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ABSTRACT

This study explores children's understanding of television commercials that feature the same primary characters as those in the adjacent program content, a commercial technique known as "host-selling." Responses of children 4 to 5 and 7 to 8 years of age to identical commercials presented in both a host-selling and normal viewing (non-host-selling) context are examined. Three dimensions of the processing of television advertising are assessed: ability to discriminate commercial from program content; ability to attribute persuasive intent to a commercial; and attitudinal responses to commercial appeals. Results indicated that (1) both age groups were significantly less likely to discriminate commercial from program content when the host-selling format was viewed, and (2) older children were more favorably influenced by commercial content when it was seen in a host-selling presentation than in a normal viewing situation. The relevance of this research for existing Federal Communications Commission regulatory policy regarding children's television advertising is discussed. (Author/RH)

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CHILDREN AND HOST-SELLING TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

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## CHILDREN AND HOST-SELLING TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

### Abstract

This study explores children's understanding of television commercials which feature the same primary characters as those in the adjacent program content, a technique referred to as host-selling. Responses of younger (4-5 years) and older (7-8 years) children to the same commercials presented in both a host-selling and normal viewing (non-host-selling) context are examined. Three dimensions of the processing of television advertising are assessed: ability to discriminate commercial from program content; ability to attribute persuasive intent to a commercial; and attitudinal responses to commercial appeals. The results indicated that: (1) both age groups were significantly less likely to discriminate commercial from program content when the host-selling format was viewed, and; (2) the older children are more favorably influenced by the same commercial content when it is seen in a host-selling presentation than in a normal viewing situation. The relevance of this research for existing Federal Communications Commission regulatory policy regarding children's television advertising is discussed.

## CHILDREN AND HOST-SELLING TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

Children's understanding of television advertising has been a topic of considerable research interest for over a decade. Commercials are such an integral part of American television that an average child-viewer is exposed to an estimated 20,000+ commercials a year (Adler, Lesser, Meringoff, Robertson, Rossiter, & Ward, 1980). Moreover, there is ample evidence demonstrating that children are influenced by the commercial messages they view. Several surveys of research (Adler et al., 1980; Atkin, 1980; Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Federal Trade Commission, 1978; Roberts & Bachen, 1981; Wartella, 1980) document that TV commercials are at least moderately successful at generating positive attitudes towards products, that young children often request advertised products, and that such requests are positively related to the amount of exposure to commercials for the advertised product.

Concern about television advertising to children grew into a major public policy issue in the early 1970s (Adler, 1980; Choate, 1980; Cole & Gettinger, 1978). Two of the primary concerns voiced by child advocates were that young children: (a) experienced great difficulty in distinguishing programs from commercial content, and; (b) lacked the ability to recognize and take into account the selling purpose and persuasive nature of advertising. Both of these considerations, it was argued, provided advertisers with an unfair advantage in addressing their messages to children.

In one of the first regulatory responses to such concerns, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1974 issued a report stating "basic fairness requires that at least a clear separation be maintained between the

program content and the commercial message so as to aid the child in developing an ability to distinguish between the two" (Federal Communications Commission, 1974, p. 39401). Applying this principle, the FCC called for broadcasters to follow several new policies designed to help youngsters distinguish between programs and advertising. Among these were restrictions on the use of certain specific advertising practices, such as host-selling, during children's programming.

Host-selling refers to the use of the same characters in commercials as are featured in the adjacent program content. For example, a "Smurfberry Crunch" cereal ad presented during a break in "The Smurfs" cartoon program would be considered a case of host-selling. The concern was that such ads would further blur the distinction between programs and commercials for young children.

Clearly, the FCC's ruling on host-selling was intended to address the "unfairness" problem presented by children's difficulty in distinguishing programs from commercials. Interestingly, however, this action appears to have been based on implicit assumptions about the extent to which it might benefit children. No published research preceding this policy had examined the influence of the host-selling format on children's understanding of or responses to television advertising, and only a single study has emerged since its enactment. This situation is most probably related to the longstanding absence of such practices from the television airwaves. Recent changes, however, in both the broadcast regulatory climate and television industry programming and advertising trends suggest that host-selling to children may soon become a more common practice.

In a recent relaxation of virtually all restrictions on television commercialization practices (Federal Communications Commission, 1984), the FCC legitimized an emerging children's programming trend, that of creating

programs designed to promote products to children. The appearance of such programs, better known as "program-length commercials," is noteworthy because it has increased dramatically the number of program-related products being marketed to children (Kunkel, 1987). The emergence of these programs has brought with it commercials complementing the programs' marketing efforts, both typically featuring the same popular children's characters. To the extent that broadcasters lack caution in monitoring the placement of such commercials in children's programs (a common industry practice is to sell commercial time across blocks of children's programs rather than for individual shows), the potential for host-selling to occur increases.

While the FCC's restriction on host-selling remains in effect, it is important to note that this decision was implemented in the form of a policy guideline rather than a formal Commission rule requiring absolute compliance (Kunkel & Watkins, in press). This was a concession to the broadcast industry, which had sought to avoid the enactment of FCC rules by establishing its own set of children's advertising guidelines in the voluntary self-regulatory code of the National Association of Broadcasters (Krasnow, Longley, & Terry, 1982). Ironically, the NAB's rules were later overturned in an antitrust lawsuit filed by the government (U.S. vs. National Association of Broadcasters, 1982) challenging industry-wide restrictions on advertising practices as an illegal restraint of trade.

Collectively, these developments may now be loosening the reins that previously prohibited host-selling to children. According to industry observers, commercials for toy products drawn from children's program themes and characters are now beginning to appear during the same programs on which the products are based (Forkan, 1984). Other evidence of the existence of host-selling comes from the Children's Advertising Review Unit

of the Council of Better Business Bureaus (1986), an advertising industry self-regulatory body which, in the absence of the NAB's rules, serves as the primary authority in maintaining responsible standards in children's television commercials. This organization reports that the number of instances where program characters have appeared in commercials placed during their program content has increased during the last year, although there is no account of the exact number of such situations which have occurred.

Yet even in the face of the FCC's policy against it and despite the self-regulatory efforts of the advertising industry's review board, the practice of host-selling to children still occurs. Data reported by a national advertising monitoring service (Broadcast Advertisers Reports, 1985), which provides listings of all commercials aired for a sample week each month in the top 75 television markets, offers the clearest evidence of its existence. In the Kansas City area, for example, two children's cartoon programs included commercials promoting products based on the program content during four of the five episodes broadcast the week of November 18-24, 1985. Although this case may be an extreme example, similar though less extensive instances of host-selling were also observed in other markets such as Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. at about the same time. Data from a 1985 content analysis project examining the extent to which children's program characters also appear in commercial content is presently being analyzed and will be reported in the future, providing an accurate assessment of any host-selling practices during children's programming.

#### Cause for Concern?

If host-selling is indeed beginning to permeate children's television, is there cause for concern? Are such commercials more difficult for youngsters to recognize, compared to other advertisements? Are children

less likely to recognize the persuasive intent of advertising when it is presented in a host-selling format? And do children respond more favorably to this type of commercial approach?

Unfortunately, previous research provides little evidence to help answer these questions. During the time when most children's advertising studies were conducted, host-selling appears to have been effectively restricted, probably accounting for the fact that the question has been virtually ignored by researchers. In spite of the call by Adler et al. (1980) for research on what they termed the potential "confusion effect" created by the adjacent presentation of programs and commercials featuring the same characters, only a single study (Atkin, 1975) has addressed this topic directly.

Atkin presented a "Flintstones" cereal commercial to 3 to 7 year olds in one of three treatment conditions: embedded within a "Flintstones" program, embedded within a different program shown after viewing the "Flintstones" program, and embedded within a different program shown by itself. Only the first treatment condition represents a host-selling format. After the treatment, the experimenter asked children if they remembered seeing the "Flintstones" characters eating cereal (they did so only in the commercial, not the program), and if so, whether it was during the program or a commercial. The results indicated that 25% of those who received the host-selling treatment recalled the cereal eating scene as part of the program, indicating program/commercial confusion. However, a comparison between those receiving the host-selling treatment and the other two treatment groups revealed no significant differences in the number of children experiencing such confusion. Moreover, the second treatment group, which viewed the "Flintstones" ad embedded in a non-"Flintstones"



program, experienced slightly greater confusion than the first, or host-selling treatment group.

Interpretation of Atkin's results, however, is confounded by several factors. Possible confusion effects could have been overlooked by requiring recall rather than allowing for immediate measurement at the time it was experienced. Indeed, substantially fewer children in the "Flintstones" program groups were able to recall the cereal-eating event as compared to children in the third, or control group, and were therefore excluded from further questioning. Also, because the study grouped children from ages 3 to 7 together for analyses, program/commercial confusion on the part of the younger children may have been masked by the lack of such confusion on the part of the older ones. Thus, although Atkin's results demonstrate that some young children experience difficulty in discriminating between programs and host-selling commercials, they provide scant support for the hypothesis that the host-selling format contributes to this problem.

When children first develop the ability to discriminate programs from commercials, they typically distinguish the two based on perceptual characteristics, often noting "commercials are shorter than programs" (Blatt, Spencer, & Ward, 1972). While most studies indicate that a majority of children as young as 4-5 years can recognize commercials at a rate significantly above chance (Butter, Popovich, Stackhouse, & Garner, 1981; Levin, Petros, & Petrella, 1982; Palmer & McDowell, 1979; Stutts, Vance, & Hudleson, 1981), a substantial proportion of children below this age (roughly one-quarter to one-third) demonstrate no consistent ability to distinguish program from advertising content. It is not until somewhat later that children develop the ability to recognize the persuasive intent of commercials. Most research in this area indicates that half or more of

the children aged 6 and below are unable to recognize the underlying selling purpose of advertising (Donahue, Meyer, & Henke, 1978; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Rossiter & Robertson, 1974; Ward & Wackman, 1973; Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977). Such ability generally is not well developed until at least age 7 or 8.

Given that children's earliest recognition of commercials focuses on perceptual attributes which separate them from programming and the fact that host-selling minimizes some of those perceptual differences (i.e., characters and their settings are the same as in the adjacent program), younger children may be particularly susceptible to program/commercial confusion when viewing this commercial format. On the other hand, older children of about ages 7-8 who are just developing a conceptual grasp of the persuasive intent of commercials may experience difficulty in applying such knowledge to host-selling commercials, especially to the extent that they have increased difficulty in recognizing commercials presented in a host-selling format.

Another area that might be affected by host-selling is children's attitudinal responses to a commercial's product appeals. Such effects could be related to either one or a combination of two factors: children's difficulty discriminating programs from host-selling commercials and/or children's more positive affect toward popular program characters acting as product endorsers. Ross, Campbell, Wright, Huston, Rice, and Turk (1984) found that 8-14 year old boys responded more favorably to a toy car commercial featuring a celebrity endorsement, as compared to a similar version of the same ad without an endorser. Although the 11-14 year olds evidenced greater awareness of the persuasive intent of the ads and were more skeptical of the claims presented in them than the younger children,

these factors did not act to diminish the older group's desire for the advertised product. There is little doubt that endorsement effects on children exist (Adler et al., 1980) -- the question that remains is the extent to which such effects might be enhanced by the buttressing effect of the character's presence in adjacent entertainment programming.

To gain a better understanding of the effects of host-selling on children's understanding of and responses to television advertising, an experimental study was conducted in which one treatment group viewed a commercial placed adjacent to a program featuring the same primary characters while a second group viewed the identical commercial adjacent to unrelated program content. Children's program/commercial discrimination, recognition of the commercial's selling intent, and attitudes toward the advertised product were then measured. Any difference in children's responses across the two treatment groups should thus be attributable solely to the host-selling format.

#### METHOD

Sample. Subjects were divided into two age groups -- younger children aged 4-5 years (N=72) and older children aged 7-8 years (N=80). Boys and girls were represented in almost equal numbers in each of the two groups. The sample was drawn from 7 schools and day care programs in the Southern California area and included a rich diversity of racial backgrounds (44% Caucasian, 22% black, 17% Hispanic, 11% Asian, and 5% others). No evidence emerged throughout any of the analyses to indicate significant differences in children's response patterns as a function of either gender or race.

Treatment. Utilizing program and commercial content taped off-the-air from Saturday morning network children's television, 4 videotapes were specially prepared for the study. Each tape featured a self-contained

cartoon segment lasting approximately 10 minutes, followed by a standard network commercial/program separation device lasting about 5 seconds, and then a 30 second commercial.

Two of the four videotapes presented both program and commercial content featuring the same primary characters. These tapes are referred to as the host-selling treatment. One featured a "Flintstones" cartoon and a "Fruity Pebbles Flintstone" cereal commercial, the other a "Smurfs" cartoon and a commercial for "Smurfberry Crunch" cereal. The remaining two videotapes were created by rotating the same program and commercial elements used in the host-selling videotapes so that the "Flintstones" program content was seen with the "Smurfs" commercial and the "Smurfs" cartoon with the "Flintstones" commercial. These tapes constituted the non-host-selling, or normal viewing treatment condition.

Within age groups, children were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment conditions where they viewed one of the two stimulus tapes prepared for each condition. Counterbalanced use of the two different versions of each treatment was employed to strengthen the generalizability of results. Use of the same two program and commercial elements across the two treatment conditions (only their groupings are changed) also served as a control for any unique effects potentially attributable to a particularly attention-getting program or commercial segment, since any such effects should be equally distributed across both of the treatments. The viewing was conducted in quiet rooms at the school or day care sites with groups of up to four children at a time. Viewing groups included only children from the same age range and most groups were mixed in gender. Immediately after viewing, each child was individually interviewed.

Measures. Three primary types of dependent variables were measured: ability to discriminate program from commercial content; ability to

recognize the persuasive intent in the commercial viewed; and responses to the product appeals in the commercial.

Discrimination ability was assessed both indirectly and directly, and scored dichotomously for each of the two measures. First, each child was shown 5 photographs (derived directly from the treatment videotapes), 4 depicting key scenes from the cartoon story just viewed and one depicting the commercial that accompanied the program content, with the product clearly visible. The children were then asked to use as many of the pictures as they would like to help them in retelling the story in the cartoon program. Responses were scored according to whether the child: (a) incorporated the commercial photograph into the version of the story [indicating the absence of commercial recognition] or, (b) spontaneously noted that the picture was not part of the story or that it was a commercial [indicating discrimination]. Most children (N=126) fit clearly into one of these patterns. Those who ignored or omitted the commercial photograph in retelling the cartoon program's story were asked to explain why. If the response fit into category (a) or (b) above, it was categorized accordingly on this measure. Those whose discrimination ability could not be determined from the story-telling task or the follow-up questioning (N=12) were excluded from the analysis for this variable. The subjects omitted did not differ substantially from the sample as a whole on any of the variables assessed in the present study.

Following this indirect measurement, the interviewer pointed to the commercial photograph and asked whether this was part of the "Flintstones" (or "Smurfs") show, a commercial, or something else. Only those children responding that the scene was from a commercial were scored as demonstrating correct discrimination.

Children's ability to recognize the selling purpose of commercials was measured using a non-verbal technique adapted from studies by Donahue, Henke, & Donahue (1980) and Ballard-Campbell (1983). Each child was shown a set of three photographs clearly depicting: (a) a child of the same gender as the subject with his or her mother at the market buying the advertised cereal product, (b) a child at home eating the cereal product, and (c) a child at home watching TV. After the interviewer explained what each response alternative depicted, children were given two chances to select what "the last part of what we just watched" (interviewer pointing to the commercial photograph) "most wants you to do." The three alternatives are listed above in descending order of selling intent recognition and were assigned ordinal values accordingly. Possible scores once the items were combined ranged from 3 to 9 (values for each child's initial response were doubled), with higher scores indicating greater understanding.

Children's attitudinal responses toward the advertised product were measured by closed-ended items scored on 4 or 5 point Likert scales. The questions focused on how much the children thought they would like the cereal and whether they would ask their mother to buy it. Children's cereal brand preference was also assessed, comparing the product seen advertised to two similar highly popular cereal brands.

## RESULTS

The results for the two measures of children's program/commercial discrimination provided substantial contrasts in the proportion of children correctly demonstrating such ability (see Table 1). The direct questioning approach yielded a much higher report of correct discrimination than the indirect measure involving the story-telling task. For example, over 90% of both the younger and older children in the non-host-selling, or normal

viewing condition correctly identified the commercial content through direct questioning, whereas only 31% of the younger and 64% of the older

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Table 1 about here  
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children demonstrated discrimination on the indirect measure. This same trend was reflected in the host-selling condition as well.

Clear evidence of a confusion effect related to the host-selling format emerged from the results. The number of children demonstrating correct discrimination was lower for the host-selling condition than the control format, with this effect consistent across both measures of this ability. Log-linear analyses were conducted to assess the influence of treatment and age on children's responses on each of the two different discrimination measures. Log-linear analytic techniques are designed primarily for multivariate analysis of nominal level data. The procedure is essentially a series of Chi-square analyses that yield information analogous to a standard ANOVA (see Knoke & Burke, 1980 for a more detailed explanation). The two log-linear analyses indicated significant treatment effects for both the story-telling task  $\chi^2 (1, N=139) = 5.22, p < .05$  and the direct questioning measure  $\chi^2 (1, N=152) = 6.01, p < .01$ . These results provide strong evidence that host-selling increases children's confusion between program and commercial content.

Age also emerged as a significant main effect predicting discrimination ability  $\chi^2 (1, N=139) = 8.66, p < .005$ , but only on the story-telling measure. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating commercials are better recognized as something separate from a program by 7-8 year olds than 4-5 year olds.

No evidence emerged to indicate that host-selling affected recognition of a commercial's selling intent for either age group. Consistent with

prior research, older children ( $M=6.7$ ,  $SD=1.7$ ) performed better overall than younger ones ( $M=6.1$ ,  $SD=1.7$ ) on this ability. This age trend was consistent regardless of treatment condition. Though the mean difference between age groups in recognizing selling intent was not large, a 3-way ANOVA indicated age was a significant predictor  $F(1,147)=4.32$ ,  $p<.05$  of such ability.

Three dimensions of children's responses to the commercial appeals were measured: product liking, product purchase requests, and brand preference. The data indicate that children responded quite positively in all of these areas across both treatment conditions.

Both age groups selected the brand seen advertised as their primary cereal preference more often than the two comparable brands combined. Children receiving the host-selling treatment demonstrated a somewhat greater preference for the advertised cereal (younger=58% - older=76%) than the children in the normal viewing situation (younger=53% - older=69%). The relative difference in preferences between the older and younger children may be at least partially attributable to the fact that one of the competitive brands ("Sugar Crisp") used in the comparison measure proved more popular with the younger group (18% selecting it as their primary preference) than with the older children (5% preferring it). The greater preference for the advertised product by both the younger and older children in the host-selling treatment condition is consistent with the expectation of stronger persuasive effects for this advertising format, although no statistically significant differences emerged as a function of treatment on this measure.

Children's attitudinal responses (how much they liked the product and how much they would request its purchase) were also highly favorable across



the two age groups and treatment conditions (see Tables 2 and 3). Any variance in scores attributable to the host-selling treatment may therefore have been limited somewhat by the children's strongly positive reaction to the commercials in both treatment conditions. While no statistically significant main effects for treatment were observed, a significant treatment  $\times$  age interaction effect did emerge. In the non-host selling condition, the younger children evidenced greater liking of the advertised product than the older group and greater desire to make product purchase requests. In the host-selling condition, however, these age-group differences did not occur; both age groups responded almost equally in their attitudes toward the advertised products (see Figures 1 and 2). Separate ANOVAs yielded a significant treatment  $\times$  age interaction effect for product liking  $F(1,147)=3.71, p<.01$  and for product purchase requests

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Figures 1 and 2 about here  
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$F(1,147)=6.97, p<.01$ . These results indicate that the host-selling format may have a different effect depending upon the age of the child-viewer. Specifically, the data indicate that 7-8 year olds are more favorably influenced towards the advertised product by host-selling than by viewing the same commercial in a non-host-selling format. This effect, however, is not evident in 4-5 year olds; and in fact these younger children tend to respond somewhat less favorably, or about the same, to a commercial using the host-selling format.

#### DISCUSSION

Three dimensions of children's understanding of and responses to host-selling commercials were investigated in this study. In the first area, children's ability to discriminate programs from commercials, the results

indicated strong support for the existence of a "confusion effect" created by the host-selling format. Children in both age groups were significantly less likely to distinguish commercial content from the adjacent programming when the commercials featured the same primary characters across both types of content. These results emerged from treatment conditions testing two different program/commercial combinations ("Flintstones" and "Smurfs") and were consistent across two distinct measures of commercial discrimination ability.

These findings indicate that concern regarding children's ability to recognize host-selling commercials as advertising content should be focused not only on younger children who tend to experience difficulty in distinguishing programs from commercials in general, but also on older children up to at least 8 years of age (the oldest children included in this research). Even the 7-8 year olds, who demonstrated substantial ability to recognize commercials in a normal viewing (non-host-selling) situation, evidenced markedly less correct program/commercial discrimination when viewing a host-selling format.

One of the most interesting outcomes was the disparity in the two different measures of program/commercial discrimination. Although designed to assess the same ability, these two items yielded substantially different estimates of the extent to which children could correctly distinguish between program and commercial content.

Many more children correctly recognized a commercial when questioned directly about it than when they were faced with the story-telling task which called on them to apply such recognition. A surprising number of children who included the scene from the commercial in retelling the program story were still able to correctly label the advertising content "a commercial." When asked how they knew it was a commercial, the most common

reply of the children fitting this pattern was "they told you about cereal." This outcome suggests that many youngsters who recognize that short television messages featuring products are called "commercials" may not necessarily understand that such messages are separate and conceptually different from the story elements contained in program content. This possibility, if correct, could account for some of the divergence in previous studies which have found differences in children's understanding of television advertising according to the framing of the research questions.

One other consideration related to children's recognition of host-selling commercials is the role which program/commercial separation devices might play in the process. All of the stimulus tapes used in this research included standard separation devices so that the experimental treatment would correspond as closely as possible to children's actual viewing circumstances. The use of the separators, however, did not prevent confusion induced by host-selling.

This outcome is consistent with prior research indicating that the most commonly used separators consistently fail to accomplish their intended purpose (Ballard-Campbell, 1983; Butter et al., 1981; Palmer & McDowell, 1979; Stutts et al., 1981). Few children in this study referred to the separation devices in explaining how they knew that certain content was a commercial, even though they had been viewed just minutes before. As most separators used in children's programming feature the characters from the adjacent program content (including the ones used in this study), it is not surprising that these devices provide little help for children in discriminating program from commercial content. Based on this outcome, other research documenting the inadequacy of most separators, and Ballard-

Campbell's (1983) finding that a more perceptually distinct separation device can generate greater program/commercial discrimination in children, it is clearly time to take a closer look at this topic. It would seem that a separator featuring entirely different characters and settings from that of either the adjacent program or commercial would better aid children in discriminating between the two. If separators are to serve any purpose, future research exploring strategies to enhance their efficacy is clearly needed, along with a willingness on the part of broadcasters to consider reform in this area.

In the second area examined, children's recognition of the selling intent of commercials, the results provided no evidence to indicate that this ability was affected by the host-selling format. Virtually no differences emerged across treatment groups for children of either age range, although, consistent with prior research, the older children performed significantly better than the younger ones. The lack of any treatment effects is not altogether surprising since such recognition is based on knowledge that would typically be applied consistently to all commercials or to none at all, depending upon the child's level of development.

The third area explored, children's attitudinal responses to the advertised product, produced interesting findings about the effects of host-selling commercials. The significant results in this area indicated that the host-selling format has a different effect on younger and older child-viewers. The 7-8 year olds responded more positively to the products in commercials when they viewed them adjacent to their related program content than when they were seen with an entirely different program. In contrast, the 4-5 year olds responded either less positively or about the same on the attitude measures when they viewed the commercials in a host-

selling format.

Unfortunately, the results do not make clear the causal factors underlying this effect. If the older children's more positive response to the host-selling commercials is related to difficulties in distinguishing such content from programming, then why are the younger children, who also evidenced program/host-selling-commercial confusion, not similarly affected? The answer to this puzzle may lie somewhere in the older children's attitudes towards the program characters featured in the host-selling commercials.

While the older group's general skepticism towards commercials is almost certainly greater than that of the younger children (see Adler et al., 1980 for a review), which likely accounts for the age differences observed in reactions to the non-host-selling commercials, such skepticism may somehow be minimized in the host-selling scenario. By definition, host-selling commercials feature figures who are well-known and trusted program heroes. Reactions to the products endorsed by such figures may be enhanced by an increase in children's positive affect toward the characters generated through their viewing of the adjacent program content. This possibility could be explored in future research by incorporating measures of children's affect towards the characters featured in the programs and commercials studied. While the factors underlying the older children's more positive response to the host-selling format may not be clear, this outcome provides further reason for concern about the impact of host-selling on older as well as younger children.

The lack of comparable research to corroborate the findings of this study makes drawing hard and fast conclusions difficult, but the results clearly establish that host-selling commercials do indeed provide

advertisers with an unusual advantage over child audiences. This is not a surprising outcome; restrictions on this type of advertising were enacted because of just such concern. Nevertheless, in the face of diminishing self-regulatory policy, increasing commercialization in children's programming, and a political climate where government is retreating from virtually all content-related broadcast regulation, empirical evidence demonstrating the unique influence of host-selling commercials on children may be crucial in determining the future of this advertising practice. This study's findings provide a clear rationale for maintaining restrictions on host-selling directed to children.

From a more theoretical perspective, further research in this area is called for to identify the factors responsible for the 7-8 year olds more positive response to commercials presented in the host-selling format, as well as to determine the upper limit of the age range so influenced.

A final question which is raised by this research is the extent to which children base their program/commercial discrimination on factors such as the length of the message or the prominent display of a product, as opposed to recognition of the featured characters. If the appearance of program characters in commercials in general (i.e., in non-host-selling situations) acts to blur the distinction between programs and advertisements for young children, then the increasing use of this technique in children's advertising, which is a by-product of the growth of the program-length commercial format, raises important issues regarding the principle of maintaining clear program/commercial separation. If policymakers are truly concerned about aiding children in distinguishing programs from commercials, this possibility would seem to warrant close consideration and is certainly worthy of further research.

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Table 1

Age x Treatment Differences Across Both  
Program/Commercial Discrimination Measures

% children correctly discriminating:	Younger		Older	
	<u>Non-host selling</u>	<u>Host- selling</u>	<u>Non-host selling</u>	<u>Host- selling</u>
Story-telling task	31.3	24.2	63.9	42.1
N =	32	33	36	38
Direct questioning	91.2	76.3	97.4	85.4
N =	37	38	39	41

Figure 1

Interaction of Treatment x Age on Children's Liking  
of the Advertised Product

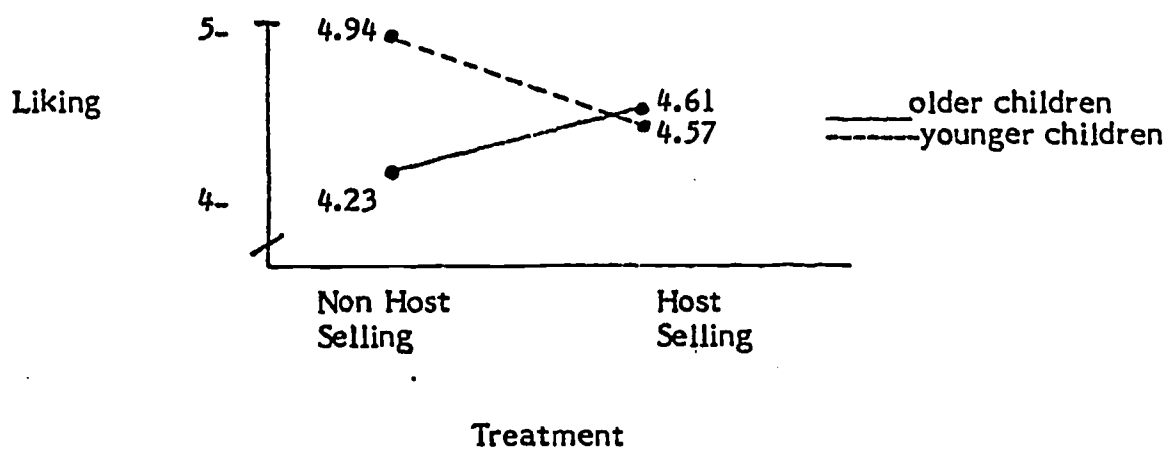


Figure 2

Interaction of Treatment x Age on Children's Willingness  
to Make Purchase Influence Requests for  
the Advertised Product

