The Unintended Effects of Television Advertising

A Parent-Child Survey

The aim of this parent-child survey is to investigate how television advertising is related to children’s purchase requests, materialism, disappointment, life dissatisfaction, and family conflict. In a first step, a conceptual model based on existing hypotheses was developed, and in a second step, this model was tested using a sample of 360 parent-child (8- to 12-year-olds) dyads. Using structural equation modeling, the findings show that advertising is positively and directly related to children’s purchase requests and materialism. It is also positively, though indirectly (mediated by advertising-induced purchase requests), related to family conflict, disappointment, and life dissatisfaction. Parent-child consumer communication and parental mediation of advertising are important moderators of the effects of advertising on children’s purchase requests and materialism.

Keywords: children; advertising; parent-child survey; materialism; parent-child conflict

Studies on the effects of advertising on children are generally based on two paradigms: the paradigm of the empowered child and that of the vulnerable child. In the empowered child paradigm, children are viewed as skilled and streetwise consumers capable of critically processing commercial messages. Research based on this paradigm—mostly marketing research—generally focuses on the intended effects of advertising. Intended advertising effects refer to children’s brand awareness, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions.
Advertising-effects research based on the vulnerable child paradigm assumes that children lack the cognitive skills to protect themselves against advertising messages. It is believed that children are more susceptible than adults to the seductive influences of commercials. Research within the vulnerable child paradigm typically concentrates on the unintended effects of advertising, which are the secondary, usually negative, effects of advertising exposure.

Research into the unintended advertising effects has mostly focused on three dependent variables: materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness. Research attention to these effects started in the early 1970s and reached its peak in the second half of the same decade. Remarkably, a few years later, interest in the topic began to wane again. Since the 1980s, very little scholarly research has addressed the unintended effects of advertising.

The aim of this study is to revitalize the research on the unintended effects of advertising. Extension of this line of research is necessary and important because it is uncertain whether the results found in the 1970s still hold for the present generation of children. On one hand, it is possible that today’s children have become more susceptible to advertising because in most Western societies, the commercial pressure on children has significantly increased in the past two decades (e.g., Buckingham, 2000; Gunter & Furnham, 1998). On the other hand, it is conceivable that children have become less vulnerable to unintended advertising effects because changes in child rearing and family communication styles in the past decades (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; McNeal, 1999) may have increased children’s defenses against advertising effects. In comparison to earlier generations, children are now more often encouraged to voice their opinion, to be critical, and to take part in consumer-related decision making (e.g., McNeal, 1999). It is, therefore, uncertain whether the results found in the 1970s still hold for the present generation of children. The aim of the present study is to reinvestigate whether and how television advertising is related to materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness.

Hypotheses About Three Unintended Effects of Advertising

During the past three decades, several hypotheses regarding the impact of advertising on materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness have been put forward in the literature. The model in Figure 1 includes all the different hypotheses on the three unintended effects that have received research attention since the 1970s.
Advertising enhances materialism. Several authors have suggested that advertising stimulates materialistic values in children (see Path 1 of Figure 1; Greenberg & Brand, 1993; Liebert, 1986; Pollay, 1986; Wulfemeyer & Mueller, 1992). According to these authors, advertising enhances materialism because it is designed to arouse desires for products that would not otherwise be salient. Advertising propagates the ideology that possessions are important and that desirable qualities—such as beauty, success, and happiness—can be obtained only by acquiring material possessions (Pollay, 1986; Wulfemeyer & Mueller, 1992).

Most correlational studies on the relation between advertising exposure and materialism have yielded small to moderate correlations, ranging from $r = .13$ to $r = .32$ (Atkin, 1975a, 1975b; Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1982; Ward & Wackman, 1971). These correlational findings have been confirmed by two experimental studies (Goldberg & Gorn, 1978; Greenberg & Brand, 1993).

Advertising causes parent-child conflict. A second hypothesis is that exposure to advertising leads to parent-child conflict (see Path 2; Atkin, 1980; Robertson, 1979). This direct advertising-conflict hypothesis was supported by two correlational studies (Atkin, 1975a, 1975b) and one experiment (Goldberg & Gorn, 1978).

Although it is possible that advertising exposure directly influences parent-child conflict, it is more plausible that the advertising-conflict relation is mediated by children’s purchase requests. According to this mediated hypothesis, advertising (a) leads to an increased number of requests for
advertised products that (b) increases the chance of parent-child conflict. This mediated relation is represented by Paths $2_a$ and $2_b$ in Figure 1. The indirect advertising-conflict hypothesis has also been confirmed. All correlational studies find positive correlations between advertising exposure and purchase requests (Atkin, 1975a, 1975b; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000; Galst & White, 1976; Isler, Popper, & Ward, 1987; Robertson & Rossiter, 1976, 1977; Robertson, Ward, Gatignon, & Klees, 1989) and between purchase requests and parent-child conflict (Atkin, 1975a, 1975b; Robertson et al., 1989; Ward & Wackman, 1972).

Advertising makes children unhappy. In the advertising-effects literature, unhappiness has been conceptualized as a short-term, temporary state of mind (being disappointed) and as a longer term, enduring state of mind (being dissatisfied with one’s life). Because these types of unhappiness are conceptually different from each other, they are modeled as separate variables in Figure 1.

Disappointment. The advertising-disappointment hypothesis assumes that greater exposure to advertising causes children to subject their parents to purchase requests more often. When children do not receive the requested products, they may become disappointed (Atkin, 1980; Goldberg & Gorn, 1978). This hypothesis received only marginal empirical support. Two studies find a small to moderate effect size between advertising exposure and disappointment after denial of a purchase request (Atkin, 1975b; Robertson, Rossiter, & Ward, 1985).

Life dissatisfaction. A first advertising–life dissatisfaction hypothesis stems from social-comparison theory (see Path $3_a$; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Richins, 1991). Advertising is assumed to depict a world full of beautiful people and desirable products. When children watch television advertising and compare their own situation with this idealized world, the discrepancy between the two worlds might cause life dissatisfaction (Atkin, 1980; Richins, 1991). Evidence for this hypothesis is lacking. The sole study on the topic conducted among children did not find that advertising exposure affected girls’ satisfaction with themselves and their environment (Martin & Kennedy, 1993).

A second advertising–life dissatisfaction hypothesis is a mediated one. It assumes that advertising exposure (a) leads to materialism that (b) results in life dissatisfaction because materialistic people are assumed to be less satisfied with their lives (Path $3_b$). Materialistic people consider objects as an important means to gain happiness (Sirgy, 1998). When the products fail to
yield the promised state of happiness, unhappiness will follow. There is evidence for a relation between advertising exposure and materialism (see below). However, although the relation between materialism and life dissatisfaction has been established among adults (see Wright & Larsen, 1993, for a meta-analysis), this relation has not been investigated among children.

Conclusion and research question. Although most studies into the unintended effects of advertising find results in support of the different advertising-effects hypotheses, most studies were conducted several decades ago. The aim of the present study was to reinvestigate all direct and indirect unintended advertising effects that are modeled in Figure 1. Therefore, our first research question was:

Research Question 1: To what extent are the hypothesized relations between advertising exposure, materialism, parent-child conflict, disappointment, and life dissatisfaction modeled in Figure 1 supported by empirical survey data?

The Moderating Influence of Child and Family Variables

Although most previous studies yield evidence in support of the hypotheses modeled in Figure 1, several of these studies demonstrate that the three unintended advertising effects are moderated by both child (i.e., age and gender) and family variables (i.e., socioeconomic status and parent-child consumer communication).

Age. There is as yet no evidence that age moderates the effects of advertising on materialism and unhappiness (Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Goldberg & Gorn, 1978; Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1982). However, age does moderate the relation between advertising and parent-child conflict: Younger children more often come into conflict with their parents about advertised products than do older children (Isler et al., 1987; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000). There are several explanations for this moderating effect of age. First, younger children have been shown to make more advertising-induced purchase requests than do older children, which increases the chance of parent-child conflict (Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Ward & Wackman, 1972; Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977). It has been shown that younger children are more vulnerable to persuasive information because they have less experience and domain-specific knowledge that they can use while processing commercials (Roedder, 1981). They are, therefore, less able
to come up with critical thoughts and counterarguments while watching commercials, which enhances the likelihood that they will ask for advertised products (Brucks, Armstrong, & Goldberg, 1988).

A second reason for a stronger effect of advertising on parent-child conflict among younger children is that younger children more often have difficulty delaying gratifications than do older children (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). If young children see something as attractive, they focus all their attention on the enticing aspects of this stimulus and find it very difficult to resist, which may increase the chance of parent-child conflict.

Finally, the decrease in advertising-induced parent-child conflict with age may be a result of children’s growing ability to apply sophisticated persuasion techniques. Research shows that young children quite often ask, whine, and show anger to persuade their parents. Older children, in contrast, tend to use more sophisticated persuasion techniques, such as negotiation, flattery, and white lies (Williams & Burns, 2000). Such sophisticated persuasion strategies generally lead to less parent-child conflict than do the persuasion strategies of younger children (Atkin, 1978; Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Giroius-Brown, 1987; Mangleburg, 1990; Williams & Burns, 2000).

Gender. It has been shown that the effect of advertising on parent-child conflict is stronger for boys than for girls (Atkin, 1975a, 1975b). Boys are generally more persistent in their requests for advertised products than are girls (McNeal, 1999; Sheikh & Moleski, 1977; Ward & Wackman, 1972). They more often rely on forceful or demanding strategies when trying to persuade their parents, whereas girls are more likely to rely on tact and polite suggestions (Cowan & Avants, 1988). The subtle persuasion strategies used by girls may decrease the chance of parent-child conflict (Atkin, 1978).

Socioeconomic status. There is as yet no evidence that socioeconomic status is related to advertising-induced materialism and unhappiness. However, there is evidence that low-income children make more advertising-induced purchase requests than do high-income children, which could increase the chance of parent-child conflict in low-income families (Young, 1990). One explanation for this higher advertising-induced purchase request behavior in low-income families is that low-income children watch more television, which may stimulate their advertising-induced purchase request behavior (Moore & Moschis, 1981). Another explanation is that parents of low-income families less often discuss advertising effects with their children than do high-income parents (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Robertson, 1979), which may put low-income children at a disadvantage to protect themselves against advertising influences (Donohue & Meyer, 1984).
Parent-child consumer communication. Several studies show that family communication processes interact with advertising effects. By discussing consumer matters and advertising content, parents are able to increase their children's defenses against advertising and to mitigate advertising-induced materialism and purchase requests (Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1982; Prasad, Rao, & Sheikh, 1978).

Conclusion and research question. Findings from earlier research give reason to assume that age, gender, socioeconomic status, and parent-child consumer communication affect the relations between (a) advertising exposure and materialism, (b) advertising exposure and purchase requests, (c) purchase requests and parent-child conflict, and (d) purchase requests and disappointment. However, these earlier studies do not agree on the precise nature and the direction of these moderator effects. Because earlier research is too scarce to formulate specific hypotheses, we formulated the following research question:

Research Question 2: How do age, gender, socioeconomic status, and parent-child consumer communication moderate the hypothesized relations between advertising exposure, materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness?

Method

Sample and Procedure

The results of this study are based on a parent-child dyad survey conducted in February 2002. A parent-child sample was chosen because some variables in our study (e.g., advertising exposure) are assumed to be more accurately measured among children, whereas other variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, parental mediation) are more adequately measured among parents.

The children were recruited from five elementary schools in urban and rural districts in the Netherlands. In all, 427 children completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, which had been previously tested in a pilot study among 10 children. The questionnaires were administered in the children's regular classrooms by a trained examiner. After completing the questionnaire—which took about 25 minutes—the children were given a parent questionnaire to take home. They were told they would receive a present when they returned the completed questionnaire.

A total of 360 questionnaires (84%) were returned. This resulted in a total sample of 360 parent-child dyads with various economic backgrounds. In the
sample of parent-child dyads, all educational levels of parents were represented, although most of the parents were relatively well educated: 25% had completed high school, 35% were college graduates, and 28% had master’s degrees. It must be noted, however, that Dutch adults are comparatively well educated. The final child sample consisted of 175 boys (48.6%) and 185 girls (51.4%) between the ages of 8 and 12 (M = 10.0, SD = 1.25). The children were grouped into two age ranges: from ages 8 to 10 (n = 224, M = 9.17, SD = .79) and from ages 11 to 12 (n = 136, M = 11.31, SD = .54). The parent sample consisted of 291 mothers and 61 fathers, and 8 parents who did not indicate their gender.

The parent questionnaire was accompanied by a letter asking the parent who spends the most time with the child to fill out the questionnaire. If more than one child in the family had brought home the questionnaire, the parent was asked to complete the questionnaire for each child, with that child in mind. When all questionnaires had been collected, the parents were debriefed about the nature and purpose of the study via the school newspaper. All the children—including those who had not returned the questionnaire—received a present.

Measures

Survey research among children may lead to concerns about the reliability of children’s self-reports. To eliminate this potential problem, we measured nearly all variables in this study among both children and parents. Only two scales, which were validated in earlier child surveys (advertising exposure and children’s life dissatisfaction), were measured exclusively among children.

Advertising exposure: advertising viewing frequency. Advertising viewing frequency was measured by presenting the children with the titles of 10 commercials that had been broadcast on several television networks during the data collection period. We asked the children to indicate whether they had seen each of the commercials 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, or 3 = often. This method has been demonstrated to be a valid measure of children’s television exposure among elementary school children (Vooijs, Van der Voort, & Beentjes, 1987). We conducted a principal components analysis with varimax rotation on the 10 commercials. This analysis yielded one factor, which explained 33.1% of the variance. A total score of children’s advertising exposure was calculated by averaging the unweighted scores on the 10 commercials. Cronbach’s α of this scale was .77 (M = 2.13, SD = .41).
Materialism. To ascertain the children’s level of materialism, we adopted a scale used by most studies on the advertising-materialism relation (Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1982; Ward & Wackman, 1971). Because our pilot study had demonstrated that the youngest children in our sample could not deal with items posed as statements, all items were transformed into questions. Examples of questions were (a) Do you (does your child) think it is important to have a lot of money? (b) Do you (does your child) think it is important to own a lot of things? and (c) Would you (your child) like to be able to buy things that cost a lot of money? Children and parents responded to the questions on a four-point scale, ranging from 1 = no, not at all to 4 = yes, very much.

A principle components analysis with children’s responses on these five items yielded one factor, explaining 35.7% of the variance. A principle components analysis with parents’ responses yielded a similar one-factor solution, explaining 50.0% of the variance. Materialism scales were constructed by averaging the scores of the five items for children (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .70$, $M = 2.74$, $SD = .55$) and for parents ($\alpha = .75$, $M = 2.29$, $SD = .55$). The correlation between the materialism scales measured among children versus parents was $r = .37$ ($p < .001$).

Purchase requests. To measure children’s purchase request behavior, both parents and children were presented with a list of nine products, which were selected to appeal both to boys and girls and to younger and older children (i.e., toys, CDs, school stationery, candies, clothes, computer games, snacks, sports equipment, and money). The children were asked to indicate whether they 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, or 3 = often asked their parents for each product. Parents were asked the same questions about their children’s request behavior. Children’s and parents’ responses proved to be highly consistent. Principle components analyses on children’s and parents’ responses showed a similar one-factor solution, explaining 23.5% of the variance in children’s responses and 25.4% of the variance in parents’ responses. The total purchase-request variable was constructed by averaging the scores on the nine items for children (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .59$, $M = 1.76$, $SD = .33$) and for parents ($\alpha = .69$, $M = 1.69$, $SD = .33$). The correlation between the two purchase request measures was $r = .40$ ($p < .001$).

Parent-child conflict. Parents and children were asked to indicate on a four-point scale how often they had a conflict after denial of a purchase request for each of four products (toys, candy, school stationery, clothes). Principle components analyses yielded one factor that explained 45.0% of the variance in children’s responses and 52.5% of the variance in parents’
responses. Total conflict scores were constructed by averaging the scores on the four items for children (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .58$, $M = 1.17$, $SD = .29$) and for parents ($\alpha = .69$, $M = 1.18$, $SD = .30$). The correlation between the child and parent measures was relatively low but still significant ($r = .11, p < .05$).

Unhappiness: disappointment. Disappointment was measured by asking both children and parents how often the children felt disappointed after denial of a request for toys, candy, school stationery, and clothes. In both samples, principle components analyses yielded one factor, explaining 35.4% of the variance in children’s responses and 48.6% of the variance in parental responses. Separate scales were constructed for parents (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .65$, $M = 1.84$, $SD = .50$) and children ($\alpha = .51$, $M = 1.69$, $SD = .46$). The correlation between the disappointment measures among children and among parents was $r = .21$ ($p < .001$).

Unhappiness: life dissatisfaction. To determine children’s life dissatisfaction, we adapted the Student Life Satisfaction Scale developed by Huebner (1994), which has been proved to yield reliable results among 8- to 12-year-olds. Children were asked to indicate on a four-point scale how happy they were about their life, home, parents, friends, class, school, and themselves (1 = very happy, 2 = happy, 3 = a little happy, 4 = not happy). Principle components analyses yielded one factor explaining 43.2% of the variance. A total life-dissatisfaction score was constructed by averaging the scores on the eight items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$, $M = 1.63$, $SD = .45$).

Moderator Variables

We identified two child variables (age, gender) and three family variables (socioeconomic status, consumer-related communication, advertising-related communication) as possible moderator variables. The three family variables were recoded into dichotomous variables by means of median splits.

Socioeconomic status. To determine the family’s socioeconomic status, parents were asked to indicate the family income on an eight-point scale. These responses were recoded into low-income families ($n = 177$, $M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.33$) and high-income families ($n = 183$, $M = 7.39$, $SD = .66$).

Consumer-related communication. Most studies investigating consumer communication (e.g., Carlson & Grossbart, 1988; Moschis & Moore, 1982) use a scale based on Chaffée, McLeod, and Atkin’s (1971) Family Communication
Patterns Scale. However, because the reliabilities of these adapted scales were usually low and some items were outdated, we developed a new scale based on the concept-oriented items of the Family Communication Patterns Scale. Our list of seven items measuring consumer-related communication on a four-point scale (ranging from 1 = never to 4 = very often) included such questions as (a) How often do you and your child discuss the advantages and disadvantages of products? and (b) How often do you encourage your child to give his or her opinion on certain products or brands?

Principle components analyses on these seven items measuring parent-child consumer communication yielded one factor explaining 44.7% of the variance. A total consumer-communicationscore was constructed by averaging the scores on the seven items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79, M = 2.53, SD = .52$). We distinguished parent-child dyads low on consumer communication ($n = 191, M = 2.14, SD = .26$) from parent-child dyads high on consumer communication ($n = 169, M = 2.69, SD = .36$).

Advertising-related communication. Advertising-related communication involves the methods parents use to mediate children’s advertising viewing. To determine the family’s level of advertising-related communication, we adapted a parental television mediation scale developed by Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, and Marseille (1999). We used 10 items that dealt with the frequency (ranging from 1 = never to 3 = often) with which parents used various advertising-mediation strategies. The final list included such items as (a) How often do you explain that the purpose of advertising is to sell products? (b) How often do you point out that advertising does not always tell the truth? and (c) How often do you tell your child to turn off the television when he or she is watching advertising? A total advertising-communication score was constructed by averaging the scores on the 10 items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80, M = 1.54, SD = .33$). We distinguished between low advertising mediation ($n = 208, M = 1.31, SD = .17$) and high advertising mediation ($n = 152, M = 1.84, SD = .23$).

Results

Our first research question addressed the relations between advertising exposure, materialism, parent-child conflict, disappointment, and life dissatisfaction. To answer this question, we first investigated the zero-order correlations between the variables in the model presented in Figure 1 (see Table 1). The upper-right triangle in Table 1 presents the correlations between variables measured in the child sample. The lower-left triangle depicts the correlations between variables measured in the parent sample.
As Table 1 shows, the correlations between the variables measured among children and those measured among parents exhibited highly similar patterns. With the exception of the relation between disappointment and life dissatisfaction, there were no substantial discrepancies between the correlations investigated in the child and parent samples. We therefore based the remaining analyses in this study on the child measures.

Testing the Model

To investigate the hypothesized model, we used the EQS program for structural equation modeling (Bentler, 1989). The path analysis was carried out in two steps. First, we investigated whether the initial model in Figure 1 conformed to the data. This model would be supported if the $\chi^2$ was not significant and the comparative fit index (CFI) was higher than .90. In case the model would have to be rejected, we undertook a second step in the analysis to determine what causal paths should be added to or removed from the initial model. We based our path analysis on one independent variable (advertising exposure), one mediating variable (purchase requests), and four dependent variables (materialism, parent-child conflict, disappointment, and life dissatisfaction). This model is represented by the solid arrows in Figure 2.

The initially hypothesized model had to be rejected, $\chi^2(8, N = 360) = 111.59, p < .001$, CFI = .50. Both the Lagrange Multiplier Test (Bentler, 1989) and the report of the largest standardized residuals indicated that the model could be improved with four additional causal paths: (a) from materialism to purchase requests ($\beta = .35, p < .001$), (b) from materialism to parent-child conflict ($\beta = .19, p < .001$), (c) from disappointment to parent-child conflict ($\beta =$...
31, p < .001), and (d) from disappointment to life dissatisfaction (β = .11, p < .05). The Wald Test for dropping parameters (Bentler, 1989) indicated that the model could be improved by dropping three paths, namely, (a) between advertising exposure and parent-child conflict, (b) between advertising exposure and life dissatisfaction, and (c) between materialism and life dissatisfaction.

The resulting model fit the data very well, with χ²(7, N = 360) = 13.03, p = .07, CFI = .97, and was therefore accepted as an adequate description of the data. The broken arrows in Figure 2 represent the relations that were added to the initially hypothesized model. The coefficients in Figure 2 represent standardized beta weights.

Our structural equation modeling indicated that of the seven causal paths specified in the initially hypothesized model, four were found to be statistically significant. These paths represented the relations between (a) advertising exposure and materialism (β = .22, p < .001), (b) advertising exposure and purchase requests (β = .11, p < .05), (c) purchase requests and parent-child conflict (β = .12, p < .05), and (d) purchase requests and disappointment (β = .34, p < .001). Three initially hypothesized relations turned out to be nonsignificant: (a) the direct relation between advertising exposure and parent-child conflict, (b) the relation between advertising exposure and life dissatisfaction, and (c) the relation between materialism and life dissatisfaction.

Figure 2. Observed Path-Analytic Model for the Unintended Effects of Advertising

Note. Solid arrows indicate initially hypothesized relations. Broken arrows indicate relations that were added to the final model.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. ns = nonsignificant.
**Moderator Analyses**

Our second research question addressed the moderating effects of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and parent-child consumer communication. To investigate these effects, we tested whether the relations between advertising exposure and the dependent variables found for the whole sample also held for different subgroups. These subgroups were defined in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, consumer communication, and advertising communication.

In our subgroup analyses, we concentrated on the four main relations between the independent and dependent variables in the final model. Therefore, we investigated the relations between (a) advertising exposure and materialism, (b) advertising exposure and purchase requests, (c) purchase requests and parent-child conflict, and (d) purchase requests and disappointment. Differences between correlation coefficients in the different subgroups were computed with the formula:

\[ z = z_{r1} - z_{r2} / \sqrt{(1/N_1 - 3) + (1/N_2 - 3)} \]

(see McCall, 1998). The results of the moderator analyses for the four relations are shown in Table 2.

As Table 2 shows, three of the four investigated relations (i.e., between advertising exposure and purchase requests, between purchase requests and parent-child conflict, and between purchase requests and disappointment) were stronger for younger children than for older children. However, most of these differences only approached significance, probably due to the relatively small sample sizes of the subgroups.

As for gender, our results showed that all four relations were stronger for boys than for girls, suggesting that boys are more susceptible to some unintended effects than are girls. This particularly pertained to the relations between purchase requests and disappointment and between purchase requests and parent-child conflict.

Socioeconomic status turned out to be a significant moderator of the relation between purchase requests and parent-child conflict. In low-income families, children's purchase requests were significantly more likely to result in parent-child conflict. The relation between advertising exposure and materialism followed the same pattern. As anticipated in the introduction, there are two possible explanations for the moderating influence of socioeconomic status on advertising effects, namely, (a) the relatively high television exposure of low-income families and (b) the relatively low consumer communication in these families. To check the validity of these explanations, we investigated correlations between socioeconomic status, advertising exposure, and consumer communication. Socioeconomic status was significantly related only to advertising exposure (\( r = -.16, p < .01 \)) and not to consumer communication, sug-
Buijzen, Valkenburg • Television Advertising

Table 2
The Moderating Influence of Child and Family Variables on Four Unintended Advertising Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigated Relation</th>
<th>Advertising Exposure—Materialism</th>
<th>Advertising Exposure—Purchase Requests</th>
<th>Purchase Requests—Parent-Child Conflict</th>
<th>Purchase Requests—Disappointment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderator Variable</td>
<td>Age ≤ 10 (n = 224)       0.23</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age &gt;10 (n = 136)        0.24</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Boys (n = 175)    0.23</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.41(^x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Girls (n = 185)   0.18</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.30(^y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socioeconomic status Low (n = 177) 0.26</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.23(^x)</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socioeconomic status High (n = 183) 0.16</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.04(^y)</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer communication Low (n = 191) 0.28</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer communication High (n = 169) 0.16</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advertising communication Low (n = 208) 0.30(^x)</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advertising communication High (n = 152) 0.13(^y)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All data are regression coefficients based on structural equation modeling (Bentler, 1989). Values with different superscripts are significantly different from each other at least at \( p < .05 \).
Advertising Enhances Materialism

The hypothesis that exposure to advertising stimulates materialistic values in children was supported by our results. Children who frequently watched television commercials held stronger materialistic values than their peers who less often watched commercials. The moderate advertising-materialism relation was just as strong for younger as for older children. This result is in line with theories of materialism, which assume that both younger and older children are sensitive to the desire-provoking messages in television advertising (Moschis & Moore, 1982; Sheikh, Prasad, & Rao, 1974; Young, 1990).

Our study shows that the effect of advertising on materialism was significantly weaker for children in families that often discuss consumer and advertising matters. This finding is in agreement with a series of adult-mediation studies that show that instructive or evaluative parental mediation can mitigate, channel, or counteract undesirable media effects (see Nathanson, 1999; Valkenburg et al., 1999).

Advertising Causes Parent-Child Conflict

Our results demonstrate that advertising is related to parent-child conflict. However, as anticipated, this relation is not direct but is mediated by children’s purchase requests. In accordance with the mediated advertising-conflict hypothesis, our results show that (a) advertising exposure leads to an increased number of purchase requests that (b) enhance parent-child conflict.

The relation between advertising exposure and purchase requests was moderated by the child’s age. We found a stronger advertising–purchase request relation for younger children than for older children, which is in line with earlier evidence showing younger children’s greater susceptibility to advertising effects. The advertising–purchase request relation was also moderated by consumer- and advertising-related family communication. Children in families low on advertising and consumer communication made more advertising-induced purchase requests. This result confirms earlier evidence that parents can discourage advertising-induced request behavior by teaching children consumer skills (Donohue & Meyer, 1984; Moschis & Churchill, 1978).

Our findings show that the relation between children’s purchase requests and parent-child conflict is stronger for younger children and for boys. These findings corroborate research showing that younger children and boys use less subtle and less sophisticated persuasion strategies than do older
children and girls, thus reducing the chance of parent-child conflict (Atkin, 1978; Mangleburg, 1990; Williams & Burns, 2000).

Finally, we found that the relation between purchase requests and parent-child conflict was stronger in low-income families than in high-income families. This means that a request made by a child in a low-income family more easily results in a parent-child conflict than a request made by a child in a high-income family. One explanation might lie in the likely higher refusal rate due to limited monetary resources in lower socioeconomic-status families. Another explanation for higher parent-child conflict in lower socioeconomic-status families might be that low-income parents employ less sophisticated strategies for conflict resolution. It has been demonstrated, for instance, that parents in low-income families more often use coercive methods to deal with family conflicts than do parents in high-income families (Bardi & Borgognini-Tarli, 2001).

Advertising Leads to Disappointment and Life Dissatisfaction

Our study did not find a direct relation between advertising and disappointment or between advertising and life dissatisfaction. Therefore, our results disconfirm the hypothesis that advertising makes children unhappy because it creates unrealistic expectations about themselves and their environment. However, we did find an indirect relation between advertising, disappointment, and life dissatisfaction. Our structural equation modeling showed that advertising exposure (a) led to an increased number of purchase requests that (b) led to an increased level of disappointment (because not all advertising-induced requests can be granted) that (c) negatively affected children’s satisfaction about themselves and their environment.

Conclusion

The majority of our results are in line with those found during the 1970s. Despite the observed changes in children’s media and family environment (e.g., Gunter & Furnham, 1998; McNeal, 1999), the effect sizes in our study are comparable to those found during the 1970s. An explanation for this unexpected lack of difference could be that media in the Netherlands have only recently been commercialized. Until the end of the 1980s, Dutch children’s programming was limited to public television on Wednesday afternoons and Saturdays. However, since the introduction of commercial television in 1989, children can watch children’s programs every day and all day. Although the Dutch public broadcasters have always been reserved with
child-targeted advertising, today’s children’s programs aired by commercial networks usually contain approximately 25 child-targeted commercials per hour (Valkenburg, 2000).

Our study suggests that television advertising has three unintended effects. One of these—the relation between advertising exposure and materialism—is direct. The other two—between advertising and parent-child conflict and between advertising and unhappiness—are indirect. It is important to realize, though, that parents are able to mitigate or even counteract most of the undesirable advertising effects found in the present study. Our findings show that the effects of advertising on children’s purchase requests, materialism, and parent-child conflict can be reduced by parental mediation of advertising (e.g., explaining the function of advertising and commenting on commercials) and by explaining consumer matters (e.g., teaching the child consumer skills and talking about purchase decisions).

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Buijzen, Valkenburg • Television Advertising


501


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