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Chan, Kara

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Children's perceived truthfulness of television advertising and
parental influence: A Hong Kong study

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Dr. Kara Chan

Associate Professor, Department of Communication Studies

Hong Kong Baptist University

Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

Tel: (852) 2339 7836 Fax: (852) 2339 7890

email: karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

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Dr. Kara Chan is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication
Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University. She served in the advertising and public
relations profession and as a statistician for the Hong Kong Government before she
joined the academic. She actively involves in research on Hong Kong and China's
mass communication, advertising and consumer behavior, and environmental
studies.

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Abstract

This study examines Chinese children's perceived truthfulness, liking and attention of television advertising in Hong Kong. A quota sample of four hundred and forty-eight children (ages 5 to 12) was personal-interviewed in May 1998. Results indicated that nearly equal proportions of children perceived that television advertising was mostly true and mostly not true. The judgment was mainly derived from their perception of the advertising content. The bases for skepticism about advertising varied by age. Older children depended more on personal user experience and younger children relied on others' comments. Hong Kong children liked television advertising and watched commercials sometimes. Like children in the West, perceived truthfulness and liking of commercials decreased with age. Perceived truthfulness of television advertising was positively related with liking and attention. Hong Kong children reported that their parents often used commercials to teach them about good citizenship and bad products to avoid.

(146 words)

1. Introduction

Advertisers target at children because of their high disposable income, their early establishment of loyalty to certain brands and a conventional wisdom that young adults buy products on impulse (Fox 1996). Many parents and critics fear that children are susceptible to commercial appeals because young viewers lack the necessary cognitive skills to process the highly persuasive messages and make appropriate judgements about them (Choate 1975). Educators and researchers have attempted to design programs that will teach children about the intent of advertisements and help children construct defenses from commercial messages (Pecora 1995).

Twenty-five years of consumer socialization research have yield impressive findings on the developmental sequence characterizing the growth of consumer knowledge, skills, and values as children mature throughout childhood and adolescence. Many evidence shows that as children grow in cognitive and social terms, there is growth in knowledge of products, brands, advertising, parental influence strategies, and consumption motives and values (John 1999). Although the issue of children and advertising is a largely explored issue in the U.S.A., there has been limited investigation on children's receptivity to advertising in Asian cultures.

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 7 a.m. to

12:00 mid-night on a school day in May 1999 for children 4 to 14 was 11 rating points (equivalent to an audience size of 95,000). Children watched a lot more television during school holidays. The average rating of TVB-Jade on an Easter holiday was 16 rating points (40 percent more audience than on a typical school day). A child that spends four hours per day watching television may be exposed to 15,000 commercials every year. Hong Kong parents were concerned about the impact of advertising on children. A survey of Hong Kong adults indicated a majority accused television advertising of having adverse effects on children. They reported television advertising leads children to pester their parents (Chan and Ruidl 1996).

There are stringent regulations that govern television advertising to children in Hong Kong. The basic principle is that television commercials should not take advantage of the natural credulity and sense of loyalty of children. The presentation of commercial information must not result in physical, mental or moral harm to children. Commercials that are frightening, anxiety provoking or which contain violent, dangerous or anti-social behaviours can not be directed toward children. Children in commercials also need to display good manners and behaviour. If there is a reference to a competition in an advertisement aimed at children, the value of prizes and the chances of a child winning one must not be exaggerated. The true size of the product advertised and any free gift for children should be made easy to judge (Hong Kong Broadcast Authority 1993).

With all the efforts to control the advertising presentation, what is the overall attitude of Hong Kong children toward television advertising? Do they perceive commercials to be truthful and how do they make such judgments? How do Hong Kong parents communicate with their children about television advertising? This study attempts to examine children's attitudes toward television advertising. The study adopts Piaget's (1970) theory of cognitive development. The theory identifies distinct stages of cognitive development and postulates that children would manifest differences in the ways they select, evaluate, and use information. Children's attitudes toward television advertising will therefore be analyzed by school year.

The objectives of the current study are:

- a) to study children's perceived truthfulness of television advertising and how they judge whether commercials were true or not;
- b) to examine children's attention to and attitudes toward television advertising;
- c) to investigate whether attention and attitudes toward television advertising are related to perceived truthfulness; and
- d) to investigate children's perceived parental guidance on their exposure to TV advertising.

The study is of major interest to both marketers and to public policy makers. Marketers are keen to know if their target audiences are attending to the commercials and children's general attitude toward television advertising. Policy makers are

concerned whether existing regulations are effective to protect the interests of the children. The study has much to contribute as there is a paucity of empirical information on the topic in Asian cultures.

2. Literature Review

Studies about children and advertising often refer to Piaget's (1970) theory of cognitive development due to the consistent age differences in the way children understand and respond to commercials (Cosley and Brucks 1986; Wartella 1980). In Piaget's theory, children pass through four stages of cognitive development: (1) sensorimotor thought from ages 0 to 2; (2) preoperational thought from ages 2 to 7; (3) concrete operational thought from ages 7 to 12; and (4) formal operational thought after age 12. During sensorimotor thought, children represent information with their bodies. During preoperational thought, children begin to use symbols and representational thinking. Because of the cognitive limitations that are age-related, children have difficulty in distinguishing fantasy from reality (Wartella and Ettema 1974) and understanding commercial intent (Macklin 1987). During concrete operational thought, children begin to think logically, but concrete experiences continue to set boundaries on their thinking. At this stage, children are able to understand the difference between commercials and programs and between imaginary and real experience. Finally, children at formal operational thought exhibit abstract thinking and are able to differentiate between image portrayed in advertising and reality.

Previous study findings indicate that comprehension of commercial intent is related to age. Children younger than 7 or 8 years old show little awareness of what a commercial is and its persuasive intent and appear unable to deal with commercials appropriately (Blosser and Roberts 1985; Ward and Wackman 1973). As children get older, they increasingly understand that the underlying motive in commercial advertising is to persuade them to buy things. Children begin to understand persuasive intent at about 7 to 8 years of age, and most children master this concept by about 10 or 11 years (Comstock and Paik 1991; Van Evra 1990; Young 1990). Researchers using non-verbal measures found that some children at younger age from 5 to 8 also understand advertising intent (Macklin 1987).

While understanding of the purpose of advertising improves with age, belief in the truthfulness of advertising tends to decline over age. With comprehension of persuasive intent comes cynicism and distrust about the advertised product (Rossiter 1980). Distrust begins to emerge by the second grade and is evident for most sixth graders (Gaines and Esserman 1981; Rossiter 1980). Ward, Wackman and Wartella (1977) reported that the percentage of kindergartners, third graders, and sixth graders believing that advertising never or only sometimes tells the truth increased from 50 percent to 88 percent to 97 percent, respectively. Children also developed a better understanding of why commercials were sometimes untruthful and how to distinguish truthful from untruthful ads. For example, kindergartners could not state the reason for why

commercials lie while older children connected lying to persuasive intent (Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977).

A national survey of over 500 British children aged 4 to 13 found that only six percent thought that commercials 'always' tell the truth, while 15 percent thought they 'quite often' are truthful. Most (60 percent) reported that commercials 'sometimes' tell the truth. The remaining 20 percent perceived commercials 'rarely or never' tell the truth (Greenberg, Fazal and Wober 1986). Perceived truthfulness of advertising was not found to differ according to the gender or social class of the children, but age did make a difference. The youngest children were most likely to believe that commercials told the truth, while older children were more skeptical (Greenberg, Fazal and Wober, 1986).

The same survey indicated that attention to commercials varied among children. Thirty percent said that they watch all commercials and 37 percent said they watch most. Fifteen percent reported that they watch around half and fifteen percent watch a few. None of the children said that they did not watch commercials at all. Attention did not differ by age or social class, but did differ by gender. Girls reported greater attention to commercials than boys. Furthermore, attention was positively related to the perceived truthfulness of advertising. Those who paid more attention to advertising were more likely to perceive that commercials were truthful (Greenberg, Fazal and Wober 1986).

Despite their skepticism, children had favorable attitudes towards certain type of commercials. A survey on children aged 9 to 10 in Belfast, Northern Ireland found that

two-thirds believed that advertisers only sometimes tell the truth. Despite the doubt toward commercials, most of the children said they enjoyed particular commercials, especially the ones featuring humor (Collins 1990).

Review of the literature indicates there are two under-researched areas that need further study. There is a lack of studies that investigate how children viewers make judgment on whether commercials were truthful or not. There is also limited research on how parents use the commercials to teach children in Asia. The current study will attempt to fill these gaps.

3. Method

Six advertising and public relations undergraduate students of Hong Kong Baptist University interviewed four hundred and forty-eight Hong Kong Chinese children from five to twelve years old recruited through personal sources. The children were from a quota sample of equal number of boys and girls for each school year from kindergarten through grade six. Interviewers were trained on the purpose of the study, the structure of the interview and the skills in soliciting responses. Interviews were conducted at public libraries, churches, restaurants and parks near school areas in May 1998. Efforts were made to minimize interruptions and intrusions by other family members or friends present. In order to minimize potential problems and facilitate children's efforts, respondents were told that 'when we are watching television, sometimes the program stops and there is other message coming up. These messages are called the commercials'. The interviews then went on to ask

three closed-ended questions about how often they watched the commercials, whether they liked them or not, and whether these commercials were mostly true or not. Two open-ended questions were asked about how they know commercials are true or not, and what their parents asked them to learn and not to learn from television advertising. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and later coded by a research assistant. A coding menu was developed for the open-ended questions after reviewing all the responses, and one tenth of the questionnaires were counter-checked. The inter-coder reliability coefficients for open-ended responses were over 85 percent.

4. Findings

Perceived truthfulness of television advertising. Table 1 summarizes Hong Kong children's perception about the truthfulness of television advertising. Nearly equal proportions of children perceived that commercials were mostly true (forty two percent) and mostly not true (forty percent). Fourteen percent of respondents perceived that commercials were partly true. Result for children in kindergartens and grade one was bi-modal. They either perceived commercials to be 'mostly true' or 'mostly not true' and very few of them considered commercials 'partly true'. Perceived truthfulness of television advertising differed according to gender and school year. On the whole, a higher proportion of younger children perceived commercials to be mostly true than older children (Chi-square value=16.6, significance<0.005). When analyzed by gender and by school year, results indicated that difference in perceived truthfulness of television advertising according to school year was

significant for boys but not for girls. Boys had increased skepticism of commercials with school year, but not girls. The percentage of boys in kindergartners and first graders, second and third graders, and fourth to six graders believing that advertising is mostly true dropped from 58 percent to 41 percent to 33 percent respectively. The drop for girls was from 48 percent to 41 percent to 38 percent respectively.

[Table one about here]

Table 2 summarizes how children know whether TV advertising is true or not. A majority of the children's judgments were based on perception of advertising content as well as intrusive feelings. Thirty nine percent of children said they perceived commercials mostly true because the content seemed so or they felt so. Fifty-six percent of children said they perceived commercials mostly not true because the content seemed so or they felt so. Other frequently mentioned reasons for perceiving commercials true were through encountering the product (seeing the product: 26 percent; trying the product: 17 percent) and from word-of-mouth (16 percent). Other frequently mentioned reasons for perceiving commercials not true were having tried the product (19 percent) and from word-of-mouth (18 percent). Chi-square test results indicated that the reasons given by those perceiving commercials mostly true were similar for children of different school years. However, the reasons given for suspicion were different according to school year. Skepticism about advertising for the youngest children came mainly from others' opinions while that for the older children came mainly from their personal experience. Bases for judgments did not

differ by gender.

[Table two about here]

Attention to television advertising. Table 3 summarizes Hong Kong children's self-report of their attention to TV advertising. This only measures children's perceptions of their attentiveness to commercials. Children's actual visual attention to the television screen was not measured in the current study. Only three percent of children said that they did not watch TV commercials at all. Fifty-two percent of children said that they 'sometimes' watched TV advertising. Twenty-nine percent said they watched often and sixteen percent watched nearly every time. Comparing with the results of a survey on British children, Hong Kong children were less attentive to TV advertising. However, when compared with results from a survey on Hong Kong adults, Hong Kong children paid more attention to TV advertising than adults. Two-way ANOVA result indicated that attention did not differ either by school age or by gender.

[Table three about here]

Attitudes toward TV advertising. Table 4 summarizes children's attitudes toward TV advertising. Results indicated that children liked TV advertising. Fifty-six percent of respondents expressed liking while seventeen percent expressed disliking of commercials. Result for children in kindergartens and grade one was bi-modal. They either 'like' them or 'dislike', and very few of them reported a neutral answer. Chi-square test results indicated that attitudes differed by school year for boys as well as girls. Younger children liked TV

advertising while older children took neutral position. Older girls reported a greater drop in liking of commercials than older boys did.

[Table four about here]

Table 5 shows the relationship between children's perceived truthfulness of TV advertising and attention to TV advertising. Attention to commercials was positively related to the perceived truthfulness of TV advertising. Those who perceived commercials 'mostly true' paid more attention to commercials than those who perceived commercials 'mostly not true'.

[Table five about here]

Table 6 shows the relationship between children's perceived truthfulness of TV advertising and attitudes toward TV advertising. Attitude toward commercials was positively related to the perceived truthfulness of TV advertising. Those who perceived commercials 'mostly true' were 50 percent more likely to say they like them than those who perceived commercials 'mostly not true'.

[Table six about here]

Table 7 summarizes the children's perception of the parental influence on what to learn and what not to learn from commercials. The actual parental influence was not measured in the current study as parents were not asked directly. Children reported more don'ts than do's. Children perceived that their parents were concerned about the consumption of 'bad' products including drugs, cigarettes and liquor. Hong Kong children also reported that their

parents asked them not to imitate violent and dangerous actions. Some children reported that their parents were concerned about illegal behaviours (e.g. stealing) and incorrect behaviours (e.g. telling lies). Children reported that parents use commercials to teach them to study hard and be good children. They also reported that parents used commercials to teach them about keeping good health and a tidy environment.

[Table seven about here]

5. Discussion and conclusion

The current study indicates belief in the truthfulness of commercials and liking of television advertising tend to decline over age. This is in line with previous findings in Western societies. However, children's attention to television advertising did not decline over age.

Chinese children were not totally susceptible to advertising appeals. Even children in kindergarten and grade 1 cast doubt about the truthfulness of commercials. It was interesting to find children's bases for skepticism about advertising vary by age. Younger children relied mainly on the advertising content or had been told to cast doubt on advertising. This study is limited in that most of the interviewees did not follow up on children's sources of information about the truthfulness of commercials. Younger children probably learned to defend themselves against the persuasive messages from their parents, siblings, teachers or other adults. Older children had more consumer experience and were more likely to draw upon them to cast doubt on the commercials.

One fifth of those who perceived commercials were mostly not true because they had tried the product. According to findings in Western societies, belief in the truthfulness of television advertising declines with age. This is consistent with Piaget's (1970) theory of cognitive development. As the children entered the concrete operational stage, they were better able to differentiate between imaginary portrayals in the commercials and real-life experiences. Children, as consumers, were better able to compare user experience with advertising promises.

As most of the children relied on the commercial content to make judgments about its trustworthiness, existing regulations on message presentation should be maintained.

Another interesting finding is the difference in skepticism of television advertising with age for boys and girls. A high percentage of boys in kindergartens and grade 1 believed that commercials were mostly true while boys in grades 4 to 6 no longer believed so. Skepticism toward commercials was moderately high for girls in kindergartens and grade 1. The drop in perceived truthfulness with age was not significant for girls. The results seem to suggest boys and girls have different pace of cognitive development. Girls seem to be more mature in early age and read commercials more critically than boys. However, boys read commercials more critically than girls in older age. Further research is needed to explain such difference.

Despite children's skepticism of television advertising, most of the respondents expressed their liking of commercials. The results indicated that those who put perceived commercials 'mostly true' were also more likely to enjoy commercials and paid more attention to them. Perhaps this represents the group of children most easily persuaded by selling messages. Media education on critical reading and viewing of persuasive messages is mostly needed for this audience segment.

Hong Kong children reported that their parents used commercials as teaching aids. The emphasis was on topics related to health, safety and proper behaviours of children. Children seldom reported that their parents use commercials to teach them about consumerism and purchasing decision making. Although Hong Kong parents perceived that television advertising took advantage of children (Chan and Ruidl 1996), children did not perceive that their parents helped them to become competent consumers. Surprisingly, children's rights as consumers are not fully respected. Fostering a consumer culture empowering consumers to be conscious of their rights and obligations is one of the main areas of work of the Hong Kong Consumer Council (Hong Kong Consumer Council 1998). Over the past decades, the Consumer Council has launched several campaigns to encourage dissatisfied consumers to lodge complaints with them. However, none of these campaigns are targeted at children. Publicity campaigns on children's consumer rights and ways to collect consumer complaints from children should be developed. Perhaps consumer education should start with the parents, teachers,

community leaders and administrators. Parents and teachers should discuss with children their consumer rights and support them to express their dissatisfaction, if any. Hong Kong is certainly in need of a media literacy program to teach people how to read advertising messages critically.

To conclude, Hong Kong children did cast doubt about television advertising. Perceived truthfulness of commercials decreased with age. Hong Kong children also enjoyed television advertising and paid a lot of attention to it. Perceived truthfulness of television advertising had positive association with children's liking and attention to these messages. Hong Kong children reported that their parents were more concerned about the influence of commercials on their health and moral standards. Commercials were perceived as teaching aids for becoming good citizens and avoiding hazardous product categories. As a result of the study, continuing consumer education and media literacy programs for children and adults should be encouraged.

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Table 1 Children's perceived truthfulness of TV advertising

	Year (%)			Total
	Kindergarten,G1 n=128	G2-3 128	G4-6 192	
Television advertising is	%	%	%	%
Mostly true	53	41	35	42
Partly true	6	15	18	14
Mostly not true	32	41	45	40
Don't know	9	3	2	4
Total	100	100	100	100

chi-square value for the sample = 16.6 (<0.005)

chi-square value for boys = 18.9 (<0.005)

chi-square value for girls = 10.1 (N.S.)

Table 2 How children know whether television advertising is true or not true

Reason*	Ad is	Year			Total
		Kinder-g arten,G1	G2-3	G4-6	
	True(T)	n=55	50	69	174
	Not-true(NT)	n=43	69	114	226
The content seems so/ I feel that it is	T(%)	33	38	43	39
	NT(%)	49	61	56	56
Other people tell me	T(%)	31	12	7	16
	NT(%)	35	20	10	18
Having/Having not seen the product	T(%)	20	32	26	26
	NT(%)	0	3	4	3
Having tried the product	T(%)	15	14	20	17
	NT(%)	14	10	26	19
The product is just like/not like the advertising	T(%)	0	0	0	0
	NT(%)	2	3	4	3
Others	T(%)	2	3	3	0
	NT(%)	0	3	1	1

* coded from open-ended responses

Chi-square value for those considered advertising is mostly true = 15.7 (N.S.)

Chi-square value for those considered advertising is mostly not true =22.6 (<0.05)

Table 3 Children's attention to TV advertising

	Year (%)				British children 4-13* National sample of over 500	HK adults# 691
	Kinder-g arten, G1 n=125	G2-3 128	G4-6 192	Total 445		
Don't watch at all	3	2	3	3	0(did not watch any)	2
Watch sometimes	46	57	53	52	33(watch a few/around half)	76
Watch often	28	27	32	29	37(watch most)	20
Watch every time	23	13	13	16	31(watch them all)	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

chi-square = 8.7 (N.S.)

* Greenberg, Fazal and Wober (1986), original wordings of answers in bracket

Chan and Ruidl (1996), wordings of questions and answers are the same as the current study

Table 4 Children's attitudes toward TV advertising

	Year (%)				HK adults# 691
	Kinder-gar ten,G1 n=	G2-3 128	G4-6 192	Total 448	
Dislike very much	2	4	2	2	1
Dislike	20	16	11	15	7
Neutral	12	27	37	27	34
Like	61	49	46	51	49
Like very much	6	4	4	5	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100

chi-square = 28.9 (<0.0001)

Chan and Ruidl (1996), wordings of questions and answers are the same as the current study

Table 5 Attention to TV advertising and perceived truthfulness of TV advertising

Attention to TV advertising	TV advertising is	
	Mostly true (%)	Mostly not true (%)
Don't watch at all	3	4
Watch sometimes	44	57
Watch often	32	26
Watch every time	21	13
Total	100	100

chi-square = 8.3 (<0.05)

Table 6 Attitudes towards TV advertising and perceived truthfulness of TV advertising

Attitudes toward TV advertising	TV advertising is	
	Mostly true (%)	Mostly not true (%)
Dislike very much	2	4
Dislike	10	18
Neutral	21	32
Like	60	44
Like very much	9	3
Total	100	100

Chi-square=20.2 (<0.0001)

Table 7 Children's perception of parental influence on what to learn from television advertising

	No.	Total
Don'ts*		124 (73%)
don't take illegal drugs	38	
don't copy violent behaviour	33	
don't copy incorrect behaviours (tell lies, watch bad movies and read bad books, etc)	13	
don't steal/corrupt	11	
don't smoke	9	
don't copy dangerous action	9	
don't imitate a specific cartoon figure	8	
don't drink alcohol	3	
Do's*		45 (27%)
study hard	13	
keep good health	8	
be good to parents	3	
be a good child	9	
keep Hong Kong clean/conserve	7	
others	3	
Total mentions		169 (100%)

* coded from open-ended responses