

Title: *Defence against the dark art of marketing: exploring socio-contextual influences on children's marketing literacy in the contemporary media environment*

Broad Area of Research

Marketing

Theoretical background

Marketing to children as an area of academic interest has experienced a growing resurgence. As the media landscape has grown and evolved over the last forty years, so too has academic interest surrounding the consumption of marketing materials and messages by children and young people. As such, scholars from across the world continue to discuss and debate the psychological, ethical and regulatory issues associated with marketing to children (Nelson, 2018).

In the UK, children have more purchasing power than ever before, and are a key target market for many companies (Boland, Connell and Erickson, 2012; De Jans, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2017). Many brand preferences and consumer habits are formed in childhood (Valkenburg, 2000) and marketers currently spend billions on fostering relationships with young consumers in the hope they will last a lifetime (Lapierre, Fleming-Malici, Rozendaal, McAlister and Castonguay, 2017). Socially, there is growing concern about the commercialisation of childhood and the consequences of marketing to children (Gunter, 2014) and important questions have been raised over the appropriateness of allowing young consumers to be exposed to sophisticated or inappropriate advertising that they may not be able to fully understand (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2015).

Therefore, this research aims to provide a theoretical contribution to the marketing discipline by exploring how children's 'marketing literacy', that is, their ability to recognise, process and understand advertising and marketing messages (Young; 2000, Moses and Baldwin, 2005) is defined and understood within the contemporary marketing environment, a better understanding of which will benefit society in terms of providing guidance for responsible marketing policies within the UK. Past research has been dominated by cognitive perspectives on children's development, using various iterations of 'ages and stages' theories to explain the consumer socialisation process, i.e. how children's marketing literacy gradually becomes more sophisticated as they age (Friestad and Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005). Research has tended to focus on the child, or rather, the cognitive abilities of the child to critically reflect on the multiple facets of advertising (i.e. the persuasive and selling intent) as the defining factor in acquiring marketing literacy (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Rozendaal et al., 2009). Many existing theories of children's marketing literacy are based on out-dated media formats (Buijzen et al., 2010). There is also an idea that "marketplaces invade children's lives with vanity, obesity and unfulfilled desires from which they need to be protected" (Spaarmann et al., 2012, p10) and for decades, researchers have shared this view, focusing on attempts to better understand marketing literacy in order to increase its efficacy as a defence against these negative effects of advertising. However, evidence has repeatedly supported the idea that "merely having the [cognitive] concepts in some latent form does little, if anything to prevent children from being led astray by advertising" (Moses and Baldwin, 2005, p.197). Hence these theories are becoming increasingly contested within the academic community (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008).

Crucially, responsible marketing to children should appreciate *all* elements of children's lifestyles (Nairn and Spotswood, 2015). As such, in order to ultimately determine what can be considered "fair" marketing to children, new research needs to get to grips with the contemporary media environment, where many "persuasion attempts blend seamlessly into everyday discourse" (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014, p.35). It needs to decode children's increasingly digital lifestyles and explore persuasion and influence, from all angles, to better understand children's marketing literacy in today's society.

Specifically, this thesis intervenes in established debates surrounding *how* children develop marketing literacy. It aims to revisit cognitive perspectives, which fail to consider the importance of social and cultural elements of children's everyday lives (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008) such as being able to draw on experience of persuasion attempts in other contexts; for example, within sibling interactions (McAlister and Cornwell, 2009) or within friendship groups (De Pauw et al., 2019).

Drawing on the concept of 'situated child consumption' from childhood studies, (Sparman, Sandin and Sjöberg, 2012, p12) this thesis delves deeper into the world of children as consumers by exploring socio-contextual influences; such as their social and virtual relationships, as well as looking at marketing content in more detail, for example executional factors (humour, characters and popular music), which have received little attention in the literature (De Jans et al., 2017; Hudders, De Pauw, Cauberghe, Panic, Zarouali and Rozendaal, 2017; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018; Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmstead, 2018). This research also seeks to understand more about the potential for marketing to be a force for good (Lapierre et al., 2017) for example via social marketing campaigns where the aim is to 'sell' behaviours rather than products (Kotler and Lee, 2008).

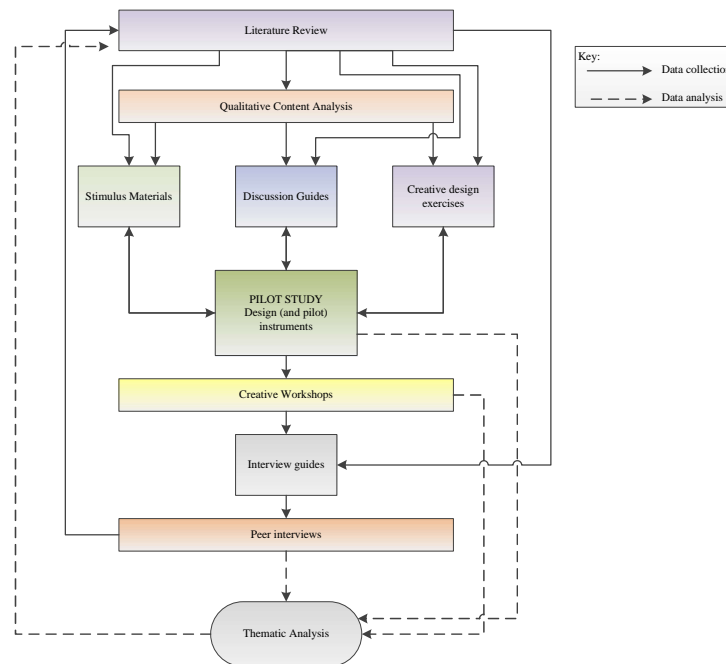
Methodology

This research adopts a combination of qualitative, participatory and creative methods in an inclusive approach to research, which combines scientific rigour with imagination and creativity (Mukherji and Albon, 2015). Participants are children aged 7-11 from primary schools within the Yorkshire/Derbyshire regions of the UK. Stage one consists of detailed, qualitative content analysis of marketing materials aimed at children, guided by similar work (Cai and Zhao, 2013) and a review of up-to-date consumption trends from UK market research reports, such as those produced by 'Kids Insights', 'Ofcom' and 'Mintel Market Research'. Materials will be analysed in terms of purpose, format (online/offline) and content (visual, audio and text). It is anticipated that categories of interest will include toys, cosmetics and gaming as well as food and beverages based upon recent findings from industry and academia (Ofcom, 2019; Folkvord, Bevelander, Rozendaal and Hermans, 2019; De Jans et al., 2019).

Stage two will consist of several 'creative workshops'. A form of co-creation, these workshops are similar to focus groups, yet combine practical, creative activities with discussions around a particular set of topics (Vaart, Hoven and Huigen, 2018). The technique is widely used within the advertising industry yet is still relatively uncommon within academic research (Daems, Moons and De Pelsmacker, 2017). Therefore, there is potential for this work to add value to methods literature too. In stage three, the researcher will conduct peer interviews with older children in the sample (i.e. 10 and 11 year olds) to gain a deeper understanding of their 'lived experience' of contemporary marketing materials (Dixon, 2015).

Figure 1. shows how insights from each stage of the project will inform the next, and where methods of data collection and analysis overlap.

Figure 1



Potential contribution

In addition to enhancing the existing body of knowledge in this area, this research aims to develop guidance for policy-makers concerning the regulation of online and offline marketing content and provide recommendations for socially-responsible marketing to children via different formats in the UK.

Discussion/Conclusions

The value of this paper lies in its power to stimulate debate and discussion around a number of critical issues in terms of responsible marketing to children and young people in the digital age. At the time of writing, the author does not have findings to discuss, but would welcome the opportunity to present the theoretical basis for this research within the collegiate environment of NARTI, particularly the opportunity to discuss the prizes and pitfalls of conducting qualitative research with children, a task which has been described as “not quite Herculean but pretty darn close” by Lapierre (2019, p498).

Keywords

Marketing, young consumers, participatory methods, influence