

**Children's understanding of advertising in the new media era:
An exploratory study**

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Abstract

Children are exposed to advertising in various media platform, including television, outdoor and transit, newspapers and magazines, internet, as well as video games. Most of the studies on understanding of advertising among children were focused on television advertising. This study examines children's understanding of advertising in the new media era. Visual prompts were used to investigate children's understanding of television commercials, product placements in television programs, public service advertisements on television, as well as banner advertisements in the internet. A qualitative face-to-face interview with 31 children aged seven to twelve was conducted. Results indicated that interviewees were able to understand television advertisements and internet banner advertisements. However, they had limited understanding of product placement in television programs. Altogether 18 out of 31 interviewees did not perceive a product placement prompt as an advertisement. Furthermore, understanding of public service advertisements depended on execution styles and themes.

Introduction

Advertising today penetrates into the life of every person, including children. Children in Hong Kong are exposed to a large amount of advertising, especially through television advertising. According to a weekly AC Nielsen's television rating report, the average rating of TVB-Jade, the dominant Chinese channel, from the evening prime time 6:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. on a school day in September 2012 for children 4 to 14 was 27 rating points (equivalent to an audience size of 170,000). A child spending 3 hours per day watching television may be exposed to more than 13,000 commercials every year. Children nowadays also exposed to other forms of advertising such as public service advertising, product placement in media contents, and internet ads. What do children in Hong Kong know about advertising and are they able to identify different forms of advertising? This study attempts to examine children's response to television advertising on aspects relating to the communication process.

The study is of major interest to marketers, parents and public policy officials. Marketers are keen to how to influence children in their consumer decisions while parents and policy makers are concerned with the wellbeing of children. The study is particularly important as there is a paucity of empirical evidence on the topic within the context of children in the new media era.

Literature review

Based on Piaget's (1970) stage theory of cognitive development and Selman's (1980) stage theory of social developments, John (1999) proposes a model of consumer socialization. The model proposes that children learn to become a consumer through the perceptual stage (3-7 years), the analytical stage (7-11 years), and the reflective stage (11-16 years). Using John's (1999) theoretical framework and empirical evidence from a survey of 1,758 children in China, Chan (2014) summarizes children's responses to television advertising at different stages. At the perceptual stage, children did not have a clear understanding of the persuasive intention of advertising. They are aware that advertising wants them to buy the product featured in the commercial or tell their parents about it. However, they do not have a clear picture about the advertiser as the source of the communication. They believe that advertising is mainly or mostly true. They have strong views about advertising, either like it a lot or dislike it a lot. The advertising appeals they like the most are funny advertisements and animated advertisements. At the analytical stage, at least one third of the children are able to understand that advertising promotes products. They are aware that advertising wants them to buy the product featured or tell parents about it. They perceive that only half of the advertising is true. They have less strong views about advertising. Some still like advertising a lot but some neither like it nor dislike it. In addition to funny ads and animated ads, they show appreciation of public service advertisements. They find them meaningful. When children reach the reflective stage, most of them are able to demonstrate an understanding that advertising is message that promotes products. They know that advertisements want them to buy the product or tell the parents about it. They perceive that half of the television commercials are true. They become somewhat desensitized. They neither like nor dislike television advertising. They are no longer interested in animated ads. They still show appreciation of public services advertising. They pay attention to social service advertisements about environmental protection. They find that meaningful (Chan, 2014).

A study using face-to-face interviews with a structured questionnaire was conducted among 448 children aged 5 to 12 in Hong Kong (Chan, 2000). It was found that by age 7 to 8, children were beginning to understand what advertising was and were aware of the persuasive intention of television advertising. The main factor in determining whether they like an advertisement was the entertainment element.

Research method

Thirty-one undergraduate students taking an interdisciplinary general education course on "Children as Consumers" at a public university in Hong Kong were

recruited and, through personal sources, interviewed 31 Chinese children from seven to twelve years old in Hong Kong. The children were from a quota sample of equal number of boys and girls for each school year from elementary grade two to six. Interviews were conducted at public libraries, children's homes, restaurants and parks near school areas in September 2013. On average each interview took about 12 minutes. Verbal consent was obtained from the interviewees' parents or guardians before the interview. The interviews started by showing a video clip of a news program followed with a 20-second candy commercial and a 30-second toothpaste commercial. Interviewees were asked to identify which were television advertisements. Interviewees were followed-up with two open questions about the purpose of television advertising as well as why television stations broadcast commercials. They were also asked about which commercials they like and dislike and their reasons. The interviewees were prompted with a video of 61 seconds of a popular television drama *Triumph in the Skies* with audience rating over 30 points. The video clip featured a male character used many bottles of Vitamin Water to build a heart-shape visual on a beach to please his girlfriend. The brand occurred five times of at least two seconds each time in the clip. Among them, two were close-up shots. The interviewees were asked whether they saw any message about any product in the video clip, and whether they perceive it as an advertisement. Afterwards, the interviewees were shown a homepage of a popular newspaper with three banner advertisements. They were asked to identify the advertisements in the webpage by pointing at them.

Subsequently, two public service advertisements were shown. In the first public service ad on anti-drug abuse, the serious consequences of taking thinner and cough medicine such as rotting teeth and wetting the pants were shown. The ad featured children aged around 10 to 12 as its central characters. The other public service ad included in the study was about social inclusion. The ad featured characters of different race, age and gender. The narration urged the audience to respect individuals of different values or lifestyles. Interviewees were asked to report the key message of these two advertisements. This advertisement obviously was not targeting children, as its narration was adult-oriented. They were also asked to describe the differences between these public services messages and the advertisements of commercial nature such as an advertisement of a toothpaste or an advertisement of a candy shown at the beginning of the interview.

Findings

All the interviewees were able to identify the two television commercials and reported the product categories being advertised from the video clip. When being asked about

the purpose of advertising, 28 out of the 31 interviewees reported that advertising wants people to buy the products. Two reported that advertising as messages that entertain people, and reported he/she did not know the answer. When asked about why television stations broadcast advertisements, 14 reported that television stations broadcast advertisements in order to make money or to sponsor programs. Another 10 reported that the stations wanted to promote the products. Two reported that the stations wanted to inform people about the products and five reported that they did not know the reason.

Regarding the product placement, 26 out of the 31 interviewees reported that they saw product information about a drink, but were not able to tell the brand name. One interviewee reported the brand name of the drink. The remaining four interviewees did not report seeing any message about products. When prompted that there were messages about a branded drink in the video clips, 18 out of 31 interviewees perceive that the message was not an advertisement. Eight of them reasoned that advertisements should be messages appear outside the television programs. Four of them perceive that the product was needed in the television program. Two perceived that showing the visuals of the product in the program without further elaboration about the product was not advertisements. On the other hand, twelve interviewees perceive that the message was an advertisement. Four of them considered that since the visual of the brand or the close-up of the product was shown, it was an advertisement. Two commented that the product was not needed in the television program. So, the deliberate inclusion of the bottled drink indicated that it was an advertisement. Several interviewees were not able to tell why they perceive it as an advertisement or not as an advertisement.

Regarding internet advertising, only two of 31 interviewees were not able to identify any banner advertisements from the visuals of a selected web site. The remaining 29 interviewees were able to identify at least one banner advertisement from the web site.

Regarding the understanding of public service advertisements, there was significant difference in the comprehension of key messages from the two selected advertisements. Altogether 23 out of 31 interviewees were able to demonstrate full understanding of the anti-drug advertisements. For example, most of them were able to tell that drug abuse was hazardous to health, or children should not take illegal drugs. Several interviewees remarked that their parents or teachers discussed the meaning of the anti-drug commercials with them and advised them not to engage in drug abuse. Seven of the interviewees demonstrated partial understanding of the ad. They reported that children should not take too much cough syrup or medicines. One reported that he/she did not know what the ad was about.

For the ad about social inclusion, only 12 of the interviewees demonstrated full

understanding of the advertisements. They were able to tell that the key message of the ad was to show respect to different types of people in the society. Seventeen of them demonstrated partial understanding of the ad by reporting one particular aspect of the commercials only, for example, to respect the seniors. Two reported that they did not know what the ad was about.

When being asked about the difference between the ads for products (such as the candy ad and the toothpaste ad in the first video prompt), and the two ads about societal issues, 20 out of 31 interviewees differentiate them based on purpose of the message. Most of them reported that ads for products aim at selling products or making money, while ads for social causes aim at educating people or telling people about what are the right things to do. Five of the 31 interviewees differentiate them based on entertainment values of the messages. They perceived that advertisements for products were more lively, and funny. On the other hand, they perceived that public service ads were boring and sometimes even scary. Four interviewees reported using other attributes for differentiation, such as length or truthfulness of advertisements.

Discussion

The presentation will compare the results of the current study with those reported in the literature. Marketing and social implications will be made.

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Research objectives:
What do children know about advertising?
Are they able to identify different forms of advertising?

Method:
A qualitative study interviewing 31 children aged 7 to 12 (grade 2 to 6) was conducted in September 2013 in Hong Kong. Children recruited through social network. Verbal consent was obtained from parents.

Form of advertising	How it look like	Finding
TV spot commercial: a video clip of a news program followed by a candy ad and a toothpaste ad		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All can identify the two ads and its product category 28 out of 31 reported that ad wants people to buy the products
Product placement a one-minute video clip of TV drama with a product placement of Vitamin water		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18 out of 31 considered that it was not an ad 12 considered it an ad 1 don't know
Banner ads on a newspaper website		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 29 out of 31 were able to identify at least one banner ad
Public services advertising on anti-drug targeting at children		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 23 out of 31 demonstrated full understanding by identifying the key message
Public services advertising on social harmony targeting at adults		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 out of 31 demonstrated full understanding by identifying the key message 17 demonstrated partial understanding 2 don't know

Theoretical framework: John (1999) model of consumer socialization
Further studies: It can be developed into a quantitative survey for testing of hypothesis