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CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Keywords:

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Persuasion

Abstract. The purpose of this study was to explore the understanding and perception of television advertising by Turkish children. This study was conducted in two kindergartens in Adana, which is in southern Turkey. In study 44, children at the ages of three to six were included. In the research, questions about the TV ads were asked to children verbally. Individual interviews were held with each child and they were recorded to a tape recorder. At the end of the study, it was found that most of the 3-6 years old children in this study remembered the TV commercials and the names of the products; almost none of the children distinguished between the commercial and the other programs; one fourth of the children perceived the intention of the commercials and more than half of the children believed in what was said in the TV commercials. The results of this study showed that the preschool children (3-6 years old) had considerably high information about the TV commercials.

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INTRODUCTION

At present, TV is an important tool in the children's lives and constitutes the most important part of their lives. The studies showed that children spend more than two hours a day watching TV (Arnas, 2004; Bernard-Bonnin, Rousseau, Masson, Gilbert & Maheux, 1991; Taras, Sallis, Nader & Nelson, 1990; Woodard & Gridina, 2000). Arnas (2006) determined that average of 35 commercials are being advertised during the morning hours on weekends when children watch TV the most and in the commercials advertising approximately 77 products are being presented. Based on these data, it can be determined that children are exposed to commercials approximately 1890 minutes a year only by watching TV during morning hours on weekends. Naturally, the number of commercials and products that children are exposed to increase in accordance with the increase of hours the children watch TV. It has been indicated that in our days children in USA are exposed to an average of 40000 TV commercials a year (Kunkel et al., 2004).

Parents, educators and politicians are increasingly being concerned about the effects of TV commercials that especially young children are exposed to due to the dramatic increase in the hours that children spend watching TV nowadays. It has been indicated that the messages in the commercials may not have an effect on children since they cannot remember the ads due to their limited memory capacity (Macklin, 1994). Other studies demonstrate that the limited cognitive skills and abilities that young children have, as opposed to the older children and adults,

block their understanding of the messages aimed by the commercials. Therefore, the risk of them to be influenced by the ads is exceptional (Pine & Nash, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2004).

For children to understand maturely the messages built in the ads they must acquire two key information-processing skills. First is the perceptual level in which children can distinguish a commercial from other programs and the second is being able to perceive the intend of advertising (Kunkel et al., 2004). It was put forward that the potential effects of ads might decrease if children can understand the commercials and distinguish a commercial from other programs (Bijmolt, Classen & Brus, 1988).

Children's Ability to Distinguish between Advertising and Programmes

The evidence provided by the previous studies is conflicting. Some studies were suggesting that the three to five years old children could distinguish a commercial from other TV program (Butter, Popvich, Stackhouse & Garner, 1981; Levin, Petros & Petrella, 1982) whereas other studies were indicating that the children in this age group do not acquire the ability to distinguish. However, almost all studies indicate that this ability is developed in children at the age of 10 (Vaccaro & Slanemyr, 1998; Oates, Blades, Gunter & Don, 2003).

The conflicting results of the studies may be due to applying different methods. In other words, the studies in which observation (using non-verbal measures) was used to measure the

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children's attention during transition from programs to commercials (Donohue, Henke & Donohue, 1980; Henke, 1980; Zuckerman, Ziegler & Stevenson, 1978). It was determined that children develop the abilities at early ages; while, the studies in which interviews (using verbal measures) were used (Levin et al., 1982; Oates et al., 2003). It was indicated that these abilities develop at older ages (Oates et al., 2003). It can be indicated that using different methods results in different outcomes (Bjurström, 1994). In some other studies in which both methods-observation and interview-were used the results showed that when compared to non-verbal measures, the verbal measures assisted more in distinguishing between programs and commercials (Bijmolt et al., 1988).

Children's Understanding of Purpose of Advertising

All television commercials have the same primary goal that is, to influence the attitudes and behaviours of the viewers. Children due to their limited cognitive skills, unlike adults who understand that commercials aim to persuade people to buy the products that are advertised, do not perceive the aim of commercials which is "to sell" (Kunkel et al., 2004).

According to most researchers, in order for children to develop a critical and questioning attitude towards ads they must be able to understand the intention of the commercials (Bjurström, 1994).

Results of most studies demonstrated that most children develop the understanding of the intentions of commercials by the ages of seven to eight. Before these ages, children do not understand the ads or understand only a little (Bijmolt et al., 1988; Blosser & Roberts, 1985; Chan, 2000; Donohue, Meyer & Henke, 1978; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Oates et al., 2003; Vaccaro & Slanemyr, 1998). Butter et al. (1981) informed that children at the ages of four to five do not comprehend the reason why commercials are on television. Young children, before seven to eight years, view ads either as entertainment (e.g., "commercials are funny") or as a form of unbiased information (e.g., "commercials tell you about things you can buy") while at the ages of 7 to 8 they begin to comprehend the persuasive intention of commercials and indicate that commercial try to influence people to buy the advertised products. On the other hand, the studies using non-verbal measures determined that children as early as 5 years old understand the intention of TV commercials. Donohue et al. (1980) and Macklin (1987) in their studies reported that children between ages of 2 to 6 have a high level of understanding of commercial intentions. In addition, in a study by Henke (1980) in which non-verbal measures were used, it was indicated that there is a significant qualitative change in the children's perception of advertising experience between three and six years. To sum up, although the nonverbal measures of the persuasive intention may allow some children to express levels of understanding which are not covered by the verbal measures, there is little reason to believe that vast majority of children younger than seven or eight years of age have a command of the

persuasive intention of ads (John, 1999; Kunkel et al., 2004). When the studies about the children's comprehension of TV commercials are examined it was found that almost all of these were related with the Western societies. In addition, there were few conducted in China and Hong Kong (Chan, 2000; Chan & McNeal, 2002; 2004a; 2004b). However, no researches in this field were found in Turkey, the bridge between the east and west, in which a high number of children and adolescent population accommodate. The purpose of this study is to explore the understanding and perception of television advertising by Turkish children.

METHOD

When the studies about TV commercials and its effects on children are examined, it can be determined that almost all of these studies are constituted of quantitative data. Most of the researchers who worked in this field preferred the experimental approaches. However, there are as many difficulties in interviewing young children to obtain verbal data as there are in the experimental studies. Especially, it is reasonably difficult to both obtain verbal data from young children and to assess the data obtained qualitatively. In addition, most of the studies showed that children younger than eight years have a very little understanding of ads. However, it was not possible to determine the focus of problem by using the quantitative evaluations. In order to obtain more detailed information regarding younger children's comprehension of TV ads the data in this study are assessed qualitatively.

Sample

This study was conducted in two kindergartens in Adana, which is in southern Turkey. 44 children at the ages of 3-6, 22 from each school, were included in this research study as this is a qualitative study. 5 children at the age of three ($n = 3.4 - 3.10$), 16 children at the age of four ($n = 4.0 - 4.11$), 15 children at the age of five ($n = 5.0 - 5.11$) and 8 children at the age of six ($n = 6.0 - 6.4$) were included in this study.

Interview Procedure

In the research, questions about the TV ads were asked to children verbally. Individual interviews were held with each child and they were recorded to a tape recorder. Afterwards, the data recorded were transferred to the computer, which was then transformed to written texts. The two teachers selected from each school held the interviews with the children in this study. Both of the teachers in the meantime were completing their master's degree in the same university with the researcher. The reason of choosing these two teachers was because they were working in these schools for a long time and the children knew them very well. The researcher trained these two teachers about how to interview the children. No problems were encountered during the interviews because the children knew the teachers. The teachers

interviewed the children in an empty classroom of the school, individually. Each of the children was taken from their class to this room. The teachers had pre-conversations about “the programs they like to watch the most” with each child. After the conversation, the teachers asked the children “the three ads that they watched and liked the most on TV” and by this, the conversation started. When the children determined three ads, the teachers asked them to describe the ads, to tell the products’ names and the attributes. After the pre-conversation about the ads, the teachers asked the children “whether they could distinguish a program from an ad, distinguish the aims of the ads, and whether they believed what was said in the ads”. Each interview lasted almost 20 minutes.

Measures

Donohue et al. (1980) claimed since the preschool children are in the preoperational period, they will have difficulties in replying to the researcher’s questions. They were arguing that the 3-6 years old children will not reply to questions asked or will give short answers like “I don’t know”. For this reason, they were indicating that non-verbal measures should be used for preschool children.

In addition, some researches who considered Donohue et al. (1980) indicated that the non-verbal measures would not clearly determine whether children understand the selling intention of the commercials (Bijmolt et al., 1988; Macklin, 1985). The researchers stated that the children without actually understanding purpose of the ads could distinguish an ad from a program using perceptive evidences such as the jingles or the length of the stories (Bijmolt et al., 1988; Stephens & Stutts, 1982; Stutts, Vance & Hudleson, 1981).

For this reason they argue that in order to explicitly study the effects of young children’s understanding of the TV commercials the verbal measures to distinguish between the children will be more effective (Bijmolt et al., 1988; Macklin, 1985). Under the light of these studies, the data of the present study were derived from verbal measures.

Analysis

The data gathered in this study were transferred to the computer, which was then transformed to written texts. The data were analyzed qualitatively and percentages of some of the qualitative data were calculated by transforming them to frequencies.

FINDINGS

Recalling the Content and Brand Name of Television Commercials

Children were asked about the three ads they watched and liked the most on TV and then they were asked to describe these advertisements. It was expected that each child would tell three ads, which will make a total of 132 advertisements. However, children could tell 88 ads accurately. 3 years old children

specified 9 advertisements, 4 years old children 26, 5 and 6 years old children described 39 and 14 ads, respectively.

However, it was found that the 3-4 years old children could not exactly distinguish between the advertised product and the content. When the children were asked to describe the three ads they watched and liked the most on TV, it was determined that the children at the age of 3-4 perceived other elements in the ad as the advertised product. Children were more confused when the leading characters of ads were cartoon film characters or animated cushion characters. For example, a 3 years 4 months old child indicated that “the ad of a fabric softener in which an animated cushion teady bear was an ad for toys”; another 4 years 11 month old child indicated that “the ad of a toilet paper in which a cartoon elephant was the character, was about the elephant itself”.

When the children were asked whether they recalled the names of the products advertised in these commercials that they liked 50% succeeded. Children recalled the names of the products in 44 of the 88 ads that they liked. The 3 years old children recalled only the name of one product while the four years old children recalled eight names. 5 years old children recalled 25 and 6 years old children recalled 10 product names. Of the 88 ads, children successfully identified the attributes of the 87 products.

Distinguishing Commercials from Programs

Almost none of the children could distinguish a commercial from a program (40 children). Moreover, one of the children (4 years 4 months old) stated “they are the same because they are in the same channel” while another child (3 years 4 months old) indicated “there is no difference between them because they are all shown together”. In addition, while none of the 3-4 years old children distinguished a program from a commercial, three children in the 5-6 years old group distinguished by considering the length of a program and a commercial. These children indicated that “the ads were shorter than the movies”. For example, one of the 5 years old children stated that “they are different because movies are longer and ads are shorter” and a 6 years 3 months old child indicated that “they don’t look the same because ads are shorter”. One of the 5 years old children indicated that “ads are shown before TV episodes” while another child said that “ads were for children and movies were for mothers”.

As it can be seen from the Table 1, when children were asked about “the purpose of TV advertising”, half of them (22 children) could not explain the purpose of advertising.

In addition, it was determined that five of the 44 children thought that the ads were for “selling the products” and four of the children thought that they are “to give information about the product”. For example, one of the children (6 years old) said “they are persuading us, making us buy (the product), they are saying buy what is advertised” while another child (5 years old) indicated “because they want us to buy they will make money.”

Purpose of TV Advertising

TABLE 1

Percentage of Responses to Question about the Purpose of TV Advertising for Each Age Group

Aim of Ad	Age 3		Age 4		Age 5		Age 6		Total	
To persuade	1	2.3	1	2.3	2	4.5	1	2.3	5	11.4
To inform	-	-	-	-	2	4.5	2	4.5	4	9.1
To amuse	-	-	1	2.3	4	9.1	1	2.3	6	13.6
For a break,	-	-	3	6.8	2	4.5	2	4.5	7	15.9
Don’t know, no answer	4	9.1	11	25.0	5	11.4	2	4.5	22	50.0

Another 6 years 4 months old child explained “they are informing us about the product so that we would know and buy” and a 3 years 10 months old child stated that the ads are “for fathers to buy”.

Six children indicated that the TV advertising is for “entertaining the viewers”. Children mostly stated that ads are for “entertaining the children, entertaining us and for fun”. For example, a five years old child indicated “they want us to watch” while another

six years old stated that “they are for entertainment, they make us laugh, they inform us about the products, so that we can know and buy them”.

Seven of the children perceived that the ads were to give a break to movies. One of the children (5 years 3 months old) explained this as “because they want to give a short break to movies”, while another child (4 years 11 months old) stated “they are advertising to give a break to TV episodes”.

Believing the TV Commercials

TABLE 2

The Frequency Distribution of Whether Children Believe What is said in Ads of Not

Believing or not to what is said in Ads	N	%
Yes, I believe	25	56.82
No, I don’t believe	19	43.18

In the interviews, it was found that most of the children believed what was said in ads. It was determined that all of the three years old children believed that what was said in the ads was true and while some of the four years old and older children believed the ads others did not. Especially when children were asked questions by giving examples and repeating such as, “Some of the food ads say that if you eat them you will get taller. Do you believe that you will get taller when you eat them?” It was determined that more than half of them (25 children) believed in this. Only 19 children did not believe or had doubts.

One of the children (4 years 3 months old) who believed that what is said in the ad is true indicated “Yes. I eat, eat and finish. After I eat I am full and I become taller”, while another child (5 years 4 months old) stated “Yes. I get taller slowly slowly”.

One of the children (6 years old) who did not believe what was said in ads said “I don’t believe because people grow up slowly”. One of the children who had doubts (4 years 11 months old) stated “No because they are saying you will grow up but it doesn’t happen. It is not healthy” while another child (5 years old) said “No. I ate and I ate from those but did not grow up. They are saying it so that we believe”.

DISCUSSION

Some points of the findings of this study were similar to the previous findings in the literature. The results of this study showed that the preschool children (3-6 years old) had considerably high information about the TV commercials. This is because when children were asked to describe and name the three products they watched on advertisements and liked the most they were reasonably successful. Children were able to describe all the 88 advertisements that they indicated they liked the most. In addition, they were able to describe 87 of the 88 products and recall the names of the 44 products. The number of product names recalled increased in parallel with the age.

These findings show that young children were considerably successful in understanding and recalling the ads. Children were not given any clue to recall the ads and were asked verbally to recall them. When children were asked about the ads they liked, they were able to tell them. This shows that children are able to distinguish an ad from a program and to recall from long-term memory and manage the recalling processes. All these recalling and replying processes were the results of information-processing approach.



In addition, upon examining the literature it was found that there were some findings different from the findings of this study. In a study by Oates, Blades and Gunter (2001) in which 6-10 years old children were tested for recalling, recognizing and understanding a new TV advertisement it was found that children recognized the ad scenes after watching it once but could not recall the product names even after the third time. While the two older groups were able to recall the product names after being exposed to the advertisement more than once or twice, younger children could not recall.

However, in another study it was found that children could successfully recognize the logos of the products; the recognition rates of logos for The Disney Channel and Old Joe were highest. Approximately 30% of the 3 years old children were successful in matching a picture of a cigarette with the Old Joe logo while this rate was 91.3% in 6 years old children. It can be concluded that recognition rates increased with age (Fischer, Schwartz, Richards, Goldstein & Rojas, 1991).

When children were asked to describe the ad they liked the most, they were confused between the product advertised and the leading character in the ad. Especially, some of the children in the 3-4 years old group were not able to distinguish the products advertised from the content. Some of the children perceived the leading character (cartoon film character or animated cushion toys) as the product advertised.

These findings show similarities with the other findings in the literature that determined that children get more confused when a cartoon film character is used in the ads. Kunkel reported that well-established licensed characters such as the Walt Disney characters could produce the greatest confusion when youngsters are asked to distinguish between programs and advertisements (Kunkel, 1988).

However, this study had an interesting outcome that is almost none of the children in this study could distinguish between ad and program. When asked, children were able to explain the ad but could not verbally explain what the difference between a program and an ad is. Only four children (9%) were able to distinguish the commercials from other programs perceptually, saying that ads are shorter.

In previous studies, the researchers showed conflicting evidence for whether young children (younger than 6) were able to distinguish between programs and commercials. Children as young as of the age of three years (Levin et al., 1982) can distinguish between a program and a commercial successfully but cannot explain the difference (Butter et al., 1981). This is because the children may be using the percentual clues such as the length, color, action speed and jingle of an ad to identify.

In addition, some researchers also indicated that some children could distinguish (Bijmolt et al. 1988; Butter et al., 1981; Levin et al., 1982). Oates et al. (2003) in a qualitative study with 6 – 10 years old children found that six years old children were confused in differentiating between programs and commercials.

As opposed to the findings in the literature, one important finding of this study showed that one fourth of the children comprehended that the purpose of ads was “to introduce the product and sell”. 5 of the 44 children indicated that the ads were for “selling the product” and 4 of the children indicated that their purpose is “to introduce the product”.

In some early researches it was suggested that young children were not able to understand the selling purpose of ads and children younger than eight understood a little or did not understand at all (Oates et al., 2001; Vaccaro & Slanermyr, 1998). In addition, some researchers determined that some of the children in pre-school period comprehended the purpose of the ads (Bijmolt et al., 1988; Chan, 2000; Donohue et al., 1980; Macklin, 1985). According to Kline (1985), by the age of five almost half of the children understand the persuasive purpose of advertising (see: Oates et al., 2001).

In this study, it was determined that some of the children comprehended the purpose of the ads and indicated that they were for introducing the products and selling. This could be because the parents who cannot meet their children’s needs frequently talk about the ads to persuade the children who keep on asking for the products they watch on TV. In a study conducted by Arnas (2006) in Turkey, it was found that 40% of the 3-8 years old children asked for the products they watched on the ads and especially the parents of the 4-5 years old had problems with their children in buying those products. In the same study, it was found that 95% of the parents talked about the ads and the products advertised with their children while watching them.

As indicated in the literature, the findings of this study also showed that some of the children perceived that the purpose of the ads is “to entertain” and “to give a break to the programs”. The findings of previous studies also supported this study (Oates et al., 2003).

Another important finding of this study is children believed what was said in ads. Almost all the children in three years old group believed that what was said in ads were true. However, as the age increased some children were more septic about whether the ads revealed the truth. Interestingly, it was determined that three of the five children, who indicated that the purpose of ads was to sell the product and understood the persuasive intention of advertising, did not believe that the ads were revealing the truth. This can be used as evidence that children who understand the purpose of the ads don’t believe the things as said in the ads and are more septic.

Same findings were seen in previous studies as well. In a study conducted with 6-10 years old children it was determined that the 6 years old children were confused whether to believe the ads or not and did not believe what was said. In addition, as opposed to the 6 years old, it was found that children at the 8-10 years old group did not believe the ads and derived this conclusion from their personal experience (Oates et al., 2003).

In a study conducted by Chan and McNeal (2004) with 6-14 years old Chinese children it was found that almost half of the children believed that the ads were true / honest. In this study also, it was found that in parallel to age the skepticism for TV commercials increased.

When compared to the older children, the youngsters believed in what is said in the ads to be true and the reason for this is their moral development. This is because the moral judgment of younger children is based on their moral development and what others say while the moral judgments of the older children depend on their personal experience (Chan & McNeal, 2002). For this reason, as children grow older they believe less in the ads due to their maturation and experience. This is because as they grow older they are less persuaded by what others say and use other sources of information more (Chan, 2000, Chan & McNeal, 2002). Due to this reason, children younger than seven could be less successful in understanding the advertising messages (Pine & Nash, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the understanding and perception of television advertising by Turkish children. The small sample used for this study is not considered representative and therefore cannot be generalized to all 3 and 6 years old Turkish children. The information offers only an initial step in an ongoing study of children's advertising literacy in Turkey. The insights provided by this exploratory study may be used to identify areas for further research. First, the research propositions

can be investigated with a larger, more representative sample. Second, this study is limited to 3-6 years old children's understanding of the TV commercials. Older age groups can be studied in another research. Third, children's recalling the products advertised and their consumption of these products can be studied. Fourth, the finding of this study was presented qualitatively. In another study, both qualitative and quantitative data can be evaluated together.

Altogether, these findings and their future research suggestions are significant in that they highlight the importance of considering how Turkish children perceive television advertising. This is particularly important to both domestic and global marketers for whom the Turkish children are primary and influential consumers.

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Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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— This article does not have any appendix —