

A critical study of  
international research  
concerning the effects of  
TV-commercials on children  
Report 1994/95:8

BY ERLING BJURSTRÖM

# Children and television advertising

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**CHILDREN AND TELEVISION ADVERTISING**

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# FOREWORD

FOR SOME YEARS now, television advertising has been an established form of advertising in Sweden, and TV advertising reaches children too. They watch commercials intended for adults and they watch commercials aimed at children on the satellite channel TV3.

BUT ADVERTISING aimed at children is not allowed on Swedish terrestrial television. The ban is laid down in Sweden's broadcasting legislation with the following wording: "***A commercial with advertising that is broadcast during commercial breaks on the television must not have the purpose of attracting the attention of children under 12 years of age.***"

THE BAN APPLIES in practice to TV4, which can now be viewed in 98% of Swedish homes and which is so far our only terrestrial commercial TV channel.

THE REASON for the ban is not hard to understand. Children are children; they are trusting and naive. The techniques at the disposal of TV advertising carry considerable impact. The gripping sequences of images in TV commercials reach large numbers of children at the same time and so can create a stronger pressure to buy.

THE GROUND RULES for advertising laid down by the International Chamber of Trade include special rules concerning children. These rules were considered to be necessary because children lack experience and are not always able to identify advertising or to perceive it as pressure to buy.

SO WHEN a product and its trademark are presented on the TV in the form of a short cartoon with an exciting story line it is not easy for children to be critical or even to identify the purpose of the amusing cartoon.

TV COMMERCIALS alongside children's programs must today be considered the most effective form of advertising when it comes to reaching large groups of children. Consequently, powerful financial interests are seeking to have the ban on advertising to children on terrestrial Swedish TV removed. Indignant voices demand proof that TV advertising for children is "harmful". Sometimes reference is made to research that is claimed to prove the opposite, namely that advertising for children is a good thing.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH in the field have to say on the subject? We asked sociologist ***Erling Bjurström*** to study and evaluate international research on children and TV advertising, its influence and its effects. This does ***not*** mean that we want to maintain that research results are of crucial significance for decision makers where TV advertising for children is concerned, but research does provide us with greater knowledge of the field as a whole. An evaluation of the research done and referred to can also tell us about the quality of the research.

HOWEVER, the question of children as a target group for TV advertising must be seen as a question of ethics and morality, a question that has to do with our view of children and children's needs in our society.

WHO NEEDS advertising for children? Children? Parents? Companies? The owners of TV channels? Who benefits by it? And whose needs should we put first?

***The National Swedish Board for Consumer Policies***  
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# THE EFFECTS OF ADVERTISING

**A**re we influenced by advertising? Does it make us buy things we don't really need or even want? Does it affect our needs, wishes, standards and values? Questions of this type are often among those considered most urgently in need of an answer when advertising is discussed. When we spontaneously try to answer these questions we are inclined to take ourselves as the starting point. And, in my experience, the answers tend to vary between categorical denial that we are influenced by advertising and a certain degree of doubt. The more or less categorical answers come from people who have taken up a position either *for* or *against* advertising. But a certain element of doubt pervades their answers too.

In many contexts, proponents of the advertising sector have an interest in toning down the influence and possible effects of advertising. They often present it as an 'innocuous' aspect of daily life, while at the same time they depend on their clients' faith in the ability of advertising to attract the attention of potential customers and influence them. Similarly, opponents and critics of advertising often exaggerate the ability of advertising to influence us, while their very existence is evidence of relatively widespread scepticism and even resistance towards it. So in the debate about the effects of advertising, the arguments used both *for* and *against* it are to some extent contradictory and paradoxical.

The contradictory and paradoxical aspects are easy to understand if we place the arguments *for* and *against* advertising in relation to each other. Opponents and critics of advertising constantly emphasise its **negative** effects, whilst those in favour of it stress its *positive effects*. In the discussion of the ability of advertising to influence us, the negative is opposed to the positive. The "pro" arguments of one side are constantly coloured by the "contra" arguments of the other side and **vice versa**.

***“The greater the ability of advertising to influence us, the greater, of course, is the likelihood that it will have negative effects?”***

For the advertising sector, arguments which maintain that advertising does influence us often cut both ways. The advertising sector is of course dependent on these arguments in relation to its clients, but in the debate about the negative effects of advertising they are something of a trap. The greater the ability of advertising to influence *us*, the greater, of course, is the likelihood that it will have negative effects. On the other hand, the argument that advertising only influences us to a very small extent or not at all is open to the

argument that it is superfluous or harmful. In brief, why should companies spend huge resources and sums on something that has no effect?

The arguments for and against the effect of advertising play an important part for both the proponents and the opponents of advertising, but in different ways. The argument that we are **not influenced at all** by advertising is open to the counter-argument that it can hardly have either *positive* or **negative** effects. In many cases both those who are for and those who are against advertising agree that advertising influences us, while disagreeing about the extent to which this influence is **positive** or **negative**. But **the** arguments about the positive and negative effects often swing between a variety of contexts. For example, those in favour of advertising frequently highlight its positive effects for the economy, whilst its opponents often maintain that it makes us buy unnecessary things or conveys and reinforces unacceptable standards and values.

In the advertising debate, reference is often made to research results to underline or strengthen various arguments. It is often assumed that research can confirm or refute the arguments that are put forward in the debate. However, the field that can be defined as research into advertising<sup>1</sup> gives hardly any unambiguous answers on more general questions about the influence or effects of advertising. In addition, it is extremely difficult to get an overview of the research that has been done in this field. It is unlikely that even the majority of researchers involved in this type of research have an overview of more than limited parts of it.

There often seems to be a great need for information about and an overview of the research that has been done into the influence and effects of advertising. The gap between "believing" and "knowing" is frequently evident when advertising is discussed publicly. For example, in debates in which I have myself taken part in recent years, the so-called Coca-Cola experiment has been cited as an argument showing that research has demonstrated that advertising affects us unconsciously. According to the market researcher who did this experiment in the late 1950s, it was possible to influence sales of Coca-Cola and popcorn by inserting, in the newsreels that preceded the feature film in American cinemas, pictures that could not be perceived consciously, with the message "Drink Coca-Cola" and "Eat popcorn". The fact that many people cite this experiment, which, according to available information, was invented, and which proved impossible to repeat under controlled conditions, as evidence for the "subliminal"<sup>2</sup> effects of advertising, demonstrates more clearly perhaps than anything else the need for information about the results of research into advertising.

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, "research into advertising" means all research that in any sense has advertising as the object of its investigations.

<sup>2</sup> **The** word **subliminal** refers to whatever is below the level or threshold of consciousness. According to compilations of scientific studies of subliminal perception there are no results to confirm that it is possible to influence people's actions, behaviour or motivation in the way described in the "Coca-Cola experiment" (Moors 1982; Rundkvist 1988; Goldstein 1992). The sociologist Robert Goldmann (1992 p 1) is of the opinion that the idea that advertising can "subliminally seduce us" contributes only to making discussions of advertising frivolous, since it gives an entirely unrealistic picture of the ability of advertising to affect us. The attempts of the advertising sector to influence us subliminally have been described above all in popular books such as Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1981) and Wilson Bryan Key's *Subliminal Seduction* (1974) and *Media Sexploitation* (1976). In these books, the authors give plenty of examples to show that hidden messages occur in advertising, but do not discuss at all the question whether these messages have any effect; instead they tacitly assume that they have).

## Research into advertising

The field of research into advertising differs in many ways from other fields of research in the social and behavioural sciences. This is mainly due to the powerful financial and political interests that are linked to advertising. Research into advertising is divided into public and non-public (ie confidential) research. The former takes place mainly at universities and is financed from public funds by government bodies and research councils; the latter is mainly conducted at private market research institutes which are either a part of or are associated with the advertising sector. Universities also carry out market research or various research projects for private clients, who have sole rights to the results.

The first large private market research institutes were set up in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s. To begin with they concentrated mainly on surveying new markets for various products and evaluating the impact of the advertising message, but this was gradually extended to include more detailed surveys of the values and lifestyle patterns of different groups of consumers, both actual and potential (Mattelart 1991 p 144 *et seq*). Over the past thirty years the research of the largest multinational market research institutes has grown to include new techniques – the use of electronic equipment to record the amount of time different individuals and groups spend watching TV advertising, for instance – and transnational or multi-national research programmes (known as *multicountry research*) (*ibid.* p 151).

Since research conducted by private research institutes is not public, it is impossible to comment on its results, its quality or its reliability. In general, however, it is a matter of **applied research** with the aim **of predicting the** effects of various advertising and marketing campaigns rather than **understanding** or **explaining** why they have these effects.

Public research into advertising, that is, research done at universities and financed from public funds, has developed over a far shorter time than confidential or non-public

research, which is linked to various private market research institutes.

Not until the early 1970s was there any extensive independent research into the influence and effects of advertising. Right from the outset, this research was mainly focused on the influence and effects of TV advertising on children and to some extent on young teenagers.

Of course, only public research into advertising can be regarded as independent, in the sense that it is not controlled by the advertising sector or the financial interests of its clients. The question that I shall try to answer within the relatively limited scope of this survey is to what extent this research answers questions about the influence and effect of advertising. The purpose of the survey is to present, as

simply as possible, important research results about the influence and effects of advertising and the conclusions that can be drawn from them. They make no claim to be comprehensive. As I have already mentioned, it is practically impossible nowadays to obtain a complete overview of the research that has been done into the influence and effects of advertising. Consequently, the choice of research results presented here

***“Of course, only public research in to advertising can be regarded as independent, in the sense that it is not controlled by the advertising sector or the financial interests of its clients.”***

necessarily has a selective slant. However, this is compensated for by the fact that I have limited the survey to a small number of important and relatively well researched areas. Still, the criteria that govern which research results have been perceived as important or fundamental do change, of course. For example, some research results may be regarded as important or fundamental because they have been confirmed in several (independent) studies, whilst others may be seen as important because they gave unexpected results or revealed more complex relationships between different factors and characteristics than previous research.

Since the major part of the research that has been done on the influence and effects of advertising is directed at the way children are influenced by TV advertising, I have chosen to limit the survey to that field, but I shall from time to time touch upon the results of investigations that have been done among young teenagers.

### Drawing conclusions from research

Research results can be presented and discussed in many different ways. Often, it is only the results of a research process that are given. In most cases nothing is said about **how the** researchers reached these results, in other words which methods they used, how they defined various concepts, what initial assumptions they made, and so on. The main reason for this is that it is difficult to describe or discuss these aspects of a research process in a simple way. Generally, it is the results of research that are communicated to those who are not specialists in a particular field; knowledge of how the results were arrived at remains with the specialists (cf Bourdieu 1992 p 259). But in scientific contexts the production process, comprising everything from value-related and theoretical starting points to the choice of methods, is just as important as the finished process, ie the results.

Knowledge of how research results have been arrived at is often indispensable when explaining why different results do not agree. The same applies, of course, when the need arises to evaluate how safe or reliable different research results are and what conclusions can be drawn from them.

***“Knowledge of how research results have been arrived at is often indispensable when explaining why different results do not agree?”***

A number of difficulties are associated with the aim of presenting a survey of the research into the influence and effects of advertising. The first difficulty arises when bringing together all the research that has been done. Since research into the influence and effects of advertising (especially TV advertising) began in the mid- 1970s, more than one thousand studies must have been done in this field. In addition, research is conducted within a number of different disciplines (subject fields) and from a variety of theoretical and methodological starting points.

In general, the results of research in sociology and the behavioural sciences seldom provide a basis for more definite or **unambiguous** conclusions one way or the other. What is more, it is often hard to relate research results obtained with different perspectives and *methods* to each other and to draw any *common* conclusions from them.



Since the mid-1970s, countless studies have been done of the effects of TV advertising on children (and to some extent on young teenagers). Most of these studies are American, so quite a lot is known about how **American children** react to and are influenced by advertising. But the knowledge and research results on which they are based cannot necessarily be transferred directly to other countries, such as Sweden. Cultural differences in socialisation, values and standards, as well as other factors, may mean that children and young people from different countries relate to and are affected by advertising in very different ways.

The cultural specificity of research results is only one of the difficulties when it comes to drawing more general conclusions about the influence and effects of advertising. Another difficulty – already referred to – is that there are different research traditions and consequently different types of “result”. Research results reported in the form of statistical relationships, for example, cannot be compared directly with results based on ethnographic methods, in-depth interviews or participatory observations, though they need not contradict each other, of course. On the contrary, they often complement each other.

But naturally it does sometimes happen that research results are contradictory. And as long as we do not try to explain **why they** contradict each other it is easy to perceive research into the influence and effects of advertising as “failing to produce results”. This impression is reinforced by the fact that many researchers present their results with a number of reservations. From the research that has been done so far we cannot expect a clear or definitive “yes” or “no” to the question whether advertising affects us. In general, the answers that research gives have a limited range and are subject to many reservations. This is not because there is anything wrong with the research; it simply because reality is complex. No-one can give a more definitive answer to the question of the influence and effects of advertising – all we have are many pieces of a puzzle which together show a part of reality.

Just as in comprehensive media research, a need has emerged in advertising research for **overviews** and **summaries** of the research that has been done and the results that exist. The main reason for this need is that different interested parties want arguments **for** or **against** the positive and negative effects of advertising. Consequently, the need for an overview often goes hand in hand with a need to popularise research results and to clarify what they “really” mean and what conclusions can be drawn from them. Almost all the overviews that have been published of the influence and effects of advertising have been produced either for government authorities in various countries that work with advertising matters, or by organisations linked to the advertising sector (Brown 1976; Adler *et al* 1980; Young 1990; Goldstein 1992; De Bens & Vandenbruaene 1992). Behind most of these assignments lies the politically controversial question of bans or restrictions on TV advertising directed at children. The primary purpose of these overviews has therefore often been to answer the question whether TV advertising may **have** or **has negative** or even **harmful effects** on children.

*“Research answers many questions, but far from all“* The overviews presented have not given any unambiguous or definitive *answers*, but this is not the same as saying that they have not given any *answers* at all. In certain fields the knowledge is fairly sound; in others it is more vague and contradictory. So research answers many questions, but far from all.

## Effects research

Research into the influence and effects of advertising emerged initially as an aspect of mass communications research in America. The major part of the research that has been done into the influence and effects of advertising also starts from the scientific perspective and paradigm that has long dominated American media research. This perspective is generally called *effects research* or *the effects model*. In its basic form, this perspective starts from the hypothesis that the messages of the media or the content that they convey have an *effect* on our values, actions or behaviour. This assumption conceals a stimulus-response model; in other words, the messages and contents that the media convey are seen as *astimulus* to which we react in various ways, and this reaction is the *response*. According to this model, the response is synonymous with the *effect* of the stimulus that has been presented to us or conveyed to us via a medium. In its traditional form, effects research is based on a very simple view of people. Like the scientific view known as behaviourism, it is interested only in the reactions or responses caused by various types of stimuli. Human actions and behaviours are regarded as reactions to stimuli that come from various sources in our surroundings. Interest is directed at the *effects* (responses or reactions) caused by different types of media message or media content. Questions of *how* different individuals or groups *interpret these* messages or contents therefore fall outside the scope of this research approach. This type of question belongs mainly in research traditions of *hermeneutics*<sup>3</sup> and cultural analysis, but these have had a very limited influence in advertising research.

The fundamental effect model used as a starting point by American mass media research has gradually been developed and extended. Nowadays, for instance, they often use what is known as a uses *and gratifications*<sup>4</sup> model or a combination of this model and the effects model. This model is based on the assumption that people have different needs which they satisfy with the aid of different media. These may be needs for relaxation, stimulation, entertainment, information or knowledge. Whilst the emphasis in the traditional effect model is on the question *what the media do with different individuals and groups*, the emphasis in the uses and gratifications model is conversely on *what different individuals and groups do with the media*. The model attempts to combine the use model with a more traditional effects model. While starting from the basis that all people satisfy certain needs by their use of the media, researchers

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<sup>3</sup> *The term hermeneutics* comes originally from theology, where it was used to refer to the interpretation of biblical texts, but today it refers more or less to the “science of interpretation”.

<sup>4</sup> Not needed in the English version.

attempt to determine what effects this has on their values, attitudes, actions or behaviour. This is why the researchers who work on the basis of a combined uses-and-gratifications and effects model often talk about **circular** or **spiral effects**. An example of a (negative) circle effect is that children and young people who are aggressive watch violent films or horror films more than other children, and this contributes to further reinforcement of their aggressiveness. In other words, where consumption of media violence is concerned, effects of this type may give rise to a “vicious circle”, where the aggressiveness of certain individuals and their consumption of films containing violence or horror mutually reinforce each other.

Circle effects may be seen as a special kind of **reinforcement effects**; in other words, a particular media use or media content contributes to reinforcing values, attitudes, needs or physical features of certain individuals. Effects researchers also talk about **indirect** and **cumulative effects**. The media can influence us **indirectly** in various ways: on the one hand by determining *what* we think about, talk about and discuss with other people, even if the media do not directly influence our values or our attitudes; and on the other by influencing us *over time* and in **complex** ways which are difficult to survey and get to grips with immediately or in a short time. In both these instances we can speak of **indirect effects**. The term **cumulative effects** refers to the influence over time of several media (messages or contents) or repetitions of the same media message or contents. For example, the probability of our being influenced by a television commercial may increase if it is transmitted several times (or decrease, if we tire of it).

Effects may also be **short-term** or **long-term**. The division into short-term and long-term effects is not the same as that between direct and indirect effects, even if most direct effects are short-term and most indirect effects are long-term.

“Most of the effects that have been studied in advertising research are short-term.”

When we speak of short-term effects in effects research, we are referring to more or less **immediate** reactions or responses, whereas we use the term direct effects when there is no **mediating link** between the use of the media and the reactions or responses it gives rise to.

Generally, it is of course easier to study short-term effects rather than long-term effects. Most of the effects that have been studied in advertising research are short-term, in other words, it has been concerned with the **immediate** reactions of different individuals or groups to different advertisements or messages.

The use of terms such as “influence” and “effects” is by no means unproblematic in the media field – not even in effects research. As mentioned earlier, the effects studied in

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<sup>5</sup> In media research this effect is usually known as *agenda setting*. In this context “agenda” means the perspectives, subjects and questions that are defined as important by the media and by the public that uses them.

<sup>6</sup> The simplest definition of the term **indirect effects** is effects that are the result of one or more **mediating links** or **factors** between the stimulus presented and the effects that can be distinguished. In a stricter scientific sense a **direct effect** is the effect a variable (a property) has when all other independent variables (cause variables) are kept constant. An **indirect effect**, on the other hand, occurs if one independent variable affects other independent variables, which in turn affect a dependent variable (effect variable). In effects research, the reactions or changes that only appear in the receivers of a media or advertising message after a long time are also described as indirect effects (often described as **sleepier effects**).

effects research are largely synonymous with the **responses** (reactions) caused by one or more stimuli. The **responses** (effects) may be of different kinds, ranging from immediate reactions and behaviours to changes in attitudes and values. In most contexts it is far from obvious which responses should (and can) qualify as **effects**. A major part of advertising research limits the question of the influence of advertising to whether different groups or individuals buy or ask for the goods being marketed. In other words, what is regarded as the effect in this context is synonymous with the number of people who buy or ask for the goods. At this level, the question of effects is fairly uncomplicated, even if it may be difficult in this case to determine the “stimuli” to which people are responding or reacting. Things become far more complicated when attempting to determine the effects of advertising on the knowledge, values or attitudes of different individuals or groups. In these cases, it is a matter both of longer-term effects and of pinning-down effects that are often hard to “measure”.

It is plain from the brief outline above that the concept of effects is far from unambiguous when used in media and communications research. In principle, effects means all types of changes that can be registered in the uses (receivers) of different media. Summarising the types of effects referred to here we have:

- 1) Direct **effects** – those effects in the receivers that can be related directly to their use of different media, one or more media messages or contents;<sup>7</sup>
- 2) **Indirect effects** – those effects that are the result of **mediating links** or **factors** between the media and those who use them or who receive the message they carry;
- 3) **Short-term effects**- more or less **immediate** reactions or responses in the individuals or groups that use different media;
- 4) **Long-term effects**-*those* changes in the users of different media that take place over **a (long) time**;
- 5) **Individual effects** – short- or long-term reactions or changes that occur in **distinct individuals** or on an **individual level**;
- 6) **Social effects** – short- or long-term reactions and changes that occur in a **social category** or **group social (level)**.

The research that has been done into the effects of advertising has in principle been aimed at one or more of the effects listed above. Some of the research has been based on the reactions of various individuals or groups to different advertising messages; some has been concerned with the way in which advertising messages are dealt with in certain social groups and what effects (indirect or more long-term) this process has. The more long-term and indirect effects in which interest has been shown as regards the effect of advertising have to do with values, attitudes, knowledge and purchasing behaviour.

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The effects listed here are of course not the effects that are discussed or studied in the media and advertising research. When discussing advertising, for instance, it is often important to distinguish between *intentional* and *unintentional* effects. I shall be returning to these types of effect in Chapter 2.

## Cause and effect

Effects researchers aim for **causal explanations** when it comes to defining the effect of the media on particular individuals or groups. Causal explanations are the most important type of explanation in the natural sciences – and can also be described as the type of explanations that scientists are generally seeking. When looking for causal explanations, the objective is to explain a phenomenon in terms of “cause and effect”, in other words they try to trace **causal** relationships or laws. If you find out why a phenomenon occurs (effect) you have given a **causal explanation** for it.

Causal explanations assume that it is possible to isolate factors and phenomena from each other, so that it is possible to distinguish what is a cause and what is an effect. They also assume that you know about and have control over the factors that are included in a chain of cause and effect, so that the causal relationships are not influenced by unknown factors and or factors that cannot be controlled.

The scientific technique that offers the best possibility of determining causal relationships is the **experiment**. In an experimental situation, the researcher can control and changes one or more causal variables<sup>8</sup> and determine whether this leads to changes in the effect variables. The most common form of experiment in the social and behavioural sciences involves exposing an **experiment group** to an influence (causal variable) to which a **control group** is not exposed. The values of the **effect variable** are then measured for the members of each group. In an ideal experiment, the only thing that distinguishes the two groups is that the experiment group has been exposed to an influence (cause) to which the control group has not been exposed.

In the social and behavioural sciences it is difficult to use the experimental method. There are several reasons for this. A fundamental one is that it is far harder to isolate different factors and phenomena from each other in the social and behavioural sciences than in the natural sciences. Another reason is the ethical (moral) considerations that always apply in the social and behavioural sciences because the object of study is people. Because of these and other factors, the scope for the researcher to manipulate the causal variable (ie to determine what values it will have) are far more limited than in the natural sciences.

An additional problem is that the situation the social or behavioural researcher must create in order to carry out an experiment can easily become unnatural or artificial. Unlike atoms or molecules, people do not react in exactly the same way to stimuli in a laboratory and in their “natural” environment. So it is an open question to what extent the effects that can be demonstrated in experimental situations or laboratory environments are representative of or equivalent to those in actual social life.

The explanations primarily used in the social and behavioural sciences can be described as **statistical explanations**. **These** are often confused with causal explanations.

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<sup>8</sup> In scientific parlance a variable stands for a property of the object or units covered by a study. The term *variable* derives from the fact that these properties may vary, ie assume different values.

Cause and effect is a theoretical concept which does not have any equivalent in observable reality. Statistical explanations that *do not* form part of a theoretical cause-and-effect model therefore provide no basis for statements about what cause different phenomena. The simplest form of statistical explanation is **correlation analysis**. In its basic form, a correlation analysis shows only that there is a co-variation between two variables (properties). If, for example, a study reveals that children with highly-educated parents watch television far less than other children, this admittedly shows an interesting correlation (a statistical relationship), but it does not prove that the level

**“In effects research it is hard to isolate different causal factors from**

**each other?**

In effects research it is both hard to **isolate** different (possible or actual) **causal** factors from each other, and to determine the relationship between **cause (stimulus)** and **effect**. The likelihood of success is greatest in experimental situations, but these have limited validity when it comes to explaining human behaviour. On the other hand, in studies where other techniques, such as questionnaires or interviews, are used, the scope for giving causal explanations for the effects that may be shown are reduced.

## Media and advertising research

The major part of research into advertising belongs in the discipline (ie field of study) known as media research or mass communication research. Particularly where matters relating to the influence and effects of advertising are concerned, most researchers use theories and methods developed in media research. But for a long time, advertising took a back seat in research into the influence and effects of the mass media.

The breakthrough for media research – or mass communications research, as it was known for many years – came in the 1920s and 1930s. The background to its development was, on the one hand, increasing unease about the influence and effect of the new mass media and, on the other, the expansion of social and behavioural sciences.

The first large media research project, which was conducted in the USA in 1929-32, **The Payne Fund Studies**, attempted to answer the concerns directed towards the effect of the new sound films, especially the effect on young cinema-goers. The **Payne Fund** studies also confirmed – at least if we go by the interpretation of their results by the American press and public – the concerns that were focused on sound films. Films appeared to be giving young people new ideas, influencing their moral values, their concept of reality, attitudes, daydreams, fantasies and feelings. But it was not long before the image research gave of the influence and effects of the media became more and more complicated, as the results of new studies and investigations were presented. During the 1940s and 1950s a number of studies revealed a far more complex image of the effect of the media that that shown by the **Payne Studies**. **New** investigations based on more sophisticated methods, checks and measurements, contradicted above

all the finding that the effect of the media was immediate, direct and palpable. When, in the late 1950s, media researcher Joseph Klapper (1060) summarised the results of research into the effects of the media, he stressed that they were probably significantly **smaller** and also more *complex than* had previously been thought.

Klapper 's conclusions were also confirmed by the first major study of the effect of television on children, which was conducted in the late 1950s, and which was presented in the book ***Television in the Lives of our Children***, where the results of eleven large research projects were set out (Schramm *et al* 1961). The conclusions the researchers drew, summarising the results of the various studies, were cautious and subject to numerous **caveats**. Their main conclusion was that “For *some* children, **certain** programs are harmful under **certain** circumstances. For **other** children under the same circumstances or the same children under **other** circumstances, the same programs may be beneficial or enriching. For **most** children, under **most** conditions, *most* programs are probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial“ (Schramm *et al* p 333). **This** conclusion – which can justifiably be described as vague – amounted to an attempt to summarise in as general a manner as possible the results of the studies that were included in the project about the “TV-life“ of children and earlier research in the field. However, the conclusion did nothing to calm opinion that had turned against what had become known as TV violence.

During the 1960s there was an intensive debate about the effects of TV violence on children and young people in the USA. This led the US government to appoint, in the early 1970s, a committee by the name of the **Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behaviour (The Surgeon General's Committee)**<sup>9</sup>, with the task of summarising and evaluating research into the effects of TV violence on children and young people. It was widely expected that the report the Surgeon General was commissioned to produce would provide a definitive answer to the question whether the violence portrayed in American television programs was “harmful“ or “harmless“ to young viewers. But the report containing the Surgeon General's conclusions, published in 1972, came nowhere near giving a definitive answer to the question of the effects of TV violence; on the contrary, the conclusions in the report were quite vague and cautious. At the same time as the Surgeon General's Committee stated that there was nothing to indicate that TV violence had a distinctly harmful effect, they found that there was a “preliminary indication of a cause-and-effect relationship between seeing violence on TV and aggressive behaviour“, but this was only true of **certain** children under *certain* circumstances (SGR 1971 p 11). In other words the conclusions were almost identical to those presented in ***Television in the Lives of our Children*** ten years before.

The Surgeon General's conclusions were presented in a summary report with the title ***Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence*** (SGR 1971). A further ‘technical’ report presented the results of 23 research projects carried out in the framework of the Surgeon General Committee's work. The studies that were done were based on a series of different sociological and behavioural science methods, such as

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<sup>9</sup> The Surgeon General is the United States' highest federal official in the area of medicine and health.

quantitative contents analyses, laboratory experiments, field studies, observation studies and questionnaire-based surveys. But in the public debate it was almost exclusively the conclusions of the summary report, with more of a popular science tone, which was discussed. The report came in for a fair amount of criticism, in some cases even from the researchers who took part in the projects presented in it. Many expected if not a definitive answer at least a clearer answer to the question whether TV violence was ‘harmful’ or ‘harmless’ to children and young people. In view of the quite considerable criticism, the question was looked into at a ‘senate hearing’, at which the person who chaired the Surgeon General’s Committee drew clearer conclusions from the report and argued that violence should be limited in certain ways on American television: “Whilst the report of the Committee is cautiously formulated and uses qualified language which is acceptable for social and behavioural scientists, it is clear to me that the cause and effect relationship between TV violence and anti-social behaviour is sufficient to justify appropriate and immediate measures. Data on social phenomena such as the relationship of TV violence to actual violence will never be so clear that all social and behavioural scientists will agree on a general statement on a cause-and-effect relationship. But there is a point at which the data that exists is sufficient to justify action being taken. We have reached that point now.” (Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Communications of the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate, quoted in Lowery & DeFleur 1988 p 323).

The debate about and criticism of the conclusions (or, as many saw it, the lack of clear conclusions) of the Surgeon General’s Committee was based throughout on the brief report, of a more popular-scientific nature, *Television and Growing Up*. However, media researchers Shearon Lowery and Melvin DeFleur maintain that three fairly clear conclusions can be drawn from the comprehensive material presented in the ‘technical report’. According to Lowery and DeFleur, the technical report shows a) that the content conveyed by TV is saturated with violence; b) that both children and adults are being exposed to more and more TV violence; and c) that the results of the research projects conducted in the framework of the Surgeon General Committee’s work, broadly support the hypothesis that TV violence increases the probability of aggressive behaviour. At the same time as they point out that the latter conclusion is supported both by laboratory experiments and extensive questionnaire surveys, they also conclude that not all social and behavioural scientists are prepared to agree with it – above all because it is primarily based on results that give evidence of short-term (and probably rapidly transient) *effects* (Lowery & DeFleur 1988 p 323 et *seq*).

The Surgeon General’s Committee also took up – for the first time in a more broadly-based manner – the question of the effect of TV advertising on children and young people. On the recommendation of the committee and with funds allocated to it, research into the effects of TV advertising in the USA was started, on a more comprehensive scale than had been the case hitherto. The first resumes of this research were published by the second half of the 1970s and the early 1980s. But at the same time it was pointed out in these resumes that research into the effects of TV advertising was still far too limited for any firm conclusions to be drawn from it (Brown 1976; Adler *et al* 1980).



The work of the Surgeon General’s Committee led not only to a breakthrough for research into the influence and effects of TV advertising but also contributed – in the form of recommendations and financial support- to an intensification of research into the effects of television in the USA. By 1979 a new committee has been appointed by the American public health authorities (The national **Institute of Mental Health**. This body was assigned to evaluate and summarise the results of the research that had been done. The committee’s report, which was published in 1982 under the title **Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties**, stated that the research done in the 1970s confirmed that there was a relationship between TV violence and aggressive behaviour among children and young people over time. (Lowey & DeFleur 1988 p 389 *et seq*). But at the same time it pointed out that that relationship is hardly direct and that it is still unclear what lies behind it (ie what is the cause of it).The report also summarised the results of the research that has been done into TV advertising during the 1970s. On a general plane it was found that the research done showed that reactions to TV advertising varied greatly between different social categories, but that **age** appears to be the most significant characteristic (variable) when it comes to explaining these variations.

During the 1970s and 1980s, media research (and to some extent research into advertising) was increasingly extended to attempts to embrace more **indirect consequences** of the effects and influence of the media (above all television). Today, most researchers agree that the effect of the media is both more **indirect** and more **complex than** was previously imagined. At the same time, new areas – the importance of television for children’s cognitive (intellectual and knowledge-related) development, for example – have been opened up in media research, areas in which questions of influence and effects play a lesser role.

*“During the 1970s and 1980s, media research was increasingly extended to attempts to embrace more indirect consequences of the effects and influence of the media.”*

During recent decades, media and communication studies with other perspectives than those that dominated in ‘effects research’ have become more common. This is especially true of studies with **hermeneutic** and **cultural-analytical** alignment, most of which start from **how** different categories of the public **interpret the** messages conveyed by the media. The concept of a **passive** public receiving different media messages has given way (in effects research as well) increasingly to the idea of an **active** public which interprets messages that are **polysemic** (ie that have multiple meanings). In those areas of media research that are usually referred to as **cultural studies** and **reception research**, ethnographic methods are often used in an attempt to capture the **multiplicity** of the reception by different categories of the public of different media messages and content in a totally different way from traditional effects studies (Morley 1992). But at the same time as these studies **expand** our understanding of how different categories of the public use the media, interpret and ascribe meanings to different media messages and contents, the result is often hard to generalise. In addition, thinking in terms of cause and effect is foreign to the type of studies that start from an interpretative (**hermeneutic**) **perspective**. **The answers** that these studies give to the question whether the media (including advertising) influence us cannot actually be understood in terms of **effects** since they

start from a perspective of **understanding**, ie they attempt above all to find a meaning or significance in people's use of the media.

The differences between different fundamental perspectives in media and communications research can be understood most simply in terms of **explanation** or **understanding**. **An explanation answers the** question why things are as they are; understanding is about something else. The question that forms the basis for a perspective oriented towards understanding is not **why** but **what something means** or what its **significance** is.

The latter perspective is still represented only to a very small degree in the field that can be delimited as research into advertising. This can partly be explained by the fact that a large part of the research that has been done in the field is aimed at providing answers to limited questions – often extremely limited ones – about the effect of advertising on children. In addition, a primary purpose of a majority of the research projects that have been done has been to determine **whether** it is possible to demonstrate (either positively or negatively) the effects of advertising on children or young teenagers – a question that is hard to answer from a perspective oriented towards cultural analysis or understanding.

## TV advertising and children

As I have already stated, it is an almost impossible task to give a total picture of research into the effects and influence of advertising. Every overview or summary must therefore be subject to various limitations. In the overview presented here I have chosen to limit the survey to the effects of TV advertising on children, and to a number of limited questions. But in some cases I shall also refer to research results that apply to other forms of advertising than that on television and also to other age categories than children (mainly young teenagers).

There are several reasons for imposing these limits. The main ones are that the question of TV advertising aimed at children is politically controversial, and that, in the light of research done so far, TV advertising appears to be the form of advertising that has the greatest **influence** on children and young people. This is confirmed by research results from various countries: for instance, in a German study done in the early 1980s, 79 percent of all children in the age range 7 to 12 years answered the question **where** there was advertising with 'on TV' (De Ben & Vandenbrouaene, p 5). Fewer answers such as 'on the radio' (46%), 'in shops' (31%), 'on hoardings' (30%), 'in magazines' (28%) and 'in newspapers' (20%) were given. In another study done in several West European countries, children in the **7-9** age range were asked to recall and describe **where they** had seen advertising for a particular brand of toy. Almost every child (96%) recalled TV advertising for the toys, whilst only a few (3-5%) could recall advertising in the form of advertisements in newspapers, catalogues or on hoardings (*ibid.* 1992 p 5). Research results of this type indicate fairly unanimously that children primarily associate advertising with TV advertising and that this is far better placed to attract the attention of children than other forms of advertising. There is of course no clear definition in advertising research of where the boundaries run between children, young

people and adults. The ages of the children studied using various approaches in advertising research also vary considerably. However, in most research projects a boundary for childhood is drawn at 12 years. Correspondingly, people between the ages of 13 and 17 are referred to as young people in most contexts. But the limits between what may be regarded as young people and adults are – as one might expect – much more fluid. In the research described here, the emphasis is on children between 5 and 12 years old. From now on, when I refer to **children**, I am referring to people who are under or not more than 12 years old, whereas the term younger **children** refers to those who are under or not more than 7 years old. The survey presented here is based on a review of over fifty studies and the compilations of research results about the effects of TV advertising already published.

The survey has been restricted to answering the following questions:

- 1) The ability of TV advertising to attract the **attention** of children
- 2) The ability of children to **distinguish between** advertising and program content while watching television
- 3) The ability of children to understand the purpose or intention of TV advertising
- 4) Children's **interpretations** of the message and content of TV advertising
- 5) The **effect** of advertising on children's **demand for** and **purchase of different goods and products**.
- 6) **The effect** of advertising on children's **values, attitudes** and **knowledge**.

Only items 5 and 6 deal with the influence and effects of advertising in a stricter sense, whilst the first four items could be described as **prerequisite** for TV advertising having any effects at all. However, the boundary between what are seen as **prerequisites** and **effect** is far from distinct. The fact that TV advertising is capable of holding children's can, for example, be seen as a precondition for it having any effects at all, **and** as an effect of it.

# THE EFFECT OF TV ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN

**T**he fundamental purpose of advertising is to influence us to purchase various goods and products. In this sense advertising is a phenomenon that *aims* to *persuade* or influence people. In today's society, only political propaganda (which is often also conveyed in the form of advertising) has an equally clear purpose to persuade. In view of this, it is hardly surprising that questions of influence and effects occupies a central position in research into advertising.

Today's advertising and marketing are described by cultural analyst Andrew Wernick (1991 p vii) as "a rhetorical<sup>1</sup> form that permeates our entire culture". According to Wernick, advertising nowadays comprehensively influences our society and our fundamental cultural patterns. But questions associated with the way advertising influences society and our basic cultural frames of reference go beyond the bounds of what can be studied using the perspectives of advertising research. Many critics of both advertising and the view of its effects that has dominated in advertising research also maintain that the most important effect of advertising lies in promoting the modern *ideology of consumption* (Ewen 1976; Lee 1993 p 90). *The central* message of advertising – which is always present whatever goods it is promoting – is to make us *buy*, ie consume.

Several researchers with a cultural analysis orientation have accordingly emphasised the ability of advertising to destabilise and convert traditional cultural ideas by linking them with different goods (McCracken 1990 p 77 *et seq*; Goldman 1992 p 5 *et seq*). This also amounts to influence on a societal level and universal cultural patterns, an influence that is difficult to document with empirical studies.

Most people are probably aware that advertising *attempts to influence* them in various ways. On the other hand they are surely not fully aware of why they choose certain goods in preference to others and the role advertising plays in these choices. Already in one of the first major research projects about the influence of advertising, carried out in the USA in the mid-1940s, media researchers Elihu Katz and Paul F Lazarsfeld found that personal influence (in the form of conversations and discussions, for example) played a more important role than media advertising when it came to explaining individuals' choice of new consumer goods and decisions about trying

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<sup>1</sup> Rhetoric can be as the art of public speaking or persuasion.

them (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). The results appeared to confirm the ‘two-step’ hypothesis (***two-step flow of communication***) which was originally formulated on the basis of the results of a comprehensive study of political choice behaviour, according to which media messages are spread in two steps: first to local opinion leaders who oriented themselves towards the media (including advertising) to a greater extent than others and who then in turn spread the information via personal contacts.. In other words, personal influence appeared to have a greater effect than direct contact with advertising in the media in explaining why the people who took part in the study chose certain goods in preference to others. However, in the light of the strict quality criteria applied to today’s social science studies, Katz and Lazarsfeld’s investigation suffers from a number of theoretical and methodological weaknesses<sup>2</sup>. At the same time as the study – together with several others – contributed to researchers being increasingly interested in the ***indirect effects*** of the media, there were shortcomings in, for example, the selection on which it was based (only women were included) and in the statistical analyses that were done.

However, the studies that were intended to reveal different ‘communication flows’ were not followed up to any significant extent by advertising research. So the research done over the past three decades has scarcely given us any more detailed answers than those of the 1950s and 1960s to the question whether we are influenced to purchase different products and services more or less by advertising than by people around us.

In general, the available advertising research does not seem to explain how ***adults*** are influenced by advertising in its various forms. This is of course related to the fact that research has primarily been directed towards children (and above all young teenagers). However, individual studies have shown that there is a relationship between the extent to which adults<sup>3</sup> are exposed<sup>4</sup> to different advertising messages and their purchases of the goods extolled in these messages. (Lowery & DeFleur 1988 p 413). Still, the relationships vary from relatively weak to relatively strong, and in some studies no relation of this kind has been found at all. Similarly, studies among American young people<sup>5</sup> have shown that TV advertising has a ‘noticeable but hardly overwhelming influence’ on their behaviour and ideas about different categories of goods and products (*ibid* p 4 12). Here, ‘noticeable’ means relatively weak relationships between young people’s exposure to TV advertising and their ideas about and inclination to purchase different goods. However, it would not appear possible to draw any more far-reaching conclusions from these studies since they are based on relatively inexact

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\*Even so, subsequent studies carried out towards the end of the 1940s and during the 1950s and which are more theoretically and methodologically sophisticated do broadly confirm the results of the Katz and Lazarsfeld study) Merton 1968 p 441 *et seq*; Nowak *et al* 1968 p 19? *et seq*; Lowery & DeFleur 1988 p 209 *et seq*). But these studies are only marginally concerned with the spread of various advertising messages.

<sup>3</sup> Here, ‘adult’ means people over 17 years of age.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘exposure’ means that different individuals have the opportunity to become aware of an advertising message. Adequately ‘measuring’ exposure poses a number of problems, however. In most cases, methods are used that are aimed at determining whether a person has *noticed* or remembers an advertisement or a TV commercial.

<sup>5</sup> Here, in most cases, ‘young people’ means people in the 13-17 year age range.

definitions and measures of the extent to which young people have been exposed to TV advertising<sup>6</sup>, and since they do not provide decisive evidence that it is the advertising and not other factors that lie behind the young people's interest in the various categories of goods and products.

**“One significant result of this research is that children, especially young children, literally believe what advertisements say about products.”**

There has been far more research into how children are influenced by TV advertising than into its effects on young people and adults. One significant result of this research is that children, especially young children, literally **believe** what advertisements say about products. For example, in a laboratory experiment children in the 4-7 year age range were shown a commercial for Cocoa Pebbles breakfast cereal in which the cartoon figures Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble declared that the cereal ‘tastes chocolatey enough to make you smile’. When the children subsequently explained why they wanted to eat Cocoa Pebbles cereal, two-thirds of them said it was because of the taste of chocolate, three-fifths said it was because it would make them smile, and more than half because Fred and Barney liked them. (Lowery & DeFleur 1988 p 411). Several studies correspondingly confirm that young children in particular **are not critical** or **do not question the** messages conveyed by advertising. I shall return to these studies later, when I deal more systematically with part of the research that has been done into the effect of TV on children.

### **The ability of advertising to attract children's attention**

The first question to arise where the effect of TV advertising on children and young teenagers is concerned is **how much** advertising is conveyed to them via the television. Surprisingly there are **no more precise** details of the extent to which different age groups are exposed to TV advertising. The estimates that have been made are based on the time for which different age groups watch TV, and from this the number of commercials they have been exposed to is estimated.

The estimates made have given different results. American estimates of the number of commercials children are exposed to via television usually vary between **20 000** and 25 000 per year (Adler 1980; Geis 1982; Lowery & DeFleur 1988 p 411; Riecken & Yavas 1990). However, in isolated cases the estimated figure has been as high as 40 000 per year (Condry 1989). These estimates were made during the 1980s and against the background of investigations that provide evidence to show that the number of commercials per hour on American television increased significantly towards the end of the decade. They provide a strong indication that American children are today exposed to more than 25 000 commercials per year via television (*cf* Kinkel & Roberts 1991). But it cannot be concluded from this that the **time** for which American children are exposed to advertising has increased over the past decades. According to available data, the **number** of commercials on American television has increased over the past decades, but the **length** of the commercials has decreased (Barcus 1980; Goldstein 1992 p 4 *et seq.*)

<sup>6</sup> The majority of the studies are based on the time the young people spend watching TV and not on the extent to which they actually notice or watch different commercials.

It is important to emphasise the roughness of the estimates on which the figures for exposure of American children to television are based. It is also difficult to assess how reliable the estimates are, since the calculations and limitations they are based on have not been reported in detail. For instance, it is not clear from the reports that have been presented whether the calculations relate to **all** commercials on American television or only to those **directed at children**.

So the estimates that have been made of American children's exposure to TV advertising do not give a picture of the extent to which they actually **watch it** or **notice it**. It is also important to note that the estimates were made in the USA. In general, American children watch much more television than Swedish children. Whilst American children watch TV for just over four hours a day on average, the corresponding figure for Swedish children is about two hours (von Felitzen *et al* 1989; De Bens and Vandenbruaene 1992 p 15; Schyller 1992).

Already at an early stage, much of the research into advertising was aimed at establishing what features of advertising control and attract our **attention**. In this research it has proved difficult in many ways to 'measure' the phenomenon to which the term **attention** applies. Somewhat simplified, the problem is due to the fact that we can pay different amounts or degrees of attention to something. Researchers attempting to isolate the factors that direct our attention towards different advertising messages mainly used the S-O-R model, where **S** stands for stimulus, **O** for organism and **R** for response. In this context, the concept of 'organism' stands for different properties of the individual receiving the message. From this basis, research has mainly been aimed at determining how **features** of different advertising messages (the basic stimulus), **features** of the individuals (recipients) exposed to it, and the **environment** (other stimuli) around them, control attention to TV advertising.

Summing up the research carried out on the above basis, it shows in a general manner that **features** of the advertising, the recipients and their environment influence in different ways the **extent** to which TV advertising is able to **attract the attention of children**. As far as features of different TV commercials are concerned, several studies

have shown that both their **form** and their **content** control the extent to which children notice them (see, for example, Wartella 1980; Calvert & Scott 1989; Condry 1989 p 213 *et seq*; Scott 1990).

*“. . .younger children perceive the repetition as enjoyable and meaningful in its own right – more or less in the same way as they like to hear the same story or see the same film time after time.”*

Several researchers point out that the content of TV commercials must not be too complex, but at the same time something 'new' must be introduced to maximise the likelihood of attracting children's attention (Rice *et al* 1983 p 38; Rolandalli 1989 p 73 *et seq*; De Bens and Vandenbruaene 1992 p 21 *et seq*).

Most of the research has involved observing children's reactions to different TV commercials. However, many researchers argue that the ability of TV advertising to attract children's attention does not change

– or take a serious form – until a commercial has been **repeated** several times. Some of these researchers also maintain that younger children (up to five years old) perceive the **repetition** as enjoyable and meaningful in its own right – more or less in the same

way as they like to hear the same story or see the same film time after time (Winick & Winick 1979 p 157 *et seq*; De Bens and Vandenbrouaene 1992 p 22 *et seq*). But it is far from clear what effect such repeated transmissions have on young children. Whilst some research results indicate that the commercials lose their ‘novelty value’ and younger children (like older children) lose interest in them, others indicate that the repetition increases children’s expectations and consequently their attention to the commercials (Winick & Winick 1979 p 84 *et seq*; De Bens and Vandenbrouaene 1992 p 221).

However, a number of studies have shown that the ability of TV advertising to attract children’s attention varies greatly depending on their age. Disregarding sophisticated details, the results of these studies largely agree. In general, the ability of TV advertising to attract children’s attention decreases with *increasing age* (Greer *et al* 1982; Liebert & Sprafkin 1988 p 165 *et seq*; Young 1990 p 56 *et seq*). However, if the results of a number of different studies are taken together, there is no clear indication that any other characteristics of children, apart from their age, influence the ability of TV advertising to attract their attention (Anderson & Field 1983; De Bens and Vandenbrouaene 1992 p 25 *et seq*).

Several studies have pointed out that the environment of children itself is an important factor for the extent to which they notice TV advertising. Some studies have indicated that children’s attention is affected depending on whether they are watching TV alone, with their parents or with other children of the same age. Similarly, other studies have indicated that their attention depends on whether they are playing, eating or occupied with something else while watching TV. Generally it is assumed that these factors contribute to reducing children’s attention to TV advertising, but as far as I have been able to determine, there are no studies that confirm this (see, for example, Dorr 1986; De Bens and Vandenbrouaene 1992 p 27).

One weakness of most studies of the extent to which TV advertising is able to attract children’s attention is that they are based on observations in artificial (laboratory) environments. Even if the environments in which the observations were made to appear ‘realistic’ they differ in some way from those in which the children do most of their TV viewing. It is therefore scarcely possible to generalise the results of these observations for the natural viewing environments of the children. And even if this is disregarded, in most cases it is only possible to draw very limited conclusions from the studies that have been done of children’s attention to TV advertising. The fundamental reason for this is that they are often based on a small number of very simple stimuli which are manipulated in various ways so that their effects, ie changes in the children’s attention, can be registered. Despite this, the studies that have been done indicate that the ability of TV advertising to attract the attention of children varies quite markedly with their *age*.

The fact that TV advertising (or individual TV commercials for children) is able to attract children’s attention can be regarded as a form of influence, and *a precondition* for TV advertising influencing them at all. If commercials fail to attract their attention, it is not likely that they will influence them in other respects. On the other hand, a TV



commercials that succeeds in attracting children's attention does not necessarily influence them in other ways. Attention can, as media researchers Els de Bens and Peter Vandenbrouaene found, be seen as a necessary but **not sufficient condition** for TV advertising having an influence on children, young people and adults. (De Bens and Vandenbrouaene 1992 p 28). In other words, there is no direct link between the attention children give to TV advertising and the effect it has on them in other respects.

As can be inferred from that conclusion, many of the results of research into the ability of TV advertising to attract children's attention can be considered trivial. The most general conclusion that can be drawn is that there are several factors which affect the amount of attention children give to TV advertising, but that it is impossible to isolate more exactly the significance of every **individual** factor.

### **Children's ability to distinguish between advertising and programmes**

One of the questions that has been at the centre of advertising research since the 1970s is to what extent and at what age children can tell the difference between commercials and programmes when they watch television. The reason why this particular question is central to advertising research is that it is directly related to the politically controversial question whether TV advertising directed at children ought to be banned or regulated, and that (like the question whether children understand the purpose or intention of advertising) is laden with ethical (moral) complications. Against this background, both government authorities in various countries and private consumers have financed relatively large research projects to determine **whether** and at what **age** children can distinguish the program content of television broadcasts from the commercials.

As several researchers have pointed out, there is no direct link between children's ability to tell the difference between commercials and programmes on television and their ability to understand the purpose of TV advertising. The fact that

***“The fact that children can distinguish between commercials and programmes does not mean that they understand the purpose of TV advertising.”***

children can distinguish between commercials and programmes does not mean that they **understand** the purpose of TV advertising. But the converse is true: if children do understand the purpose of TV advertising they can also tell the difference between commercials and programmes.

Many critics of advertising and many researchers have maintained that the boundaries between advertising and programmes on television and the content conveyed by other media (such as music videos) have become more and more diffuse and unclear in recent decades (see Bjurström 1991; Goldman 1992; Bjurstrom & Liljestam 1993; Lee 1993). The most important difference between the advertising and the program content conveyed by television is that advertising **always** tries to influence us to buy goods or products. In other words, the difference lives above all in the different **purposes** of programmes and advertising. Needless to say, this difference is not always reflected – as many have pointed out – in the **form** and **content** of the advertising or the

programmes. If children do not understand the purpose of TV advertising, everything indicates that they depend on its form or content to distinguish it from the programme content of television.

The research that has been done gives quite clear evidence that children's ability to distinguish between the advertising conveyed on television from the programmed content **does not** coincide with their being able to understand the purpose of TV advertising (Young 1990 p 60 *et seq*; De Bens and Vandenbrouaene 1992 p 41). However, the studies carried out do not show precisely which features of TV advertising enable children to distinguish between it and programmes, but there is much evidence that the appearance of cartoon characters in TV advertising generally **makes it harder** for children to make this distinction, whilst clear visual and auditive signals when commercial break begins and ends **make it easier** for them to tell the difference (Palmer & McDowell 1979; Dorr 1986 p 56; Kunkel 1988; De Bens and Vandenbrouaene 1992 p 39 *et seq*).

The research into the age at which children can tell the difference between television advertising and programme content has not been entirely conclusive. According to some studies, **some** children can distinguish between advertising and programmes as early as 3 to 4 years old, but other studies indicate that this ability does not developed to age 6 to 8. However, almost all studies indicate that this ability is fully developed in **all** children at the age of 10.

One explanation for the lack of agreement of the results may be that different **methods** were used in different studies. All studies in which the researchers **observed** whether the attention of children watching television changed at the transition from programmes to commercials, report that the ability to distinguish between the two develops at a relatively early age, whilst studies based on interviews report that this ability does not develop until children are older. In other words, the consistent difference between the results of these kinds of study probably shows that the choice of investigation method has influenced the result obtained.

Both methods – observations and interviews – used in the studies of children's ability to distinguish between advertising and programs have their advantages and drawbacks. There is much evidence to show that children – especially younger ones – 'know' things that they cannot express in words. The advantage of the observation method is that it makes it possible to study the reactions of very small children to TV advertising without the need for them to 'verbalise' what they 'know' or 'feel'. The drawback is of course that it is often doubtful whether what the researcher observes is indeed reactions to the children's ability to distinguish between television programme content and commercials. In other words it is far from self-evident that changes in children's attention when the television programme content is replaced by commercials can be interpreted as showing that they have a cognitive ability (intellectually and in terms of awareness) to distinguish between programmes and commercials. The main advantage of the interview method is that it gives a more detailed understanding of (and more reliable knowledge of) children's ability to distinguish between children's ability to distinguish between programmes and commercials when watching television.

Although there are differences between the results of different studies, it would nevertheless seem that we can draw more general conclusions from them about children's ability to distinguish between programmes and commercials. Whilst *some* children possess a cognitive ability to distinguish between advertising and programs as early as age 3 or 4, in *most* children this ability does not develop until the age of 6 to 8, and it is only by age 10 that practically *all* children have developed this ability.

## Children's ability to understand the purpose of advertising

Most researchers agree that children's ability to understand the *purpose* or *intention* of TV advertising is one of the most important prerequisites for them to be able to develop a critical or questioning attitude to it. For example, evidence from many studies indicates that it is not until children have understood the purpose of TV advertising that they question whether the image advertising gives of a product is 'true' or 'false', ie form a view about how true the advertising is. (Dorr 1986 p 38 *et seq*; Young 1990 p 71).

A number of complex questions arise when determining the age at which children develop an understanding of the purpose of TV advertising. The most fundamental question is what it means to 'understand the purpose of TV advertising'.

***“Children do not eitherfully understand the purpose of TV advertising or not understand it all; reality is not like that.”*** Children do not either fully understand the purpose of TV advertising or not understand it all; reality is not like that. Understanding is -in this as in other cases - something that develops gradually. In the light of this, it is hardly surprising that the criteria for what is meant by 'understanding the purpose of TV advertising' differs significantly from one study to another. However, according to media researchers Els De Bens and Peter Vandenbrouaene, most studies undertaken since the mid-1980s have been based on the requirement that a child should understand 1) that the interests of the people who made the commercial are different from those of the intended audience; 2) that advertising tries to persuade the people it addresses; 3) that messages of persuasion are not 'objective'; and 4) that messages of persuasion differ from messages that can be categorised under headings such as information, education or entertainment, and must be evaluated differently (De Bens and Vandenbrouaene 1992 p 44).

Even so, there are still major variations in the meaning attached to the expression 'understanding TV advertising' from one study to another. Some studies require only that children should understand that the purpose of commercials is 'to sell', whereas in others they must say that the people who produce the commercials pay the TV companies to transmit them (Wartella 1980; Macklin 1987). In view of this, it is highly probable that the different criteria used to isolate children's ability to 'understand the purpose of TV advertising' have influenced their results. In addition, the use of different methods of investigation, such as different tests or interviews, has given different results for the *age* at which children can understand the purpose of TV advertising. There is ample indication that the *definitions* and the *methods* used in the studies have influence the results.

Some studies – above all those in which non-verbal test methods were used – have reported that *some* children understand the purpose of the advertising that appears on television as early as 5 years of age<sup>7</sup> (Macklin 1987 p 231 *et seq*; Liebert & Sprafkin 1988 p 169; Young 1990 p 76 *et seq*). However, these results are not confirmed by the majority of the other studies. There is much evidence that it is only by the age of 8 to 10 that *most* children have developed a *fundamental* understanding of the purpose of advertising (Blosser & Robbins 1985; Brucks *et al* 1988; De Bens and Vandenbruaene 1992 p 45 *et seq*). *Looking* at those studies in which a distinction is made between different degrees of *understanding* of the purpose of advertising, it would appear that a more complete understanding develops only after the age of 12 (Blosser & Roberts 1985; Liebert & Spafkin 1988 p 169; Kunkel & Roberts 1991; De Bens and Vandenbruaene 1992 p 46 *et seq*). If we accept that children should be able to describe verbally the financial interest of the advertisers behind the commercials, the study done by American researchers Scott Ward, Daniel and Ellen Wartella in the mid-1970s would appear to give a reasonably correct idea of the age at which American children develop a fuller understanding of the purpose of TV advertising. This study showed that only 4 percent of children in the 5-6 year age bracket had developed a ‘full understanding’ of the purpose of TV advertising, as against 15 percent of children in the 8-9 year age bracket and 38 percent in the 11-12 year age bracket (Ward *et al* 1977). The results of studies that have attempted to distinguish between different degrees of understanding or levels of awareness, all indicate that it is *only* after the age of 12 that children develop a *fuller understanding* of the purpose of advertising.

The conclusions that can be drawn from the research done into children’s ability to understand the underlying purpose of advertising is partly dependent on the criteria that were used to isolate what it means to ‘understand’ this purpose, and partly on the methods – ranging from non-verbal tests to interviews – used in different studies. All studies based on the view that ‘understanding the purpose of advertising’ means the same as understanding its ‘purpose to sell’ and where non-verbal tests (such as using pictures illustrating different ideas of why advertising is shown on television) are used, have reported that the ability of children to understand the purpose of advertising develops at a relatively *early* age. Conversely, studies based on a ‘fuller understanding’ of the purpose of advertising and in which interviews were used, indicate that it is only after the age of 10- 12 that *most* children develop an understanding of the purpose of advertising. Taken together, the studies that have been carried out show relatively clearly that *most* children *cannot explain the* underlying purpose of advertising verbally before the 7 to 8 years of age.

*“An understanding of the purpose or intention of TV advertising would seem to be one of the most important prerequisites for children to be able to question and criticise it.”*

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<sup>7</sup> Some studies have reported that most children understand the purpose of advertising as early as the age of 2 to 3, but these studies are based on very simply non-verbal test methods. After the children have been shown a commercial for breakfast cereal, they are asked, for example, to choose between a picture in which a mother is buying cereal for her child and one in which the child is watching television. It is of course very doubtful whether the child’s choice of picture in these situations can be interpreted to mean that they understand or do not understand the purpose of TV advertising (Donohue & Meyer 1984).

Some studies have also pointed out that the level of education of the parents and the amount of time for which the children watch television **influences** the age at which they can understand the purpose of advertising (Young 1990p 76; De Bens and Vandendruaene 1992 p 47 *et seq*). However, the extent to which these factors influence children's ability to understand the purpose of advertising is far from clear. On the other hand, several studies show that, if children do **not understand the** underlying purpose of advertising, it is highly likely that they will **not question the** message it conveys. In other words, understanding the persuasive purpose of advertising is an important **prerequisite** for children to be able to question and critically evaluate different advertising messages (Dorr 1986 p 33; Young 1990 p 99 *et seq*).

### Children's interpretation of TV advertising

Most of the research that has been done into children's (and in some cases young people's) **interpretations** of the messages of TV advertising is limited to very **basic aspects** of this process. Only in a small number of studies have researchers tried to find out how children interpret in a more general manner the messages conveyed by TV advertising. The aspects primarily investigated in various research projects are how children perceive the **credibility** of advertising and to what extent they **understand the** messages it communicates. In other words, the main aspects investigated in various research projects have to do with what **influences** children's and young people's interpretations of TV advertising rather than with the meaning or significance they give to the messages it communicates.

Investigations of how children perceive the credibility of TV advertising deal both with the images that the advertising presents of goods or products, and with the other messages that the advertising contains. Most studies take as their starting point the advertising and products that are directed at children, such as toys, sweets and various kinds of food (especially breakfast cereals). On the other hand, as far as I have been able to ascertain, there have been hardly any studies of how children perceive advertising in general, ie also advertising directed mainly or solely at adults. However, a number of studies confirm that children's and young people's attitude to advertising becomes increasingly sceptical and questioning as they grow older. According to media researchers Glen Riecken and Ugur Yavas, most children over ten years old are sceptical about the message conveyed by advertising (Riecken & Yavas 1990 p 145). They draw this conclusion from a number of American studies which show that a majority of children from 10 years old upwards **do not** believe that advertising messages are 'true' or 'objective' (Ward *et al* 1997; Young 1990 p 94 *et seq*; Riecken & Yavas 1990).

Since different studies are concerned with different aspects of children's and young people's perception and understanding of advertising messages, it is very difficult to **summarise** their results in a general manner. The simplest way to summarise the results is ask which factors in the advertising, in the children and in their environment makes it **easier** or **harder** for them to evaluate the **credibility** of TV advertising and to **understand** it. Studies that have attempted to estimate how children perceive the

credibility of advertising have indicated above all that in many instances younger children **cannot see through** and assess the **credibility** of the visual image presented of different goods and products with the aid of ‘special effects’. According to these studies, the use of special effects generally makes it harder for children to get a credible idea of **the product** being marketed and the way it **can be used**. By way of example, the results of a study from the first half of the 1980s showed that a commercial for toy cars gave younger children an unrealistic idea of the actual product and how it could be used, when the product was presented in conjunction with pictures from an actual car race. (Ross *et al* 1984). In other words, the children tended to attribute to the toys the same characteristics as the real race cars. Similarly, a number of other experiments have shown that television commercials often cause young children to attribute to various products (especially toys) characteristics they do not possess (and which in some cases are even highly ‘unrealistic’). However, a number of researchers have criticised these studies on the grounds that they are based on products that the children have no knowledge or previous experience of. The children have had no opportunity to judge the credibility of the TV commercials on the basis of their own experience of the products. Some researchers have argued that it is above all children’s own experience of different products that gradually makes them question the credibility of TV advertising (see, for instance, Donohue & Meyer 1984). But this does not stand up as an argument against the idea that the use of different persuasion tricks in TV commercials **make it more difficult** (especially for young children) to assess their credibility. On the other hand it may contribute to explaining why different experimental studies of children’s evaluation of the credibility of TV advertising have given different results. The researchers conducting these studies have not always checked whether the children have had an opportunity, before the experiment, to get to know about or experience the products presented in the commercials to which they are exposed in the studies (*cf* Young 1990 p 100 *et seq*).

There is considerable evidence that many of the persuasion techniques used in TV commercials influence the way children (young children in particular) assess their credibility. In other words, these persuasion techniques **make it harder** for children to assess the credibility of commercials. On the other hand, it is easier for them to do so if they have previous knowledge and experience of the products that the TV commercials are trying to persuade them to buy.

In general terms, research into children’s and young teenagers’ **understanding** of different advertising messages has given sounder results than research in to how they perceive the **credibility** of TV advertising. Several studies have shown that many children do not understand the messages in the TV advertising that is directed at them. Understanding of TV advertising varies greatly between age categories and is obviously linked to the children’s cognitive development (intellectually and in terms of knowledge) (Ross *et al* 1984; Werner 1989; Dorr 1986 p 48 *et seq*). But since different advertising messages may have different content and complexity and be shaped in different ways, it is of course impossible draw any more general conclusions about **the age** at which children understand the TV advertising directed at them. In some cases, ‘understanding’ has to do with the entire message conveyed by a

commercial; in others it may relate only to isolated (verbal or textual) messages within it.

Studies of young people (mainly in the 13-17 year age range) show that they are generally far more questioning and sceptical about TV advertising than children. At the same time, a number of studies indicate that the young people who are exposed to a lot of TV advertising value the products it promotes more highly than other young people. For example, some studies have shown that young people exposed to a lot of TV advertising on American television agreed to a greater extent than others with the statements made about certain health and hygiene articles and kinds of alcoholic drink in advertising (Atkin *et al* 1984). It is a general weakness of these studies that they draw conclusions, on the basis of young people's total TV viewing, about the extent to which they are exposed to TV advertising, and that they do not 'measure' the credibility that the young people give to the advertising itself but to individual products and goods.

### The influence and effects of advertising

Turning to the influence and effects that advertising *may have* on children's and young people's values and attitudes, we may make a distinction between *intentional* and *unintentional* influences. The purpose of a TV commercial for a particular product is of course for various groups and individuals to *buy* that product. This may be defined as *the primary objective* of the commercial. But it would be wrong to see this as the only intentional effect that the advertisers have in mind. To achieve this primary objective they often try to make us feel and think in a certain way. For example, a TV commercial makes us associate the promoted product with concepts that we are assumed to value highly or with feelings that we find pleasurable. Therefore it can be said that the *intentional* effects of advertising include both making us *buy* certain products and making us value these products in a positive way. In other words, the *intentional influence* that advertising is trying to achieve is mainly *related to the promoted product*. At the same time advertising has an unintentional influence. For example, the message "Buy and you'll be happy!" probably does not occur in a single advertisement, but even so it is the concerted message of all advertising. In this way advertising can be said to contribute unintentionally to maintaining and confirming a particular *consumer ideology*. In the same way it can influence our values, attitudes and opinions by continually producing images of what is worth striving for or achieving in life. This effect can be regarded as *unintentional* or as a *side-effect* of the primary and *intentional* efforts to influence us by advertising.

In discussing research into the *effects* of TV commercials on children's and young people's values, attitudes and knowledge it is important to stress the difficulty of *isolating* the influence of advertising and of relating this to *other forms* of influence. This problem presents itself even with effects that would appear to be relatively easy to establish.

One of the fundamental questions when discussing the influence of advertising is whether it "entices us to buy", in other words whether it influences us to buy certain goods or products. One might imagine that research could easily answer this question.

And it is this question that concerns the majority of studies conducted by various market research organisations evaluating different promotional campaigns. The evaluations carried out by these institutes are based mainly on a comparison of the sales of a certain product **before** and **after** a commercial has been shown. In other words, the effect is considered in terms of the increase or decrease of sales as seen in the sales figures. The interpretation of the results seems to be very simple: If sales have increased, the conclusion is that the commercial has had the desired effect, and if sales stay on the same level or have decreased, the conclusion is that the commercial had no effect. If the study makes no claims to be “scientific”, this type of conclusion would be sufficient. But to be able to establish a **relationship** between the TV commercial and the sales figures it is necessary to use more stringent methods. First, **otherfactors** that may have influenced or that may explain the increase or decrease in sales must be investigated. Further research may for example show that it is common for sales of this type of product to increase at the time of year when the commercial was being run. It may also transpire that sales had been increasing for some time before the commercial was run, and that the increase that is shown by the sales figures is only a continuation of a longer-term trend. If these factors are investigated it may well be found that sales of the product generally increase during the season when the commercial was run and had already started to increase long before. It may even be discovered that sales increased even more during the same season the year before, without the commercial. If so, has it therefore been proved that the commercial had no effect? No. There is still the possibility that the commercial contributed to the sales increase of the later season. Without the commercial, the trend might have swung in the other direction. Since it is impossible to know how the sales figures would have developed if the commercial had not been run, it cannot be ruled out that there are other factors underlying the increase in sales.

This example shows in a somewhat simplified way that it is difficult to **isolate** and to **weigh up the** different factors when we want to explain something in terms of influences and effects. The influence and effect of advertising cannot be established in a simple way – not even regarding such a seemingly uncomplicated question as whether a commercial has contributed to the increase of sales of a certain product. The effects of influence cannot be decided in a direct and easy way, and asking people whether they are influenced by advertising **when** they buy a certain product is not much help. Although the answer people give to the question whether they are influenced when buying certain goods gives us an idea of what they “believe”, it gives us no insight into the actual influence that advertising has on them.

To decide whether advertising influences children more than adults to buy certain goods is even more complicated. The question is further complicated by the fact that children are dependent on their parents when purchasing most goods and products, and that it is much more difficult for children (especially the very young ones) than young people and adults to express verbally their reasons for asking for or buying certain goods.



## The influence of TV commercials on children's purchasing behaviour and the demand for goods and products

Research on how advertising influences children to buy or ask for certain goods and products has been carried out using various methods. The majority of the studies have used experiments and surveys (questionnaires and interviews). Even in these cases the differences in methodology may largely explain why different studies gave different results. The studies based on experimental methods show consistently that the influence of advertising is fairly large in deciding what goods or products children want, while those based on questionnaires and interviews on the other hand show that this influence is fairly small.

Most experimental studies show that TV commercials have an immediate and **short-term** effect on children's desire to acquire certain goods and products. But it is not possible to extrapolate from these results how children react in natural social situations. Because the experimental situation differs markedly in many important respects from "real" situations one may question whether what is studied in these experiments is really the extent to which advertising makes children buy or ask for certain products. For example, in most experiments children are allowed to choose different prizes (goods) immediately after having been exposed to different films promoting these products. Even if attempts are made in certain experiments to "simulate" more realistic situations and environments they still differ quite considerably from "real" and more complex situations and environments. The most important limitations that

*"Most experimental studies show that TV commercials have an immediate and short-term effect on children's desire to acquire certain goods and products."*

characterise these experiments are that they are not conducted in realistic environments, that they only take account of short-term effects, and that they do not try to identify any **mediating links** between the child who is exposed to various commercials and that child's choice of products. Their strength lies in the fact that they show that children are subjected to considerable short-term influence to buy certain goods in situations where there are no mediating links between themselves and the commercials. Another strong point is of course that it can be claimed with relative certainty that it is the commercials and no other factors that are **the reason** for the children choosing certain products rather than other products (cf Young 1990 p 147 et seq, Goldberg 1990).

In studies based on surveys it is often stressed that a number of other factors besides the commercial may explain why children and young teenagers ask for or buy certain goods and products. Some studies also show evidence that there are a number of factors which **contribute** to influencing children and young teenagers to ask for or buy certain products and also some factors that **counteract** such influence. It appears for example that parents and peers often contribute to strengthening the influence of advertising, or in other cases to weakening its influence. (Young 1990 p 147 et seq, De Bens & Vandenbruaene 1992 p 97). **The weakness** of studies based on surveys is that they give no data that can be used to evaluate to what extent advertising can be seen as **a reason** for children and young teenagers asking for or buying certain products. This is especially obvious as regards the (statistical) correlation that these surveys have shown

to exist between for example watching lots of TV commercials and asking for the products that are being promoted. In other words, the question whether TV commercials influence the demand or whether there is some other need concealed behind this demand which also makes the child watch more television (and as a result more TV commercials).<sup>8</sup>

The most general conclusion to be drawn from the studies is that TV commercials are *an important but hardly the most important* factor in determining what makes children and young teenagers buy or ask for different goods and products. For example, a number of survey-based studies confirm that TV commercials (and other forms of advertising) play an important part for many children and young teenagers when they buy or ask for different goods, but that factors like friends, parents and direct experience of various products often are more important (Ward et al pp 56 et seq, De Bens & Vandendriessche 1992 pp 97). The main factors that have been found to play an important part in deciding to what extent children and young teenagers buy or ask for different goods and products is how often they see the product on television, their age, their socio-economic and cultural background (including the parents' level of education) and peer group influence.

The question to what extent TV commercials influence children's and young teenagers' values, attitudes and knowledge is much more complicated than the question how TV

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<sup>8</sup> In certain studies attempts have been made to avoid this by using a "quasi-experimental" set-up. In such a study the experimental set-up is combined with traditional methods using questionnaires. Surveys of this type rely on a "natural experimental situation", i.e. a situation not created by the researcher conducting the experiment. A very interesting quasi-experimental study has been conducted by Marvin Goldberg, who studied the influence of TV commercials on French-speaking and English-speaking children in Canada. Since TV commercials aimed at children were banned in the province of Quebec in 1980 there were no commercials for toys and breakfast cereals in that part of Canada at the time of the study. The only commercials aimed at children that reached Quebec were commercials broadcast in English by American TV stations. When Goldberg analysed the differences between children in the two language groups he found a (statistically) significant correlation between the extent to which they watched TV and the extent to which they consumed breakfast cereals or asked their parents to buy toys for them. In this study Goldberg had access to the causal variable that was not present in most survey-based studies, since he knew which of them had been exposed or not exposed to the TV commercials that promoted breakfast cereals and toys. But this does not preclude the existence of other factors that may explain (and constitute underlying reasons for) the correlations found in the study.

A general weakness of quasi-experimental studies is the fact they do not use totally random samples. In Goldberg's study the main difference between the extent to which the children consumed breakfast cereals or asked for toys was whether they were French-speaking or English-speaking. Since this difference coincides with the fact that they were exposed or not exposed to TV commercials aimed at children (i.e. the causal variable), there is no way to be certain that cultural differences between the two groups influenced the correlations that Goldberg found in the study. Furthermore the results of the Goldberg study also indicate that socioeconomic differences play an important role in explaining the differences between the two language groups (Goldberg 1990).

Another study with a quasi-experimental set-up was conducted in Norway and concerns the way in which the play, values and wants of younger children (4-7 years) are influenced by TV commercials. The study was conducted among children and parents in two day nurseries in two towns with a similar social structure, but where only one town had access to satellite television and TV commercials. The study shows some evidence that the parents were under stronger pressure to buy and that the children's play was more dominated by those launched in various promotional contexts at the nursery in the town with satellite TV and TV commercials than in the other nursery. The greatest weakness of this study is however the fact that it is still based on interviews and observations of a comparatively small number of children (25 in all) and their parents (Bjørnebekk 1992).

commercials influence them to buy or ask for certain goods. The reason is that this question is not limited to the intentional influence of advertising but also to the correlated **unintentional** effects or what can be regarded as its **side effects**.

## Values and attitudes

Most studies of how advertising influences children's and young teenager's values and attitudes are limited to their views on **consumption, violence, alcohol, smoking (cigarettes), eating habits, gender and race differences** (or gender/race stereotypes). In other words, with the exception of children's views on violence and gender and race differences, the studies are limited to values and attitudes related to consumption and different consumer goods.

The definition of the concept "value" is far from clear and unambiguous. When we use the word we may mean both evaluating something, and the result of this process or action, in other words the value itself. The difference may be expressed as "evaluation" and "value". Without further trying to investigate the meaning of these two concepts – which would take us too far away from the present topic – we may note that the basic meaning is seeing something as good and right, something worth striving for or something desirable. We may also differentiate between positive or negative values. Something which is given a negative value is seen as bad and wrong, something to condemn and if possible avoid.

The concept of value is difficult to define and is used in many different ways in the social and behavioural sciences. The same is true for its use in research into advertising. Another problem is to differentiate between values and attitudes. In most contexts we see values as more deeply seated and more difficult to shift than attitudes. Attitude in this sense refers to something more ephemeral and situation-dependent than values. At the same time there is of course a correlation between our values and our attitudes. Since values are more fundamental, a change in our values will generally lead to a change in our attitudes as well.

In research that has been done on how TV commercials influence the values and attitudes of children and young people there is no consensus on how to define and delimit the concepts of value and attitude. The two concepts are used with different meanings in different studies. Since the research into advertising only very exceptionally deals with more fundamental values it would seem to be justified to regard the object of these studies as attitudes rather than values.

## Consumption ideology and materialism

The studies that have been carried out with a view to answering the question whether TV advertising influences children's values and attitudes where consumption is concerned perhaps give more than anything an idea of the limitations of the effects perspective, as it is known. In these studies the initial idea is often to prove or disprove the hypothesis that TV advertising leads to a particular consumption ideology or what is known as increasing materialism. In most cases "**increasing materialism**" means that

children and young people demand more consumer goods as a consequence of watching television advertising. It is of course doubtful whether the demand for products and goods can be regarded as an indicator of materialistic values, in other words the view that the acquisition and ownership of things brings happiness or success in life. But this is not the only weakness of studies of the extent to which TV advertising influences children towards “increased materialism”. Another weakness is that the results that were first reported are based on interviews with mothers who related that TV advertising had made their children more interested in or concerned with consumer goods (Kinsey 1987; De Bens & Vandembrouaene 1992 p 83 et seq). On the basis of this the possibility that the studies reflect the mothers’ positive or negative attitudes to advertising rather than the actual values or behaviours of their children cannot be ruled out.

The studies that have been done of the extent to which TV advertising influences the consumption values of children and young teenagers have rightly been criticised heavily by various researchers. Many also point out that it is **impossible** to demonstrate the effects of TV advertising in this respect (Young 1990 p 125). The fundamental model that is used in effects research cannot encompass and isolate the effects of TV advertising on the multidimensional and complex phenomena to which the terms “consumption values” and “materialism” refer. In other words, even if it is likely that TV advertising and the combined messages of advertising in general contribute to maintaining, securing and possibly reinforcing a certain consumption ideology, and materialistic values, it is not possible to demonstrate it in concrete empirical studies.

### **Eating habits and “nutritional awareness”**

Several American studies have shown that the TV advertising that is directed at children consists largely of advertisements for food items with low nutritional values, but with high fat, sugar, salt and cholesterol values (Young 1990 p 130 et seq). Against this background, many studies have also been conducted into the extent to which TV advertising influences the attitudes of American children where various food products and eating habits are concerned. The central concept in these studies is nutritional awareness. However, this is defined and delimited in different ways in different studies. Whereas some studies emphasise the attitudes (which are in some cases called **nutritional values**) that children have developed to different food products and eating habits, other emphasise the **knowledge** that they have of the nutritional value of food products.

The results of the studies of the effects of TV advertising on children are without doubt among the most controversial and debated results in American advertising research. Often the results of the studies contradict each other. The same applies to the interpretations of the results. Whilst some researchers argue that the studies have shown a relatively clear relationship between the extent to which American children are exposed to TV advertising that tries to persuade them to eat food products with a low nutritional value, others maintain that the effect of TV advertising in this respect is far less than a series of other factors (such as the eating habits of parents). In most

cases, however, it is hard to draw any firm conclusions from the studies that have been undertaken. At the same time, the results of some studies do indicate that there are several factors (among them TV advertising) which contribute in a **complex interaction** to developing American children's attitudes to different food products and habits (cf Young 1990 p 134; de Bens & Vandebraene 1992 p 82 et seq). So there is much evidence that the influence of TV advertising can be very significant under special circumstances. For example, some studies have shown that children of parents with low socio-economic status and educational level are both exposed to more TV advertising and develop a lower degree of "nutritional awareness" than other children. So in this case, it is conceivable that TV advertising **confirms** or **reinforces** attitudes to and knowledge of "nutritional matters" that exists in the environment in which the children are living.

***“The influence of TV advertising can be very significant under special circumstances?”***

### **Alcohol and tobacco**

The reason why a number of studies have been done of the part played by TV advertising in the attitudes that children and young people develop to alcohol and smoking is of course that bans and restrictions on alcohol and tobacco advertising on television have long been discussed and have been introduced in some countries. In this area a number of comparative studies have been done, comparing young people's attitudes to smoking in different countries with different legislation where tobacco advertising is concerned. Practically every study uses as its starting point the available statistics for the proportion of young people of different various ages and in different countries who say that they smoke. The most extensive survey in this field was done in the late 1980s and was based on data for the smoking habits of 15-year-olds from fifteen countries (including Sweden) with different legislation on tobacco advertising. The survey showed that the proportion of smokers was highest (36%) in Norway where all forms of tobacco advertising are banned and lowest (11%) in Hong Kong, where there are no restrictions of any kind on tobacco advertising (Smith 1990). However, there are several reasons why it is risky to draw any conclusions from the survey, since it is based on statistics of varying quality from different countries and assumes that it is only advertising that explains the differences between the smoking habits of 15-year-olds in the different countries.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Summaries of the studies that have been carried out into how young people's attitudes to alcohol and smoking are influenced by TV advertising (including other forms of advertising) often emphasise that this influence is indirect (Goldstein 1992 s 45 et seq). A number of studies also confirm that the attitudes of parents and peers to alcohol and smoking are at least as important as advertising when it comes to explaining the attitudes that children and young people have developed to alcohol and tobacco.

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<sup>9</sup> The conclusion drawn from the study is that advertising "plays an insignificant part in relation to the **considerable** personal and social (family) influence" (Smith 1990 p 64). But there is no empirical evidence for this conclusion since the study contains no data about "personal and social influence". The conclusion that it is "personal and social influence" that explains the differences in the smoking habits of 15-year-olds is drawn only because the existence of tobacco advertising in the various countries cannot explain these differences.

However, the results that confirm this originate from a series of different survey studies that do not provide a basis for drawing any conclusions about causal relationships, and in which it is impossible to “isolate” the influence attributable to advertising from other factors (such as the socio-economic background of the young people, their sex or the peer pressure to which they are exposed).

The most general conclusion that can be drawn from these surveys is that there are a number of different factors that probably reinforce or conversely counteract the influence of advertising on the alcohol and smoking habits of children and young people in the countries where this type of advertising is permitted.

### Gender roles and ethnic differences

Many people have criticised advertising for reinforcing stereotypical attitudes (prejudices) and conceptions of gender roles, different ethnic groups and minority groups. A number of analytical content studies have also been done, surveying the image of women and men, different ethnic groups and minorities, as portrayed in advertising. Most of these analyses were done in the 1970s and showed with relative agreement that in many cases advertising (primarily in the form of press advertisements) contributes to preserving prejudices about gender roles, ethnic groups and minorities (Schneider 1987 p 165 et seq). The comprehensive analytical content study carried out with reference to the evolution of advertising in Sweden over the period 1950 to 1975, found that “advertising is unaffected by the changed status of women” in society, but that this picture is not universal (Nowak & Andrén 1981 p 75).

However, the results of some content analyses of commercials on American television during the 1970s and 1980s provides evidence that the women who appear in them are portrayed in a less “stereotyped” and more “emancipated” way than before (Goldstein 1992 p 8 et seq). But where advertising aimed at children is concerned, analytical content studies have come to the conclusion that, over the past three decades, TV advertising for toys in particular has become increasingly “stereotyped” in terms of the image it conveys of men and women (see, for instance, Macklin & Kolbe 1984; Rajecki et al 1993). An analytical study of the content of toy advertising on five American TV channels during different seasons over the period 1989- 1991 showed, for **example**, that boy actors were over-represented in advertising where **the use** of the toys was emphasised, whilst girl actors were over-represented in advertising with an **emotional** connotation (Rajecki et al 1993 p 324).

Similarly, analytical content studies have shown that ethnic minority groups are under-represented in advertising, compared to their proportion of the total population of the USA (Goldstein 1992 p 11 et seq). In this area too, changes can be detected. As the market becomes more and more segmented, and as more and more media are directing their attention to ethnic minority groups, their representation in advertising has also increased (Wilson II & Gutiérrez 1985 p 126 et seq). In some cases it has been found that “crossover advertising” – advertising directed expressly at several ethnic groups – is more common in the USA (ibid p 127).

Of course, analytical content studies give no idea of the extent to which advertising influences those who are exposed to it. But there are a few studies which look at the way different age groups are influenced by the stereotypes of gender roles, ethnic groups and minorities that advertising conveys. In most cases the

**“The most general conclusion that can be drawn is that advertising is one of the factors that may contribute to reinforcing stereotypical notions of gender roles, ethnic groups and different minority groups”**

results of these studies confirm that the stereotypes conveyed by advertising reinforce the values and attitudes of those exposed to it. But at the same time it is impossible, on the basis of the available studies, to assess the particular significance of advertising in this process, since **other media** contents also contribute to reinforcing these values and attitudes. On the basis of the research that has been done into how stereotypes in advertising affect the values and attitudes of children and young teenagers concerning gender, ethnic groups and minorities, it is in principle impossible to **isolate the** specific effect of advertising in this respect (de Bens & Vandenbruaene 1992 p 87). The most general conclusion that can be drawn is that advertising (in various forms) is one of the factors that **may contribute to reinforcing** stereotypical notions of gender roles, ethnic groups and different minority groups. Obviously this conclusion is not far from being trivial since it is probable that all media contents that convey stereotypes **may** contribute to reinforcing notions of those who receive them.

## Violence

Research into the extent to which TV advertising influences children’s attitudes to violence can be regarded as a part of the more comprehensive research that has been done into the effect of what is known as media violence (for an overview of this research, see von Feiltzen et al 1993).

Analytical studies of the content of American and British television have shown that violence is relatively uncommon in commercials aimed at children (Goldstein 1992 p 122 et seq). However, the boundaries of the concept of violence often differ from each other in these studies, so that they do not give a consistent idea of the extent to which episodes of a violent nature occur in TV advertising. The number of studies that deal specifically with children’s and young people’s attitudes to violence is very limited, however. Most have been experimental in nature and have looked at **short-term** effects of TV advertising directed at younger children, with a content coloured by violence (primarily advertising for toys and “action figures”). They are for the most part limited to the extent to which TV advertising with an element of violence causes **aggressive behaviour** in children.

Overall, the experimental studies that have been done show that violent aspects of TV advertising have a **short-term effect** on younger children. Some studies have shown that TV advertising with lots of action, a fixed tempo and rapid image changes contributed to increasing younger children’s aggression **regardless of the content** (Greer et al 1982). In other words, the results of these studies indicate that both **form** and **content** affect younger children’s aggressiveness in the **short term** (cf De Bens &

Vandenbruaene 1992 p 88 et seq; Goldstein 1992 p 13 et seq). But since the studies are limited to experimental situations they tell us nothing about the extent to which TV advertising has this effect in natural social situations. Another weakness is that the concept of “aggressive behaviour” has in most cases been so broadly defined that it is difficult to draw a line between when the children who took part in the studies are generally “excited” and when they are “aggressive”. Since violence occurs in many media, it would also appear to be impossible to isolate the more *long-term effects* of the violence that occurs in TV advertising. Thus it is scarcely possible to isolate, for instance, the violence that occurs in advertising from the violence that occurs in the programmes themselves, when studying the long-term effects of what has become known as media violence.

### **Consumer socialisation - knowledge and expertise**

Many researchers have started from the assumption that advertising contributes to providing children and young people, as they grow up, with knowledge and expertise that is important for them as consumers. By contrast to the aspects dealt with in previous sections, this type of research can be said to deal with the *positive effects* of advertising. In the USA, the term consumer *socialisation* is used as a general heading for this research. Studies done from this viewpoint have argued, among other things, that advertising in various forms contributes to children’s knowledge about different products and consumption behaviour, and how different markets work (Smith & Sweeney 1984 p 30).

The most general meaning of the term “socialisation” is the process by which people move from the biological to the social and adopt the values, standards and skills that enable them to operate as social beings. In advertising research, *consumer socialisation* has been defined as “the development process through which young people acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills that are relevant for their way of operating in the market society” (Lowery & Fleur 1988 p 410). Defined in this way, socialisation into a consumer comprises the acquisition and incorporation of a number of values, attitudes and behaviours, as well as cognitive abilities. Against this background it is of course very hard to isolate the significance of advertising in this process from several other factors. Nor is there any agreement between different researchers as to the part played by advertising in children’s and young people’s socialisation into consumers (Young 1990 p 7; Goldstein 1992 p 56 et seq; De Bens & Vandenbruaene 1992 p 80 et seq).

The most general conclusion that can be drawn from the studies done is that they hardly demonstrate that advertising imparts knowledge which makes it easier for children and young people to grow up in the role of consumer. Another fundamental reason is that it is often difficult to get a more precise idea of what is meant by terms such as “consumer behaviour”, “consumption knowledge” and “consumption expertise” in the studies that have been done of the socialisation process that shapes young people into consumers. In addition, in many instances *the positive effects* that advertising may have for the socialisation of children and young people into consumers are not put in



relation to the **negative** effects it may have in the same respect (for example by frequently giving a “exaggerated” or “misleading” image of various products).

Most of the conclusions drawn from the studies that have looked into the knowledge that advertising contributes to the socialisation of children and young people into consumers are relatively vague. For example, after evaluating the research done in this field, the Dutch media researchers Els De Bens and Peter Vandenbruaene came to the conclusion that “TV advertising may have positive effects on children by equipping them with knowledge and attitudes that are related to how they use their pocket money, but can also familiarise them with one of the dominant influences in daily life: the marketplace” (De Bens & Vandenbruaene **1992** p 81). However, conclusions that emphasise that something may have positive effects amount – in this as in most other cases – to another way of saying that there is no evidence that it does **not** have these effects.

### **Short-term and long-term effects**

It is plain from the review above that what has primarily been surveyed by research into the effects of TV advertising on children is relatively **short-term** and at the same time “simple” (and in some cases fairly trivial) effects. As for the more long-term effects, the results are generally meagre and contradictory, and it is hard to draw any conclusions from them. Overall, research has cast very little light upon the long-term effects. By contrast with the situation in broader media research, there are still no longitudinal studies of the effects of advertising, ie studies that follow the same individuals over time to determine longer-term cause and effect. In the present situation, it would appear that there are only a few studies of that type that can be used as a basis for more definite conclusions about the long-term effects of TV advertising on children and young people.

Where the long-term effects of TV advertising are concerned, the main problem is to determine what is cause and what is effect. At best, therefore, we can talk in terms of **reinforcement, circular or spiral effects** when attempting to draw more general conclusions about the effects of TV advertising on children. Conversely we can talk in terms of a number different factors that **counteract the** effect of TV advertising in the long term and which in many cases relate to parents, peers, school or the age of the children or young people.

There are a number of important and global questions about advertising that the traditional effects-related approach is poorly equipped to identify and study in a meaningful way. This should not be taken to mean that the approach is superfluous or that it no longer has a part to play in advertising research – only that it needs to be backed up by other more hermeneutic and culturally analytical perspectives that try to **understand the** role and significance of advertising for different social categories.

The major part of the research that has been done into children’s **ability** to understand TV advertising. The results of studies done to determine the age at which children can distinguish between TV commercials and programmes and at which they understand

the purpose of advertising have been relatively unanimous. As early as 3 to 4 years old, *some* children can distinguish between television commercials and programmes, but it is only at 6 to 8 years of age that *most* children can do so, and not until 10 years of age that *all* children can make the distinction. There is much evidence that this ability is purely perceptual for younger children (under and up to 5 years); in other words, they notice that “something happens” when a commercial break interrupts or follows the programme content, but are hardly aware that what they are seeing is a different form of presentation with a different purpose. It is not until around the age of about 10 years that children begin to develop a fuller understanding of the purpose of advertising .

The results of the research that has been done also indicate that it is only around or after the age of 12 that we can be more certain that most children have developed a more complete understanding of the purpose or objective of advertising. Similarly, the results of several studies indicate that younger children accept TV advertising far less critically than older children. As they grow older, children believe advertising less and less. Young people are generally more questioning and sceptical than children about the messages conveyed by television advertising.

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# THE COMPLEX EFFECTS OF ADVERTISING

A critical view of the research that has been done on the influence of TV commercials on children is in many ways justified. The aspect that can be criticised most is the way researchers have concentrated on answering relatively limited questions about the direct effect of TV commercials. In most cases the goal has been to give answers to politically controversial questions (above all in the US, where most of the research has been done). The question that has been the driving force behind this research since the 1970s is of course whether TV commercials aimed at children should be banned or regulated.

Research has therefore been concentrated on TV commercials and not on the combined effects of advertising in general or on relatively limited questions relating to children's attention to and comprehension of commercials. There is of course nothing wrong in research trying to answer politically controversial questions, but as regards research into the influence of advertising, this has had both positive and negative consequences.

Many scientists (above all in America) have also protested against research into the influence of advertising being too controlled by non-scientific and policy-related interests (see, for instance, Young 1990 p 69, Riecen & Yavas 1990 p 145). Because of strong control by outside interests, priority has sometimes been given to presenting (empirical) results rather than contributing to the theoretical development of the field. This trend has – probably more than anything else – contributed to making the field very fragmented. In short, the research has produced a plethora of (empirical) results, but has hardly developed a comprehensive theoretical insight into the cognitive, psychological and social conditions that dictate how children (as well as young people and adults) react to and interpret advertising.

When *purely* the results of the studies conducted on the influence of TV commercials on children are presented, they can easily give a contradictory impression. For example, the answer given to the question at what age children understand the purpose of TV commercials varies from 2-3 years old in certain studies to 12-13 years old in others! But if we scrutinise the results we can see why they differ so markedly, and we find in fact that the answer is *relatively unanimous*, given that there are different levels or dimensions of comprehension of the purpose of TV commercials. What is lacking however is a more developed *theoretical* understanding of how children gradually

develop an insight into the purpose of advertising and which factors (cognitive, psychological, social and cultural) are important in this process. The results provided by the research give information on when a child understands the purpose of advertising but very little on how this understanding develops and why the insight is limited at different ages.

One could claim somewhat cynically that the problem with research into the influence of commercials on children is that the questions posed are too limited rather than that the answers given are too open to different interpretations. This is fairly obvious if advertising research is seen in the context of the more general field of media research which it mainly falls under. While the traditional effects approach has been widened and new perspectives have opened up within this latter discipline, research into the influence of advertising is still tied to relatively simple models. This is partly because of the preoccupation with direct effects of the influence of advertising. But advertising probably seldom influences our actions, values and attitudes in a direct way. In most cases its influence combines with impressions from other media and our immediate social surroundings and is also dependent on characteristics that we developed earlier in life. So it is probably the rule rather than the exception that advertising has an indirect influence on us, in conjunction with other factors, which may often be more important.

Because the traditional effects approach still dominates research into the influence of advertising, those exposed to advertising are often seen as *passive* receivers. The emphasis is fairly consistently on *what advertising does to the* individual, not what the individual does *with advertising*. A large part of media research however indicates that different individuals take a considerably more *active* part in receiving the media

***“Advertising can be seen as one of the factors that contribute to shaping people’s view of life, and the basic values, attitudes and cultural ideas that are dominant in society?”***

output. This is not only true of adults but also of young people and to a large extent also of children. Because research has concentrated on what advertising does to children, little has been said on how they actively process, use and interpret the message conveyed.

Advertising can be seen as one of the factors that contribute to shaping people’s view of life, and the basic values, attitudes and cultural ideas that are dominant in society. The influence of advertising in this respect lasts throughout life. But in that case it is hardly possible to isolate the influence that advertising exerts. As advertising increasingly merges with and integrates into the general media output, the greatest influence probably lies in the *cumulative* and at the same time very *complex* effects that this overall output can be taken to have. However, the effects approach adopted by current advertising research is poorly equipped to identify this type of influence – which is probably the most important one in the long perspective. A more complete understanding of the influence of advertising on society as a whole, as well as on different groups and individuals, must therefore be complemented by studies who adopt another approach.

An important question is to what extent research into the influence of TV commercials on children can or should be used as a basis for political decisions. Research can provide important (although limited) clues and facts to be used in the political debate

on the need for regulating commercials aimed at children, as this study has hopefully demonstrated. But these clues and facts must of course be evaluated from a political, ideological and ethical standpoint, not least because even seemingly “objective” facts are loaded with value judgments and theoretical considerations. It is not possible to study reality without having a preconceived idea (theory) about the methodology used, and this idea always colours the resulting image. The theory of science tells us that this is one of the reasons why research into the influence and effects of TV commercials on children has not arrived at a unanimous answer. The results are influenced by the initial assumptions of the scientists, by what methodology they use and how they interpret the data they collect. This is one of the most important reasons why research results must always be weighed against other approaches when they are to be used as a basis for political decisions.

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