

Kara Chan, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

James U McNeal, Peking University, Beijing, China

Abstract

Most of the research literature on children's understanding of advertising is based on research conducted in Western societies, and there are very few comparable studies in China¹, the country with the largest children population. China adopted a one-child-per-family policy in 1979 and today it is the rule in urban China (Zhang & Yang, 1992). As only children, Chinese children act like "little emperors" according to recent observers (e.g., Shao & Herbig, 1994). There are 290 million children under the age of 14 in China (The State Statistical Bureau, 2000). It is estimated that in 1999, the approximately 58 million children, ages 4 to 12, in the 16 largest cities of China spent around US\$6.2 billion of their own money on their own wants, and influenced the spending by parents and grandparents of over US\$61 billion, giving them a market potential of US\$67 billion (McNeal & Zhang, 2000). Rapid commercialization of childhood as a result of economic restructuring, new affluence, and innovative retailing practices is not unique to China. The one-child policy and the rapid economic development in China, however, have enabled the process to unfold at a fast pace and across all social strata (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000). Advertising is relatively new to Chinese consumers. It appears that there is no media literacy program in Chinese schools to explain it. Because of only one child in a Chinese family, parental control is high in all aspects of life. Children's leisure time is strictly controlled in order to maximize the time available to school work and educational recreation (Zhao, 1996).

In addition to cultural factors children's advertising in China has several unique characteristics not shared by Western and more developed societies. First, the development of advertising is highly uneven within China. Second, children in China are exposed to an abundance of adults' commercials and relatively few children's commercials. Third, television program sponsorship is common in China (similar to the Public Broadcasting System in America, for example) where a company subsidizes program development and/or presentation.

This study employs a verbal method to examine children's understanding of television advertising in three Chinese cities with different levels of advertising. A survey of 1758 elementary school children, ages 6 to 14, was conducted during December 2001 to March 2002 using a structured questionnaire. John's (1999) model of consumer socialization was employed as the theoretical framework for hypothesis testing. *Understanding* of television advertising by children was measured by a verbal method as follows. Children were told: When we watch television, some messages occur before or after the television program that are not related to the program. They are called commercials (*Guangguo*). Children were then asked, "what are TV commercials?" "What do TV commercials want you to do?" and "Why do TV stations broadcast commercials?" For

¹ In this article, China refers to its mainland.

each question, usually five to six answers were presented. The children were asked to check one answer that s-he thought most appropriate. Selected answers were classified as “demonstration of understanding” of television advertising. All other answers were classified as “no demonstration of understanding” of television advertising.

We found that over half of the sampled children, even at a very young age, were able to understand that television stations broadcast commercials to make money. However, their understanding of ‘what are television commercials’ and ‘what do TV commercial wants you to do’ developed with age. The influence of gender, level of advertising, and level of television viewing on children’s understanding of television advertising were also examined using three-way factorial models.

References

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