

No, Kidding! Are We Branded From Birth? Content Analysis of Ads in Children's Magazines

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Introduction

“Pester power” is a term put together by advertisers and marketers and refers to the ability of children in convincing their parents to buy products by asking for it many times until they get it. Coined in the late 1990’s in the United States, pester power is now a tactic effectively used by almost every advertiser and marketer, especially in the developing countries to reach out to young and adult consumers alike. Using children to indirectly market and persuade their parents to buy products has impacted sales remarkably and marketers/advertisers make use of this opportunity to push their products.

Human beings are acquisitive in nature. This trait is very strongly projected by children, as they are eager to experience and gain knowledge and acquire things they see in the world. Interestingly enough, they also have a quality to be easily distracted. When it comes to supermarkets, the chances of getting distracted become lean. According to a study conducted by Cancer Council NSW and the University of Newcastle (Murphy, 2012), it is getting tougher and tougher for parents to stand up to pester power. The retail stores lay out plans for impulse buyers and there are things, which cannot be missed by children. The participants of the study revealed that almost all of them were pestered in to buying food and that over 70% gave in and bought chocolates/confectionery.

The primary goal of this study is to: (i) understand how message strategies are employed by the advertisers in children’s magazines, (ii) examine how the message strategies have varied over time, (iii) the relationship between the message strategy and the product category. This study will use the Taylor’s six-segment strategy wheel to analyze the ads.

Literature Review

Advertising to children is an act of marketing or advertising products or services to children. It could be anything right from toys, books, food and beverage and stationery. An exhaustive search of literature of children and advertising has found that most of the research done is based on television commercials targeting children.

There has been research conducted to understand how and whether children had an ability to comprehend and process the message of the ad claim based on cognitive development (Bijmolt, Classen, & Brus, 1998; Moses & Baldwin, 2005). Studies have helped in verifying children's ability to evaluate and deduce the message depending on their cognitive development. Studies have also indicated that children's ability to grasp and interpret the intention and disclaimers in ads gets better with age (Bijmolt, Classen, & Brus, 1998; Oates, Blades, & Gunter, 2001). This argument has been further strengthened by Pawlowski, Badzinski, & Mitchell (1998) who found that sixth graders had a better cognitive development to infer pictorial and verbal messages including metaphors when compared to fourth graders, thus proving that the ability to grasp information increased with age.

Research studies have helped in elucidating food and beverage advertisers' intention in marketing their products to children and how this has directly impacted the consumption of messages and products by children. Within the US, it is widely acknowledged that the increased consumption of unhealthy products including soda and fried foods has directly led to the increase of obesity within children. Most advertisers in the processed food industry focus on images that convey fun, good times, feeling of happiness and joy that results from consuming the food or beverage. This in turn has been found to be one of the reasons why children over consume high calorie food leading to early obesity (Folta et al., 2006).

Advertisers also effectively make use of several media, which children watch. For instance, the television channels or programs aired for children, children's magazines, and the children's section in supermarkets, retail stores and the freebies and interactive displays in the malls and other locations. In a surprising study conducted in Britain (Balmford et al., 2002), it was revealed that children could recognize more Pokémon characters than wildlife species, leading to the belief that there is an associated risk of how children consume information presented to them.

Advertisers employ several message strategies and these strategies have been widely researched by many in academics and industry (Laskey, Day, & Crask, 1989; Taylor, 1999). Our study will use the six-segment strategy wheel defined by Taylor (1999) to identify and define the message strategies in the context of advertisements in print media, specifically from children's magazines. This model was developed based on Carey's communication model (1975): transmission and ritual. The transmission model uses the transport model where the communication of the message is the primary goal. However, in the ritual communication, the goal is transformation. Taylor (1999) proposed six-segment strategy wheel based on other theoretical and conceptual ideas such as FCB grid (Vaughn, 1980), Kotler's buying behavior model (1965), and communication model (1975). The Kotler's buying behavior model (1965) helps in classifying the categories of buying behavior among consumers. FCB grid also categorized the buying or decision-making pattern of consumers based on their involvement level in decision-making.

The wheel is formed by dividing the informational side of the wheel in to three segments: ration, acute and routine and then the transformational side of the wheel is also divided in to three segments: ego, social and sensory. The informational (transmission) view of the wheel

looks at consumer's need for cognitive data and information and the transformational (ritual) view of the wheel looks at the emotional need and side of consumers.

Ever since the six-segment wheel was published in 1999, it has been applied in many segments and industries to understand the message strategies and patterns. It has been used to understand the websites of cosmetic surgeons (Anh & Taylor, 2011), to develop health messages in rural areas (Haley, Avery, & McMillan, 2011), and to understand luxury brand advertising and viral advertising. Golan & Zaidner (2008) used Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel to analyze creative strategies in viral advertising. This study used content analysis to understand the viral ads on web and found that the most commonly used appeal was the high-emotional segment of ego.

Research Questions

In this study, we propose to understand the message strategies used in print advertisements in children's magazines. We will examine the time frame of 1980's-2010's period, and aim to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the most commonly used message strategy segment from the six-segment wheel?

RQ 2: Are there any differences in the message strategies used by certain product categories with time?

RQ3: Is there a correlation between message strategy and product category?

Method

This study will use content analysis to analyze the print advertisements in select children magazines (See Table 1). This study plans to collect ads from 8 select children's magazine from a period of 1980 to 2010. The period will be scattered between 1980-1990, 1991-2000, and 2001-2010.

Table 1: *Magazine list*

Magazine	Issues/Year	Age-group
Spider	9	6-9 years old
Lady Bug	9	3-6 years old
Faces	9	12 onwards
Cobblestone	9	9-14 years old
Cricket	9	9-14 years old
Boy's life	12	9-14 years old

Coding Process

To code the selected ads, coding sheet will consist of total three parts: (i) overall information about advertisement, for example, brand name, year of magazine and ads, (ii) product categories, and (iii) message strategies.

Table 2: *Coding sheet*

Contents	
Ads brief	- Name of the brand / ad - Year of the ad and the magazine - Size of the ad: Full page, Half page and quarter
Product categories	- Snacks, Chocolates and Confectionery, Books and Stationery, Bags and Accessories, Shoes, Toys, Other
Message strategies	- Ego, social, sensory, ration, acute need, and routine

This study will use three coders. The authors/researchers will be two of the coders and will have a third coder who will be trained by the researchers to code. After training, coders will perform coding process about 10% of total samples to check for inter-coder reliability. The percent agreement method will be used for inter-coder reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2008). Even if there will be a minimal agreement, the coding will be reexamined to understand any disagreements and that will be sorted out with final consensus coding for 100% agreement.

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