



Journal of Promotional Communications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://promotionalcommunications.org/index.php/pc/index>

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To cite this article: Knight, C. 2013. An Exploration of the Use of Childhood Associations in TV Advertising Campaigns Targeting Adults. *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 1 (1), 29-47

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An Exploration of the Use of Childhood Associations in TV Advertising Campaigns Targeting Adults

The aim of this research is to gain an insight into responses of the use of childhood associations in adult audiences when visual images create disconnect from the product or service. In-depth interviews were conducted with a mixed-gender sample of 20 – 50 year olds, as previous research suggests this is a preferred method. The results showed that incongruent messages between childhood associations and adult-orientated products or services can generate negative associations and reduce the persuasiveness of the advertising message. The results suggest that the level of realism in the metaphor employed is a significant factor in creating positive connections with the product or service. While, it is acknowledged that advertising practitioners often use visual metaphors as a communication tool, conflicting cues can mean interpreting the metaphor can be complex and the nuance of the message fails to reach the audience. As such, this paper offers insight for future research.

Keywords: Childhood, nostalgia, advertising, visual images, message affect, dissonance



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INTRODUCTION

The advertising industry is growing and has contributed £100 billion to the UK economy in 2013 (Patterson 2013). In a WARC Report (2013) the growth of advertising is predicted to increase by 3.1% in 2013. While digital advertising platforms have increased, the traditional media channel of Television (TV) remains strong (Patterson 2013). Despite, studies confirming that there is a low level of interest when watching TV advertising (Clancy 1994; Soley 1984), Binet and Field (2007) suggest that effectiveness might be increasing. A recent WARC report (2012, p.2) also revealed that TV advertising is the “most impactful.” Therefore, TV advertising remains an important channel to communicate with target audiences, emphasising for advertising professionals to deliver effective advertising campaigns.

The aim of this paper is to explore audience's perceptions of a selection of TV advertisements that use childhood associations and consequent impact on the persuasiveness of the product or service. TV advertisements have increasingly become visually complex that rely on imagery rather than the focus on the product features and claims of the company (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006). This study explores ads using figurative visual images specifically IKEA (2012), Barclaycard (2012), Santander Air (2008) and Orange (2009). While, Moriarty and Duncan (1991) contend that visual images are universally accessible in terms of understanding the intended message, with growing numbers of advertisements using complex visual images, research needs to examine the ways in which the audience perceive and interpret these (Aitken et al. 2008; Stathakopoulos et al. 2008). An increasing number of advertisements use childhood associations and memories as visual images for adult-orientated products or services. The way in which characters and toys are being used to sell products and services, promoting the message of simplicity and usability have been extended across a wide range of products and services (Ward 1990). As an example, Silentnight Beds introduced the 'Hippo and the Duck' in order to "set the tone for describing further product features and consumer benefits in a non-technical way" (Ward 1990, p.6).

There has been extensive research into advertising using nostalgia to evoke memories of childhood (Muehling and Pascall 2011; Braun et al. 2002; Braun 2007). As an example, Kellogg's launched the "Kid in You" (1984 cited in Shostak 2000, p.2) campaign which presented cereal to appeal to: "...both sides of a typical adult: the rational side concerned with nutrition and fibre, and the juvenile side attracted to sweet flavour" (Shostak 2000, p.4). The use of nostalgia has been widely discussed; however few studies have explored the ways in which adults perceive the use of childhood associations to aid understanding of how audience responded to this approach to advertising (Philips 1997). Research focusing on the processing of advertising by the audience featuring childhood associations to evoke nostalgia is indicated (Braun 2007). This is particularly important as increasingly advertising drives effectiveness through audience emotions (Oldham 2012). Therefore this study examines the ways in which adults react towards the representation of childhood associations in visual images for products or services targeting adults. The study emphasises the importance to practitioners of the associations made by viewers, liability of the advertising and the response in relation to the product or service of the company (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006).

This paper offers further insight into the effects of childhood associations used as a visual metaphor in advertising. Using visual metaphors through childhood associations can create dissonance in relation to the product or service where visual ambiguity occurs. Advertising practitioners should be encouraged to associate childhood associations in a way that is directly relevant to the key product or service for the audience to decode the message as the advertiser intends. It is important that advertising practitioners understand the ways in which the product or service is positioned within the mind of the viewer at the conceptual stages of the creative process. Understanding the audience's perceptions of the product or service attributes can then be reflected in advertising messages, thereby increasing persuasiveness of the visual argument. Achieving greater understanding is particularly important, as whilst the study is supported by previous research that found that childhood associations can be deemed positive, it was also found that responses can also be negative thereby affecting perceptions of the advertised product or service.

The first part of this paper, presents a review of existing research into childhood associations in advertising and the use of this creative technique as a visual image. In

section three the qualitative study of adults aged 20-50 is described. Section four includes a review of key findings. In conclusion, it is argued that the level of realism in the metaphor employed is a significant factor in creating positive connections with the product or service. Whilst childhood memories do create emotional responses, the relevance of such associations can affect the persuasiveness of the advertising message, especially if the relevance is not explicitly linked to the product or service.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Braun (2007) states, studies on the 'childhood domain' should be conducted in order to establish its usefulness in the 'consumer domain'. Furthermore, as Philips (1997) proposes the responses to different types of visual images and in this case the use of childhood associations need to be understood. Especially when recent research prioritises the associations between "audiences and advertising information and imagery they choose to interact with" (Aitken et al. 2008, p.281). For the purpose of this paper and in order to underpin the research and establish gaps the following academic areas have been critically analysed: Childhood nostalgia and associations; visual metaphors in advertising and the production of meaning in advertising.

Advertising and Childhood Associations

Nostalgia is a growing advertising technique and the subject of considerable research (Havlena and Hovlak 1991; Stern 1992; Holbrook and Schindler 1996; Goulding 2002; Reisenwitz et al. 2004). Nostalgia in advertising is used to transport the audience to an idealised past to evoke associations with the 'good old days' (Havlena and Holak 1991). Advertisers use emotions of childhood to engender associations between the audience and their own childhood (Braun et al. 2002). Belk et al (2003) also argues that childhood associations can evoke a memory of a preferred object. Interestingly, Braun (2007) argues that advertisers should move beyond the traditional forms of nostalgia and use childhood memories to connect with the audience. Childhood association has been used in a number of advertisements for adult products and services (Martinez et al. 2006), as seen in the Santander (2008) advert in which the Formula 1 racing driver Lewis Hamilton is constructed as a toy model which transforms into Lewis Hamilton. The Santander (2008) advert is a representation aimed at adults with a playful variation on a service (banking) (Fletcher and Kenway 2007). This is intended to evoke positive memories and remind the audience of their own childhood, research has found that this can be activated "within the context of an advertising message" (Braun et al. 2002, p.2). Supporting this contention, Garretson and Niedrich (2004, p.28) assert that people "long for connections to their childhood" which supports the use of memories in advertising campaigns. Furthermore, it has been argued that media texts can encourage an audience to "re-experience" an event and thereby create emotional responses (Braun 2007, p.403). Hirschman and Holbrook (1986 cited in Proctor et al. 2005) argue that the consumption experience and in this case through advertising will refer to thoughts such as imagining. Braun (2007) argues that advertisers should move beyond brief references to nostalgia in their campaigns to create deeper connections with the audience and gain insight into perceptions of the advertising message. Furthermore, Sujan et al.'s (1993) study found that these associations should facilitate the link to the brand from memories retrieved. However, Moran (2002, p.171) argues that childhood nostalgia, which creates 'imaginary childhoods', is used to address anxieties in society but on the contrary it generates more anxieties.

Furthermore, while the ambiguity of the advertising message is purposefully used by advertising practitioners to gain audience attention, dissonant objects could limit

understanding of the product or service key attributes (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011). The use of conflicting images with the product or service such as a toy and banking could lead to ambiguity. It is therefore important to study the associations between childhood visual images and responses generated in relation to the product or service being advertised (Proctor et al.2005).

Visual Rhetoric

Visual rhetoric's and in particular visual metaphors have received a great deal of attention by communications researchers (McQuarrie and Mick 1996; McQuarrie and Mick 2003; Stathakopoulos et al. 2008). Metaphors create unexpected similarities or associations between two terms, typically generating new implications (Philips 1997). This technique is commonly used verbally as a function of advertising (Stern 1988) however the process can also be presented visually and is often used in TV advertising (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006). Jeong (2008) study found that audiences can understand arguments of visual advertisements without verbal explanations. On the contrary, Stathakopoulos et al (2008, p.631) conclude that there needs to be "a strict interaction between the visual and the verbal component of an ad." According to Proctor et al. (2005) advertisers connect with the audience by creating ads that are "out of the ordinary" to encourage the audience to interpret the message through the ambiguities of the metaphor. As products and services often have little differentiation, for example banking, it is the role of the advertiser to encourage the audience to engage in a particular way so as to convey a dynamic meaning (Goldman 1992; Williamson 1993). Furthermore, as Proctor et al (2005, p.57) contends advertisers often combine:

"Reality with imagination in their work, leaving the viewer to distinguish reality from fantasy and draw their own understanding and interpretation."

Advertisements aim to invoke people's imaginations through the use of images (Stern 1988). Child-like qualities are regularly used as objects of the gaze and have reappeared in a number of adult-orientated product advertising (Luke 1991). Increasingly childhood association is valued as a resource that enriches the representation of a product or a service (Martinez et al. 2006). Lagerwerf et al. (2008) explain this is so because they create more meanings than verbal metaphors and therefore tend to be more complex, allowing for variation of interpretations (Phillips 2000; Proctor et. al 2005; Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006). However, the use of visual metaphors can lead to misinterpretation and thereby affect the persuasiveness of the key product or service attributes (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011).

Increasingly advertisements are using child-like qualities when targeting audiences (Martinez et al. 2006). This can be seen in the Barclaycard (2012) advertisement where a male adult is escorted around a toy store by a giant toy monkey: the anthropomorphised monkey exhibits human qualities in order to encourage an adult audience to use Barclaycard's services (Stern 1988). Leiss et al. (1990) argue that the metaphor is a key communication tool in advertising employed to encourage the audience to draw out their own meaning. Furthermore, Phillips and McQuarrie (2009, p.59) argue that:

"It is deviant, incongruous metaphors that are most likely to facilitate belief, change and persuasion."

However, it is important to note metaphors can be interpreted differently, and must be meaningful in order for the message to be transferred to the audience (Proctor et al.2005). This contention may seem contradictory - in the sense that advertising is related to unexpectedness - however highly ambiguous visual metaphors are increasingly present in advertising and therefore are worthy of in relation to audiences'

responses and perceptions (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2001). Supporting this point, Williamson (1993) argues that the significance of one object has to be transferred to another. Whilst childhood association's aims to simplify notions and understandings of a product or service, Darke and Richie (2007) argue that the audience could be resistant to this metaphorical positioning. Understanding could be limited if the audience does not connect with the message (Stern 1988). Furthermore, as Darke and Richie (2007) found advertising deemed deceptive can negatively impact perceptions of the product or service. In addition, as Stathakopoulos et al. (2008, p.653) contend while the use of visual rhetoric is a:

“stylish device by itself is not adequate under any circumstance if the advertisement's theme is found inconsistent by consumers.”

This is an important point as it would obviate the aim of the advertising. Gkiouzepas and Hogg (2011, p.114) argue “way objects are visually linked... [and] ... their degree of relatedness are both important”, adding:

“The metaphorical objects embodied in visual form should not be excessively dissimilar from each other if the superior impact of the synthesis visual is to be achieved.”

As with advertising deemed deceptive, advertisements that use highly dissimilar objects such as childhood toys for adult-orientated products or services could reduce the persuasiveness of the key product element in the advertising message (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011, p.103). The audience need to be able to interpret visual metaphors that are simple to process in order to connect with the message (McQuarrie and Mick 2009). Furthermore, Heckler and Childers (1992) argue that relevant visual information is easier to interpret than irrelevant visual images. Recent research demonstrated positioning the reader at the centre of understanding advertising processes (Mick and Buhl 1992; Aitken et al.2008; Kenyon et al. 2008). This places emphasis on the active involvement of the audience in the response process of determining the implied meaning by the advertiser and the role it plays in individual lives (Aitken et al.2008). This research builds on established theories of passive and active audiences (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944; Hall 1974; O'Donohoe 1997; Kenyon et al. 2008).

Producing Meaning

Scott (1994) posits the reader-response theory in which there is no single “correct” meaning inferred from an advertisement. Although media encodes texts, the audience will decode these in different ways and may generate interpretations that were not intended by the advertisers (Hall 1974; Mick and Buhl 1992). According to Storey (2009) it is the audience that determine the final terms of reference of meaning, supporting the contention that meanings extend beyond the creative intentions of the advertiser (Hall 1974; Stern 1996). Furthermore, those meanings are not chosen by the advertisers; rather the subjectivity of the ad originates from the audience's point of view which will be determined as child-like or not (Goldman 1992). Kenyon et al. (2008) also argued that people will draw on other forms of popular culture in order to decode and interpret an advertisement. As advertising literacy increases, audiences are aware of the functions of advertising (O'Donohoe and Tynan 1998). The levels at which the use of child-like messages are accepted will therefore vary between individuals (Philips 1997). Further as O'Donohoe (1997, p.250) study showed that while audiences can be sophisticated in their understanding of advertising this then “had little do with brand or product choice.” Audiences interpret advertising campaigns in the context of their own lives to make sense of the advertising meaning; therefore the use of childhood associations in advertising positioning the viewer as a child will resonate on different levels (Scott 1994;

Bartholomew and O'Donohoe 2003). This introduces a more complex view of communication in advertising, as in addition to the notion of the active audience advertisers must also consider potential differences and interpretations (Aitken et al. 2008).

The use of childhood associations gives rise to the need for research to ascertain whether audiences are "getting the messages that are being conveyed" (Stern 1988, p.93) to them through childhood associations in relation to the product or service attributes. Aitken et al. (2008) recommend a reader-response approach to analyse audience engagement with and understanding of advertising (Aitken et al.2008). Extensive research has been conducted into the use of visual metaphors in advertising (Stern 1988, McQuarrie and Mick 1996; McQuarrie and Mick 2003) and childhood nostalgia (Braun et al. 2002; Braun 2007). Therefore, as childhood associations are increasingly used in adult-orientated products and services, the audience perceptions of this must be understood (Braun 2007). While the creative attention is to allow the audience to draw their own meanings from personal experience, the persuasiveness - in relation to the product or service - must be considered (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011). As previously noted, positioning the audience at the centre is the key to understanding the effectiveness of advertising (Aitken et al.2008).

While advertising that is largely metaphorical (in order to grab the viewer's attention) has been studied (Leiss et al. 1990; Cook 2001), audience understanding of the depiction and referents implied by visual messages has been neglected in the literature (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011). As previously noted highly dissimilar associations can be difficult for audiences to decode. As Philip (1997) notes, this can lead to misinterpretation or diminution of the meaning of the advertising message, in particular the key product or service attributes. There is a dearth of qualitative research exploring audience responses and effectiveness to advertising that use childhood associations as a visual image for adult-orientated products or services (Braun 2007). This subject is worthy of research in order to attempt to meet gaps in understanding of the ways in which the audience interprets visually complex messages.

METHODS

As Elliot and Elliot (2005) argue there is an increasing need to understand meanings from the audience in advertising. Similarly, Aitken et al. (2008) argue that the audience should be at the core of exploring the effects of advertising. Furthermore, Philips (1997) findings suggested studies are needed to understand how and why thoughts are provoked from advertising visual images. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted to build rich descriptions in relation to the interpretations of childhood associations as a visual image from respondents (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006; Daymon and Holloway 2011). In-depth interviews were used to discover the perceptions of childhood associations in relation to adult-orientated products and services as many studies looking at visual metaphors have taken this approach (Proctor et al. 2005). Using semi-structured interviews allowed deeper understanding of respondent interpretations of the four ads (Kenyon et al. 2008). All interviews were conducted face-to-face in order to capture deeper perspectives from the respondents (Marshall and Rossman 2006). The researcher ensured that each interview was organised - as far as possible- to suit the needs of the respondent in a convenient location to encourage them to speak freely and enhance credibility (Daymon and Holloway 2011). Prior to the interview a statement was read to ensure that answers respondents gave were their own thoughts and opinions (Silverman 2005). Respondents were assured that answers would be treated in

confidence and remain anonymous (Denscombe 2010). Due to the small sample size, a non-probability sample was chosen as this is most suited to the study (Bryman 2007). A convenience snowball sample was used to meet the meet the inherent resource limitations. Respondents were recruited through a colleague of a family member, who suggested a list of potential respondents with the caveat that they may require information about the study prior to participation. This use of snowball sampling increases the likelihood of honest answers from respondents, which the researcher required, however it is acknowledged this can reduce transferability of results (Denscombe 2010). Notwithstanding this potential limitation, Bryman (2007) suggests that findings can encourage and inform future research and links can be made to existing literature. The snowball sample was primarily drawn from the South West (see Table 1).

Table 1- Respondent Profiles

	Gender	Age	Occupation
Bella	F	22	Carer
Paul	M	27	Estate Agent
Susie	F	32	Teaching Assistant
Darren	M	33	Teacher
Janet	F	45	Secretary
Sophie	F	47	Teaching Assistant
Jennifer	F	48	Shop Assistant
Tom	M	49	Structural Engineer
Lauren	F	50	Teaching Assistant
Christine	F	55	Teaching Assistant
Neil	M	56	Site Premises Manager
Alan	M	57	Caretaker
Debbie	F	59	Teacher
	F	22	Teacher
	F	22	Student

There is a dearth of research in the area of childhood associations used as a visual metaphor in advertising, therefore respondents aged between 20-50 of both genders and a range of occupations were recruited. This approach provided a more representative sample of the target population, to discover the interpretations of the use of childhood associations between age ranges (Holbrook and Schindler 1996). The minimum age of 20 was determined as according to Kastenbaum (1993) it is the official classification of adulthood. Four adverts that used childhood associations to represent products and services that would be used by adults were chosen to explore the interpretations from the viewer (Luke 1991). Keegan (2009) argues that the use of animated material in advertising allows for more detail interpretations. Advertisement 1 (IKEA) was chosen as children and toys were representing the responsibilities of an adult. Advertisements 2 (Barclaycards) and 3 (Orange) were chosen due to their overt use of toys to evoke emotive responses (Belk et al. 2003). In advertisement 4 a toy was used to 'construct' a facsimile of an adult (Santander). The advertisements selected illustrate the ways in which childhood associations have been used to engage the adult target audience with the product or service (Luke 1991; Denscombe 2010). The selected advertisements were pre-tested in two pilot studies.

A pilot study is recommended as a "small scale version or trial, done in preparation for the major study" (Chenail 2011, p.257). Whilst complete objectivity is impossible, to reduce this, two pilot studies were conducted to pre-test the discussion guide (Chenail 2011). Two major changes were made. Firstly, the removal of leading questions that generated short responses as the researcher wanted to encourage in-depth responses (Bryman 2007). Secondly, introductory questions, including TV watching habits and recollection of current advertising were added. This was done to put the respondents at ease and also invoke notions of TV advertising campaigns, as a precursor to the interview. A discussion guide was drafted prior to piloting and conducting the research. While the same structure was followed, the researcher did allow for some flexibility as these produced unexpected directions that had not been contemplated at the design phase to allow for additional findings (King and Horrocks 2009).

Thirteen interviews were conducted to capture interpretations of the four ads. The interviews lasted on average 30 -50 minutes, which were shorter than anticipated. Nevertheless, as Bryman (2007) notes, shorter interviews are not axiomatically inferior in the analysis process. It was acknowledged that written documentation cannot be fully relied upon and therefore recorded observations of the interview were carried out, which is important when coding qualitative data (Bryman 2007). It was important that the researcher was able to refer back to the recordings of the respondents to gain a deeper understanding of the interpretations from the four advertisements to increase dependability (Malhotra et al. 2012; Daymon and Holloway 2011). Each interview was transcribed and analysed individually, then looked at collectively to identify similarities and differences, themes and relationships with the literature (Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Elliot and Elliot 2005; Malhotra et al. 2012).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Advertising Understanding

As O'Donohoe and Tynan (1998) argue, with increased advertising literacy the functions advertising uses has become progressively more understood by viewers. All respondents reported that they watched TV every evening and acknowledged strategies that advertising employed. Respondents noted that notions of childhood were being used in each of the four adverts to encourage an adult audience to engage with the messages.

Respondents identified the principal aim of the advertising was to engage and positively influence purchasing decisions (O'Donohoe 1994):

"... I mean obviously the purpose of an advert is not to make sense is it? And to attract your attention to watch it. They are not trying to sell kids' stuff but using the kids and animals and stuff...to try and get you to watch it."(Tom, 49)

Respondents also understood that childhood associations and memories were being used to sell to adults, supporting O'Donohoe and Tynan's (1998) contention that audiences are increasingly aware of the functions of advertising. Further, supporting Aitken et al. (2008) that audiences should be a key element in evaluating advertising's effectiveness as an audience becomes more aware of advertising's function.

Gender Interpretations of the Advertising Text

There were notable differences in interpretation of the perceptions of childhood associations according to gender in the four TV advertisements across the age ranges. Male respondents drew upon imagination in order to create their own understanding of the advertisement. This supports Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006) who argue that visual images will encourage the audience to make efforts to understand the message, discussing the IKEA advert, Paul (27) stated:

"... when you were a child your toys were your friends...they take on characters and they all have personalities....when your imagination it at its best. Um so they [in the advert] were all going around and obviously you had one of the toys that got all the cutlery out and another one put food on the table and another one cut the bread and the kids were there having a good time. Then it cuts to the mirror and obviously it was their parent's things like that."

Most of the male respondents drew on their imagination in an effort to make sense of the adverts intended message which is consistent with Hirschman and Holbrook (1986 cited in Proctor et al. 2005) who argue that audiences draw on imagination in order to understand and interpret messages. On the contrary, female respondents more earnest in relation to the TV advertisements, with reference to the Orange (2009) ad (Sophie, 47) commented:

"Well I suppose it would be cheaper to own a dolls house wouldn't it, than bricks and water, might be easier to move furniture around to be all plastic [Laughing]... I don't think it would be very good in a storm."

Hirschman and Holbrook 1986 (cited in Proctor et al. 2005) argue that imagination will be evoked through advertising. The findings suggest through the use of childhood associations prompted female respondents to understand the IKEA (2012), Barclaycard (2012) and Orange (2009) advertisements in an earnest way. Findings suggest that male respondents were more inclined to draw on their imagination to make sense of the message. The female respondents were more literal in the way they expressed understanding of the messages. The findings support Storey (2009) and Hall (1974) who argue that advertisements may elicit unintended interpretations from the audience that the advertisers had not envisioned. This suggests that evoking understanding through imagination in the interpretation of the advertising message was elevated in male respondents through childhood associations.

Personal Experience Outside the Advertising Text

As Scott (1994) argues respondents interpret advertising messages in the context of their own lives. The findings showed that through personal experience with the

brand/company the effects of childhood associations evoked responses about the toys and services after watching the TV advertisements in a positive and negative way.

“They [her grandchildren] also have little rocking chairs um and obviously there are soft toys that actually come from IKEA, there are loads. Dragon, crocodiles, the whole lot, not generally teddy bears, we usually like something different [Laughing] (Debbie, 59, p.78)

In the Orange (2008), Santander Air (2008) and Barclaycard ads, findings showed that respondents tried to understand the advertising message through their own experience with the company. In reference to the Orange advert Paul (27, p.73) said:

“I am already with Orange but it sounds like they are maybe, presents out there for adults, or toys out there for adults which we would class as toys such as ipads and mobile phones and so on.” (Paul, 27,)

Findings also showed that the use of childhood connections had negative emotional affects in relation to the advertisements:

“I am not sure because I bank with Santander Air and I am not always happy with them.” (Susie, 33)

In addition, one female respondent Suzanne (47) perceived negatively with the giant toy doll in the IKEA advert (2012) as it evoked disturbing connotations. This respondent stated that the size of the doll evoked unnerving connotations:

“The very large doll walked in and it was um spooky actually, you know like one of those horror movies that sort of thing um yeah” (Sophie, 47)

Echoing this point, another respondent said:

“Yes probably quite attractive for children to watch, but I didn’t like the one that came through the door with an axe..., I don’t know what he was doing with an axe, I thought it was quite inappropriate” (Debbie, 59, p.77)

This supports Jeong’s (2008) study that the level of personal involvement will affect the effort devoted to interpreting the advertising message. Findings also demonstrated that when respondents spoke negatively about the product or service it decreased the level of involvement with the advertising message. As Moran (2002) argues the findings suggest that childhood associations potentially prompt additional anxieties. This seems inconsistent with Braun et al. (2002) who argue that the use of childhood associations will always evoke positive responses from the audience, as findings indicated that this is dependent on the personal interpretation of the viewer.

Manipulation Through the Use of Childhood Associations

Interestingly one respondent expressed highly negative feelings towards the use of childhood associations in the Barclaycard (2012) advertisement. The respondent, (Debbie, 59) raised questions and identified the transmission of information to an adult audience as manipulative.

“It’s a disappointment, not happy with it, why does it do that... they are misleading the child who could be captivated by that, but their argument would be, it’s an adult advertisement and that’s how they would get away with it. Very manipulative. It makes me angry that they are targeting a supposedly adult audience but they are doing it through the children, so they are taking advantage of the vulnerable child.... I think that is disgraceful.”

Debbie (59) further noted that children would watch the adverts portraying the toys and potentially pester their parents to buy these. Echoing this point, Darren (33) noted: “There seemed to be quite a dark undertone running through it [Barclaycard]... flipping

dogs you wouldn't expect children to be using that sort of language." As Darke and Richie (2007) argue advertising deemed deceptive may have negative effects on the product or service. Supporting Stathakopoulos et al. (2008) that while the use of visual rhetoric is a device used in advertisements if the theme is found inconsistent by viewers this will have negative effects. This finding is inconsistent with Braun's (2007) study, which found that childhood associations may be a value adding resource.

Childhood Associations and Advertising Meaning

A significant finding is that respondents across all age ranges did refer to childhood toys when making sense of ads chosen. A number of respondents associated the Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton in the Santander Air advert with the Airfix brand. Across all age ranges, males recalled playing with the Airfix models. Interestingly, most of the females referred to their male family members building Airfix models:

"When my brothers were younger they would have Airfix kits and they would come in a box and you could get tanks and aeroplanes and things...."
(Christine, 56)

"It reminded me of those like little games where you have got to stick all the pieces together, Airfix I think it is called."
(Bella, 22)

The findings support Belk et al. (2003) that attaching notions of childhood to a product or service created a memory of a preferred object. Most respondents related to childhood memories and associations to the products and services in the Santander Air (2008) advert, suggesting an understanding of the intended advertising message through the interpretation of the childhood associations as a visual image. Interestingly, childhood associations also prompted respondents to recollect programmes watched in their childhood and draw on other cultural texts in an effort to understand the Santander Air (2008) advertising message:

"I thought... Santander Air have amalgamated...with other companies and...want people to think that people are coming together ... I... think it looked quite effective the way they were talking about what they were doing... whilst they were assembling this model. It also made me think of something from Bionic Man...which was about this 6 million dollar man that was a TV programme...he was rebuilt and they had the technology to build him and he was part man and part robot."(Lauren, 47)

The identification with the 'Robot' was also a common theme in responses:

"The robot, I remember the robot as a child. It was an all metal robot that you used to wind up and used to shuffle along and that brought back memories." (Alan, 57)

The findings also showed that respondents drew on their knowledge in relation to Lewis Hamilton and indicated positive associations to understand the advertising message:

"Well he [Lewis Hamilton] is a good icon for anyone really, um whether he would be advertising a bank or whatever... He is the perfect model for any advert really." (Neil, 56)

"Yeah I like Lewis Hamilton in his adverts he is a good person to have in commercials." (Alan, 57)

These findings suggest that when a positive association is evoked, this can lead to greater understanding of the message, moreover as Sujun et al. (1993) contend, may facilitate a link to the brand. This was demonstrated in the Santander Air (2008) ad. Conversely, the IKEA (2012), Barclaycard (2012) and Orange (2009) childhood associations were

deemed 'deceptive' in relation to the brand/company, which led to higher levels of misinterpretation of the relationship to the product or service (Darke and Richie 2007). This finding suggests that childhood associations should facilitate rather than hinder the link to the brand (Sujan et al. 1993) when targeting adult audiences. The findings demonstrate, as McQuarrie and Mick (2009) argue, that the level of realism in the metaphor employed is a significant factor in creating positive connections with the product or service: as exemplified in the case of the Santander Air (2008) advert. Moreover, when the visual metaphor has higher levels of literal meaning (Proctor et al. 2005) and positive childhood associations (Braun 2007) the message is better received. So whilst the audience decoded the advertising message in all four ads, these messages then created dissonance to the product or service.

Product/Service Dissonance

Leiss et al. (1990) argue that metaphors are used as a key marketing and promotional tool, supported by the respondents who all identified that childhood associations were employed to engage the audience's attention. Interestingly, respondents reflected that when they did not recognise the brand in an ad, they were intrigued to discover what the product or service was. This was particularly prevalent in the Barclaycard (2012) and Orange (2012) ads:

"... When I started watching that [Barclaycard] that wasn't the type of advert you usually see... so it held my attention wondering where it was going...I was curious to know what it was advertising from the initial moment."(Darren, 33)

"Only thing for me was I had never seen the advert [Orange] so I was a bit interested to see what it was at the end."(Alan, 57)

However, it was found that respondents were unclear how childhood associations in the IKEA (2012), Barclaycard (2012) and Orange (2009) adverts linked to the key product or services attributes:

"Well knowing it was IKEA I find it quite bizarre that they used cuddly toys and children for advertising their furniture products...Just using robots and children to advertise furniture why? Why don't you show the product more... there was no indication of that to me?" (Neil, 56)

"I thought , it's not going to be anything to do with Barclaycard you think it is going to be something, I don't know some shop, or a toy they are trying to sell."(Christine, 55)

"Um Orange I didn't understand why, the toys and the adults are associated with Orange, I wouldn't link it. I associate Orange with mobile phones and a network."(Paul, 27)

Gkiouzepas and Hogg's (2011) study highlighted that ads that connect dissimilar objects fail to produce the same benefits as objects that assimilate. Whilst respondents drew on childhood associations, as identified previously, to make sense of the ads sampled (IKEA 2012; Barclaycard 2012; Orange 2009), they found associations confusing. All respondents were confused by the use of childhood associations linked to furniture, banking and mobile phones.

"Maybe I missed something, but what was the relation between them? Orange is phones... there was nothing to do with communication."
(Alan, 57)

These findings suggest that incongruent messages can dilute the product or service's key attributes (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011). Respondents also questioned the intended audience of the IKEA (2012), Barclaycard (2012) and

Orange (2009) TV advertisements as they thought they could be consumed by adult and child audiences potentially causing confusion about the intended target. With reference to the Barclaycard advert Christine (56) said: "I think adults and children would watch that." Ads, which do not reach the intended target audience through this form of confusion, could potentially create further dissonance regarding the service or product attributes (Stathakopoulos et al. 2008). This finding is significant, if the key product or service message evokes confusion the final message may not reach the targeted adult audience (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011).

Connecting with the Product/Service

While there was some variation in the interpretations of the Santander Air (2008) they were consistent. Interestingly, respondents for the Santander Air (2008) advert associated with the visual construction of Lewis Hamilton in relation to the service attributes of the company.

"It is an analogy of how successful he is and how successful they are and the fact that Santander Air is on his racing car and people will know his name and associate with it." (Debbie, 59)

"Yeah ...I would say really it's given me the impression that its partnerships... joining together to make things. In that advert there they were saying that they were with Bradford and Bingley and Alliance and Leicester, so they have joined together to help form a partnership, like they were building a car together." (Paul, 27,)

The Santander Air (2008) advert appears to be assimilated to the service attributes of the organisation. This contradicts Jeong's (2008) contention that visual advertisements can be understood without verbal explanation as all respondents engaged with the dialogue in the Santander Air (2008) advert in order to aid their understanding of the visual argument:

"That one [Santander Air]... you know what the advert is about more like coz they are talking over and telling you about Santander Air and its banks... So you know what it is about... you are listening and know what they are talking about more." (Bella, 22)

The respondents were able to relate to the construction of Lewis Hamilton as a toy to Santander Air's (2008) service attributes. Only the Santander Air (2008) advert generated positive childhood associations, understanding of the message and the relation this had to the services the bank offers. As McQuarrie and Mick (2003) argue, the findings demonstrate that interpretation of the message must be simple to process and the visual images should make a connection to the key product and service attributes through the aid of dialogue. However, interestingly, one respondent connected with the IKEA (2012) advert through recollection of personal experience, evoking childhood associations in relation to the products:

"We used to buy quite a few bits when Evie was younger...the little plastic bowls with the colours, practical but pretty... they [IKEA] do the children plastic bowl sets and cup sets...they are nice and practical ideal for kiddies." (Janet, 45)

Notwithstanding this anomalous finding, the majority of respondents claim that the use of verbal explanations aided their understanding of the adverts message. This was articulated by Paul (27, p.75):

“...the advert had some dialogue in there which helped because in the IKEA and Orange one there was just music. But in the others [Barclaycard and Santander Air] the dialogue probably helped.”

Addressing the issue of recall, it was found that a number of respondents had previously seen the adverts, however they had not been persuaded by the message about key product or service attributes:

“I found the advert appealing...However, I already knew you could do that, you don't need to do it with Barclaycard, you could do it with Google Wallet anyway...so it made me aware that Barclaycard has got a version of it but it doesn't overtly appeal to me to use it.” (Paul, 27)

Moreover, a number of the female respondents in the 40 – 50 age categories were curious about the product or service and found the childhood associations, in relation to the advertising message, a distraction. Referring to the IKEA (2012) advert, Lauren (50) stated:

“I was actually trying though to look at the kitchen equipment and the drawers...because I was thinking that are what it was about, so I was trying not to focus too much on the toys.”

While the images used may enrich the format of the text, this can lead to misinterpretation of the persuasiveness of the key product attributes and services as found in the IKEA (2012), Barclaycard (2012) and Orange (2009) adverts (Martinez et al. 2006; Darke and Richie 2007; Stathakopoulos et al. 2008). It is worth noting that in contrast to Philips and McQuarrie's (2009) study, the findings demonstrate that the visual deviation and incongruent messages may not facilitate persuasion in relation to the product or service. The findings suggest that 'incongruency' of the advertising message decreased persuasion to the product or service when prior knowledge of the organisation was evoked. Whilst childhood associations may be used in attempt to simplify the product or service attributes, the process can evoke confusion for the audience thus the message about the key product attributes or services do not reach them (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011). As Stathakopoulos et al. (2008) note, if the visual images use dissonant objects to evoke associations with the product or services engagement, with the product or service attributes decreases.

CONCLUSIONS

In accordance with O'Donohoe and Tynan (1998), respondents recognised advertisers' intentions behind the use of childhood associations, in particular that they aim to attract the attention of and engage. Furthermore, the use of childhood associations was found to encourage respondents to delve deeper into the perceptions of advertising messages (Belk et al. 2003). However, extending Braun et al.'s (2007) notion that positive childhood associations are prompted in relation to the product or service being advertised, the study found that negative associations can also be created. Importantly, the findings suggest that interpretation of visual metaphors can be more complex than advertisers anticipate. Moreover, interpretation will depend on consumers' individual experiences to determine the narrative of the advertising message (Scott 1994).

A main insight that is consistent with research carried out by Gkiouzepas and Hogg (2011) is that while respondents engaged with the visual metaphor to understand the advertising message they did not always understand the connection this then had to the key product or service attributes. Importantly, negative responses to visual images evoking childhood associations and memories affected the persuasion of the key product

or service attributes (Darke and Richie 2007). Additionally, it was found that if the audience's experience of the advertising visual metaphor through the use of childhood associations was deemed deceptive, they did not engage as intended with the message. These findings have implications for future advertising campaigns. The findings highlight the importance of the visual metaphor. In particular the degree of relevance to the viewer in the context of the advertising message (Stathakopoulos et al. 2008). Furthermore, it was found that dialogue is key in aiding understanding of the visual image when the audience is less certain of its link to the product or service. In addition, childhood associations as a visual image cannot always be understood in isolation. While childhood memories do create emotional responses, findings suggest that the relevance of such associations can affect the persuasiveness of the advertising message, especially if the relevance is not explicitly linked to the product or service (Gkiouzepas and Hogg 2011). It is acknowledged that there are limitations to the study. Given the qualitative nature of this study, the generalisation of findings to a wider population should be treated with caution (Bryman 2007). Future research is recommended using a larger sample, across a wider adult age range (20+) in order to increase validity. However, the primary aim of the research was to extend the theory of adult's perceptions of advertising messages that use childhood associations as a visual rhetoric, which is an under-researched area. The use of the stimulus material could be problematic as the respondents may have had different levels of involvement with the product or service, thus influencing the findings (Proctor et al. 2005). Future research could be undertaken to test effects of childhood associations as a visual metaphor in advertisements with products or services that are more relevant to the population from which the respondents were sampled. It is also recommended that research be undertaken focussing on the use of childhood associations in advertising isolated to one industry to explore whether the findings of such a study would increase reliability and offer further insight into the use of visual metaphors to best fit that product or service. Finally, deeper understanding of audience responses to the use of childhood associations and visual metaphors in advertising could be achieved by undertaking a reader-response (Scott 1994) research focussing on visual rhetoric (Phillips 1997; McQuarrie and Mick 2003).

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