
 Peter: The Nike ad.
 Author: Why?
 Peter: It's cool with all the professional footballers.
 Tom: The same as him – the ads with the Man United players in them – they're my favourite. (both aged 8, group 3)

A celebrity's appearance in an advertisement was also seen as being a source of curiosity and/or knowledge for the viewer. For example, one girl suggested that viewers might be curious to learn why a famous person was appearing in an advertisement: 'people pay more attention to them because they're like "oh that's Tina [reference to a member of a popular pop group] or Roy Keane" and they say "I wonder what they're on for?"' (Louise, 8, group 7).

A further consideration was the knowledge or skills which could be assimilated by watching an advertisement featuring a celebrity:

Eric: You know the Nike ad about the footballers – the one where they're hitting each other with the ball on the head.
 Author: Why do you like that one, Eric?
 Eric: I like watching it because I think what they do is really skilful. (aged 8, group 6)

An understanding as to how a celebrity's aura may be associated with a brand was reflected elsewhere. One girl spoke of Britney Spears appearing in an ad for Pepsi and justified Pepsi's rationale thus: 'a lot of people know her name and, like, they like

to see her. They will probably buy it if they saw her' (Sheila, 8, interview 1). In this case, Sheila was alluding to the power that a celebrity has to generate liking and popularity, and that this in turn may transfer onto the brand.

All in all, a large number of children expressed their enjoyment of advertisements that featured celebrities. In terms of the literature, the children's awareness of, and attraction to, the use of famous people in advertising reflects the findings of Ross et al. (1984), who contend that celebrities can positively affect children's cognitive and attitudinal reactions to an advertisement.

Ordinary People

Where the children spoke at great length about the use of celebrities in advertising, the author then asked them about the use of ordinary (non-famous) people in advertising. In this study, it emerged that a small number of children felt that it was preferable if the advertisement featured ordinary people. Interestingly, the children in one group discussion implied that celebrities were a scarce resource when compared to ordinary people. The girls had been discussing a favourite pop group and this introduced the topic of famous people appearing in advertising:

Author: Is it better to have famous people or ordinary people in ads?
 Samantha: I'd say famous people, because everybody will get to like them and they can buy their CDs if they had any out.
 Eileen: I think ordinary people, because there isn't a lot of famous people around. If the famous people were coming on all the time, you'd run out of famous people.
 Deirdre: I'd go for ordinary people. If famous people kept going on, then the ordinary people would never become famous. They'd never get their own experience or career.
 Judy: Yeah, I think ordinary people, because the famous people – everybody knows them usually and the ordinary people get a chance to be famous. (all aged 8, group 2)

The excerpt above from the group discussion also offers an insight into these children's ability to look beyond the commercial nature of advertising and instead discern an aspirational element to it. In other words, the children are clearly decoding a meaning from advertising other than that intended by the sender. The advertiser may use

spokespeople in advertising with a view to indicating to the viewer how he/she can aspire to a certain persona or lifestyle. In this case, it is interesting to observe that the children are looking beyond the surface of the advertisement (i.e. awareness of what the advertiser is trying to achieve and how the message is being transmitted) and towards the medium itself, i.e. the actors/spokespeople being used. In this case, the girls are clearly separating the message from the medium and perceive a reward, not with regard to the product or the persona being advertised, but in opportunities that may be enjoyed by actors/spokespeople in advertising.

Children

Whilst a small number of children discussed the theme of ordinary people appearing in advertisements, the attractiveness of children appearing in advertisements was a very widespread theme across the discussions. The children not only exhibited awareness of the use of child models in advertising but also welcomed it as an alternative to adult actors:

Eric: Because it's always usually adults in advertising and I think it's good to give children a chance.

John: [expresses agreement] Yeah, I'd go with Eric again. (both aged 8, group 6)

This sentiment was echoed elsewhere:

Sheila: I enjoy seeing someone my own age on television.

Author: Why is that?

Sheila: Because you don't normally see it. You normally see grown-ups around twenties, thirties. (aged 8, interview 1)

It was felt that children had an effective role to play in advertising, in that child viewers could identify with their television counterparts: 'sometimes I think when I see a little girl like me in the ad, I daydream and I think it would be myself in the ad' (Eileen, 8, group 2). Similarly, Alison alluded to advertising as having an aspirational quality in terms of her dream of being selected to appear in an advertisement: 'You think you could go into an ad one day ... you could be picked anytime to go into an ad' (Alison, 9, group 7).

All in all, the children enjoyed advertisements that featured child actors. A related theme which emerged from their discussions was an aspiration

on the part of many of the children to appear in an advertisement. The children's liking for the use of child actors in advertising corresponds with Kinsey's (1987) observation that child audiences tend to identify positively with child actors in advertising on the basis of their shared age and life experiences.

Action and Stunts

Another type of advertising that a small number of the children deemed to be enjoyable was the use of action scenes or stunts involving some element of skill. For example, one boy referred to his liking of cartoon characters on the basis of an action sequence: 'the way they use sledge hammers to whack someone's head!' [laughs] (Brian, 7, interview 23).

It was evident that the boys who favoured the use of action techniques based this liking on their favourite action programmes. For one boy, his favourite advertisement was for Micro Machines, a type of toy car. When probed as to why he liked this advertisement so much, he explained he liked the stunt involved in which a car turns into a truck (Bill, 8, interview 9).

Also, advertisements that featured some form of daring were deemed to be 'cool'. An example was given of an advertisement for the Spiderman movie which was at that time being screened in cinemas:

Ross: Yeah, the one for Spiderman in the cinema. That's a cool ad.

[group agrees]

James : The Spiderman one in the cinema climbing up the wall. (both aged 8, group 1)

It was noted that only a small number of (male) children in the study identified favourite advertisements as being those featuring stunts and action sequences. In contrast, Collins' (1990) study of nine- and ten-year-old children's attitudes towards advertising indicated that action was the second most popular advertisement tactic after humour.

Advertising as an Entertaining Alternative to Programmes

With a view to further probing their attitudes towards advertising, the author asked the children to imagine a world without any advertising, and

they were asked to comment on this prospect. There was overwhelming and staunch support for advertising. Six children were in favour of a 'no-advertising' scenario whilst forty-six children opposed this.

For example, one child argued that viewers would be unable to see their favourite advertisements:

It would be pretty boring ... Because there are some ads that people like very much and if they didn't get to see them ... [at this point, the child's voice trailed off and she shook her head as if in regret] (Laura, 7, interview 18)

It was also observed that a commercial break facilitated the viewer in doing other things and so preventing him/her from missing part of the programme being viewed:

Samantha: Say you're thirsty and there was no such thing as ads and you're on your favourite programme, and you would really like to see this part or you have to go the toilet or get a drink because your mouth is really dry, then you'd go out and you'd miss the really good part of the show. It would be better if there were ads.

Judy: It's better with ads in case anything happens, like, during the show.

Author: What do you mean?

Judy: Like if you're hungry or need to go to the toilet. (both aged 8, group 2)

It was suggested above that some children might find advertisements as entertaining as the programmes with which they coexist. This is interesting, because it suggests an active engagement with the advertisements in that the viewer is drawing upon them as an entertainment resource in the absence of a good programme. Furthermore, this is a theme which has not been developed in the literature, which has instead tended to focus on children's annoyance towards advertising's intrusion during their television viewing (Gunter et al., 2002).

One boy alluded to this by referring to non-stop programming as 'boring':

A bit boring. Actually quite boring because you'd be watching one programme and then, straight after, another programme would come on, and then another and another and another. At least

three ads you'd need, in between or something. (Dean, 7, interview 2)

It is interesting to note Dean's use of language regarding the repeated use of the word in 'another and another and another'. This is reinforcing the child's belief of non-stop programming as monotonous and repetitious. Another child communicated her negative feelings concerning a 'no-ads' scenario in terms of being 'weird': 'because the programmes would go on forever and they wouldn't stop at all' (Rachel, 8, interview 4). One interpretation is that the commercial break is seen as a diversion or respite from the programmes being watched.

It is therefore evident that most of the children appear to have a dual-edged attitude towards advertising. At one level, they talk about liking advertising and actively seeking out certain advertisements. At another level, they articulate their perception that advertising breaks in television programmes conveniently allow them to undertake other activities, such as having dinner.

Conclusion

The aim of this research study was to explore the children's feelings towards the specific advertising techniques to which they are attracted. It was noted above that many of the children appear to exhibit positive attitudes towards advertising on the basis of its perceived entertainment value. Another interesting observation was that advertisements were often deemed to be as entertaining, if not more entertaining, than many programmes. Forty-six of the fifty-two children negatively viewed a scenario whereby advertising was removed from television. The feeling was that commercial breaks facilitated the viewer in doing other things, such as planning mealtimes with their parents and other activities around their favourite programmes. To this end, the presence of advertisements was perceived as a source of convenience.

With respect to placing these findings in the context of the literature, it is useful to refer to Collins' (1990) study of nine- and ten-year-old children. He posited that, even though the children in his study were quite sceptical towards advertising claims, they also enjoyed advertising. Specifically, they were attracted to, in the following order, the

use of humour, action, music, content and information in advertising. Other studies have indicated that children respond positively to the use of animated characters, famous people, child actors, animals and swift action in advertising (Rolandelli, 1989; Ross et al., 1984; Goldberg and Gorn, 1978). More recently, Chan (2000) found that the Chinese children in her study were attracted to advertisements that used humour or celebrity endorser appeals.

The children in the present study were particularly attracted to the use of humour in advertising. A large number of children tended to remember and like advertisements featuring memorable catchphrases. This reflects the findings of Scott (1990) and Wartella (1980), who noted children's ability to learn brand names and slogans from an early stage. Indeed, the children's enjoyment in enacting advertising plots and imitating jingles also reflects the findings of Bartholomew and O'Donohoe (2003) and Buckingham (1993).

An interesting finding is the enjoyment which many of the children gained from advertisements featuring animals (as established in the literature) but, more particularly, animals that are seen to take on human abilities (e.g. playing sports) and human qualities (e.g. 'coolness' and friendliness). It was noted that, in many cases, both the advertisements and the children were imbuing the animals in question with human characteristics. This is an interesting outcome that adds to the literature in that it recognises children's predisposition to the use of animals with human characteristics and abilities.

Another advertising technique that was widely recognised as an effective means of garnering audience attention was the use of celebrity endorsers. Whilst the children recognised that celebrities can arouse viewer curiosity, they were divided as to the value of using celebrities or ordinary people in advertisements. The feeling was that celebrities had the advantage of fame and success and therefore could generate viewer curiosity as to their presence in an advertisement. Furthermore, these advantages were recognised as having a persuasive influence on some viewers. On the other hand, some children were attracted to the use of ordinary people, as advertising was

seen as an opportunity for them to earn fame and recognition.

The children reacted very positively to the use of child actors in advertising on the basis that it was easier for them to identify with advertising characters who appeared to be similar in age and lifestyle. Again, this is in keeping with Kinsey's (1987) suggestion that child audiences tend to identify with child communicators in advertising. This was a strongly articulated viewpoint across the interviews. Finally, other advertising techniques that were mentioned on a smaller scale included the use of animated characters and also advertisements featuring action scenes and stunts. The latter invariably appealed to the boys.

Of even greater interest is the extent to which the children in this study interact with such advertising. They can imitate catchy jingles and music, whilst also memorising advertising storylines. They refer to the use of celebrity endorsers but can also offer informed arguments as to how viewers might respond to celebrities appearing in advertising. The children appear to especially engage with advertising that makes them laugh. Interestingly, there was also a suggestion that advertisements can be as entertaining as the programmes into which they encroach.

In a previous study focusing on eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds' experiences of advertising, O'Donohoe and Tynan (1998, p. 474) used the term 'casual cognoscenti' to describe how the young people in their study tend to assess and critique advertising. In the same vein, the term 'connoisseur' is relevant to this discussion. A dictionary definition of connoisseur refers to characteristics such as 'knowing', 'critical judgement' and 'matters of taste'. The present author would suggest that the label of advertising connoisseurs can also be applied to many of the children in this study, who, far from being passive recipients of advertising, are actively engaging with, and enjoying, this form of communication. In a regulatory context, the unveiling of children's attitudes towards advertising is critical. In the current climate in which many advertising regulators, policymakers, consumer groups and parents in Ireland and the UK are calling for further curbs on television advertising because of children's apparent gullibility, it is all the more important to

probe into what children both know and like/dislike about advertising.

The findings in this study should be of interest to advertising interests seeking to communicate with this market. Specifically, this study presented findings that reflect the literature, namely children's liking for the use of animation, humour, animals and famous people. Other outcomes which emerged and which have not been as widely explored in the literature included the children's liking for animal characters that assume human characteristics. It is important that advertisers and advertising agencies draw upon current knowledge regarding what children like and dislike about advertising if their choice of message and media is to be effective. Other future directions for research include an exploration of the use of, and ethical considerations associated with using advertising appeals and techniques in adult-targeted advertising that are known to be attractive to child audiences.

The findings in this study are based on the experi-

ences and insights offered by a study of a particular group of children aged seven to nine years. Further research might explore this area by assessing the appropriateness of advertising techniques and tactics to different age groups. In conclusion, this paper sought to offer a contemporary Irish perspective on the type of advertising and specific advertising techniques to which children are attracted. Far from being the passive recipients of advertising as often suggested in the literature, these children present themselves as advertising connoisseurs who are actively engaging with, and enjoying, this form of communication. They know what they like about advertising and they are also using it as a resource in terms of their own entertainment, diversion, aspiration and convenience.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Dr Andrea Prothero, Michael Smurfit Graduate School of Business, University College Dublin, for her helpful advice in the conduct of this research.

Author

Dr Margaret-Anne Lawlor is a lecturer in marketing communications at the Faculty of Business, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland. Her research interests include advertising to children and retailing. Margaret-Anne's work concerning children's understanding of advertising has been published in the *Journal of Marketing Management*, and her paper on children's advertising literacy is forthcoming in the *European Journal of Marketing*.

References

- Bartholomew, A. and O'Donohoe, S. (2003), 'Everything under control: a child's eye view of advertising', *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 19, nos. 3-4, pp. 433-57.
- Bijmolt, T.H.A., W. Claassen and B. Brus (1998), 'Children's understanding of TV advertising: effects of age, gender and parental influence', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 171-94.
- Boush, D.M., M. Friestad and G.M. Rose (1994), 'Adolescent scepticism toward TV advertising and knowledge of advertiser tactics', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 21, June, pp. 165-75.
- Buckingham, D. (1993), *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy*, The Falmer Press, London.
- Butter, E.J., P.M. Popovich, R.H. Stackhouse. and R.K. Garner (1981), 'Discrimination of television programs and commercials by preschool children', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 21, April, pp. 53-6.
- Chan, K. (2000), 'Hong Kong children's understanding of television advertising', *Journal of Marketing Communications*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 37-52.
- Chan, K. and J.U. McNeal (2004), 'Chinese children's attitudes towards television advertising: truthfulness and liking', *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 337-59.
- Collins, J. (1990), 'Television and primary schoolchildren in Northern Ireland: the impact of advertising', *Journal of Educational Television*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 31-9.
- Denzin, N.K. and Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) (1998), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, California.
- Derbaix, C. and C. Pecheux (2003), 'A new scale to assess children's attitudes toward TV advertising', *Journal of Advertising Research*, December, pp. 390-9.
- European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) (1999), 'Guidelines on interviewing children and young people', (Online) www.esomar.org
- Fischer, P.M., M.P. Schwartz, J.W. Richards, A.O. Goldstein and T.H. Rojas (1991), 'Brand logo recognition by children aged 3 to 6 years', *Journal of the*

- American Medical Association*, vol. 266, no. 22, pp. 3145–8.
- Friestad, M. and P. Wright (2005) 'The next generation: research for twenty-first century public policy on children and advertising', *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 183–5.
- Goldberg, M.E. and G.J. Gorn (1978), 'Some unintended consequences of TV advertising to children', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 5, June, pp. 22–9.
- Goldberg, M.E., G.J. Gorn and W. Gibson (1978), 'TV messages for snacks and breakfast foods: do they influence children's preferences?', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 73–81.
- Gorn, G.J. and M.E. Goldberg (1977), 'The impact of television advertising on children from low-income families', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 4, September, pp. 86–8.
- Gunter, B., B. Baluch, L.J. Duffy and A. Furnham (2002), 'Children's memory for television advertising: effects of programme-advertisement congruency', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 16, pp. 171–90.
- Gunter, B. and A. Furnham (1998), *Children as Consumers – A Psychological Analysis of the Young People's Market*, Routledge, London.
- Kinsey, J. (1987), 'The use of children in advertising and the impact of advertising aimed at children', *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 169–75.
- Lawlor, M.-A. and A. Prothero (2003), 'Children's understanding of television advertising intent', *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 19, nos. 3–4, pp. 411–31.
- Macklin, M.C. (1987), 'Preschoolers' understanding of the information function of advertising', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 14, September, pp. 229–39.
- Moore, E.S. and R.J. Lutz (2000), 'Children, advertising and product experiences: a multimethod inquiry', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 27, June, pp. 31–48.
- Moses, L.J. and D.A. Baldwin (2005), 'What can the study of cognitive development reveal about children's ability to appreciate and cope with advertising?', *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 186–201.
- O'Donohoe, S. and C. Tynan (1998), 'Beyond sophistication: dimensions of advertising literacy?', *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 467–82.
- Robertson, T.S. and J.R. Rossiter (1974), 'Children and commercial persuasion: an attribution theory analysis', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 1, June, pp. 13–20.
- Rolandelli, D.R. (1989), 'Children and television: the visual superiority effect reconsidered', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, vol. 33, Winter, pp. 69–81.
- Ross, R.P., T. Campbell, J.C. Wright, A.C. Huston, M.L. Rice and P. Turk (1984), 'When celebrities talk, children listen: an experimental analysis of children's responses to TV ads with celebrity endorsement', *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 5, July–September, pp. 185–202.
- Rossiter, J.R. (1979), 'Does TV advertising affect children?' *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 49–53.
- Scammon, D.L. and C.L. Christopher (1981), 'Nutrition and education with children via television', *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 26–36.
- Scott, L.M. (1990), 'Understanding jingles and needle-drop: a rhetorical approach to music in advertising', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 17, September, pp. 223–36.
- Smith, G. and E. Sweeney (1984), *Children and Television Advertising: An Overview*, Children's Research Unit, London.
- Ward, S. (1972), 'Children's reactions to commercials', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 12, April, pp. 37–45.
- Wartella, E. (1980), 'Individual differences in children's responses to television advertising', in Palmer, E.L. and Dorr, A. (eds), *Children and the Faces of Television: Teaching, Violence and Selling*, Academic Press, New York.
- Young, B. (2003), 'Does food advertising influence children's food choices? A critical review of some of the recent literature', *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 22, no. 4, pp. 441–59.