Adult Mediation of Television Advertising Effects:

A Comparison of Factual, Evaluative, and Combined Strategies

Moniek Buijzen and Claartje Mens

Abstract

In an experiment among 5- to 10-year-old children ($N = 272$), we investigated how different adult mediation strategies (i.e., factual vs. evaluative vs. combined mediation) modify the effects of television advertising (i.e., liking, desires, and intended requests for advertised products). Overall, evaluative and combined mediation were most successful in reducing advertising effects. These mediation strategies were most successful among 7- to 8-year-olds, who are in the process of developing cognitive and attitudinal defenses against advertising. The 5- to 6-year-olds generally had difficulty processing the mediation, while 9- to 10-year-olds benefited only from the evaluative mediation strategy. The theoretical and societal implications of these findings are discussed.
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A growing body of evidence shows that children are less able than adults to defend themselves against the potentially undesirable effects of television advertising (see Kunkel et al., 2004 for a review). However, a number of studies have demonstrated that children’s susceptibility to advertising can be decreased by instructing them about the purpose and nature of advertising (see Boush, 2001 for a review). These studies have primarily investigated the influence of school-based instruction and media literacy programs and, to a lesser extent, parental explanations about advertising. Both types of research have shown that such instructions can increase children’s knowledge and understanding of advertising (Bijmolt et al., 1998; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005; Donohue, Henke, & Meyer, 1983; Feshbach, Feshbach, & Cohen, 1982; Prasad, Rao, & Sheikh, 1978; Roberts et al., 1980; Wiman, 1983).

However, previous research has primarily focused on general instructions about advertising, and has disregarded the role of adult commentary during children’s exposure to commercials. This lack of research is remarkable, because such adult mediation has been shown to be an effective tool in the management of other television effects, such as media-induced aggression and fears (Nathanson, 1999, 2004; Cantor, Sparks, & Hoffner, 1988; Wilson, 1989; Wilson & Weiss, 1991). In addition, previous studies have primarily emphasized children’s learning from advertising instructions as a dependent measure, and have not investigated differences in the ultimate effects of advertising on children.
Therefore, the present study investigates whether mediation administered by a co-viewing adult during exposure to television advertising can reduce the effects of the advertisements.

We investigate three advertising effects: children’s liking, desires, and intended requests for advertised products. These are important dependent measures, because (a) they are important intended effects of advertisers, whose main concern is to achieve changes in children’s attitudes and purchase or request behavior (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a; Gunter, Oates, & Blades, 2005; McNeal, 1992; Smith & Atkin, 2003), and (b) advertising research has shown that these intended effects are important precursors of potentially undesirable consequences, including materialistic attitudes, parent-child conflict, and unhealthy eating habits (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003b; Kunkel et al., 2004).

In order to predict how adult mediation can reduce the effects of advertising, more insight is needed in the processes of advertising persuasion. Children’s liking, desires, and intended requests for products are part of their attitude systems (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996; Zimbardo & Leippe, 2002). According to advertising processing theories, the different components of attitude systems can be considered as consecutive stages in the persuasion process between advertising exposure and actual behavior (Brown & Stayman, 1992; Gunter et al., 2005; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1996; Phelps & Hoy, 1996). Because attitude systems are organized, a change in any one component may cause change in another (Zimbardo & Leippe, 2002).

Two pivotal components of attitude systems are cognitions about and attitudes toward advertisements (Zimbardo & Leippe, 2002). It is often assumed that advertising cognitions and attitudes affect liking of the advertised product, which, in turn, influences desires and intended requests for the product (Brown & Stayman, 1992; Moore & Lutz,
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2000; Phelps & Hoy, 1996). Because children’s advertising cognitions and attitudes are important precursors of their susceptibility to advertising effects, they are often referred to as cognitive and attitudinal defenses against advertising (Brucks, Armstrong, & Goldberg, 1988; Rossiter & Robertson, 1974). Several studies have shown that both cognitive and attitudinal defenses are negatively related to children’s liking, desires, and requests for advertised products (Batra & Ray, 1986; Derbaix & Bree, 1997; Galst & White, 1976; Phelps & Hoy, 1996; Robertson & Rossiter, 1977; Robinson et al., 2001; Roedder, Sternthal, & Calder, 1983; Rossiter & Robertson, 1974).

In other words, in order to achieve changes in children’s susceptibility to advertising effects, adult mediation should be aimed at strengthening their cognitive and attitudinal advertising defenses. Therefore, we investigate three mediation strategies that were derived from the literature on media violence (Nathanson, 2004) and adapted to reflect mediation more directly relevant to television advertising. Factual mediation relates to children’s cognitive defenses and is aimed at increasing children’s knowledge and understanding of the commercial and the advertised product (e.g., “this commercial wants to sell you those toys”). Evaluative mediation relates to children’s attitudinal defenses and is aimed at negatively influencing children’s attitudes toward the commercial and the advertised product (e.g., “this commercial is stupid”). Finally, combined mediation combines factual and evaluative mediation comments and is aimed at stimulating both cognitive and attitudinal defenses (e.g., “this commercial is stupid, they just want to sell you those toys”).

In a controlled experiment, we compare the effectiveness of the three mediation strategies among children in early and middle childhood. Because children’s cognitive and
attitudinal defenses develop as they mature (Boush, 2001; Brucks et al., 1988; John, 1999), we expect that the effectiveness of the different mediation strategies will vary for children in different age groups. Therefore, the experiment includes children in early childhood (ages 5-6), children on the threshold between early and middle childhood (ages 7-8) and children in middle childhood (ages 9-10). In order to formulate specific hypotheses about the effectiveness of the different mediation strategies, we first review the literature on the development of cognitive and attitudinal defenses.

Increasing Children’s Cognitive Defenses Against Advertising

The development of cognitive advertising defenses is, in the first place, a matter of acquiring the socio-cognitive skills to be able to understand the nature and selling intent of advertising (Gunter et al., 2005; John, 1999). For instance, children in early childhood (younger than 6) lack the social perspective taking skills to understand that the purpose of advertisers is to influence the attitudes and behaviors of viewers (Gunter et al., 2005; John, 1999). In addition, the development of cognitive defenses is also a matter of obtaining the information processing skills that enable the child to apply this knowledge while watching a commercial (Brucks et al., 1988). Theories of children’s information processing suggest that children in early childhood are not capable of using sophisticated information storage and retrieval strategies. They do therefore not come up with critical thoughts and counterarguments while watching commercials (Brucks et al., 1988; Moore & Lutz, 2000; Roedder, 1981).

By the age of 7 or 8, most children are able to distinguish commercials from television programs and have at least a basic understanding of their persuasive intent (Bijmolt et al., 1998; Kunkel et al., 2004; Oates, Blades, & Gunter, 2001; Rossiter &
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Robertson 1974; Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977). However, they are not yet capable of spontaneously retrieving and applying that knowledge while processing the commercial (Brucks et al., 1988; Moore en Lutz, 2000; Roedder, 1981). In other words, although most children have acquired sufficient knowledge and understanding of advertising intent by the time they are 8, information processing research suggests that these cognitive defenses need to be cued or activated until they are about 12.

Factual mediation of advertising effects. We expect that factual mediation comments administered during a particular exposure occasion can reduce the effects of advertising by enhancing and activating children’s cognitive advertising defenses. More specifically, factual mediation can increase children’s cognitive defenses by providing them with information about the commercials and the advertised product. This assumption finds support in earlier research findings that adult explanations about the nature of advertising can increase children’s understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising (Bijmolt et al., 1998; Wiman, 1983), knowledge of special camera and editing techniques (Roberts et al., 1980), and skepticism about commercials (Wiman, 1983).

There are two reasons to further investigate factual mediation of advertising. First, previous research has mainly focused on the influence of factual mediation on children’s cognitive advertising defenses, but has generally disregarded its effectiveness in reducing the effects of advertising during exposure (see Kunkel et al., 2004). Although children’s cognitive defenses have been shown to be related to their susceptibility to advertising effects, it is uncertain whether they will actually apply this knowledge while processing the commercial (Brucks et al., 1988). Second, previous studies have typically involved children over the age of 8. As argued above, children develop the most important advertising
knowledge and skills before that age. It is important to investigate the effectiveness of factual mediation among children who are still in the process of developing cognitive advertising defenses (Austin & Johnson, 1997b).

Based on the developmental literature on children’s cognitive defenses, we expect that the youngest children in our sample (5- to 6-year-olds) will be unable to understand and process factual mediation comments. In early childhood, children lack the socio-cognitive abilities to understand advertisers’ motives and selling intent and will, consequently, not be able to process factual comments about the nature of advertising. In line with this assumption, research on mediation of media violence suggests that factual mediation is too abstract and complex for young children to understand and apply (Lang, 2000; Nathanson, 2004). Among children above the age of 7, who are in the process of developing cognitive defenses but are unlikely to use them spontaneously, factual mediation comments may help to enhance and activate these defenses. Our first hypothesis therefore states:

H1: Factual advertising mediation reduces the liking, desires, and intended requests for advertised products among children older than 7.

*Increasing Children’s Attitudinal Defenses Against Advertising*

Similar to cognitive defenses, attitudinal advertising defenses develop as children mature. With increasing age, children’s attitudes toward commercials change in two respects. First, young children find advertising more interesting and attractive than older children do (Barling & Fullagar, 1983; Moore & Lutz, 2000). Typical features of commercials, including appealing (child) characters, attractive products, rhyme, catchy jingles, their short length, and even their repetitive character, correspond highly to young
children’s preferences in television programs (Greer, Potts, Wright, & Huston, 1982; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). In middle childhood, children become progressively more critical about, and thereby less susceptible to, advertising messages (Austin & Johnson, 1997a, 1997b; Boush, 2001).

In addition, children’s attitudinal defenses are also determined by their level of cognitive advertising defenses. Several studies have shown that children’s increasing knowledge and understanding of advertising negatively affect their liking of commercials (Chan & McNeal, 2004; Feshbach et al., 1982; Robertson & Rossiter, 1977). It should be noted, however, that even when a child has developed the necessary knowledge and skills to counter a persuasive message, a commercial or advertised product can still be highly appealing (Prasad et al., 1978; Riecken & Yavas, 1990; Valkenburg, 2004).

*Evaluative and combined mediation of advertising effects.* We expect that evaluative mediation during exposure to advertising can reduce the effects of the commercials by activating children’s attitudinal defenses. A combined strategy of factual and evaluative mediation can increase both cognitive and attitudinal defenses. In contrast to factual mediation, evaluative and combined mediation strategies have hardly received any research attention. However, several authors have argued that not only cognitions, but also emotions and feelings play a major role in advertising processing, and that attitudes toward commercials can even be a dominant factor in children’s advertising processing (Derbaix & Bree, 1997; Phelps & Hoy, 1996). In addition, affect-eliciting information, such as evaluative mediation, is considered easier to understand and process than other kinds of information (Lang, 2000; Nathanson, 2004).
Therefore, it is worth investigating whether evaluative mediation comments can substitute or complement factual mediation comments. Based on the developmental literature on children’s attitudinal defenses we expect that evaluative and combined mediation enhance and activate children’s advertising defenses and, thus, will reduce the effects of television advertising. In addition, we expect that these mediation strategies are more effective than factual mediation in reducing advertising effects. We investigate the following hypothesis:

H2a: Evaluative and combined mediation reduce children’s liking, desires, and intended requests for advertised products.

H2b: Evaluative and combined mediation are more effective in reducing advertising effects than factual mediation.

Method

Sample and Design

A total sample of 272 children (54% boys, 46% girls) were recruited from three elementary schools in urban and rural districts in the Netherlands. The sample consisted of 95 preschoolers (ages 5-6), 83 second graders (ages 7-8), and 94 fourth graders (ages 9-10). The results of this study are part of a larger research project on the processes and effects of advertising mediation (see also Buijzen, in press).

The experiment used a 4 (mediation condition: factual mediation, evaluative mediation, combined mediation, and no mediation) x 3 (age group: 5- to 6-year-olds, 7- to 8-year-olds, and 9- to 10-year-olds) factorial design. Sixty-nine participants received factual mediation (5-6 year-olds: $n = 24$; 7-8-year-olds: $n = 21$; 9-10-year-olds: $n = 24$), 72 received evaluative mediation (5-6-year-olds: $n = 24$; 7-8-year-olds: $n = 24$; 9-10-year-olds,
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$n = 24$), 66 received combined factual and evaluative mediation ($5\text{-}6$-year-olds: $n = 23$; $7\text{-}8$-year-olds: $n = 19$; $9\text{-}10$-year-olds, $n = 24$), and 65 received no mediation ($5\text{-}6$-year-olds: $n = 24$; $7\text{-}8$-year-olds, $n = 19$; $9\text{-}10$-year-olds: $n = 22$).

**Procedure and Experimental Manipulation**

Children in each classroom were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. A female experimenter brought the children in groups of 1 to 8 ($Mdn = 5$) to an empty classroom in which a television and video recorder were located. To make the children feel at ease, the experimenter offered them some lemonade and chatted with them for a while.

The participants watched a 3-minute edited compilation of six commercials that were selected to appeal to both boys and girls, and to children of different ages. The commercials were videotaped from various children’s networks two years prior to the investigation and were no longer being broadcast. The compilation consisted of commercials for *Playmobil Pirate Lagoon, Dream Telephone, Maggie Raggie* dolls, *Lego Jack Stone, Playmobil Horse & Pony Ranch*, and the game *Top Secret*. After every set of two commercials a short pause was inserted to allow for the mediation comments. To avoid order effects, the sets of commercials were rotated, resulting in three different video compilations.

In all conditions, the experimenter watched the commercials together with the children. During each pause a statement was made that was directly relevant to the commercials the children had just viewed. The list of comments was inspired by Nathanson’s (2004) statements pertaining to violent program content and adapted to advertising-related mediation based on the advertising literature (e.g., Brucks et al., 1988; Roberts et al., 1983; Rossiter, 1979). In the factual mediation condition, the experimenter
provided facts about the commercials and the products advertised, in the evaluative mediation condition, the experimenter casually expressed negative evaluations of the commercials and the products advertised, and in the combined mediation condition, the experimenter expressed both factual and evaluative comments. In the no mediation condition, the experimenter did not give comments on the commercials shown. The Appendix contains a complete list of the comments that were administered in the three experimental conditions.

After viewing the commercials, the children completed a 20-minute questionnaire about the commercials they had just viewed. The experimenter read each question and its response options to the children who circled their answers. Before the questionnaires were administered, the experimenter emphasized that the test had nothing to do with formal grades or testing. At the end of the session, the children were brought back to their classroom.

*Measures*

To measure the persuasive impact of advertising, the questionnaire contained a set of questions about the commercials shown in the video. For each of the questionnaire items children responded on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *no, not at all* to 4 = *yes, very much*.

For each commercial, children were asked to indicate how much they had liked the advertised product. Responses to the six questions were averaged to create a product liking scale \((M = 2.87, SD = .63)\).

To measure children’s desires for the advertised products, they were asked to indicate how much they would like to have the product advertised in each commercial.
Responses to the six items were averaged to create a product desires scale \( M = 3.03, SD = .62 \).

Finally, the children were asked to indicate whether they intended to ask their parents to purchase the product advertised in each commercial. Responses to the six questions were averaged to create a product requests scale \( M = 3.15, SD = .62 \).

**Manipulation Check**

To test whether the mediation comments had indeed affected children’s cognitive and attitudinal defenses, the questionnaire also contained a number of items tapping children’s understanding of and attitudes toward the commercials. To measure cognitive advertising defenses, children were asked (1) Do you think commercials try to sell things to people? and (2) Do you think commercials use special tricks to make the toys look better than they really are? Children responded on the same 4-point scale as described above. A cognitive defenses variable was constructed by averaging the scores on the two items \( M = 3.13, SD = .82 \). To measure children’s attitudinal advertising defenses, children were asked to indicate on the same 4-point scale how much they had liked each commercial in the video. Responses of the questions about the six commercials were averaged to create a variable indicating children’s attitudinal defenses \( M = 2.62, SD = .60 \).

An analysis of variance (GLM) on the scores of these two variables with mediation strategy (factual vs. evaluative vs. combined vs. no mediation) as between-subjects factor revealed a mediation effect on both cognitive \( F(3, 268) = 4.40, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05 \) and attitudinal advertising defenses \( F(3, 268) = 2.61, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03 \). Planned comparison analysis confirmed our assumptions that (a) cognitive defenses were significantly higher among children who received factual mediation than for children who received no
mediation \( (p < .01) \) and (b) attitudinal defenses were significantly higher (i.e., less positive) among children who received evaluative mediation than for children in the no mediation condition \( (p < .05) \). Finally, in the combined mediation condition both children’s cognitive and attitudinal defenses were considerably lower than in the no mediation condition, but these differences only approached significance \( (p = .06 \text{ and } p = .08, \text{ respectively}) \).

**Results**

To investigate the effectiveness of the three mediation strategies in reducing the effects of advertising among children in different age groups, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance (GLM) on the scores of each of the dependent variables (i.e., product liking, product desires, and product requests) with mediation strategy (factual vs. evaluative vs. combined vs. no mediation) and age group (5- to 6-year-olds vs. 7- to 8-year-olds, vs. 9- to 10-year-olds) as between-subjects factors.

The GLM analysis revealed two main effects for mediation on product liking \( (F(3,268) = 4.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05) \) and product desires \( (F(3,268) = 3.25, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04) \). For product requests, no significant mediation effect was observed \( (F(3,268) = 1.87, p = .14, \eta^2 = .02) \). The analysis also yielded main effects for age group on each of the dependent variables, that is product liking \( (F(2,269) = 22.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15) \), product desires \( (F(2,269) = 24.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16) \), and product requests \( (F(2,269) = 24.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16) \). Finally, the analysis also yielded a significant interaction effect for product liking \( (F(6, 265) = 2.38, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05) \), indicating that the effects of the different mediation strategies varied across the three age groups.

To explore the pattern of results for the different mediation strategies in the three age groups, two types of posthoc analysis were conducted. First, to investigate whether the
effects of advertising were reduced in the mediation conditions, planned comparison analyses were conducted (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). Simple contrasts (SPSS 10.1) specified that the mean scores in the mediation conditions would differ significantly from those in the no mediation condition. Then, posthoc Bonferroni tests were conducted to compare each mediation strategy against one another.

Table 1 provides the mean scores on each of the advertising effects by mediation condition and age group. Among the 5- to 6-year-olds, simple contrast analyses showed that in the combined mediation condition product liking was significantly lower than in the no mediation condition ($t(45) = 2.20, p < .05$). For the remaining effects and mediation conditions, no significant differences were found. Additional Bonferroni tests comparing each of the mediation conditions to one another yielded no significant results.

Among the 7- to 8-year-olds, simple contrasts showed that factual mediation significantly decreased children’s product liking ($t(38) = 2.48, p < .05$). In the evaluative mediation condition, all three effects were significantly lower than in the no mediation condition (product liking $t(41) = 3.01, p < .01$; product desires $t(41) = 2.30, p < .05$; product requests $t(41) = 1.98, p < .05$). In the combined mediation condition product liking ($t(36) = 2.04, p < .05$) and product desires ($t(36) = 1.96, p < .05$) were significantly lower than in the no mediation group. Bonferroni tests indicated that, compared to each of the mediation conditions, only evaluative mediation significantly decreased children’s product liking ($p < .05$).
Finally, among the 9- to 10-year-olds, simple contrasts showed that each advertising effect was significantly weaker among children who heard evaluative mediation than among children who heard no mediation (product liking $t(44) = 2.83, p < .01$; product desires($t(44) = 2.92, p < .01$; product requests $t(44) = 2.42, p < .05$). Additional Bonferroni tests indicated that in the evaluative mediation condition, all three effects were significantly weaker than in any of the other mediation conditions.

Discussion

In this experiment we investigated how factual, evaluative, and combined mediation administered during exposure to commercials modified children’s liking, desires, and intended requests for the advertised products. Our first hypothesis, which predicted that factual advertising mediation would reduce advertising effects among children older than 7, received only partial confirmation. As expected, factual mediation comments were ineffective among 5- to 6-year-old children, corroborating previous research findings that in early childhood, children have difficulty processing and applying complicated information (Lang, 2000; Nathanson, 2004; Roedder, 1981).

However, factual mediation was also relatively ineffective among the older children in our sample. Even though factual mediation comments did increase children’s cognitive defenses, this mediation strategy only reduced liking of advertised products among 7- to 8-year-old children. These results indicate that, even though these children were able to understand and learn from the factual comments, they were unable to actually apply these increased cognitive defenses while processing the commercial. Thus, the relation between children’s cognitive defenses and their susceptibility to advertising effects might be more
complex than assumed in previous research, which calls for further research investigating the underlying processes of this relation.

The ineffectiveness of factual mediation among the 9- to 10-year-old children is surprising, because children in middle childhood are assumed to be able to understand and apply factual mediation (Lang, 2000; Nathanson, 2004). An alternative explanation could be that the information about the nature and intent of advertising was too basic to essentially contribute to the cognitive advertising defenses that these children have already acquired. Nathanson (2004) has argued that redundant mediation is not only ineffective, but may even backfire because it can enhance children’s involvement with the program. Future research could investigate how older children respond to more sophisticated information, for instance concerning advertising tactics and production techniques.

The results for evaluative and combined mediation vary across the three age groups (hypothesis 2). Contrary to expectations, evaluative mediation did not modify advertising effects among the 5- to 6-year-olds. In fact, among the youngest children none of the three mediation strategies were very successful in reducing the effects of the commercials. We only found a significant effect for combined mediation, which reduced young children’s liking but not their desires and requests for the advertised products. These results suggest that children in early childhood have difficulty processing and applying advertising mediation, regardless of the complexity of the comments. This could be due to their lack of information processing skills to use critical thoughts and counterarguments during exposure (Brucks et al., 1988; Moore & Lutz, 2000; Roedder, 1981).

However, in agreement with our second hypothesis, both evaluative and combined mediation were successful in reducing the effects of advertising among 7- to 8-year-olds.
Combined mediation reduced these children’s liking and desire for the advertised products, while evaluative mediation reduced each of the three advertising effects. Children in this age group are on the threshold of early and middle childhood and, therefore, at their peak of acquiring cognitive and attitudinal defenses (Brucks et al., 1988; Roedder, 1981). The oldest children in our sample (9- to 10-year-olds) only benefited from evaluative mediation comments, which significantly reduced their liking, desires, and intended requests for the advertised products.

The Success of Evaluative Advertising Mediation

Overall, evaluative and combined mediation were more successful in reducing the effects of advertising than factual mediation. In other words, our results suggest that a mediation strategy that negatively influences children's attitudes toward commercials is most effective in reducing the persuasive impact of advertising. There are several possible explanations for this finding.

First, earlier mediation research (Lang, 2000; Nathanson, 2004) and information processing studies (Brucks et al., 1988; Roedder, 1981) suggest that evaluative mediation comments are easier to understand and process than factual comments. Factual mediation requires two cognitive steps: The child should be capable of (1) understanding and processing the mediation comments and (2) applying these while processing the commercial. Both steps require advanced socio-cognitive and information processing skills (Gunter et al., 2005; John, 1999). In contrast, affect-eliciting information, such as evaluative mediation comments, is considered easier to understand and process (Lang, 2000; Nathanson, 2004). In the case of combined mediation, which did not increase
children’s knowledge and critical attitudes, evaluative comments may have improved children's information processing.

Second, evaluative mediation relates to emotions and affect toward commercials, which are considered important elements in children's advertising processing. Children’s attitudes toward commercials are related directly and strongly to their liking, desires, and requests for advertised products and, therefore, play a dominant role in their advertising processing (Derbaix & Bree, 1997; Phelps & Hoy, 1996). Children are easily swayed by an attractive commercial, because they are less able than adolescents and adults to relate new information to existing attitudes toward the advertised product or brand (Valkenburg, 2004). Future research is needed to investigate how evaluative mediation can counteract this appeal among children and adolescents in different developmental phases.

A third possible explanation for the success of the evaluative comments could involve a demand effect. It is conceivable that children liked the experimenter and tended to give social desirable responses, which they perceived to be in line with the experimenters’ comments. Although the questionnaires were completed individually, and great care was taken in emphasizing that children should give their own opinions, the social desirability explanation cannot be ruled out completely. Future studies could reduce the social desirability issue by having the intervention administered by an individual other than the experimenter. The present study could, for instance, be replicated in a more natural setting, and have the intervention administered at home by one of the child’s parents. In addition, future research could move toward a research design with behavioral outcomes, such as children’s purchase requests over time.
This study represented a first step toward knowledge and understanding of adult advertising mediation. Our experiment was designed to detect the effectiveness of the various strategies in modifying the effects of advertising and did not take into account factors external to advertising exposure, including personal experience with the products and social factors such as parents and peer groups (Gunter et al., 2005). In order to further our understanding of advertising mediation processes and fully account for individual differences, the effectiveness of adult advertising mediation should also be investigated within the context of children’s personal and social background, for instance by means of field experiments or survey research.

Conclusions and Implications

In conclusion, the present study yielded three important insights: (1) adult mediation administered during exposure to commercials can effectively reduce children’s susceptibility to advertising effects; (2) mediation strategies providing negative evaluations of the commercial are more effective than strategies that provide facts and information exclusively; and (3) evaluative and combined mediation strategies are most effective among 7- to 8-year-old children, who are in the process of acquiring cognitive and attitudinal defenses against advertising. On the basis of these findings, we can make a number of suggestions for effective mediation of television advertising, relevant to several parties involved in the care of children.

First, our findings are of interest to parents and other caregivers, who are able to apply both types of direct mediation. Children often watch television in a family context (Dorr, 1986; Lemish, 2007; Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005). Several studies have shown that many parents provide their children with comments while watching television (Boush,
2001; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005). Although these studies have generally focused on factual mediation, such as educating children about the nature and intent of advertising, our study indicates that evaluative comments about the commercials might be equally or even more effective.

Second, our finding that adult commentary during exposure can be an effective tool in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising can also be of value to school-based intervention programs, which generally focus on increasing children’s advertising literacy (Donohue et al., 1983; Feshbach et al., 1982; Roberts et al., 1980; Robinson et al., 2001). Although, in our view, the importance of educating children about general advertising and media literacy concepts should not be underestimated, intervention programs could also focus on the mediating role of the parent and incorporate parent-directed programs. Such programs could, for instance, focus on raising parental awareness and knowledge about modifying children’s responses to television advertising.

Finally, our findings might contribute to the ongoing political and socio-legal debate on child-directed advertising, and help establish guidelines for its regulation. In many Western societies, concerns about the possible adverse effects of marketing efforts directed at children have led to policies regarding child advertising (Kunkel et al., 2004). One kind of policy approach focuses on regulation of advertising, while another aims at educating children about advertising. Our results confirm the idea that children’s defenses against advertising can be increased, but at the same time also suggest that children under the age of 7 are not very receptive to mediation. This notion is supported by other researchers (Robinson et al., 2001) who argued that because young children lack the abilities to resist commercial messages, reducing their exposure to television may sometimes be the only
effective way to counteract negative effects. Although further research is needed to fully understand and predict the mechanisms of advertising mediation among young children, our findings underline the importance of taking into account the age of the target group when implementing policies regarding child-directed advertising.
Appendix

Comments in Factual Mediation Condition

After commercials 1 & 2: These commercials want to sell those [toys 1 & 2]. The makers want you to ask your parents for those [toys 1 & 2].

After commercials 3 & 4: The commercials for [toys 3 & 4] we just saw aren’t real. The makers use special tricks to make [toys 3 & 4] look better than they really are.

After commercials 5 & 6: Those commercials aren’t telling the truth. These [toys 5 & 6] look different in reality.

Comments in Evaluative Mediation Condition

After commercials 1 & 2: These commercials are stupid. Those [toys 1 & 2] aren’t any fun.

After commercials 3 & 4: They’re stupid, those [toys 3 & 4].

After commercials 5 & 6: The kids in those commercials for [toys 5 & 6] aren’t cool at all.

Comments in Combined Mediation Condition

After commercials 1 & 2: These commercials are stupid. The makers use special tricks to make [toys 1 & 2] look better than they really are.

After commercials 3 & 4: The kids in those commercials for [toys 3 & 4] aren’t telling the truth. They aren’t cool at all.

After commercials 5 & 6: They’re stupid, those [toys 5 & 6]. The makers just want you to ask your parents for those [toys 5 & 6].
References


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<td>Product liking</td>
<td>2.48 (.56)</td>
<td>2.42 (.72)</td>
<td>2.13* (.61)</td>
<td>2.55 (.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product desires</td>
<td>2.23 (.56)</td>
<td>2.26 (.67)</td>
<td>2.02 (.64)</td>
<td>2.38 (.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product requests</td>
<td>2.15 (.60)</td>
<td>2.26 (.71)</td>
<td>1.89 (.65)</td>
<td>2.16 (.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7-8-year-olds (n = 83)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product liking</td>
<td>2.06* (.53)</td>
<td>1.99** (.47)</td>
<td>2.13* (.55)</td>
<td>2.50 (.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product desires</td>
<td>1.99 (.58)</td>
<td>1.92* (.43)</td>
<td>1.96* (.63)</td>
<td>2.32 (.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product requests</td>
<td>1.98 (.54)</td>
<td>1.75* (.51)</td>
<td>1.81 (.51)</td>
<td>2.08 (.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9-10-year-olds (n = 94)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product liking</td>
<td>1.92 (.62)</td>
<td>1.53** (.42)</td>
<td>1.99 (.39)</td>
<td>1.92 (.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product desires</td>
<td>1.71 (.51)</td>
<td>1.38** (.37)</td>
<td>1.80 (.40)</td>
<td>1.74 (.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product requests</td>
<td>1.63 (.50)</td>
<td>1.31* (.36)</td>
<td>1.63 (.35)</td>
<td>1.61 (.45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Mean scores marked with an asterisk differ significantly from mean scores in the no mediation condition, *p* < .05. **p** < .01. ***p** < .001.