

2008-01-01

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### Recommended Citation

Lawlor, M.: Exploring Children's Understanding of Television Advertising - Beyond the Advertiser's Perspective. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 42 Iss: 11/12, pp.1203 - 1223.

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# Exploring children's understanding of television advertising – beyond the advertiser's perspective

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Children's  
understanding of  
advertising

1203

Received September 2006

Revised March 2007

Accepted May 2007

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this article is to explore children's understanding of television advertising intent.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A different perspective on advertising intent is offered in this paper, as evidenced in an interpretive study of Irish children, aged between seven and nine years. A qualitative approach was employed, involving a series of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with 52 children.

**Findings** – The findings indicate that the participating children view advertising as serving interests including, but not limited to, the advertiser. The existence of other interested parties is suggested by the children, namely the agendas of viewers and television channels. The authors assert that these children view advertising as being larger and more complex than the advertiser's perspective, which has been the traditional focus in the extant research.

**Originality/value** – Adopting an advertising literacy perspective, the authors seek to explore children's "reading" and understanding of advertising. Advertising literacy is an approach to understanding advertising that has not received substantial attention in the child-advertising literature. The literature to date has tended to focus on the following question – do children understand the persuasive intent of advertising? This question is suggestive of a "yes/no" answer. In contrast, the authors view the concept of understanding as being more complex and multi-faceted, and accordingly, seek to develop this concept by way of a classification that suggests four different levels of understanding that children may exhibit towards advertising

**Keywords** Children (age groups), Television commercials, Advertising effectiveness, Ireland

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The extent to which children aged under 12 years understand the purpose of television advertising has generated much debate in academic circles and also at a wider societal level (Banks, 1975; Burr and Burr, 1976; Ellis, 2000; Drumwright and Murphy, 2004; Eagle *et al.*, 2004). Critics of television advertising would argue that children's relative youth and cognitive immaturity militates against their ability to discern the commercial remit of a television advertisement. On the other hand, an emerging school of thought argues that child viewers might be more sophisticated and shrewd in their understanding of advertising, than previously assumed (Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003). This paper presents research findings from an Irish study of seven- to



nine-year-old children. The aim of the research was to explore the children's understanding of television advertising intent. The perspective taken by previous researchers in this area has been to emphasise children's understanding of the advertiser's commercial remit. This paper presents findings which highlight two additional perspectives on intent – that of the viewer and the television channel. As such, the findings within this paper add to the body of knowledge by suggesting that the purpose of television advertising, according to these children, is larger and more all encompassing, than the commercial remit of the advertiser. The paper also offers a contemporary perspective in an area where the vast majority of previous research studies have been conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, and which have focused on North American children's relationship with advertising (Friestad and Wright, 2005).

### *Advertising intent*

Young (1990) has suggested that children's understanding of advertising is contingent on their realisation that there is a source deliberately creating television advertisements, and they must also be aware that this source seeks to persuade its audience to purchase. The merit of exploring children's understanding of advertising intent lies in the contention that if children cannot discern that advertising has a commercial merit, then advertising which targets such children may be unethical, on the basis that it exploits their credulity and innocence (Martin, 1997; Gunter and Furnham, 1998). This in turn has implications for the regulation of advertising to children.

Most of the studies addressing children's understanding of advertising intent have overwhelmingly focused on intent in terms of advertising's commercial purpose, namely its informative and persuasive aspects (Ward *et al.*, 1977; Donohue *et al.*, 1980; Gaines and Esserman, 1981; Preston, 2000; Oates *et al.*, 2002). Martin (1997) sounds a warning note in her observation that most of the extant studies group together persuasion and selling, without empirically exploring the differences between the two. Furthermore, it is evident that fewer studies have moved beyond the popular concept of advertising intent as being commercial in nature. An example of one such study is that of Blosser and Roberts (1985) who identified five categories of intent:

- (1) information;
- (2) teaching;
- (3) entertainment;
- (4) selling; and
- (5) persuasion.

Table I outlines the key studies examining children's understanding of advertising intent.

While the informative/commercial purpose of advertising constitutes a relevant focus for research, it is in itself only one perspective on advertising intent. The authors argue that a fuller and richer picture of children's understanding of advertising can be accessed, by placing to one side, the traditional perspective that advertising serves to inform, persuade and sell to children. An accompanying consideration is the extent to which children perceive advertising as existing to serve other interests and purposes, and it is these other interests and purposes that are explored in this paper.

The authors contend that there is a lack of research attention being accorded to the recipient's perspective, namely how a child decodes advertising and the possible

				Children's understanding of advertising
Authors	Children's age	Measure used	Perceived intent	
Ward (1972)	5-12 years	Verbal	Persuasive/selling	1205
Robertson and Rossiter (1974)	First grade pupils	Verbal	Informational/assistive	
Ward <i>et al.</i> (1977)	Kindergarten	Verbal	Persuasive/selling	
Donohue <i>et al.</i> (1980)	2-6 years	Non-verbal	Persuasive/selling	
Butter <i>et al.</i> (1981)	4-5 years	Verbal	Persuasive/selling	
Gaines and Esserman (1981)	4 years	Verbal	Persuasive/selling	
Blosser and Roberts (1985)	4-11 years	Verbal	Inform/teach/sell entertain/persuade	
Macklin (1985)	3-5 years	Non-verbal	Persuasive/selling	
Macklin (1987)	Pre-school	Non-verbal	Informational/assistive	
Chan (2000)	5-12 years	Verbal	Selling	
Oates <i>et al.</i> (2002)	6-10 years		Experimental/verbal Persuasive	Table I. Studies of children's understanding of advertising intent
Oates <i>et al.</i> (2003)	6-10 years	Verbal	Persuasive/assistive	
<b>Sources:</b> Adapted from Lawlor and Prothero (2002); Martin (1997)				

meanings, beyond selling, information and persuasion, that it may hold for the recipient. Therefore, in terms of framing the research question within a theoretical context, the authors were mindful that in seeking to explore the advertising recipient's understanding of advertising, they were essentially seeking to address how children read advertising, namely the meanings that they appropriate from advertising. The research focus within this study is therefore arguably best captured under the lens of the advertising literacy approach.

### Advertising literacy

Advertising literacy is an approach to understanding advertising that has not received substantial attention in the child-advertising literature (Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003). Essentially, advertising literacy refers to one's ability to "read" advertising, the latter constituting a text whose meaning can be read and interpreted (Domzal and Kernan, 1992). Similarly, Young (2000, p. 191) refers to literacy as "what it means to understand advertising". The importance of developing such abilities is highlighted by O'Donohoe and Tynan (1998) who contend that literacy may empower consumers by alerting them to the persuasive power of advertising, and subsequently facilitating them in resisting advertising. A further perspective is offered by Ritson and Elliott (1995) who deem advertising-literate consumers to be those who can read, co-create and act upon the many possible meanings of a given advertisement.

A key issue in advertising literacy is that there is no consensus in the literature with regard to either a definition or the constituent components of literacy. This may be due to the expansive nature of what it means to understand advertising. Indeed, it has been suggested that where definitions have been offered, they have been over-simplified in nature (Ritson and Elliott, 1995). Some writers have tended to define literacy quite narrowly or vaguely. In this respect, Bartholomew and O'Donohoe (2003) observe that the term literacy has often been used in the literature to describe a consumer's sophistication in understanding advertisements. But what does it mean to have a sophisticated understanding of advertising?

With regard to the facets of literacy, Young (1990) deemed the eight-year-olds in his study to be advertising literate because they were aware of the commercial rationale for using advertising, and the imagery employed by advertisers. On the other hand, Buckingham (1993) proposed that the seven to 12-year-olds in his study were largely advertising literate on the basis of their ability to discern the advertiser's objectives and target audiences, as well as their facility for critically evaluating the nature and content of given advertisements.

A more detailed description of literacy is offered in O'Donohoe and Tynan's (1998) study of 18 to 24-year-old adults. These authors identified the presence of advertising literacy in terms of their sample's ability to read and deconstruct an advertisement; to decipher an advertiser's strategy in terms of advertising goals, brand positioning and target markets, and finally to appreciate advertising techniques and production values.

In a study of 10 to 12-year-old children, Bartholomew and O'Donohoe (2003) posited that the children's literacy was suggested in three roles they assumed – ad masters, ad controllers and ad critics. The children were felt to be ad masters in terms of their understanding of the advertiser's objectives and the ad's meanings and styles. Ad controllers were those children who liked to exhibit an element of control over advertising, for example by contending that they were immune to advertising's influence or that they avoided certain ads. Ad critics were those children who critically evaluated advertisements according to their ability to appeal to different audiences as well as the technical aspects of ads.

It is observed that the above studies have largely focused on literacy in terms of abilities and skills pertaining to advertising. In this respect, Ritson and Elliott (1995) sound a note of caution that advertising literacy does not solely equate with a set of skills that the user employs to read advertising. They describe such a skill set as being only one of many aspects of literacy. Instead, the authors expand the meaning of literacy to include not only how an ad is read, but also what use is made of that reading. They propose a model of advertising literacy involving "practices" and "events". Literacy practices constitute the skills and uses relating to the reading of the ads. For example, Ritson and Elliott draw attention to Buckingham's (1993) observation of children who may actively seek out pre-Christmas advertising with a view to sourcing ideas for Christmas gifts, which they then communicate to their parents. Literacy events essentially refer to individuals who may find themselves drawing upon their literacy so as to participate in a social situation. An example would be the everyday situation in which we may find ourselves discussing advertisements with others. Those who recognise a given ad can participate in the discourse whereas those who do not recognise the ad may be excluded from such social interaction. The combination of literacy practices and events therefore serve to facilitate the co-creation of advertising meanings (Ritson and Elliott, 1995).

What one can conclude from the literature is that there are different dimensions to advertising literacy. At one level, literacy can be seen to prevail where a child can understand the commercial intent of advertising, the vested interests of an advertiser, and that it is different to a programme (e.g. Young, 2000). At another level, literacy can be said to occur where children appreciate the use of advertising techniques, strategies and production values (e.g. O'Donohoe, 1994). A further level of literacy is where one's understanding of advertising may be used in a wider context, for example, as part of one's social interaction. In Ritson and Elliott's (1999) study of adolescents, young

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people were found to watch ads and to use them as a “ticket of entry” into ad-related discussions. Furthermore, they used advertising situations, catchphrases and characters as metaphors and rituals in their interaction with each other.

Notwithstanding the various levels of advertising literacy that are seen to exist, its relevance to this research lies in the fact that it requires the researcher to put to one side the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) approach which arguably has informed many of the extant studies on children and advertising. The latter have tended to ask “what does advertising do to children?” or more specifically “do children understand the advertiser’s perspective?” (see Table I). This research takes a different approach by asking “how do children read advertising?”

### Research methodology

The aim of this interpretive study was to explore children’s understanding of television advertising intent. The authors had observed that the academic research on the effects of advertising on children has been mostly driven by positivistic, quantitative perspectives. An interpretive approach was deemed appropriate in this study in view of the authors’ desire to make sense of, and understand the children’s experiences of advertising. In essence, the authors were interested in understanding a group of children’s interaction with advertising from their point-of-view, and not necessarily the advertiser’s perspective, which has overwhelmingly been the subject of scrutiny in the key studies to date. This approach mirrors that favoured by Banister and Booth (2005) who have called for a more “child-centric” approach to marketing and consumer research that encourages researchers to listen to children, their thoughts and experiences, rather than regarding the children as interviewees.

A total of 52 boys and girls participated in a series of focus group discussions and individual interviews. The children were aged between seven and nine years-of-age and were drawn from two Irish primary schools. Specifically, seven focus groups were conducted in the first school while 26 individual interviews were conducted in the second school. The children in both schools were at the same level – second class – which is approximately the middle class in primary school. It was observed, during the study, that there were no discernable differences between the different age groups in terms of their articulation of their understanding of advertising.

The research was conducted in the two schools during school hours. Consideration had been given to the use of in-home observation with a view to observing children’s television viewing patterns. However, in consenting to grant access to the children, many parents expressed a preference that the research be conducted in the neutral and non-personal setting of the school. Two qualitative methods were employed with a view to exploring children’s interaction with advertising, specifically the social milieu of a focus group situation and the more personal context of an individual interview. Again, there were no discernible differences between the opinions expressed by the children in the focus groups and interviews.

In keeping with the interpretive nature of this study, and so as not to direct the children’s attention to any specific area, a number of broad areas were offered for discussion. Specifically, the children were invited to comment on the possible purposes of advertising in general, and they were then asked to volunteer specific advertisements that they liked and disliked. The children were shown a number of pre-recorded television advertisements at the end of the individual interviews and

asked to give their opinion on each. The objective of this exercise was to encourage the children to articulate what they liked and did not like regarding specific advertisements. These advertisements were shown to the children at the end of the discussions so as not to “lead” or direct the children in their earlier choices of, and discussions pertaining to, advertising.

The discussions were tape-recorded 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 number of ethical standards were applied to this research, including the conduct of the research in a safe setting (i.e. the school setting) and also the securing of parental consent (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research, 1999).

### **The emergence of three perspectives – advertising that facilitates the advertiser, the viewer, and the television channel**

A major research objective guiding this study was to explore the children’s understanding of advertising’s *raison d’être*. As such, the following broad question was posed to the children – “why are there ads on television?” Of the 52 children, two children were unsure about the rationale for advertising. It is clear from the research findings that the remaining 50 participants were extremely verbal in terms of identifying and discussing their perceptions as to the *raison d’être* of television advertising. The children gave a variety of explanations regarding the possible reasons for advertising and three major perspectives on advertising emerged, namely those of the viewer, the advertiser and the television channel, as outlined as follows:

- (1) *The advertiser’s perspective:*
  - persuasion – purchase;
  - persuasion – increase store visits and customer numbers; and
  - purchase requests to parents.
- (2) *The viewer’s perspective:*
  - informational – commercial and educational;
  - advisory – non-commercial/safety;
  - entertainment; and
  - viewer convenience.
- (3) *The television channel’s perspective:*
  - advertising as a source of programme funding; and
  - facilitating programme schedules/television channels.

While this research highlighted three user perspectives on advertising intent, the purpose of this paper is to focus on two of these perspectives – that of viewers and television channels.



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*Advertising intent – the viewer's perspective*

When probed about advertising's *raison d'être*, the children introduced a number of possible advertising objectives, which the authors subsequently categorised as "the viewer's perspective". In other words, the children's discussion of advertising intent, in terms of information, personal safety, entertainment and convenience, carried an implicit assumption of such advertising existing to help the viewer in some way. It was observed that they placed much emphasis on the informational nature of an advertisement. The information that advertising was seen to offer, fell into two categories – commercial information and educational information – both about products and services. With regard to commercial information, the children referred to the requirement for advertisers to offer information about products and product availability. One child defined an advert as being something that would "tell you about things that might be in the shops" (Susan, 8). Another child referred to the informative nature of advertising with regard to his favourite advertisement: "the Lego ad, because they show you what the Lego will look like when they're made" (Frank, 8). A further child addressed the informative nature of advertising thus when asked to consider the prospect of advertising-free television: "that wouldn't be so good because then I wouldn't get that much info [about] new toys, new sweets, new games and all that stuff" (Mark, 8).

The category of educational information emerged from the children's perception that advertising often serves to educate or teach the viewer in some manner. For example, one child spoke of being able to learn from an ad: "say it's a science fiction one, they'll show something about science and you'll learn something from it" (Judy, 8). Another example was given by Barry (aged 7) in his discussion of an advertisement for milk featuring a singing skeleton: "they're just telling you to drink milk and your bones get strong and all that stuff". In this manner, Barry was aware that the advertiser was promoting a health benefit concerning the consumption of milk. Another example of an educational advertisement that could benefit the viewer was given by Karl (aged 8); "information like if you need a new house and there'd be this ad for builders". It would therefore appear that Karl views a property advertisement as offering a solution to a prospective home purchaser's need-state. Likewise, another child referred to an advertisement for a horse show. His reasoning was that advertising had a role to play in informing viewers of such events:

[...] say ads were cancelled, you wouldn't know what else was going on in the country. Say you want to go to the Horse Show, you wouldn't know where it is until the actual programme's on, and then you say "oh it was cancelled in Limerick – I should have known (Keith, 8).

This informational aspect to advertising whereby advertisements serve to assist the viewer, reflects previous studies by Blosser and Roberts (1985) and Oates *et al.* (2002). However, a new angle to the informative function of advertising was evident in a related perspective amongst the children, namely that advertising exerts an advisory, non-commercial remit. For example, a number of children asserted that some advertisements give information to viewers regarding health and safety. In all cases, it should be noted that the children referred more so to personal wellbeing, the inference being that these advertisements did not appear to have an overtly sales-oriented message. As such, the children appeared to discern between the persuasive intent of some advertisements, and the personal health and safety content of other messages.



One of the pre-recorded advertisements shown to the children at the end of individual interviews was for McDonalds, in which the clown, Ronald McDonald, is seen warning children against dangerous behaviour in the home, such as playing with matches and interfering with medicines. When the children were shown this advertisement, they were probed as to its rationale: “they want us to leave matches alone and bottles that we don’t know what’s in them. . .to keep us safe” (Sarah, 7).

Indeed, this understanding of the McDonalds safety message was widespread: “it is telling children to keep away from dangerous things in the house” (Richard, 8). Other children spoke of ads in terms of warning against dangerous behaviour:

Like this ad I saw and it was about these two kidnappers. I remember last year there were two kidnappers and they kidnapped a child and they showed on an ad that you should never go with other people (spoken very earnestly) (Judy, 8).

In another case, a child drew attention to an anti-smoking advertisement. Deirdre (aged 8) appeared to be both drawn to, and repelled by the somewhat graphic nature of the advertisement that depicted the lungs of a heavy smoker:

I like the no smoking ads because, em, you know at the end where they squeeze out the icky brown stuff; that will make people think “ugh, I might not want a cigarette”.

Deirdre is therefore referring to the purpose of this advertisement as being to inform and persuade smokers about the health consequences of smoking. In doing so, she suggests that this ad also seeks to instil in smokers a propensity to re-evaluate their smoking habits.

In the case of such advertisements, it was evident that some of the children perceived that the purpose was to promote their own personal safety and to indicate the dangers and risks involved in actions such as interfering with household medicines and matches, and talking with strangers on the street. It must be emphasised that a very small number of children not only discerned an advisory or safety element to advertising, but they also assessed the relevance of the message for themselves. This arose in the discussions of the McDonalds’ advertisement concerning children’s safety in the home. The implication was that previous McDonalds’ advertising had tended to focus on the food experience at McDonalds and that the safety warnings constituted a new departure for the fast food company. Sheila (aged 8) questioned the ad thus:

*Sheila:* I don’t see why they’re talking about safety, because they’re normally talking about McDonalds in the ad.

*Interviewer:* So why are they putting that in the ad, do you think?

*Sheila:* To help the children.

It would appear that Sheila is not only questioning the consistency of the company’s advertising messages, but she is also distancing herself from the message by referring impersonally to a category of children requiring assistance.

In a second case, Mark (aged 8) was seen to distance himself from the content of an advertisement but not necessarily from the product being advertised. Again, he was addressing the McDonalds’ advertisement: “that ad. . .tells you not to touch things, but I already know that. . .Well, I’m old for the ad but I’m not too old for the food!”

This finding whereby many of the children perceived advertising to exert an advisory, non-commercial remit, offers a new dimension to the well-established informative function of advertising. The literature to date has tended to view advertising's informative role in terms of offering information about product features, availability and price (Blosser and Roberts, 1985; Oates *et al.*, 2002). Such an informative function is therefore seen to be closely interwoven with the persuasive/commercial intent of advertising, which has been so widely noted in previous studies (Gaines and Esserman, 1981; Macklin, 1987; Chan, 2000). However, the children in this study broadened this concept of information to encompass its non-commercial dimensions. This finding was particularly evident in the children's unsolicited discussions on public service announcements relating to road safety and anti-smoking messages. It was also reinforced at the end of the interviews where the children were shown a number of advertisements, one of which included a McDonald's advertisement for safety in the home. This concept of advertising assisting the viewer by offering non-commercial information in terms of personal health and safety therefore offers a new dimension to the commercially informative function which has been noted previously by authors such as Oates *et al.* (2002).

Furthermore, children's advertising literacy is deemed to prevail where children are able to discern the advertiser's intent and objectives (Young, 1990; Buckingham, 1993). The findings above extend this view of literacy because they present the children as not only discerning intent, but also appropriating advertising messages about personal health and safety for one's own information or benefit.

Another aspect to advertising intent which was offered by the children, was that of entertainment. The entertainment element to advertising was introduced by nearly all of the children in terms of ads that made them laugh. All of the children spoke of having favourite advertisements that they enjoyed while some children talked about discussing favourite ads with their friends:

*Eric:* Today I was talking to my friend when we were going to school.

*Interviewer:* What were you talking about?

*Eric:* You know the Nike ad about the footballers – the one where they're hitting each other with the ball on the head.

*Interviewer:* Why do you like that one, Eric?

*Eric:* I like watching it because I think what they do is really skilful (aged 8).

It transpired that the children were widely attracted to humour appeals and special effects such as talking animals. The brand of slapstick humour was especially entertaining as is illustrated in the following discussion of a Mr Kipling advertisement for cakes:

*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 falls off! (All boys in group laugh uproariously.)

*Interviewer:* 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.)

The children were also 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).

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

Th-e-y-r-e greaaat! (Karl, 8, imitating the exaggerated tone of Tony the Tiger, Kellogg's Frosties).

Lower prices at Tesco, lower prices at Tesco! (Sheila, 8).

Other authors have recognised that children are attracted to entertaining advertisements incorporating humour, cartoon characters, famous people, child models, animals and swift action (Ross *et al.*, 1984; Blosser and Roberts, 1985; Rolandelli, 1989; Collins, 1990; Maher *et al.*, 2006). However, the entertainment finding in this study offers a new angle in that the children were not only attracted to certain advertisements but that they were using this advertising in a non-commercial manner. As such, the children were appropriating advertising as a means of self-expression or, for social networking purposes, i.e. for their own entertainment or else to regale other people. In this study, it was interesting to observe the large number of children who were able to re-enact advertisements and/or to recite advertising catchphrases and slogans, including those for products not aimed at children. In Bartholomew and O'Donohoe's (2003, p. 445) study of 10 to 12-year-olds, they used the phrase "performance masters" to describe children's facility for imitating advertisements. So too, it would appear that the children in this study were "masters" in terms of advertising imitation.

At a time in Western Europe, where regulators such as the UK's Ofcom are seeking to protect children from the perceived commercial tentacles of television advertising, this finding is salutary because it draws attention to a social function that advertising can perform. It can facilitate a child's self-expression (Preston, 2005) or, as in the case of Ritson and Elliott's (1999) adolescent sample, and which was also witnessed in this study, advertising can serve as an individual's ticket of entry to a conversation. This finding also poses ethical questions about ads, such as for alcohol products, whose humour, catchy tunes and catchphrases are ingrained in the minds of children, and which form part of their social interaction with peers.

A further, universal theme arising in the discussions was that of viewer convenience, whereby the commercial was perceived as offering the viewer an opportunity to undertake other activities. Most of the children agreed that the advertising break was a good opportunity to visit the bathroom or consume a snack:

If there was no such thing as ads and you're on your favourite programme, and, say, you're thirsty or you have to go to the toilet, then you'd go out and you'd miss the really good part of the show (Samantha, 8).

Indeed, children felt that the ads were there for their own convenience: "if you have any dinner, coming up next, there would be the ads" (Laura, 7). For such children, the absence of advertisements was seen as a very off-putting scenario, as it could militate

against watching one's favourite programme: "if there's this real good programme and you have to go and have your lunch, there would be no ads so you'd miss your favourite programme" (Barbara, 9).

Similarly, it emerged that, for some children, mealtimes could be negotiated with a parent around the timing of a favourite programme:

If there were no ads, you wouldn't be able to go for your dinner, because you'd have to say to your mam "I don't want to go because I want to watch this programme". When the ads come on, that gives you time to go and have your dinner (Annette, 8).

You say to your mum, "don't put my dinner on the plate – I'll be in, in five minutes" (James, 8).

This notion that advertising may be perceived to serve the viewer's convenience has been noted previously in a very small number of studies, e.g. Oates *et al.* (2003). However, the latter's research sought to examine children's understanding of advertising's persuasive intent. Where children in their study referred to advertising as a means to do other things such as obtaining a snack, Oates *et al.* interpreted such responses as indicating that the children viewed advertisements solely in terms of a break in a programme. Returning to the present study, the authors suggest that children, just like adults, can appropriate the commercial break for their own convenience and to allow them plan other activities around a desired programme. Obviously, advertisers do not view a commercial break in programming in this manner. Nevertheless, the authors argue that this use of the commercial break, closely mirrors the convenience use, as found by O'Donohoe (1994) in her study of 18 to 24-year-olds' advertising uses and gratifications.

In all, when one considers the various functions that advertising is seen to perform for viewers, as identified by the children in this study – informative, advisory, entertainment and viewer convenience – it strengthens the authors' argument that children view advertising as being larger and more complex than the advertiser's persuasive intent, which has been the traditional focus of much of the research to date. It also points towards these children as actively engaging with, and using advertising for a number of purposes. This use of advertising has been considered elsewhere using samples of young adults and adolescents respectively (O'Donohoe, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1999). The notion that children may perceive advertising to exist to offer functions other than commercial information/persuasion has not been adequately explored in the literature to date. Therefore, the uses and gratifications that children may draw from advertising remains a major direction for further research.

#### *Advertising intent – the television channel's perspective*

An additional perspective or vested interest regarding the use of advertising was deemed by approximately one-third of the children to be the television channel carrying the advertising. This was an area of the discussion, which these children spoke about in some detail. Furthermore, this theme emerged unprompted amongst these children, in response to the interviewer's question – "why are there ads on television?" Specifically, the children alluded to television schedulers relying on advertising as a source of programme funding and also to promote television programmes as opposed to advertisers' product offerings. The first theme within this perspective was that of advertising as a source of programme funding.

With regard to the literature, the emphasis on children's understanding of advertising intent has been placed on the child's ability to recognise the role of the advertiser and his/her purposes in using advertising. For example, Young (2000, p. 191) contends that, if we are to assess whether a child fully understands advertising, one yardstick is his/her recognition of the advertiser as "a communicative source deliberately creating television commercials". This reinforces the authors' earlier argument that the literature has repeatedly placed an emphasis on the child's awareness of the advertiser's perspective. In contrast, the authors of this study contend that, from the child's perspective, the advertiser is only one interest and that there may be other reasons or agendas involved in advertising to children. In this study, some of the children expressed an awareness of another vested interest – the television channel. More specifically, the children expressed an understanding as to why television channels sold advertising space to advertisers.

In this respect, the children were discerning a perspective other than that of the advertiser:

*Interviewer:* What if we watched TV and there were no ads at all?

*James:* It would be very boring.

*Group in unison:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* Would it?

*Ross:* Yeah, because if you're getting a bit tired of the programme.

*Robert:* If there were no ads, there would be no programmes.

*Interviewer:* Why is that?

*Robert:* Well ads make the programmes, like, for you to watch (all aged 8).

It was also suggested that television channels sell advertising space as a means of generating finances for the production of television programmes: "to make money for the programmes" (Patricia, 8). This sentiment was echoed elsewhere:

I'd like it [if there were no ads on television] because there would be no breaks and bits cut out of the programme. But the channel needs to make money and they have to have ads (Eric, 8).

Therefore, these children are exhibiting an awareness of the television channel's requirement to generate revenue from advertising. Young (2000) has suggested that children can be deemed to have a sophisticated understanding of advertising when they start to appreciate the vested interests which fund and place advertisements on television. The fact that some of the children in this study are able to voice such an understanding of advertising as a revenue generator for television channels, as opposed to solely discerning the advertiser's perspective, therefore implies a more highly developed understanding of advertising intent, than the literature has accredited children with to date.

Another related theme in the children's understanding of advertising intent was also linked to the television channels, or more specifically the programme schedulers. Advertising was seen to facilitate the programme schedulers/television channels who were obliged to highlight their impending schedules. A large number of the children

referred to advertising's informative and persuasive functions as well as its use by TV channels to promote their own programme offerings:

*Interviewer:* What are the ads on television for?

*Annette:* To tell you about something you can buy.

*Diana:* To show you new things.

*Interviewer:* Lucy, would you agree with that – that ads are there to make you buy?

*Lucy:* Yes – and also to tell you what programmes are on (all aged 8).

In the same manner, other children spoke of the informational nature of programme trailers: "I'd watch them because they tell you what's coming on after the programme that you're watching" (Barbara, 9). When asked to give examples of such programmes that a television channel might wish to promote:

Ads for new programmes. Like this new programme on the Cartoon Network on Sky called BeyBlades – they show that on other channels to make you say "oh that looks good, I think I'll go and see it" (Deirdre, 8).

Thus, it is apparent that the children are able to discern two types of television advertising, namely commercial advertising promoting the products and services of third parties, and programme trailers promoting the television channel's forthcoming programmes. It should be noted that the children's empathy for the television channel's remit towards advertising has not been widely reflected elsewhere in the literature. For example, in Oates *et al.* (2003) study of six- to ten-year-olds, even when they asked the children who makes and pays for advertisements, the eight year olds' responses were deemed to be uncertain but some responses alluded towards the product manufacturers. This factor, amongst others, led Oates *et al.* to conclude that their sample's understanding of advertising was less developed than anticipated.

Returning to this study, the findings indicate the children's empathy for the television channel's requirement to generate money with a view to financing programmes and also to highlight their programme schedules. Such findings are noteworthy, because they illustrate that the children are aware of another perspective on television advertising beyond that of the advertiser. It was contended above that the vast majority of studies on advertising intent have focused on the children's understanding of the advertiser's perspective. Where the children in this study refer to the television channel's perspective, they are indicating an enhanced understanding of advertising intent by way of their appreciation for other purposes of television advertising.

## Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore children's understanding of television advertising intent. It was argued above that advertising intent has largely been addressed in the literature under the headings of information (predominantly commercial in nature) and persuasion. While the persuasive/selling aspect to advertising is a relevant and well-mined seam for research, it is in itself only one perspective. The crux of this paper is therefore concerned with focusing on other perspectives or stakeholders regarding the practice of television advertising. This line of thought reflects Young's (1990) contention that the literature views advertising as



having one type of intent. This study has therefore, addressed a gap in the literature by exploring children's perspectives on advertising over and beyond that of the advertiser's agenda.

This research was framed within the advertising literacy approach which essentially focuses on how consumers "read" advertising. It was noted from the outset that a major flaw in the literature on advertising literacy is the lack of consensus regarding the facets or components that characterise literacy. Similarly, there is a dearth of literature regarding children's advertising literacy. To that end, the authors were interested in focusing on the meaning(s) that children take from advertising.

The first major finding from this study was that the children perceived advertising as being larger and more complex than just the advertiser's perspective. In this manner, they demonstrated empathy not only for the advertiser's perspective, but also for two other perspectives or stakeholders, relating to viewers and television channels. As is suggested in the literature, the children were fully aware of the informational and persuasive/commercial nature of advertising, from the advertiser's perspective. This paper focused on two other stakeholders – the viewer and television channel.

From the viewer's perspective, the informational remit of advertising whereby it can assist the recipient has been identified in previous studies (Blosser and Roberts, 1985; Oates *et al.*, 2002). However, the informational function has previously been viewed in largely commercial terms, relating to product or store information. This study adds a new dimension to the informative function, by illustrating that from the children's point-of-view, advertising can exert an advisory, non-commercial remit, e.g. personal health and safety. The children therefore broadened the notion of information to encompass a non-commercial dimension. This finding is also noteworthy because it indicates that these children can differentiate between an advertisement that seeks to sell, and that which seeks to provide information.

Remaining with the viewer's perspective, the children also identified an entertainment aspect to advertising. Specifically, they were attracted to advertisements that entertained or made them laugh, such ads tending to incorporate cartoon characters, humour, animals and swift action. This reflects previous studies by authors such as Collins (1990) and Maher *et al.* (2006). However, a notable finding relating to entertainment was the observation that the children appeared to be appropriating such advertisements as a means of self-expression and/or social networking. Examples were given where one child might discuss a favourite ad with a friend outside of the research setting. This concept of advertising as a resource was also supported by the large number of children who were able to re-enact advertisements, and recite slogans and catchphrases. These practices and rituals reflect Ritson and Elliott's (1995) view that advertising lends itself to such social interaction because of its ubiquity, and that such interaction also occurs amongst children, as well as adolescents.

Advertising's use in a social context has been researched elsewhere amongst an adolescent sample (Ritson and Elliott, 1999) and a sample of 18 to 24-year-olds (O'Donohoe, 1994). However, its social uses amongst children has been largely ignored in the child-advertising literature and therefore remains an interesting avenue for future research.

It is appropriate at this point to highlight another perceived intent of advertising, namely to suit the convenience of the viewer. The children referred to the commercial



break as a vehicle to do other things such as eating a meal or visiting the bathroom. The convenience aspect to advertising has been identified in a very small number of previous studies, e.g. Oates *et al.* (2003). However, such authors have tended not to view this as an indicator of advertising understanding. Even so, the authors of the present study would argue that the fact that many children are happy to forgo the commercial break so as to do other things should be of interest to parents and advertising regulators because it is a clear indicator that the children are aware of the difference between an advertisement and a programme, and indeed the differing value of both.

Leaving the viewer's perspective aside, another major finding in this study was some children's awareness of another perspective over and beyond that of the advertiser, namely that of the television channel. This finding is useful in the debate on children's understanding of, and relative vulnerability to advertising, because it indicates that these children were aware of vested interests, other than the advertiser. They were also, in this respect, equipped to discuss the relationship that prevails between advertiser and television channel.

Arising from this study, the authors would contend that the concept of what it means to understand advertising is very broad, and merits more specific examination in terms of identifying potential boundaries or levels of understanding. Since the 1970s to the present day, one of the major research avenues in the child-advertising literature has been the following question – can children understand advertising intent? The very nature of this question suggests a “yes/no” answer. Furthermore, it is observed that the term literacy has often been used in the literature to describe a consumer's sophistication in understanding advertisements (Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003). A sophisticated level of understanding is seen to exist where a child can discern advertising's persuasive intent (Young, 2000). But what if a child can decode more from advertising than solely the advertiser's perspective?

Literacy has been referred to as one's ability to read and understand a text such as advertising (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998; Oates *et al.*, 2002). This paper expands upon this concept by contending that different levels of ability or competence in understanding advertising may be exhibited by a child. Therefore, the authors propose that advertising understanding can be expanded to include four levels of understanding of advertising as seen in Table II. The purpose of this classification is to highlight the expansive, multi-faceted nature of the concept of literacy, specifically with regard to what it means to understand advertising intent. As argued above, the

Level	Understanding	Basis for level of understanding
First level	Unsophisticated	Inability to recognise advertising's persuasive intent/decipher the advertiser's intended message
Second level	Basic/rudimentary	Ability to discern between advertising and programming through use of cues such as length of ad, programme credits
Third level	Semi-sophisticated	Ability to recognise advertising's persuasive intent
Fourth level	Highly sophisticated	Recognition that advertising facilitates the advertiser in addition to other interests such as the viewer and host television station

**Table II.**  
Children's understanding  
of advertising intent –  
the different levels that  
can exist

authors adopt a different approach to the literature's focus on whether children understand advertising intent, to alternatively consider the extent and degrees of this understanding.

The first level of understanding referred to in Table II constitutes an unsophisticated understanding. This exists where a child cannot recognise advertising's persuasive intent. It can also prevail where a child incorrectly deciphers the advertiser's intended message. The second level of understanding is basic or rudimentary. This prevails where a child can differentiate between an advertisement and a programme. However, the fact that the child can make this distinction does not necessarily mean that he/she can explain that difference. Nevertheless, if a child can recognise fundamental differences between the two genres (e.g. shorter duration of an ad), then this points towards a basic comprehension that one form of communication is different to another.

The third level of understanding is an intermediate level whereby the child can recognise that advertising has an informative and/or persuasive intent. This level is referred to as a semi-sophisticated understanding. The literature has tended to deem this to be a sophisticated level of understanding (e.g. Young, 2000). However, the authors would argue that this is limited in that it only considers intent in terms of the advertiser's agenda. The fourth level of understanding exists at the highly sophisticated level and prevails where a child recognises that advertising exists to facilitate the advertiser's commercial agenda, but also serves the interest of other parties such as the host television station and the viewer. Thus, the child is able to identify and appreciate the perspective of the different parties who are exposed to and/or using advertising

There are other dimensions of advertising literacy such as consumers' appreciation of the use of advertising techniques, strategies and production values (e.g. O'Donohoe, 1994) that the authors did not address in this paper. Therefore, we are mindful that our classification of advertising understanding constitutes only one dimension of a child's advertising literacy. Nevertheless, the value of this classification is that it expands the concept of children's understanding of advertising, which traditionally has posed the question – do children understand persuasive intent? In contrast, the authors' classification recognises that such understanding can occupy varying levels or degrees of understanding along a continuum from unsophisticated to highly sophisticated.

### **Social policy issues and implications**

Governments, regulatory bodies, parents, and children's groups in the European Union and the USA have long displayed some unease regarding the practice of advertising to children. A key concern is the extent to which children can understand the advertiser's commercial intent and their ensuing ability to respond to the persuasive nature of advertising. This has resulted in some regulators taking the stringent steps of prohibiting or restricting advertising to children. For example prime-time advertising to children is not allowed in Sweden and Norway whilst toy advertising is prohibited in Greece (Mallalieu *et al.*, 2005). In 2005, a Children's Advertising Code was also introduced in Ireland. Therefore, the overall tenet underpinning social policy has been the perceived need to protect children who could be vulnerable to the powerful and persuasive overtures of advertisers.

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The research findings in this study depict children as being highly sophisticated in their understanding of television advertising intent. They understood the advertiser's perspective and, even more tellingly, could discern between advertisements that seek to sell, and those that are informational in nature. Their enjoyment of advertising and its resulting use in a social context, resonate with Ritson and Elliott's (1995) view of advertising as being a liberating and empowering force. Furthermore, some children exhibited an awareness of vested interests, other than those of the advertiser. Overall, advertising was seen to perform a number of functions for viewers – informative, advisory, entertainment and convenience.

In all, these findings should be of interest to policymakers, concerned consumers and researchers because they reflect an emerging school of thought in the literature which views children as being relatively knowledgeable about advertising (e.g. Preston, 2005). Friestad and Wright (2005, p. 183) contend that "the spectre of the policy debates has loomed over and distorted research". Arguing that this is a rather extreme perspective, we would offer a more tempered view by suggesting that advertising regulators and policymakers take a contrasting approach to the debate. Rather than solely viewing advertising as something negative or harmful that might affect children in one way, in the manner of the traditional stimulus-response-organism (SOR) mindset, an alternative position is to start by viewing children, namely from the approximate age of seven years on, as being possibly more knowing and evaluative towards advertising than they are often given credit for, and future policy decisions should reflect children's relative advertising literacy.

To that end, we would argue that the debate over child-targeted advertising should continue to be aired, albeit driven by contemporary research that reflects the changing social and technological landscape in which we find ourselves.

## Conclusion

Overall, in answer to the question, "Why are ads on television?" the children offered many reasons or purposes. As such, they demonstrated an element of advertising literacy by virtue of their ability to read advertising and to appreciate how it can facilitate interests such as the advertiser, viewer and host television. But equally, the children tended to then turn the conversation to how they used such advertising, e.g. using commercial breaks for their own convenience. As such, these children presented themselves as active and goal-directed audiences for advertising. This contrasts an image of children as passive, sponge-like viewers, which tends to prevail in the debate over advertising regulation in countries such as Ireland and the UK. Therefore, further research might seek to develop the authors' research agenda, namely to explore children's understanding of advertising, over and beyond the marketing focus of the advertiser, and specifically to further explore the various degrees of understanding or literacy that prevail. At the moment, many consumer groups, and regulators such as the UK's Ofcom, are seeking to regulate the practice of television advertising targeted at children on the basis of its commercial effects. But by adopting the agenda within this paper, other researchers can present such interested parties with a larger and more holistic picture of how children view advertising. For example, some children in this study referred to anti-smoking advertisements. They would not constitute the target market for such messages but it is interesting to observe how from the age of seven

years, these children were able to understand the message being conveyed and also to indicate that it would dissuade them from smoking. Similarly, the children were able to re-enact ads for alcohol products in an amusing way and the societal implications of this may be of interest to parents, advertising regulators and the schedulers of television advertising.

Methodologically, a note is required regarding the choice of school-based group discussions and individual interviews for this study. Banister and Booth (2005) promote school-based research on the basis that it facilitates a researcher in establishing rapport with children in the school environment in the absence of their parents. The authors of the present study would offer an additional perspective on the conduct of research in a school context. In this study, the research was presented to the children as adult “homework” that had to be completed and that their assistance was therefore invaluable. Given the typical classroom situation whereby an adult (teacher) seeks to impart information to the class, the authors of the present study observed that the children relished the role reversal in this context, whereby they were imparting information and articulating their views and attitudes to an adult.

To conclude, the value of this study has been to adopt a different research direction to the traditional approach in the literature, by exploring what advertising means to children, as opposed to the long-established tradition of asking “what does advertising do to children?” The children in this study very much enjoy advertising, they frequently find it entertaining and they may use it for their convenience and non-commercial information. But they also appreciate that it can serve many masters – the advertiser, viewer and channel – and in many ways. This concept of children as actively engaging with advertising and appropriating it for their own uses offers a worthy line of inquiry for other academic researchers and parties with a concern in this area.

From a theoretical perspective, the contribution of this study has been to place to one side the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) approach which arguably has informed many of the extant studies on children and advertising. The latter have tended to ask “what does advertising do to children?” or more specifically “do children understand the advertiser’s perspective?” This research has adopted the less employed, advertising literacy approach, seeking to explore how children read and decode advertising.

The authors contend that a child’s understanding of advertising is larger, more complex and multi-faceted than has been considered by many researchers to date. Accordingly, we have sought to develop this concept by way of a classification that suggests four different levels of understanding that children may exhibit towards advertising. In all, this study and its subsequent classification of literacy with regard to advertising intent, seeks to address a void pertaining to the lack of research concerning children’s advertising literacy and is an area that merits further exploration.

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