Examining the Nature of Australian Child-directed Magazine Advertising

Stacey Baxter and Alicia Perkins, University of Newcastle

Abstract

Children are exposed to advertising for a wide range of products and services. While previous researchers have focused on food advertising, this paper aims to provide a more holistic evaluation of child-directed advertising. Specifically, this paper examines the nature and appeals used in Australian child-directed magazine advertising, irrespective of product category. Content analysis of full-page advertisements contained in two popular children's magazines was undertaken. Results showed that the majority of advertisements contain informational elements and employ fun and fantasy appeals. It was also found that male-oriented advertisements were more active and aggressive than female-oriented advertisements. It is suggested that the results of this research will interest policy makers as well as parents and teachers who often endorse magazine readership.

Keywords: children, Australia, magazine, advertising, content analysis

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Background

Advertisers can employ a range of techniques to increase the effectiveness of their advertisements to reach child consumers. In recent years, a myriad of research has been undertaken to examine the nature and content of child-directed advertising. It is evident, however, that the vast majority of this research focuses on child-directed food advertising. Researchers have examined the nature of such advertising across a range of media types including television advertising (Stitt and Kunkel, 2008), magazine advertising (Kelly and Chapman, 2007), web-sites and online games (Lee, Yoon-yeung, Quilliam and Cole, 2009) as well as across a range of countries, including Australia and New Zealand (Kelly and Chapman, 2007, Chapman, Nicholas and Supramaniam, 2006).

With the increasing concern regarding children's obesity (Berry, 2008), such research provides valuable information to social marketers and public policy makers. It is important to consider, however, that children's exposure to marketing messages is not limited to the food industry, with children being bombarded with marketing messages for a range of products and services. In fact, a recent study found that advertisements for video games and DVDs were most prevalent in child-directed magazines (representing 36% of advertising), with advertising for food products (for example, confectionary, savoury snacks and fast food) being less represented (less than 4% of advertisements, Acharya and Mizerski, 2007).

While food-related advertising is at the forefront with regards to issues surrounding child-hood obesity, advertising for other products and services has also come under criticism with the suggestion that exposure to such advertising can limit children's creative play, encourage violent play and can negatively impact a child's self-esteem and body image (ACCM, 2009). In addition to these concerns it is suggested that advertising can act as a fuel for 'pester power', with children influencing adult purchases through requests and demands (McDermott, O'Sullivan, Stead and Hastings, 2006). Despite this, few researchers have examined this phenomena as a whole (Acharya and Mizerski, 2007). This research, therefore, aims to examine the nature and content of child-directed advertising irrespective of product type. The primary objectives of the research are to:

1. Evaluate the prevalence of child-direct advertising in popular 'tween' magazines;
2. Evaluate whether there has been a change in the prevalence and nature of child-directed magazine advertising between the period 2004/05 and 2009/10; and
3. Examine the differences in advertising content between male-oriented and female-oriented magazines.

It is suggested that the results of this study will provide further understanding of child-directed advertising. With the communities increasing concern regarding child-directed marketing practices (Berry, 2008, Story and French, 2004), findings will also be informative for those involved with policy protection. This paper will begin with a discussion of child-directed advertising issues; this is followed by the methodology employed. Results are of the analysis are then presented and discussed.

Child-directed advertising

An important consideration in an organisation's creative strategy is the selection of an effective advertising appeal (Belch and Belch, 2009). Research has suggested that advertisers frequently employ fantasy appeals and utilise animated characters when communicating with child consumers (Roberts and Pettigrew, 2007, Nelly and Schumann, 2004). The use of such techniques are said to engage the younger audience, facilitating memory storage and retrieval (Nelly and Schumann, 2004). It is evident, however, that researchers to date have focused on

television advertising, with magazine media receiving little attention (Kelly and Chapman, 2007).

Research has suggested that both the number of child-oriented magazines entering the marketplace along with the readership of these magazines is increasing with some reaching 20 percent of the child population (Kervin and Mantei, 2009, Kelly and Chapman, 2007). It has also been estimated that Australian children spend approximately 16 minutes a day reading magazines and re-read these magazines seven to ten times a week (Leppanen, Aunola and Nurmi, 2005). Magazines, therefore, have the ability to maintain high levels of reach and frequency.

For advertisers, a primary advantage of magazine advertising is the notion of 'approval'. Parents and teachers often encourage children to read magazines, as it is seen better to "*read magazines than nothing at all*" (Kervin and Manter, 2009, p. 3). While parents may look for ways to limit children's exposure to television advertising, the opposite is seen with regards to magazine advertising (Curtis, 2004). Research has shown that parents see children's magazines as trustworthy and educational (Kervin and Mantei, 2009). Magazines, therefore, offer advertisers a valuable alternative for communicating with the child consumer.

Methodology

A longitudinal study of Australian children's magazines was undertaken. Two prominent Australian child-oriented magazines, *Total Girl* (female-oriented) and *K-Zone* (male-oriented), were selected for analysis. Both magazines target children eight to 11 years of age and were identified as 'what kids are reading' (Eaton, 2004), with high circulation and readership levels (greater than 250 000 readers) within Australia (Pacific Magazines, 2010).

Magazines were collected in 2004, 2005, 2009 and 2010, with one issue from each year being randomly selected (via SRS) from those available (only 4 issues were available in 2010 at the time of data collection). As a result, a total of eight magazines were collected and analysed over the seven year period. This selection facilitated an analysis of change over the five year period; 2004/05 – 2009/10.

Content analysis of child-directed magazine advertisements

Content analysis is a common technique employed to analyse aspects of child-directed advertising (Kelly and Chapman, 2007, Chapman, Nicholas and Supramaniam, Henry and Story, 2009). This research employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis techniques to examine the nature and content of magazine advertisements. This paper focuses the results of the quantitative analysis, with only limited discussion of qualitative themes.

Researcher bias is a primary concern when undertaking content analysis research (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). To reduce the impact of researcher bias both researchers independently viewed all full-page magazine advertisements contained in the selected magazines (n = 154). A coding instrument was developed which included predetermined options to increase inter-coder reliability (Kassarjian, 1977). Categories for analysis were drawn from Roberts and Pettigrew (2007) with an additional category, 'stylised violence', being added in response to concerns raised by the Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM, 2009) regarding the encouragement of violent play.

Results were first compared across the two coders (inter-coder reliability = 96%). Advertisements were then viewed a second time to resolve discrepancies and achieve complete coder agreement. After frequencies were calculated for each category, advertisements were viewed again and with further qualitative analysis undertaken.

Results

The final sample was comprised of 154 full-page advertisements. Although the number of pages within each issue remained similar (approximately 100 pages), a sharp decrease in the number of advertisements was evident in 2010, with an average of 9 advertisements per issue (compared to previous years, with an average of 23 advertisements in 2004, 20 advertisements in 2005 and 25 advertisements in 2009).

As expected, non-food items (91%) were more heavily advertised in children's magazines than food items (9%) with video games being the most advertised product accounting for 21.8 percent of advertisements, followed by DVDs (at 12.8%). A total of 89 brands were advertised during the content analysis period with *Disney* being the most heavily advertised brand, accounting for 11 percent of the total number of advertisements.

Advertising appeals

The advertisements were coded to identify the prevalence of various advertising appeals. Informational appeals were found to be the most heavily used, with 80 percent of advertisements including information about the advertised item (example copy, "over 300 new quiz cards"). Advertisements that incorporated fun (example copy, "make loads of friends, have fun, be yourself") and/or action-adventure appeals (example copy, "the fast and the mischievous") were also popular, accounting for 32, and 26 percent of advertisements respectively.

Advertising appeals: 2004/05 to 2009/10

Further analysis was undertaken to examine whether there had been a change in the prevalence and nature of child-directed magazine advertising. Results showed that there was a decrease in the number of advertisement contained within the magazines with 86 advertisements viewed in 2004/05 and 68 in 2009/10. Frequency analysis was undertaken to examine the advertising appeals used by advertisers during the periods 2004/05 and 2009/10. A series of chi-square tests were performed to determine whether a significant association existed between year of publication and advertising appeal. Results showed that with the exception of information (increasing from 69.8% in 04/05 to 92.6% in 09/10, $p = 0.000$)), the advertising appeals employed did not change over the five year period: 2004/05 to 2009/10 ($p > 0.05$).

Advertising appeals: a comparison of female and male-oriented magazines

Frequency analysis was then undertaken to examine the advertising appeals used in female-oriented (*Total Girl*) and male-oriented (*K-Zone*) magazines. In addition, a series of chi-square tests were once again performed to analyse the association between magazine orientation and the prevalence of advertising appeals. Results of the analysis are shown in Table 1.

A number of appeal types were used in both female-oriented and male-oriented magazines. For example, all magazines were found to frequently employ information appeals, fun appeals and cool appeals and infrequently employ fear appeals, humour appeals and pleasure appeals.

For five categories an association between appeal and magazine orientation (male versus female) was evident ($p < 0.05$). Results suggested that advertisements that incorporate elements of 'cuteness' and/or appearance will be more likely to be found in female-oriented magazines. Advertisements in male-oriented magazines, however, were more likely to include action/adventure, movie tie-ins and stylised violence.

These results suggest that while some advertising appeals may be seen as gender 'neutral' (for example, information, fun, cool, fantasy), evidence of gender stereo-typing is clearly apparent, with female-oriented products frequently employing more 'cute' images, such as, a dog posting a letter or smiling cartoon characters (example copy, "Dress me!, Feed me! Love me!"), whereas, male-oriented products rely more heavily on action and violence, with advertisements employing dark colours and battle imagery (example copy, "Hero or Beast").

Table 1: Comparison of Advertising Appeals in Female and Male-oriented Magazines (%)

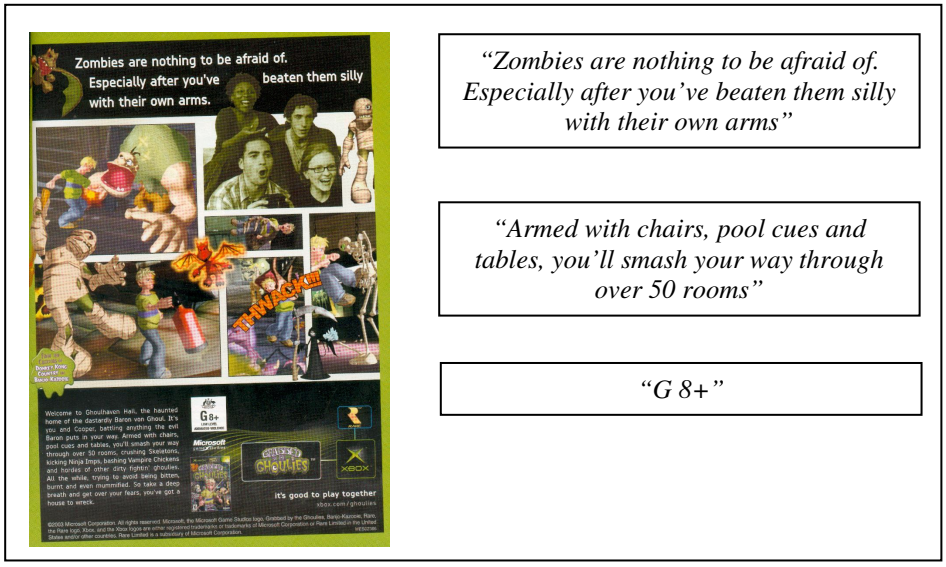
	Female-oriented magazine	**Male-oriented magazine**	**Chi-square Sig.**
n	**76**	**78**	
Information	80.3	79.5	0.904
Fun	28.9	34.6	0.450
Cool	27.6	16.7	0.101
Premium	19.7	10.3	0.099
Cute	**18.4**	**5.1**	**0.010**
Appearance	**14.5**	**0.0**	**0.000**
Fantasy	11.8	17.9	0.288
Creativity	10.5	3.8	0.108
Action/Adventure	**7.9**	**43.6**	**0.000**
Movie	**7.9**	**20.5**	**0.025**
Price	7.9	12.8	0.317
Quantity	5.3	5.1	0.970
Celebrity	5.3	5.1	0.970
Health	1.3	5.1	0.182
Humour	1.3	3.8	0.324
Fear	1.3	3.8	0.324
Stylised Violence	**0.0**	**19.2**	**0.000**
Quality	0.0	1.3	0.322
Pleasure	0.0	1.3	0.322

Encouraging Violent Play: a thematic analysis

With the belief that advertising to children can encourage violent play (ACCM, 2009), advertisements deemed to contain elements of stylised violence were subject to further qualitative analysis. While stylised violence was most often used in advertisements for video games (n = 9), violence was also used in advertisements for toys (n = 4), a DVD (n = 1) and an oral hygiene product (n = 1).

It is believed that violence is used to create drama and excitement around the product, encouraging children to "Choose your weapon" when selecting a video game or to "Pick your battle" when choosing an action figure. Advertisers depict violence through the copy (example copy, "Unleash your mascot's special attack") or imagery (for example, the 'hero' poised to fight the 'villain'), with some advertisements using both advertising elements to encourage violent play (refer to Figure 1).

Figure 1: Encouraging violent play through both image and copy, *K-Zone* (2004)



Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to provide a holistic view of child-directed magazine advertising in Australia. Findings illustrated that the majority of magazine advertisements include information about the advertised product, such as; what it does or does not include, release dates, price and/or purchase locations. Roberts and Pettigrew (2007) found that few child-directed television advertisements contain such informational appeals (for example, price information). Magazines, however, provide advertisers with an opportunity to include higher levels of information, as unlike television, magazine advertisements are not fleeting, giving children the opportunity to view the marketing communication at their own pace (or several times if required). Similar to Roberts and Pettigrew (2007), this study discovered that advertisers frequently used fun and fantasy appeals, suggesting that such appeals are believed to be effective when targeting child consumers, irrespective of delivery mode.

Results also illustrated that gender stereo typing is evident within Australian child-directed magazine advertising. This finding is consistent with previous research, indicating that male-oriented advertisements are more active and aggressive than female-oriented advertisements (Browne, 1998). Of particular interest, however, was the depiction of aggressive or violent behaviour in child-directed advertising. It was found that children's magazine advertising can portray relatively high levels of violence (as demonstrated in Figure 1). This may come as a surprise to many parents and teachers who actively guide children towards such messages (Kervin and Mantei, 2009). It is suggested that future research be undertaken to examine children's attitudes towards, and the behavioural implications of exposure to such advertising. In response to claims made by the ACCM further analysis of other advertising appeals (such as, appearance) is also recommended.

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