

The players, the arguments  
and the research  
during the period 1994-2000

BY GUNILLA JARLBRO

# Children and television advertising

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SWEDISH CONSUMER AGENCY

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## CHILDREN AND TELEVISION ADVERTISING

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# Foreword

It must be easy to identify advertising as advertising. This is an important principle which is laid down in both the international ethical regulations of trade and industry – the ICC regulations – and the TV directive of the EC. Indeed, realising that one is being exposed to advertising is required in order to be able to maintain a degree of scepticism.

**Children watch TV advertising** intended for adults, and in many countries it is also permitted to create TV advertising for children and to aim this directly at them. Therefore, it is interesting to try to answer the following questions: At what age can it be assumed that most children are able to identify TV advertising; that is to say, to differentiate between advertising and programmes? And when do they understand that the products being advertised appear on screen because someone wants children to ask for and buy these things in order to make money from the children's purchases?

**In Sweden, as in Norway, aiming TV advertising directly at children is banned.** The Swedish ban means that no TV advertising may be created with the aim of attracting the attention of children under 12. Nor may TV advertising be transmitted in conjunction with children's programmes; neither before, after nor during breaks in programmes. This regulation currently applies to TV channels transmitting from Sweden. For channels transmitting from other countries the regulations in those countries apply, in accordance with a judgement passed by the EC Court.

**There has been a great degree of national unity on this matter** since the ban was introduced. The ban has also aroused a great deal of interest abroad. Various commercial players on the European market seem to be devoting both time and resources to the matter, obviously because they perceive the ban as a threat.

So why are huge amounts of money invested in creating advertising and aiming it at the target group, children? Of course, this is because commercial players have deemed this advertising to have an effect.

**So what does research have to say about the ability of children to identify TV advertising** and understand what it is for? Konsumentverket, the Swedish Consumer Agency, asked Gunilla Jarlbro, sociologist and associate professor in journalism and mass communication, to compile a report on the international situation as regards research into this. This report may be viewed as a follow-up to the more extensive study of research implemented by Erling Bjurström for the Swedish Consumer Agency in *Barn och TV-reklam, 1994*.

Stockholm, January 2001

Karin Lindell

Director General and Consumer Ombudsman

# Introduction

*TV is undoubtedly the most powerful advertising medium.  
It reaches into the home and, in some cases, is considered  
an uninvited guest.* (Maclean, 1996)

The statement quoted above has been taken from a speech given in connection with a conference held in London in 1996. This conference was organised by the Food Advertising Unit and went by the name of Food & Drink Advertising to Children: Developing Public Policy. TV advertising is powerful, maintains this speaker, before going on to note that TV advertising does not influence our children. Children are not stupid, he says, pointing out that research has shown that children do in fact understand TV advertising better than adults do.

So, how do matters actually stand? Does TV advertising influence our children, or is it a harmless phenomenon which demands no particular attention? The quotation from the 1996 London conference indicates clearly how contradictory – and sometimes, even paradoxical – the arguments can be regarding the debate on TV advertising and children.

On the one hand, vast sums of money are invested in TV advertising, while on the other it is asserted that the effects of advertising are very limited. Various research results are used in the debate on children and TV advertising – both among people who are in favour of TV advertising being aimed at children and among those who are against it – to support the view people have chosen to represent.

It would seem that there are research results which would suit the specific purposes of each and every political or financial interest. Of course, one does ask oneself, how is it possible for research into children and TV advertising to support the people in favour of TV advertising on the one hand, while supporting the people against it on the other? Is the research in this field not independent? What is this research all about, what research questions are asked?

The questions brought up above can be said to form the starting point for this report. Below, I will be describing current research, mainly the research carried out in Europe after 1994 regarding children and TV advertising. This assignment was initiated by *Konsumentverket*, the Swedish Consumer Agency. Journalists Lilly Hallberg and Urban Löfvqvist dealt with the survey into the European players concerned with the matter of children and TV advertising and the identification of relevant research reports. However, the undersigned herself stands responsible for the content of this report.

## Procedure and restrictions

Restrictions must be imposed in surveys of all kinds. This is true of this study also. First of all, I have concentrated primarily on the research published after 1994. The reason for this is that a survey already exists regarding research into children and TV advertising which covers the period up to 1994 (see Bjurström, 1994). Secondly, I have limited myself mainly to studying the reports used and cited in the debate in favour of and against TV advertising aimed at children. This latter restriction means that this report begins with a survey of the organisations/players which are involved in various ways with the issue of children and TV advertising. The primary method employed for this survey has been to study the references of various organisations by means of their websites on the Internet.

Furthermore, the reports to which reference is most frequently made have been collected together. The starting point for the localisation of the various players was the Advertising Education Forum in Brussels, which acts as an information site on the Internet (see below). This means that we will be dealing not only with traditional academic research reports and scientific papers. All types of documents central to the debate on children and TV advertising, such as studies implemented by research companies, reports from consumer organisations and other types of study, have been included in the report.

## The players and their operations

European-based research into children and TV advertising since 1994 seems to be concentrated primarily on the United Kingdom and, to a certain extent, Denmark as well. As regards the dissemination of information on the issue of children and TV advertising, on the other hand, Belgium holds a unique position.

This section contains a brief description of the major players, the bodies which play, in different ways, an active part as regards children and TV advertising on a European level. The list given below does not claim to be exhaustive. The information given on the various players is based primarily on the organisations' own websites on the Internet. The addresses of these bodies are listed in the references.

**The Advertising Association (AA)**, with its registered office in London, is an amalgamation of 26 trade organisations which represent advertisers, advertising agencies, media and support services. According to the organisation itself, the AA played a central part in the formation of the European Advertising Standards Alliance in 1991. The AA publishes a journal, is responsible for seminars and has issued a variety of publications, including Parent Power 1 and 2, which contain advice to parents on how to bring up children in a commercial world. The AA has extensive offshoots in Europe and is a member of organisations such as the Advertising Information Group, European Advertising Tripartite, Food Advertising Unit and Children's Programme.

**The Food Advertising Unit** was formed in 1995–1996. The reason for the formation of this organisation was as follows: “the sense that the industry's [i.e. the food industry's] advertising interests and motives were being badly and sometimes

deliberately misrepresented.” This view was put forward at the organisation’s first conference on Food & Drink Advertising to Children, which took place in London in 1996. The fact that the food industry began to mobilise itself was probably due to the fact that the British press had written a lot about the effects of advertising on the food preferences of children. A 1993 report from the National Food Alliance, entitled *Advertiser’s Dream, Nutrition Nightmare?* was probably the trigger for the formation of this organisation.

**Children’s Programme** could be said to be a sister organisation to the Advertising Association. This organisation was probably formed in 1999. Children’s Programme has no authorised members, which is also the case for the AA parent organisation. The aim of Children’s Programme, according to its own website, is to disseminate information on the emotive issue of advertising aimed at children. The organisation has initiated and financed a number of surveys into this subject.

**The Advertising Education Forum (AEF)** was started by the members of the European Advertising Tripartite and acts as an information site on the Internet. The aim of the AEF is, according to the organisation itself, to disseminate objective information on the matter of children and TV advertising. This organisation also issues a monthly newsletter in e-mail form. The steering committee of the AEF includes a number of major food producers such as Kellogg’s Europe, Nestlé and Mars.

**The European Advertising Tripartite (EAT)** is an umbrella organisation promoting advertisers’ interests, and its primary aim is to defend the interests of the advertising industry.

**The Advertising Information Group (AIG)** is an organisation which has arisen from the AA. According to the organisation itself, the AIG consists of “the most respected and authoritative trade associations in the European communications business”. The members of the AIG are as follows; the AA, Zentralverband der Deutschen Werbewirtschaft (Germany), Stichting Stuurgroep Reclame (the Netherlands), Advertising Association (Hungary) and Fachverband Werbung und Marktkommunikation (Austria).

**The Independent Television Commission (ITC)** inspects all TV companies in the United Kingdom, with the exception of BBC1, BBC2 and S4C (the fourth channel in Wales). The ITC carries out various kinds of audience research polls and offers a publication service.

**The Association of Commercial Television in Europe (ACT)** is the interest organisation for the commercial TV companies. The ACT has observer status in the Council of Europe and is a member of the advisory committee of the European Audiovisual Observatory. The registered office of ACT is in Belgium, and the organisation co-operates with the EAT, *inter alia*.

**The European Group on television Advertising (EGTA)**, with its registered office in Brussels, lobbies on matters of advertising and sponsorship.

**The European Association of Advertising Agencies (EAAA)** is an alliance for European advertising industry associations. This organisation has recently (in the autumn of 2000) changed its name to the European Association of Communications Agencies.

**Toy Industries of Europe (TIE)** is an alliance of European toy manufacturers and works primarily on lobbying. TIE also initiates and finances research into children and TV advertising.

**Le Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs (BEUC)** is one of the largest European consumer organisations. Its registered office is in Brussels. The BEUC also initiates and finances its own surveys into children and TV advertising.

**Consumers International (CI)** is a federation made up of more than 260 member organisations all over the world. Its head office is in London. CI carries out, *inter alia*, various consumer surveys and has implemented a number of studies on children and TV advertising.

**The European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA)** pursues the matter of self-regulation of the European advertising market as an alternative to bans. This organisation works with information on advertising and self-regulation.

# The central issues for research

Bjurström's (1994) survey, which is based on a review of more than fifty different surveys and reports on the effects of TV advertising, sheds light upon the following research issues:

- The ability of TV advertising to capture the attention of children
- The ability of children to differentiate between advertising and programme content when they watch TV
- The ability of children to understand the aim or intention of TV advertising
- Children's interpretation of the messages and content of TV advertising
- The effect of advertising on children's demand for and purchase of various goods and products
- The effect of advertising on children's values, attitudes and knowledge (ibid:20).

It is important to note that "children" in this context is taken to mean people who are 12 years old or younger.

In a later report on children and TV advertising (Tuft, 1999) the following research issues were also dealt with: whether children understand the aim of advertising, whether they can differentiate between advertising and other programme content, their remembering and interpretation of advertising, and the effects of TV advertising on desires and the family consumption of products.

The research reports and surveys which form the basis of the present report shed light upon one or more of the above research issues. These research issues can also be said to be the arguments which both opponents and advocates use to defend their own views in respect of children and TV advertising.

**Not all research issues will be dealt with in the following report. I have focused on the issues which are most frequently used as arguments by opponents of TV advertising aimed at children, as well as those used by its advocates.**

The research and surveys which will be discussed below are those which deal with the following issues:

- the ability of children – i.e. the age at which children are able to differentiate between advertising and other programme content
- the ability of children to understand the intention of advertising – i.e. the age at which this ability has developed
- the effects of advertising on children's own consumption, and the effects of the same on family consumption – i.e. pester power
- the effects of advertising in relation to other influence factors, such as the influence of family and friends.

## The ability to differentiate between advertising and programme content

Bjurström (1994) notes, like several other researchers, that there is no direct link between children's ability to differentiate between advertising and programme content and their ability to understand the aim of advertising (see also Jarlbro, 1992). On the other hand, the opposite is true: in other words, if children understand the aim of advertising, they can also differentiate between programme content and advertising. However, in this section we will primarily be discussing the ability to differentiate advertising from other programme content on TV.

In his report, Tufte (1999) describes surveys which show that most children are able to differentiate between advertising and programme content at around the age of 7. Furnham (2000), on the other hand, reckons that German surveys show that almost two-thirds of 6-year-olds can differentiate between advertising and other programme content and understand the aim and intention of advertising. The matter of the age at which children are able to differentiate between advertising and other TV content is dealt with by another researcher, Goldstein (1998), as follows:

*First, there is no magic age at which someone understands advertising. Learning is a continual process that depends upon family and friends. The often heated debates about advertising lead me to conclude that many adults do not understand advertising, either. (ibid:5)*

The same author is of the opinion that there is absolutely no scientific proof to indicate that the children who cannot distinguish advertising from programmes would be particularly affected by this. If children do not understand and know that what they are seeing is a commercial message, they cannot react to it, notes Goldstein. Of course, it is possible to see a certain element of logic in Goldstein's reasoning. However, I am of the opinion that this reasoning is flawed, for two main reasons. Firstly, one may hold the view that it is a human right in a democracy to know when one is being subjected to commercial influence. In other words, individuals must themselves be able to decide whether to stay sitting in front of the TV and view the message. Of course, this right cannot be exercised by individuals if they do not know what is advertising and what is programme content. Secondly, it is entirely possible to imagine that communication will have an effect on the viewer irrespective of whether he or she knows whether or not the message is commercial. Even though the word *effect* and its meaning may seem obvious, it may nevertheless be appropriate to explain it briefly here. Thus McQuail (1984) is of the opinion that mass communication research *per se* is based on the prerequisite that the media influences individuals in one way or another, while at the same time this is a matter surrounded by great uncertainty and little consensus of opinion. The same author also points out that we have to differentiate between media effects and the potential effects of the media, the former referring to conditions which have already occurred, intentionally or not, as a direct consequence of mass communication. The potential effects of the media refers to future effects under specific conditions. Examples of long-term – and not always intentional – media effects could therefore be,

according to McQuail (ibid.): social control, socialisation, definition of reality and institutional change. For a detailed discussion on various types of effects, interested parties should refer to McQuail (ibid: see also Bjurström, 1994).

In this context, it may be mentioned that several studies have found that children (up to 12 years old) behave completely differently in front of the TV screen compared with teenagers and adults as far as TV advertising is concerned. Thus a national study carried out in Norway of 8–14-year-olds revealed that children, unlike adults, will not change channels or go and do something else when the advertisements come on (Borch, 1996). This is true regardless of how often the children have already seen the advertisement (see also Jarlbro, 1992; Bjurström, 1994).

**In the case of small children, it seems that repetition over and over again of the same message is all part of the appeal. There is reason to believe that the more often one is exposed to a message, the greater the effect of this message on the individual.**

Let us now return to the matter of the age at which children are able to differentiate between advertising and other TV content. Gunter and Furnham (1998) are of the opinion that the age most commonly cited in the research as that at which children are able to differentiate between advertising and other content is 5 (see also Young, 1990). Blosser and Roberts (1985), quoted in Gunter and Furnham (1998), found that half the children aged 5 or 6 were able to distinguish TV advertising – advertising aimed at children as well as that aimed at adults – while 100 per cent of 10-year-olds had this ability. In an American survey of 200 13-year-olds, it was found, on the other hand, that it was common for the children – or teenagers, if you prefer – to confuse programme content and advertising. This is illustrated by the following, for example:

*“Blurring” occurs when kids mistake one type of television text for another. Students blurred one commercial with another; they mistook commercials for regular programs, such as the news; and they confused commercials with public service announcements (e.g. drug abuse warnings). Blurring was the most surprising yet most commonly observed finding of this study (Fox, 1996:54).*

The same author was given the following answer when he asked a boy (13 years old) what he thought the difference was between a programme and an advertisement:

*Commercials don’t have as much time to get their messages across. Programmes are really long (ibid.:55).*

In a Danish study into children and their parents’ perception of TV advertising for children’s products (GfK, 1997), it was found that most children understood the difference between TV advertising and programme content. Furthermore, it was discovered that it was primarily the youngest children, i.e. those younger than 7–8 years old, who had difficulties in spontaneously describing the differences between advertising and other content. It was particularly difficult for these children to see the differences when the advertising was shown in the middle of a programme. In other words, they found it easier to see the differences between advertising and programmes

when the advertising was shown in between programmes as opposed to in the middle of programmes.

**In his survey of literature regarding the influence of TV advertising on children, Young (1997) found that children as young as two could differentiate between advertising and programme content. However, the same author points out that it is not until late childhood – from 8 to 12 years – that children completely understand the aim of advertising.**

Of course, one does ask how the research results can be so different. Why do some studies show that children as young as 2 are able to differentiate between advertising and programme content, while other research results show that children acquire this ability only at the age of 7 or so? Are German children more alert than their Nordic peers, for example, as they seem to have developed the skill of differentiating between advertising and other content at a very tender age (see Kübler, 1997; GfK, 1997; Borch, 1996)? Moreover, in this context American children seem to be particularly late developers, as it was not uncommon for teenagers to confuse advertising with other TV content (see above, Fox, 1996). There are sure to be many explanations as to why the research results look so different. Professor Goldstein explains this phenomenon as follows (quoted from González del Valle, 1999):

*Goldstein affirms that many of the researchers of children and television advertising make clear their own preferences concerning policy and regulation, even if their research does not support them (ibid:5).*

The interesting thing about the above quotation is that Goldstein has written several of his reports on behalf of the European toy industry. He can almost be considered the chief researcher of the toy industry (see, for example, Goldstein, 1995).

**So can the answers be found in the fact that researchers are “bought” in order to defend the interests of one side or the other in the matter of children and TV advertising? The answer to this question is both *yes* and *no*. Yes, because surveys initiated and financed by players who in one way or another have an interest in defending TV advertising to children find more often that even very small children have the ability to differentiate between TV advertising and editorial content.**

Correspondingly, we find that various consumer organisations refer more often to the research which has found that children develop the ability to differentiate between advertising and programme content at a considerably later age, at around 7 years. So the question can also be answered in the negative.

**Some of the differences in the results are due to the fact that different surveys have used different methods of research.**

Thus we find that surveys based primarily on verbal statements, i.e. question surveys, find more often that it is only at around the age of 7 that children can differentiate between advertising and programmes (Borch, 1996; GfK, 1997). On the other hand, surveys which are based on observations and experiments find more often that even

small children – from the age of 3 or so – are able to distinguish advertising on TV (see von Ploetz, 1999; Furnham, 2000).

A number of studies also show that the ability of children to differentiate between advertising and programme content is often impeded by the techniques used by TV advertising, such as the use of the same comic strip characters in advertising as are found in cartoons (see, for example, Young, 1990; Consumer International, 1996; Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

Studies also show that the sociocultural backgrounds of children are of a certain degree of significance as regards children's ability to distinguish TV advertising (see, for example, Borch, 1996; Young, 1997; Tufte, 1999), insofar as children from highly educated homes talk about advertising and TV viewing in the home to a greater extent than those from less well-educated homes. Parents who talk to their children and explain media content to them thus have the opportunity to accelerate the development of their children's ability to distinguish advertising from other programme content (see also Jarlbro, 1992).

**To summarise, we can state that the research results are not entirely unanimous as regards the issue of the age at which children are able to differentiate between TV advertising and other editorial content on TV. The differences in the results are due in part to differing survey techniques, and ultimately these are a consequence of who financed the survey. The advocates of advertising have financed studies which are based on observations to a greater extent, and studies based on question surveys to a lesser extent.**

Furthermore, we find that the reports prepared on behalf of the players advocating advertising to children are based primarily on surveys in which the results show that very small children are competent users of media.

So is there any objective truth which will tell us, once and for all, when children develop the ability to differentiate between advertising and programmes? No, this is naturally not the case, but all the surveys studied in respect of this question do prove that the skills of children in this respect improve as they get older. No doubt there are a few children aged between 3 and 6 who have this ability, but this does not mean that they all have it.

If we summarise the research into this field, the results show fairly unambiguously that most children aged 7–8 have developed this skill. However, at around the age of 10–12, all children seem to have developed the ability to differentiate between TV advertising and programme content. (See Bjurström, 1994; Borch, 1996; Löhr, 1999; Tufte, 1999).

## **The ability of children to understand the aim of advertising**

Above, we were able to establish that the ability of children to differentiate between advertising and other programme content is not the same as them being able to understand the intention of advertising. In this section, we will discuss the answers which the

research gave to the following questions: at what age have children developed the ability to understand the intention of advertising, and when do they understand that the messages they see are persuasive?

**One important prerequisite for individuals being able to adopt a critical attitude towards advertising is that they have to understand the aim or intention of it.**

However, what we mean by *understanding* the intention behind advertising is not entirely without complexity, as in this content the word *understanding* has a somewhat unclear definition. Different researchers use different definitions of the word *understanding* when referring to the intention behind advertising. Terminologically unclear points do of course make it more difficult to interpret and compare different research results, as the various researchers do not seem to be measuring the same phenomena. Bjurström (1994) refers to De Bens and Vandenbrouaene (1992), who are of the opinion that most of the surveys carried out in the 1980s define understanding the intention of TV advertising as follows:

The child must understand:

- that the people who have produced the advertisements have points of departure (interests) different to those of the people at whom they are aimed
- that the advertisements are trying to persuade the people to whom they are addressed
- that persuasive messages are not “objective”
- that persuasive messages differ from and have to be assessed in other ways to those that can be categorised under headings such as information, education or entertainment (Bjurström, *ibid*:29).

Yet another definition of *understanding* often cited in respect of advertising intent can be found in Robertson and Rossiter (1974; see also London Economics, 1996; Gunter and Furnham, 1998). This definition is as follows:

- the ability to distinguish a television programme from a commercial
- the ability to understand that there is an external source to the commercial, with a particular sales objective
- awareness of the symbolic nature of commercials
- the ability to distinguish between advertising claims and reality.

However, a number of researchers are of the opinion that the definition above is rather “hard” and is one of the reasons as to why many children do not seem to understand the intention of advertising (see, for example, Gunter and Furnham, 1996). Furthermore, the same authors are of the opinion that it is wholly possible for children to be able to understand the intention of advertising – albeit on a non-verbal level – even if they are not able verbally to explain this intention (see, for examples, London Economics, 1996). An admittedly older study into children’s understanding of TV advertising found that 96 per cent of 5–6-year-olds, 85 per cent of 8–9-year-olds and 62 per cent of 11–12-year-olds did not fully understand the aim of TV advertising (Ward, Wackman and Wartella, 1977, quoted from Gunter and Furnham, 1998). If the children in this study replied that advertising is “short and amusing”, this was defined

as a low level of awareness of the aim of advertising. If, instead, children answered that advertising exists to “show children where they should buy toys”, awareness of the intention of advertising was considered to be somewhat higher. Only when children were able to explain verbally the underlying reasons for and aim of advertising were they considered to have a high level of awareness.

**However, irrespective of which definition is used, all the surveys which I have studied seem to be fairly unanimous as regards the fact that children’s ability to understand the aim of advertising comes later than the ability to differentiate between advertising and other programme content.**

So at what age do children develop some kind of understanding of the intention of advertising? Furnham (2000) writes the following in a short book entitled “Children & Advertising: The Allegations and the Evidence” regarding children’s understanding of the intention of advertising:

*Data from various sources shows nearly two-thirds of 6-year-olds can even distinguish the intention of advertising while a third even question the credibility of advertising at this age. (ibid.:24 f.)*

However, it is not quite clear on precisely which data the author above is basing his assertion, apart from the fact that he seems to be referring to German surveys.

Bergler (1999) can be said to be as completely certain a researcher as the one referred to above. Bergler is of the opinion, *inter alia*, that the notion that advertising could influence people’s behaviour has nothing to do with scientific knowledge, but is merely a naïve everyday psychological theory. In his article, Bergler refers to a number of German surveys (including Backe and Kommer, 1995). In this survey, it was thus found that 57 per cent of 6-year-olds understand the aim of advertising in the sense that they understand that advertising wants to sell something. Furthermore, it was found that the proportion of children who understand the sales objective rises as they get older, and at the ages of 12–13, no fewer than 88.6 per cent of children understand that someone wants to sell something using advertising. However, precisely how this survey was carried out, who took part in it and how the sample was taken is not explained in this article. The figures above are used by the author to show that advertising aimed at children is a completely harmless phenomenon and that children are in no way helpless “victims” of various market forces.

However, it is possible to turn around the percentages quoted above and study how many children there are in the various age groups who do not understand that the aim of advertising is to sell products. In this way we find that 43 per cent of 6-year-olds do not understand the intention of advertising. The corresponding figures for the other age groups are 30 per cent of 7–9-year-olds, 15 per cent of 10-year-olds, 14 per cent of 11-year olds and, finally, 11 per cent of 12–13-year-olds. These figures show that a not inconsiderable proportion of children do not understand the simplest intention of advertising, even in late childhood. Furthermore, the same author discusses the fact that 33.6 per cent of 6-year-olds do not consider advertising to be trustworthy, which

is alleged to be further “proof” that children are competent consumers. However, if we study the figures quoted by the author a little more carefully, we find that no fewer than 59 per cent of 6-year-olds say that they sometimes or always believe what advertising tells them. For 12–13-year-olds, the corresponding figure for children who say that they always believe what is advertised is 8 per cent. 55 per cent say that they sometimes believe what is advertised.

Of course, actual figures can be interpreted differently, but I find it remarkable that no fewer than 55 per cent of the eldest children (12–13-year-olds) have a relatively high level of belief in what is advertised. This result may be interpreted to show that not even the eldest children fully understand the intention of advertising. (As regards the definition of understanding the intention of TV advertising, please see the quotations above from De Bens and Vandenbruaene, 1992 and Robertson and Rossiter, 1994).

However, what kind of advertising children seem to believe from time to time is not disclosed by this report. A plausible interpretation, which is supported by Nordic research (see Jarlbro, 1992) into children and TV advertising, *inter alia*, may be that children are more likely to believe what is advertised for products they have bought.

**Furthermore, the Nordic study discovered that children are less likely to believe advertisements aimed at adults than they are to believe advertising aimed directly at children.** (See, *inter alia*, *ibid.*: 1992).

In a survey studying British children (4–9 years old) and their mothers, it was found that the younger the children were, the more common it was for them to be disappointed by how their toys worked in reality compared to how they were described in the advertising (Hanley, 1996). This result may be interpreted as meaning that it is only during the latter part of childhood that the understanding of the persuasive aim of advertising is developed. The same author also found that it was more common for boys and children with no elder siblings to misunderstand the messages put forward by advertising.

In the national study of Norwegian children aged between 8 and 14, it was found that the older children were, the more critical they became of advertising, and they were of the opinion, to a lesser extent than the younger children, that advertisements merely had entertainment value (Borch, 1996).

**In an American study of 13-year-olds (Fox, 1996), it was found that it was unusual for teenagers to understand that the people who produced the advertisements had points of departure and interests different to those of the people at whom they were aimed.**

The author is of the opinion that the 13-year-olds studied had no understanding of the fact that the people who produced the advertisements were interested in profits. The children mainly perceived the advertisements as some kind of product information.

Tufte (1999) is also of the opinion that the age at which children learn to understand the aim of advertising is linked on the one hand to the parents’ attitudes and level of education, and on the other to the ability of school teaching to explain and discuss advertising with children and young people.

**To summarise, we find that the research results vary regarding the age at which children understand the intention of advertising. The differences in results are mainly due to the fact that different things have been measured in the various surveys. Researchers have used different definitions of the expression *understanding the intention of advertising*.**

It seems to be the case throughout that the players advocating advertising have, more often than other players, used a *nicer* definition of *understanding* and emphasised the fact that understanding may exist on a non-verbal level (I shall not go into precisely what is meant by this).

However, one common feature – regardless of who initiated and financed the survey – is that the older the children, the more they seem to understand the intention of advertising, both the more obvious and the more concealed elements. Of course, this is linked with the cognitive development of children.

However, both Bjurström (1994) and Tufte (1999) show clearly in their reports on research into children and TV advertising that children develop a more complete understanding of the aim of advertising only after the age of 12. In the surveys which I have studied, I have found no new empirical data which would in any way change the conclusions drawn by Bjurström and Tufte.

## **Pester power**

In this section, we will discuss elements of what could be termed the influence and effects of TV advertising. It has been discussed above that we have to differentiate between both long-term and short-term effects, and between intentional and non-intentional effects. A short-term, intentional effect is that we buy the product advertised. Of course, this type of effect is quite simple to measure, insofar as we study whether sales figures have gone up for the product in question.

However, in this context it should be mentioned that in spite of any increases in sales figures, it is difficult to isolate precisely what effect any advertising has had on individuals, as media effects interact in various ways with other influences from the child's sociocultural background, for instance. Therefore, this line of reasoning means that if we are interested in studying more long-term effects, such as the influence of advertising on children's attitudes and values, the difficulties we face are even greater as regards the isolation of media effects from the influence of interpersonal communication.

Perhaps due to the difficulties involved in studying the effects of TV advertising, the latest European surveys have chosen to interview mainly the mothers of the children. They have been asked whether they feel that their children are being influenced by TV advertising and whether their children influence what the family eats. Of course, this procedure is not the same as measuring the effects of advertising. Rather, the attitudes of mothers towards the phenomenon of TV advertising have been measured.

However, in this context it should be mentioned that earlier studies exist in which in which an experimental design was used to attempt to gauge the short-term effects of

advertising. In this way, Goldberg *et al.* (1987) found that 5–6-year-olds were more inclined to choose foods with a high sugar content if they had recently seen TV advertisements showing these products. Similarly, it was found that children who had seen non-commercial items on nourishing food were more likely to choose this kind of food.

Although generally successful, these experimental studies, which were carried out in a laboratory environment, could not always explain the behaviour of individuals in a natural environment. However, Gunter and Furnham (1998) are of the opinion that TV advertising can act as a socialisation agent as regards consumption behaviour and also have an influence on children's perception of nutrition. Whether the latter is correct is of course open to discussion, as there is no empirical evidence in favour of one viewpoint or the other as far as this matter is concerned.

**However, in this context it should be mentioned that when analysing the content of advertisements for foods, it was found that most of these types of advertisement market foods with a high fat or sugar content; that is to say, foods which cannot be recommended for reasons of public health (see, for example, Consumers International, 1996).**

Despite this evidence, Goldstein (1998) is of the opinion that the fact that many parents have heard their children asking for a product for which they have just seen an advertisement is often taken as proof of the immediate effects of advertising. For his part, Goldstein reckons that this is pure nonsense and that groups of friends are primarily responsible for influencing children's consumption of products. We will come back to this reasoning in the next section.

In a study in the United Kingdom in which 24 families and 59 mothers were interviewed, it was found that food advertising had very little influence on the eating habits of either children or the rest of the family (Stratton, 1994). In this context, it may be mentioned that the results were taken from a report presented at the Advertising Association Seminar on Food Advertising and Children, held in November 1994. The author concludes his results as follows:

*Advertising can make a significant contribution to families having an enjoyable, varied and healthy diet. To make this contribution it needs to be free from unnecessary myth, and when strong underlying assumptions appear, they should be checked out through research (ibid.:10).*

As Stratton's selection and analysis methods in this survey are unclear, one should ask oneself whether the empirical data is sufficient to make the above statement (see, for example, Jarlbro, 2000).

A study often referred to is "Pester Power" (1999), which is based on national questionnaire surveys in Spain and Sweden which included a sample of 1000 people aged over 18 in both countries. These surveys were carried out on behalf of the Food Advertising Unit (Children's Programme also seems to be an initiator as regards some

of the documents) and study the attitudes of adults regarding pester power during shopping trips. Spain and Sweden were selected as survey locations because the former is a country with few restrictions on advertising, while the latter is a country with a ban on TV advertising aimed at children.

Very briefly, the results show that only a small number of respondents in both countries are of the opinion that children who pester their parents are of any great significance (7 per cent in Spain, 9 per cent in Sweden), and only an extremely small number of these are of the opinion that a ban on advertising would be an appropriate solution. Of course, it is possible to discuss whether the figures of 7 per cent and 9 per cent respectively are a lot or a little. However, it is interesting to look at just how many of the respondents are parents of small children and whether the results differ between the people who do actually have children and those who do not. According to the technical data in this report, the sample was made up of resident adults over the age of 18. This means that it is likely that a not inconsiderable number of respondents will not yet have become parents, while others will have grown-up children.

Studies into the attitudes of Swedes towards TV advertising aimed at children have shown clearly that opinions on TV advertising – be they positive or negative – differ depending on the sex and level of education of respondents, and on whether or not they have small children. Thus Jarlbro and Sonesson (1990) found that men and people with low levels of education had more positive attitudes towards TV advertising, and that these people were less likely than women, people with high levels of education and parents of small children to reckon that TV advertising pressurises parents to buy things for their children.

A French study (SNPTV, 1999) which included qualitative interviews with 11 mothers of children aged between 4 and 14 and quantitative interviews with 235 mothers, found that friends had the greatest influence on the wishes of children to buy/be given various products. No fewer than 78 per cent felt that pressure from friends influenced children. The corresponding figure for the influence of TV advertising was 26 per cent. Furthermore, in this survey it was found that the mothers in general had positive attitudes towards TV advertising aimed at children. No fewer than 74 per cent of the mothers allowed their children to watch TV advertising because they felt that this allowed their children to learn various consumer skills. However, the scientific value of this report is somewhat difficult to assess as it is not clear how the sample of the 235 mothers was selected. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to study whether the ages and levels of education of the mothers affected their attitudes towards TV advertising.

Unlike in the French survey referred to above, it was found in a British study (Hanley, 2000) – implemented on behalf of the ITC – that parents felt that the effects of TV advertising manifested themselves in pestering and in their children directly copying behaviour, and that TV advertising also had subtle and gradual effects on the attitudes of children. This study was based on qualitative group interviews with parents of children of various ages and interviews with “professional” adults, i.e. nursery school teachers and school staff. In addition, this study included observations at a school in which

opportunities were given to observe the children in both their schoolwork and their play. However, it is not entirely clear from this report what selection criteria were applied for recruiting people to interview. Of course, this fact does make it more difficult to assess the universality of the report.

In another British study (McCarragher, 1998), published by the Parenting Education & Support Forum, it was also found that 62 per cent of respondents felt that the media influenced children to buy things. Moreover, 72 per cent of respondents felt that they as parents felt pressurised into buying things for their children. Furthermore, the parents felt that the older the children were, the greater the pressure exerted by advertising when it came to buying things for their children. Moreover, no fewer than 78 per cent agreed with the statement that advertising aimed at children should not be allowed during children's programmes in the United Kingdom.

Certain questions arise when it comes to assessing this survey too. The sample was not selected at random: the questionnaire was issued as a supplement to Family Circle Magazine. 220 completed questionnaires were sent in to the researcher. A further 100 questionnaires were sent out to selected members of the Parenting Education & Support Forum. This selection procedure could be called voluntary: the people who wanted to respond, did. Thus there is reason to believe that the parents who responded to the questionnaire had a fairly negative attitude towards TV advertising aimed at children, and that it is not possible to generalise the results as being the opinions of British parents in general.

**To summarise, we found that none of the surveys studied actually measured the effects of advertising, either short-term or long-term. Rather, the various surveys measured parents' – primarily mothers' – attitudes towards TV advertising aimed at children.**

The results are conflicting: the advocates of advertising find that parents in general have positive attitudes towards TV advertising, while the opponents of advertising find in their studies that parents in general have negative attitudes towards TV advertising. The scientific value of the surveys referred to in this section is quite small, as the methodological approach has not always been the most appropriate way of getting answers on what the researchers purport to be studying.

In this context, I would like to say that qualitative surveys are of tremendous value when it comes to getting answers to many research questions, but not in conjunction with attitude and opinion surveys. The quantitative surveys referred to above did not utilise selection techniques which would make them representative of larger sections of the population. (At least, this is not apparent from these documents.)

## **The influence of advertising in relation to other influence factors**

A common argument used by the advocates of advertising is that advertising has considerably less effect on the behaviour of children than their families, brothers and sisters and friends have. Communication researchers nowadays would agree with this,

that methods of mass communication are more effective when it comes to enhancing awareness of a phenomenon or product, as opposed to bringing about long-term changes in people's attitudes and behaviour. Mass communication can also provide stimulation for interpersonal communication. Essentially, this means that interpersonal communication is more effective as regards affecting people's behaviour, but that mass communication such as TV advertising stimulates interpersonal communication concerning what people have seen in TV advertisements, for example.

Fox (1996) found in his study that what was in various advertisements was a common topic for discussion among children at school. Furthermore, it was found in this study that children also encouraged their parents and brothers and sisters to watch various advertisements which had in various ways appealed to the children themselves. There is every reason to assume that advertising nowadays, in its various forms – merchandising, product placement, clubs such as the Barbie Club, Disney Club, etc., and the handing out of gifts – further stimulates this interpersonal communication among children at day nurseries and at school (see, for example, Consumentbond, 1996; Consumer International, 1999).

**The fact that it is difficult to isolate the direct effects of advertising from interpersonal influences is often put forward by the advocates of advertising. Thus Goldstein (1998) is of the opinion that each survey shows that children are influenced more by their parents and classmates than by the mass media.**

Children's interest in various products does not come from advertising, reckons Goldstein, but is disseminated by means of interpersonal communication. However, the report does not deal with the question of where children find out about the product in the first place.

For his part, Furnham (1996) is of the opinion that it is impossible to distinguish the effects of TV advertising from other influence factors. Furthermore, Furnham reckons that the age and socioeconomic status of the children, the education and cultural background of the parents and the product category are all important factors which must be taken into account when discussing influences. In spite of the fact that Furnham thinks it is impossible to isolate direct media effects, he is of the opinion that a ban on advertising would have negative effects as this would prevent children from learning about reality. However, it is not clear how these educational effects could be measured.

A study by Stratton (1994) shows that TV advertising is the main reason for the family choice of meal in only 5 per cent of cases. The same study states that the family choice of meal is influenced by mothers in 20 per cent of cases and by fathers in 12 per cent of cases. The influence of children is estimated to be 13 per cent in this instance. Consequently, according to the author, it may be concluded that these figures show that the influence of advertising is minimal compared with other influence factors regarding the family choice of meal. However, I find that these figures do not prove anything regarding the influence of advertising. What I mean by this is that it is not sufficient to ask various members of the family who influences their choice of meal in order to study the potential effects of advertising. What parent would voluntarily admit

that they are influenced by advertising when it comes to choosing what food to serve their family? In short: the way in which the questions were asked has probably affected the results in this survey.<sup>1</sup>

In 1999, a survey was carried out on behalf of the Advertising Education Forum regarding parents' perception of important influence factors in the lives of their children (AEF, 2000). This survey is based on both face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews with around 300 parents of children younger than 12 in 20 countries across Europe. According to this report, the selection was representative in every country in respect of age, social class and sex. The results show that TV advertising in general is not regarded as a strong influence factor in the lives of children. This statement is based on the fact that 86 per cent of parents did not spontaneously mention TV advertising as one of the five most important influence factors.

14 per cent of European parents spontaneously mentioned TV advertising as one of the five most important influence factors in the lives of their children. (That is to say, they were not given the option of choosing from a variety of given answers.) Of course, there are differences between the answers given in the various countries. Accordingly, no fewer than 41 per cent of Danish parents, 34 per cent of Belgian parents, 26 per cent of Greek parents and 21 per cent of Spanish parents cited TV advertising as one of the five most important influence factors in the lives of their children. The corresponding figure for Finland is 1 per cent, for Sweden 11 per cent, for Poland 3 per cent, and for the United Kingdom 5 per cent. Thus there are quite major variations between the views of parents in the various countries of Europe. The reasons for these differences are not discussed further in the report, other than to say: "*parents across Europe do not all have the same point of view on TV advertising.*"

Of course, it is possible to discuss whether these differences are due to the fact that children in the various countries have different TV consumption patterns, or whether cultural differences prevail as regards the approach to parental responsibility in the various countries. Furthermore, it is possible to discuss whether the major differences between the various countries are due *de facto* to the fact that different survey techniques were used – in some countries face-to-face interviews, and in others telephone interviews – and that the size of the sample varied greatly between the various countries.

However, I am of the opinion that these results ask more questions than they answer. Furthermore, this is obviously a matter of interpretation; whether the 14 per cent of European parents who consider TV advertising to be one of the five most important influence factors in the lives of their children is a large proportion or a small one. However, in terms of numbers, 14 per cent of European parents is a not insignificant figure.

<sup>1)</sup> TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: It was impossible to translate this phrase directly into English. Instead I have taken the sense of it and made it into something which an English speaker would understand.

**Furthermore, it is possible to discuss TV advertising as an influence factor from another perspective too – that this is an influence factor which people have the option of avoiding. It is considerably more difficult to avoid influence from schoolfriends, for example.**

Furthermore, it was found in this survey that when the parents were asked to make up their minds about the influence of TV advertising in comparison with other influence factors, they stated that TV advertising had an “average influence”, while parents, school and friends had a great influence. In addition, it turned out that the parents who had cited TV advertising as one of the five most important influence factors had more negative than positive views on advertising. They were most negative about the advertising of toys, chocolate/sweets, crisps/snacks, soft drinks and films/videos.

To summarise, we have found that the research seems to be fairly in agreement on the fact that family, brothers and sisters and friends are a greater influence factor in the lives of children than the media in general and TV advertising in particular. This is by no means new to communication researchers. Interpersonal communication is considerably more effective than mass communication when it comes to influencing people’s attitudes, notions and behaviour. As mentioned above, when studying the effects of the media it is difficult to isolate various types of influencing factors from one another, or to chart how interpersonal communication and mass communication interact with one another.

Questions which need to be answered include: how are mass communication messages transmitted in group communication and other interpersonal communication? If I hear from a friend that I ought to buy something which he or she has seen in an advertisement, is it the friend or the advertisement which has had an effect? The surveys referred to in this section have not provided answers to these questions, but have merely looked into parents’ notions regarding various factors which may influence the lives of their children. In some cases, the questions are asked in such a way that the answers are almost expected. What parent would admit freely to an interviewer that he or she has no influence over his or her child’s life?

# Summing up

In the present report, I have studied the various surveys used in the debate for or against TV advertising aimed at children, primarily over the period 1994–2000. I have been able to establish that there are many different players in Europe with strong financial and political interests taking an active part in the matter of children and TV advertising. The various players initiate and finance surveys in which the results seem, not all that infrequently, to promote their own interests. Of course, this does beg the question: how can the survey results be so conflicting? Allow me to explain this as follows: sociologists and behavioural scientists often seem – to both the initiated and the uninitiated – confusing. One reason for this confusion may be the fact that there can be a number of different approaches and perspectives, different ways of approaching and understanding social reality, within a given discipline. The choice of problems, models, conceptual tools, methods, etc. is often dependent on which perspective the researcher decides to adopt.

The fact that the majority of surveys into children and TV advertising have been controlled by non-scientific interested parties – with various attitudes on whether TV advertising aimed at children should be banned or regulated – has quite clearly contributed towards various perspectives being in a position to control the research or survey process.

**The advocates of advertising refer considerably more often to surveys based on observations which show that even quite small children can distinguish and understand TV advertising.**

**The opponents of advertising, for their part, refer more often to surveys based on the verbal testimonies of children, which show that children can tell the difference between advertising and other programme content on the one hand, and that they can understand the aim of advertising on the other, at a considerably later age.**

Of course, the fact that concepts are defined differently in different surveys – for example, what is meant by understanding the intention or aim of advertising – does make it more difficult to compare various research results as it would seem that different things are being measured. Furthermore, it is not always reported which measuring instruments were used in the various surveys. This helps make things difficult when it comes to assessing whether or not the interpretations of the empirical results are reasonable. It is normally stressed in connection with quantitative studies that a measuring instrument has to meet certain requirements for the results to be acceptable. The most important of these requirements are as follows:

- the measuring instrument must measure what it is designed to measure; i.e. it must have a high level of validity
- the measuring instrument must give reliable results; i.e. it must have a high level of reliability

- the measuring instrument must give accurate measurement results; i.e. it must have a high level of precision.

In this context, it should be mentioned that a measuring instrument can measure things other than what it is designed to measure, thereby having a low level of validity, even though its reliability and precision may be satisfactory.

**Thus we have found that several of the surveys which purport to have studied elements of what can be referred to as the effects of advertising have probably studied something else. In other words, their level of validity is low.**

Surveys which have studied what parents think of the influence of advertising on the lives of children and whether children pester their parents after having seen advertisements do not necessarily tell us anything at all about the effects of advertising. It is likely that the surveys have measured what parents in various countries think of their roles as parents, as well as measuring their attitudes with regard to TV advertising.

A great deal of questions remain to be asked as regards the qualitative surveys referred to above. What strategic considerations were taken into account in connection with the selection procedure? What kind of data compilation methods and analysis techniques were used? Unfortunately, it is rare for researchers to report on their methodological considerations.

The question is, how can we draw any general conclusions at all from the surveys of the last few years as regards children and TV advertising? However, I would like to argue, despite the implications described above, that this is possible. First of all, all the surveys show that children become more able to differentiate between advertising and other TV content and to understand the intention of advertising as they get older, which is of course all linked with children's cognitive development.

**Even though certain studies claim to show that 3–6-year-olds have a developed “advertisement skill”, there is absolutely no empirical proof which indicates that this skill would be a natural element of the cognitive repertoire of all small children.**

An essential question for the advocates of advertising as well as its opponents, is: at what age do children understand the intention of advertising? This question must be regarded as important, as it is only once a child has developed this skill that it is possible to stop viewing him or her as a helpless “victim”. Only then is it possible to argue that the child may in fact have a critical attitude towards advertising. It was mentioned above that the definitions of *understanding* in this context differ in the various surveys.

**Irrespective of which definition one wishes to use, we can demonstrate that not one survey, of which I am aware, has shown that really small children have the ability to explain the underlying motives and aims of advertising. It would seem that most children only develop this ability at around the age of 10 or 12.**

To conclude, I would like to say that I hope research in the future into children and TV advertising will be controlled to a lesser extent by non-scientific interested parties than has been the case to date. Research should ask the following questions more extensively than has been the case up to now: what kind of problems/research questions are studied best using which types of method? What kind of insights and understanding will we gain by analysing different types of empirical data? How can different methods which we have at our disposal complement one another?

If the research into children and TV advertising were controlled to a lesser extent by various interested parties, we would perhaps be able to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the complex and multifaceted relationship between children and TV advertising.

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