The Impact of Television Advertising on Children’s Christmas Wishes

Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg

In December 1997, 250 children were asked to list their Christmas wishes. These requests were then compared to the commercials that were broadcast at the time of data collection. Sixty-seven percent of the seven- and eight-year-olds, 49% of the 9- and 10-year-olds, and 40% of the 11- and 12-year-olds asked for at least one advertised product. Children’s gender and age, as well as their level of exposure to the network that aired the most commercials, were significant predictors of their requests for advertised products.

Advertising to children has always provoked strong feelings and contradictory opinions. Some advocates of child-directed advertising believe that advertising has no or negligible negative effect on children (Miller & Busch, 1979), and that the consequences of advertising are rarely lasting (Caron & Ward, 1975; Malraine, 1985). They argue that children are critical consumers who are capable of defending themselves against the possible harmful effects of advertising (Caron & Ward, 1975; Hite & Eck, 1987; Sheikh, Prasad, & Rao, 1974; Ward, 1984). According to other advocates, advertising provides children with valuable product information, so that they learn how to become consumers (Hite & Eck, 1987; Miller & Busch, 1979).

Many opponents of child-directed advertising, however, believe that commercials aimed at young children can have a profound impact on their beliefs, values, and moral norms (Gardner & Sheppard, 1989). Critics fear that children, more than adults, are susceptible to the seductive influences of commercials because they do not have the necessary cognitive skills to protect themselves against the attractive and cleverly put advertising messages (Adler, 1980; Caron & Ward, 1975). According to these authors, advertising to children can (a) create materialistic attitudes (Goldberg & Gorn, 1978; Hite & Eck, 1987); (b) result in conflicts in the family (Isler, Popper, & Ward, 1987; Robertson, Ward, Gatignon, & Klees, 1979; Ward & Wackman, 1972); and (c) encourage bad eating habits (Dawson, Jeffrey, & Walsh, 1988; Donohue, 1975; Galst, 1980; Galst & White, 1976; Goldberg, Gorn, & Gibson, 1978; Miller &

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Busch, 1979; Peterson & Lewis, 1988; Ross, Campbell, Huston-Stein, & Wright, 1981). Finally, opponents argue that advertising can make young children dissatisfied and unhappy because they are less able than adults to resist the temptations in advertisements (Feldman & Wolf, 1974; Goldberg & Gorn, 1978; Martin & Gentry, 1997; Miller & Busch, 1979; Richins, 1991; Sheikh & Moleski, 1977).

Since the mid 1970s, an impressive number of studies on the topic of children and advertising have been conducted. These studies have focused on three types of effects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects (Rossiter, 1979). Studies examining the cognitive effects of child advertising usually focus on children's ability to distinguish commercials from television programs (Blosser & Roberts, 1985; Butter, Popovich, Stackhouse, & Garner, 1981), and their ability to understand the persuasive nature and selling intent of advertising (Blosser & Roberts, 1985; Donohue, Henke, & Donohue, 1980; Rossiter & Robertson, 1976). Most of these studies have adopted Piaget’s (1965) theory of cognitive development to guide their research (e.g., Rubin, 1974; Wackman, Wartella, & Ward, 1977; Ward, 1974; Wartella & Ettema, 1974). Cognitive-effects studies have demonstrated that children who are at Piaget’s preoperational stage (2-7 years) react differently to commercials than do children at the concrete operational stage (7-12 years). It has been shown, for example, that children in the concrete operational stage are progressively more able to distinguish commercials from television programs (Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Ward, Reale, & Levinson, 1972), and show a better understanding of the persuasive intent of commercials (Blatt, Spencer, & Ward, 1972; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Ward et al., 1972; Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977).

Studies investigating the affective effects of advertising concentrate on children’s liking of and trust in commercials (Barling & Fullagar, 1983; Barry & Hansen, 1973; Bever, Smith, Bengen, & Johnson, 1975; Derbaix & Brec, 1997; Donohue, 1975; Mitchell, 1986; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974). Affective-effects studies have documented, for instance, that children's responses towards commercials gradually become less favorable as they enter the concrete operational stage (Barling & Fullagar, 1983; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974). As children get older, they are more likely to display irritation and skepticism while watching commercials.

Finally, studies examining the behavioral effects of advertising focus on the extent to which children are persuaded by advertisements. Since young children usually do not have the means to purchase products, behavioral effects are usually measured by children’s preferences for products (Galst & White, 1976; Robertson & Rossiter, 1976), or by the requests they make in response to advertised products (Atkin, 1975; Sheikh & Moleski, 1977). In behavioral-effects studies, children usually watch one or more commercials, after which they are given a choice from a series of products, which include the advertised brand (Gorn & Florsheim, 1985; Gorn & Goldberg, 1977, 1980). Researchers then often demonstrate that the advertising of a specific brand makes the child's subsequent choice of that brand more likely. A disadvantage of these studies is that the results that are found within a controlled laboratory setting may not be generalizable to more naturalistic contexts (Young, 1990).
A number of behavioral-effects studies have attempted to solve this problem by investigating advertising effects in a field setting. One type of field study has focused on the impact of advertising on children’s purchase requests by surveying parents (Caron & Ward, 1975; Robertson et al., 1989) or children (Adler, 1980; Greenberg, Fazal, & Wober, 1986; Isler et al., 1987). Another, less intrusive, type of research has observed how parents and children in retail environments interact with each other regarding the product requests of children (Atkin, 1978; Galst & White, 1976; Isler et al., 1987; Rust, 1993a, 1993b). A third type of field studies has investigated to which extent children’s Christmas gift ideas are determined by television commercials (Caron & Ward, 1975; Frideres, 1973; Robertson & Rossiter, 1976; Robertson & Rossiter, 1977; Rossiter & Robertson, 1974). These studies were conducted in the Christmas season, first because child-targeted advertising reaches a peak in this period (Valkenburg, 1999), and second because children are generally eager to list their preferred Christmas present choices.

Despite the differences in methodology, both the laboratory and the field studies have yielded a number of consistent findings. First, it has been shown that television viewing is a major source of children’s gift ideas (Caron & Ward, 1975; Frideres, 1973; Robertson & Rossiter, 1977), and that children who watch more television are more likely to ask for advertised products (Adler, 1980; Goldberg, 1990; Gorn & Goldberg, 1980; Greenberg et al., 1986; Robertson et al., 1989).

Second, it has been demonstrated that children’s requests for advertised products decrease as they mature (Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Ward, et al., 1977; Ward & Wackman, 1972). Not only do children become more critical about and, thereby, less susceptible to media offerings in middle childhood, they also become more sensitive to peer influences (Durkin, 1997). Research has found that conformity to the peer group peaks between the ages of 11 and 13 years (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966). There is reason to assume that the norms and values that are created in particular peer groups function as a filter for other socializing forces, including advertising.

Finally, it has been suggested that gender plays a role in children’s requests for advertised products. A number of studies have demonstrated that boys are more persistent in their requests for advertised products than girls are (McNeal, 1969; Sheikh & Moleski, 1977; Ward & Wackman, 1972). This research finding is consistent with general theories on gender differences in parent-child interactions (e.g., Maccoby, 1990). It has been shown that boys are on average less compliant than girls to the requests and demands of their parents (Cowan & Avants, 1988; Maccoby, 1990). Boys also more often rely on forceful or demanding strategies when trying to persuade their parents to comply with them, whereas girls are more likely to rely on tact and polite suggestions (Cowan & Avants, 1988).

Gender and developmental level also have been shown to influence the types of gifts requested (Caron & Ward, 1975, Kamptner, 1991). Boys tend to ask for activity-oriented items, like computer games, racecars, and action heroes, whereas girls prefer clothing, dolls, and jewelry (e.g., Acuff & Reiher, 1997; Furby, 1978; Kamptner, 1991). In addition, younger children—because of their early cognitive
level—often ask for simple, friendly stuffed animals, dolls, and toys, which provide them with feelings of comfort and safety (Acuff & Reiher, 1997; Valkenburg & Cantor, in press). As children become older, toys begin to lose importance, whereas products with a social function, like clothing and music equipment, take increasingly prominent places as favored objects.

The aim of the present study was to provide an extension of the third type of field studies, which investigated how television commercials influence children’s preferred Christmas gifts. This line of research needs extension for several reasons. First, studies of this type were all conducted in the 1970s (Caron & Ward, 1975; Frideres, 1973; Robertson & Rossiter, 1976; Robertson & Rossiter, 1977; Rossiter & Robertson, 1974). As most western societies have become increasingly child- and consumer-oriented in the past two decades (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Kline, 1993), there is a need to investigate whether the results of these early studies are still valid. Second, in previous studies the sources of children’s ideas were measured by asking children directly where they had seen or heard about the presents that they mentioned (e.g., television, catalogs, interpersonal influence). These studies have consistently found that television was the most dominant source of children’s gift ideas (Caron & Ward, 1975; Frideres, 1973; Robertson & Rossiter, 1976). However, it is not certain whether the self-report measures that were used in these studies can be considered as valid indicators of young children’s information sources of gift ideas.

In the present study we did not rely on children’s self-reports to investigate the extent to which television is an information source of their gift ideas. Like the previous studies, we asked children to nominate their preferred Christmas gifts, but rather than asking children directly to list the source of their requests, we compared their requests to the commercials that were broadcast in the period leading up to Christmas. We specifically examined whether and to what extent the brand names children mentioned in their gift requests were identical to the brands that were advertised at the Christmas season. We also explored if and how children’s gender and developmental level predict their requests for advertised products.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

In earlier studies, the percentages of children’s requests that were determined by television advertising ranged from 25% (Caron & Ward, 1975), to 49% (Robertson & Rossiter, 1976), and 78% (Frideres, 1973). In the present study, we investigated how these previous statistics compare to elementary school children sampled in 1997. Our first research question therefore was:

RQ1: To what extent are children’s Christmas wishes influenced by television commercials shown in the period leading up to Christmas?

As argued above, several earlier studies have demonstrated that (a) children who watch more commercial television are more likely to ask for advertised products; (b) children’s requests for advertised products decrease as children mature; and (c) boys
are more persistent in their requests for advertised products than girls are. We therefore investigated the following three hypotheses:

\[ H_1: \text{Children who watch a lot of television commercials ask for advertised products more often than children who are less often exposed to commercials.} \]

\[ H_2: \text{Older children ask for advertised products less often than younger children do.} \]

\[ H_3: \text{Boys make requests for advertised products more often than girls do} \]

Finally, earlier studies suggested that the types of products children request depend on their gender and developmental level. Since research into the types of wishes of boys and girls in different age groups is too scarce to formulate hypotheses, our second research question asked:

\[ RQ_2: \text{What types of products do boys and girls in different age groups request?} \]

**Method**

**Sample**

A total of 250 children between the ages of 7 and 12 participated in the study. The children were recruited from three elementary schools in Utrecht, an urban district in the Netherlands, which consisted primarily of Dutch students with various socioeconomic backgrounds. The sample consisted of 124 boys and 126 girls. The children were grouped into three age ranges: 7-8 (30.6%), 9-10 (40.7%), and 11-12 (28.6%). This trichotomy was chosen for three reasons. First, it provided us with the opportunity to investigate whether the observed trends in our sample were linear or curvilinear. Second, we wanted to investigate seven- and eight-year olds as a separate age group, because these children are still on the threshold of concrete operations, which qualify them as a separate subgroup. Third, we wanted to investigate 11- and 12-year-olds as a separate subgroup. As discussed earlier, children in this age group develop an interest in products with a social function and the influence of peers is at its peak in this age group (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966). These developments may affect their interest in advertised products.

**Procedure**

Early in December 1997, children in each classroom were presented with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The questionnaire contained questions about children's gender and age, their television viewing behavior, and their preferred Christmas wishes. Completing the questionnaire took about 20 minutes.

To investigate the number and types of commercials children were exposed to in the period leading up to Christmas, we taped the two most popular commercial children's networks, RTL-4 and Kinderen. We recorded all commercials that were
shown on these networks on Saturday mornings from 8.00 to 12.00 a.m. in the period from 8 November 1997 to 20 December 1997. In total, 876 commercials were sampled, 553 on RTL-4 and 323 on Kindernet. Almost 90% of these commercials were about toys, and 80% of them were shown on both channels.

RTL-4 and Kindernet have the highest viewing density among 6- to 12-year-olds (Kijk- en Luisteronderzoek, 1997). Both commercial networks were introduced at the end of the 1980s. We selected their Saturday morning programs because these programs have the highest ratings among elementary school children. The numbers of television commercials shown on RTL-4 ranged from 25 to 113 per four-hour time span, and those on Kindernet ranged from 13 to 78 over the same time period. Overall, RTL-4 showed 71% more commercials than did Kindernet. This difference is due to the fact that RTL-4 has a larger market share (16%) than Kindernet (10%) in the target age group, with the result that advertisers are more interested in this network.

Measures

*Children’s gift ideas.* We asked the children to write down their two most favorite Christmas wishes. For each present mentioned, we determined whether an advertised brand was mentioned. In some cases (e.g., Barbie, Nintendo, Action Man, Lego, K’nex) this was easy. In other cases (e.g., Beast Wars, My Beautiful Horses, Domino Express) we were not sure whether the product was advertised. In these cases, the brand name was traced in the recorded advertisements. Of course, gift ideas like “a doll,” “a racecar,” “money,” and “a teddy bear” were not considered as brand names. The intercoder-reliability based on a subsample of 25% of the requests was 99%.

*Television viewing frequency.* The children were presented a list of 12 popular children’s programs that were broadcast on RTL-4 and Kindernet. They were asked to indicate whether they always, often, sometimes, or never watched each of the programs. This method of children’s television exposure has proved to be the most valid one for elementary school children (Voorrips, van der Voort, & Beentjes, 1987). On the 12 items, we conducted a factor analysis with varimax rotation. This factor analysis yielded three factors, which explained 53.8% of the variance. The first factor (4 items, Eigenvalue 2.01) represented the children’s programs that were broadcast on Kindernet, the second factor (5 items, Eigenvalue 2.38) represented the children’s programs broadcast on RTL-4. The third factor (3 items, Eigenvalue 1.18) represented programs that were made for adults and broadcast in the evening hours. Scales were constructed for each of the three factors by totaling the unweighted scores on the items that loaded on each factor. Cronbach’s alpha values were .72 for the Kindernet scale, .70 for the RTL-4 scale, and .51 for the programs made for adults. Since the latter scale had an inadequate reliability, it was omitted from further analysis.
Results

Our first research question asked to what extent children's Christmas wishes were influenced by commercials broadcast around Christmas. The analysis of children's Christmas wishes revealed that 51.6% of the children specifically asked for at least one brand that was advertised at the time of the survey.

The brands that were most frequently advertised also turned out to be the most wanted toys. K'nx, Nintendo, Lego, and Action Man were all in the top 10 of most frequently broadcast commercials. Three of these products, Nintendo, K'nx, and Lego, were also in the top five of most requested products in the whole sample. Action Man also occurred in the top 10 of wishes, but only for the youngest boys.

Barbie turned out to be the most advertised toy. The Barbie commercial represented almost 10 percent of all the commercials that were broadcast during the period of analysis. Barbie occupied the ninth place in the top 10 gift requests for the whole sample. For the youngest girls, this toy was the second most wanted product.

Children’s Requests for Advertised Products by Age, Gender, and Television Viewing Frequency

To investigate our three research hypotheses, which stated that younger children, boys, and children who are more often exposed to commercials ask for more advertised products, we conducted a multiple regression analysis, with the child's age, gender, and television viewing behavior as independent variables. The dependent variable was the number of gift ideas mentioned by the children that corresponded to one of the commercials broadcast during the period of investigation. Table 1 provides the standardized beta weights for each of the independent variables used within the regression equation.

The number of children's toy wishes consistent with the brands in television commercials was predicted by exposure to RTL-4, the network that aired most commercials, and not by exposure to Kindernet. Consistent with our second

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<td>Multiple Regression Prediction of the Number of Requests Consistent with TV Commercials</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Number of Advertised Toy Wishes-Beta</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindernet viewing frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTL-4 viewing frequency</td>
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<tr>
<td>R²</td>
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Note. *p < .05; **p < .001
hypothesis, younger children asked for products advertised on television more often than older children did. Finally, contrary to our third hypothesis, the child’s gender did not predict the number of advertised product requests.

To investigate curvilinear patterns and possible interactions between age and gender, which would not be expressed in the regression coefficients, we investigated how many boys and girls in each of the three age groups requested advertised products (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>% Percentage of Requests for Advertised Products</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7-8 (n = 78)</td>
<td>Boys (n = 124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10 (n = 101)</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12 (n = 71)</td>
<td>27.5</td>
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</table>

As the third column of Table 2 shows, older children asked for advertised products less often than younger children did, $\chi^2 (2, N = 248) = 11.91, p < .01$. Our cross tabulation revealed that the negative age effect that was found in the regression analysis only held for boys, $\chi^2 (2, N = 123) = 19.23, p < .001$. Seventy-six percent of the seven- and eight-year-old boys asked for at least one advertised product, whereas only 27.5% of the 11- and 12-year-old boys requested at least one advertised product. For girls no significant age effect was found. Older girls asked for as many advertised products as younger girls did.

The cross tabulation yielded an interaction effect between gender and age. Among the seven- and eight-year-olds, boys asked for an advertised product more often than girls did, $\chi^2 (1, N = 78) = 2.92, p = .07$, whereas, among the 11- and 12-year-olds, girls asked for an advertised product more often than boys did, $\chi^2 (1, N = 71) = 5.47, p < .05$.

**The Types of Products Requested**

Our final research question asked whether and how boys and girls differ in the types of Christmas wishes. To answer this question, we investigated the most popular product requests for boys and girls in the three age groups (Table 3).

All children, particularly the youngest, were quite brand conscious in their selection of toys. The most frequently requested Christmas present was *Nintendo*. Although *Nintendo* products were popular among all subgroups, boys in all age groups asked for *Nintendo* products more often than girls did. Younger children asked for toys and games more often than older children did. For seven- and eight-year-old boys *Nintendo, K’nex,* and *Lego* accounted for 72% of all Christmas wishes. The boys in the lower age group mostly requested activity-oriented
Table 3
Children’s Favorite Gift Ideas by Age Group and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>% of Requests</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>% of Requests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>1. <em>Nintendo</em></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1. Nameless stuffed animal</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. <em>K’nex</em></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2. <em>Barbie</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Racecar</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3. Pet (e.g., cat, dog)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Walkie-talkie</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5. <em>Spice Girls</em> merchandising</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>1. Sports items</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1. <em>Spice Girls</em> merchandising</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. <em>Nintendo</em></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2. School Stationery</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. <em>K’nex</em></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3. Stuffed animal</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. <em>Tantrum racecar</em></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5. <em>Fingernail Fun</em></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>1. <em>Nintendo</em></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1. Compact disc</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Compact disc</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2. Items related to horses</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Clothing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3. <em>Backstreet Boys</em> merchandising</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Personal computer</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4. <em>Nintendo</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Stereo</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5. <em>Spice Girls</em> merchandising</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Toys (racetracks and racecars) and construction toys (*K’nex* and *Meccano*). For the youngest girls, stuffed animals, dolls, and real-life pets were the most frequently mentioned wishes.

Children in the middle age group more often asked for useful items, like school stationery and sports items. For these categories, children generally did not mention a specific brand name, but asked for “a ball” or “a school notebook.” Also in this age group boys and girls differed significantly in their toy wishes. Boys mainly requested sports items, construction toys, computer games, and racecars, whereas girls showed a preference for *Spice Girls* merchandising, school stationery, stuffed animals, sports items, *Fingernail Fun*, and *Barbie*.

11- and 12-year-old children often mentioned products like music equipment and clothing, without mentioning a specific brand name. For the oldest girls, this type of product accounted for 58% of all requests. Popular requests for boys in the highest age group were *Nintendo*, compact discs, clothing, and a personal computer. For girls of this age, merchandising related to their favorite pop groups, and items related to horses and horse riding were the most favorite gift requests.

**Discussion**

The main aim of this study was to investigate to what extent child-directed television advertising influences children’s Christmas gift requests. Our findings
revealed that in the overall sample more than half of the children (51.6%) asked for at least one brand that had been advertised in the period of investigation (RQ). How do our Dutch findings compare to the American results obtained in the 1970s? In the study by Frideres (1973), 78% of the children reported that they saw their requested toys on television. At first sight this percentage may seem incomparable to the 52% that we found. However, the sample in Frideres’ study consisted of children in the ages of five and eight, which is younger than the age group that we investigated. When we compare our youngest age group (seven- and eight-year-olds) with those in Frideres’ study, the results are more similar. In our study, 76% of the boys and 57% of the girls in the youngest age groups asked for at least one advertised product.

The relative low percentage (25%) of requests for advertised products found by Caron and Ward (1975) can also be explained in terms of differences in age groups between the studies, because their percentages were based on older children than the children in our sample. The 11- and 12-year-olds in our sample also less frequently asked for advertised products than did the younger children. Finally, Robertson and Rossiter (1976) who used the same age groups as we did, found percentages of requests for advertised products (49%) that were virtually equal to ours.

In summary, our Dutch percentages are comparable to the American percentages that were found more than 20 years ago. One could argue that our percentages should have been higher because most societies have become more consumer-oriented over the past two decades. 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 long. While the Dutch public broadcasters have always been reserved with child-targeted advertising, today’s children’s programs aired by commercial networks are usually loaded with more than 25 child-targeted commercials per hour (Valkenburg, 1999).

Our first hypothesis predicted that children who watch a lot of television commercials ask for advertised products more frequently than children who view little or no commercials. To investigate this hypothesis we asked children how often they watched a number of programs on the two most popular commercial networks, RTL-4 and Kindernet. Children who more often watched RTL-4, the network with most commercials, nominated significantly more advertised products as favorite gifts than did children who less frequently watched this channel. No significant differences were found for Kindernet, the network that showed fewer commercials. Our results are in line with prior research (Adler, 1980; Goldberg, 1990; Gorn & Goldberg, 1980; Greenberg et al., 1986; Robertson et al., 1989). In these studies, it was also shown that children who watch more commercial television have more favorable attitudes toward commercials (Atkin, 1975; Rossiter & Robertson, 1976), and are more inclined to believe the advertising messages, which in turn make them more susceptible to advertising influences.
Our second hypothesis, that older children ask for advertised products less often than younger children do, also received support. We found that two-thirds of the seven- to eight-year-olds nominated an advertised brand product as their favorite Christmas gift, whereas only one-third of the 11- to 12-year-old children did so. One explanation for this finding could be that the needs and preferences of younger children were more similar to the types of commercials that were included in our sample of commercials. We recorded all commercials that were shown during two Saturday morning children's programs. We found that 90% of these commercials were toy commercials. Since younger children are more interested in toys than older children (Kamptner, 1991), the commercials that were taped might have been more congruent with the preferences of younger children than with those of older children, resulting in more younger children asking for these advertised brands.

Another explanation for our finding that younger children asked for more advertised brands than did older children could be that the younger children in our study are in a transition period with respect to their cognitive and affective reactions to commercials. As children enter the concrete operational stage (7-8 years), their abilities to understand the selling intent of advertising rapidly increases (Blatt et al., 1972; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Ward et al., 1972; Ward, et al., 1977). They then also become more skeptical towards commercials (Barling & Fullagar, 1983; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974), and less susceptible to advertising effects (Valkenburg & Cantor, in press). Since the younger children in our sample were only on the threshold of the level of concrete operations, they might have been more vulnerable to the toy advertising campaigns during Christmas than the older children.

Our third hypothesis, that boys would make more requests for advertised products than girls, received support only in the youngest age group. Gender differences were not found among 9- to 10-year olds, whereas for the 11- to 12-year-olds, girls asked for advertised brands more often than boys did. An explanation for the finding that younger boys are more affected by television commercials than younger girls could be that the commercials in the Christmas period were more appealing to younger boys than to younger girls. Our results showed that for the youngest boys, Nintendo, K'nex, and Lego accounted for no less than 72% of all Christmas gift requests in this age group. The youngest girls asked most often for a nameless stuffed animal. Our finding that 11- and 12-year-old girls tend to ask for more brand name gifts than did boys in this age group could be because they often requested merchandising related to pop groups, which inherently includes a brand name. Boys in this age group were more interested in items like clothes, personal computers, and stereos, items for which no specific brand name was mentioned.

Both gender and age played an important role in the types of products children requested. Consistent with Kamptner’s (1991) findings, younger girls preferred stuffed animals, pets, and dolls, whereas younger boys mainly requested activity-oriented toys and construction toys. In accordance with earlier findings (Furby, 1978; Kamptner, 1991), children in the middle age group start to attach more value to the
usefulness of products. For instance, they frequently asked for school stationery, electronic organizers, and sports equipment. Although the older children in our sample were only 11 and 12 years old, their product preferences resembled Kampfner's findings among adolescents. Boys and girls in the highest age groups requested products with a strong social function (e.g., clothing), and products that facilitate social ties and the expression of aspects of the self (e.g., music, jewelry).

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

This field study, conducted in a naturalistic setting, was designed to investigate to which extent television advertising plays a role in the Christmas gift ideas of school-aged children. We asked children to nominate their favorite Christmas wishes. We then compared their requests to the commercials broadcast on the two most popular Saturday morning children's networks in the Netherlands. The methodology of combining a two-pronged approach—the content analysis and the subsequent survey—is in certain ways similar to agenda setting methodology. Traditionally, the theory of agenda setting assumes that public judgments of the importance of certain issues are a result of the prominence of those issues in the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting theory claims that the media determine what the audience thinks and talks about. Although agenda setting theory has traditionally focused on the realm of news and issue salience, this theory might have broader applications to contexts in which a mass medium could influence what an audience perceives as important. In this study we compared the content of children's commercial media environment with their gift wishes. We found that the brands that most often appeared on children's wish lists, were exactly the ones that were most frequently advertised. To speak in agenda-setting terms, we found a striking similarity between the agenda of advertisers and that of children.

Although we think that this study has made an important contribution to the literature on behavioral effects of advertising, several limitations do exist. First, our study failed to investigate some alternative sources of children's preferred Christmas wishes. For instance, children could have seen the toy in a store or got the idea from a friend. Second, some toys, such as Barbie, might be popular, irrespective of advertising, because they perfectly connect to the fantasies of young elementary school girls. Over the years, manufacturers of children's products have developed a diverse spectrum of highly sophisticated research techniques to investigate children's preferences during the product development cycle (Kline, 1993). As a result, children have increasingly added their voices to newly developed toys. The extensive research into children's likes and dislikes, together with the wealth of commercial messages meticulously targeted to specific child segments, has made it difficult for researchers to determine whether toy manufacturers set the agenda for children's ideas and wishes, or whether children dominate the dynamics of toy development.
References


