



PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF INFLUENCES IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LIVES

A Study by the Advertising Education Forum

Summary of AEF Study Findings

The study's findings may be summarised as follows. The full study is available www.aeforum.org:

- There is a great deal of similarity across Europe in parents' perceptions of the top 5, or the most important, influences on children's lives. Unprompted, parents say that these top influences include parents, school, friends, other family and TV programming.
- Parental perceptions of other, less important, influences, including TV advertising, vary dramatically from member state to member state. For example, TV advertising's influence in children's lives is perceived to be an important influence by 1% of parents in Finland, 17% of parents in France, but 41% in Denmark. Parents across Europe have very different points of view.
- In the majority of countries TV advertising is a middle to low ranking influence. When prompted, parents continue to rate TV advertising as a middle-ranking influence, or 7th out of 18 influences in children's lives.
- Of the total sample, 86% of European parents do not cite TV advertising as a top 5 influence. Of the total sample, only 8% of European parents cite TV advertising as a top 5 influence in their children's lives and want to see its influence decrease. Parents in this latter group cite ad frequency, promoting materialism, and fear of manipulation as the issues of most concern relating to TV advertising.
- Within the countries surveyed, parents in Belgium and Denmark expressed the highest level of concern (over 25%) about the influence of TV advertising in their children's lives.
- Within the countries surveyed, parents in Austria, Finland, France, Germany the UK, Sweden and Ireland expressed low levels of concern (under 10%) about the influence of TV advertising in their children's lives.

Comments of the AEF Academic Advisory Board

Methodology - General

The research should be considered an opinion poll, as it does not have theoretical foundations. As an opinion poll, it provides us with an accurate 'snapshot' of public opinion over various European sites at a particular time (during the run-up to Christmas 1999). The study does not give answers to questions concerning the role of advertising in the child's life, but does provide insight into the perceived role of this factor by parents.

The results are in line with what is known about the sources of influence on children, where family, school, and peers dominate. There are some important national differences, most visibly with Denmark and Belgium.

Methodology - Sampling

The study was conducted in 20 European countries and is particularly important as the range of countries sampled gives a picture that covers a broad spectrum of different types of cultures at different stages of economic development. The sample is statistically valid : 4855 interviews in total with national samples varying between 112 and 416. Comments from individual Board members such as "the size of the sample gives to the results a really statistical signification: an amount of 4855 interviews with national samples which are varying between 112 and 416"; "the sample is sound and wide-ranging "; "it gives a rather up to date picture" bear this out. Each country's results are directly comparable, as the data was collected using the same methodology in the different countries.

The extent to which the sample was representative of the population at large is important, but questionable. For example, the size of national samples does not reflect the size of the country and in some cases the relationship is reversed (for example more respondents were taken from Estonia than Germany, despite the inverse population of each country). Summary statistics based on the total sample of 4855 are, however, valid as the national samples were weighted according to population when calculating the European mean. The national samples are relatively small, which may cause error when comparing the results for different countries. The answers relating to the psychological effects of TV advertising (manipulation, promoting materialism etc.) are interesting but not very revealing because of the small numbers. We can also examine results from each country independently and draw conclusions about the proportion of countries that rate advertising as a relatively minor source of influence. The sample sizes per country are not adequate to obtain valid breakdowns within each country on socio-economic status, age, and gender.

It would have been helpful to know the age of the children within the family, which parent was interviewed, and the demographics used in the sampling frame for each country. A complete record of each of the 4855 cases, coded on all the sample and response variables, could then be analysed using multivariate procedures to provide a more detailed and valid set of conclusions, including estimations of significance levels.

Methodology - Wording of questions

The questions asked are not based on an academic model and the wording used in some of the questions to respondents leave much open to personal interpretation, such as

‘upbringing’ and ‘influence.’ It appears that these non-empirical questions have been developed and are solely rooted in the plausibility of public discussion. Therefore, the study’s analysis of attitudes and opinions cannot be used as a tool to understand practical behaviour and actions ; it merely allows us to understand what parents think about TV advertising and children.

It is important to know just what is being asked in questionnaire-based interviews and in particular how the questions are framed as recent academic research in survey design has shown the extent to which results are sensitive to question asked and response alternatives offered. The Board agrees that the procedure used (telephone or face-to-face omnibus surveys) was adequate. The questions asked will tend to access parents’ ‘folk-theories’ of the relative influence of different socialisation agents such as parents, peers, school, and media and, consequently television advertising in that context is not a high priority. This finding is not unexpected and research in this area has always demonstrated the importance of peers and parents as the main influences on children. It is useful to see this result confirmed across the different European cultures.

Conclusions

This study is well-resourced and asks important questions. As a result, this study presents an accurate picture of the relative weak perceived influence of TV advertising on children in Europe. The survey is useful as it confirms what one would predict from other academic studies on the issue. The results of the data obtained in a telephone omnibus clearly show, even when in a country-specific form, that the majority of parents do not think that TV advertising has a particularly high influence on children; on the other hand there is a proportion of parents, albeit small, whose concerns should not be ignored.

Although we are critical of the methodology, the results provide a useful indicator of the role of advertising as a perceived source of influence on child development by parents relative to other major agents of socialisation such as peers, school, and family. The range of countries sampled provide a valuable measure of public opinion in a variety of European countries.

AEF Academic Advisory Board

The AEF Academic Advisory Board is Chaired by Dr. Brian Young of Exeter University, United Kingdom. Members include Dr. Reinhold Bergler, University of Bonn (Germany), Dr. Erling Bjurstrom, National Institute for Working Life, Work and Culture (Norrköping, Sweden), and Dr. Joel Bree, Ecole Superior de Commerce de Rouen (Rouen, France).