

## A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF DISCLAIMERS IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION ADVERTISING

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### ABSTRACT

This study was designed to update, clarify and expand an earlier piece of research which investigated the role of televised disclaimers in children's advertising. The current study examines the incidence, form, positioning, language level and variance by product category of a sample of nearly 1,000 advertisements televised during children's programs.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, concern about advertising to children has been on the increase. In the early 1970's, studies of television programming and how it affects children were initially conducted. These studies generated a great deal of information and raised our consciousness about potential effects on very young audiences. Many of the study results reinforced concerns about the vulnerability of children to promotional suggestion and their lack of cognitive ability to reject false situations or discern between products as portrayed on screen and products as they perform and exist in "real-life."

Another reason for concern exists because children spend a large amount of time watching television. One study found that American children between the ages of 4 and 12 watch an average of 24 hours of television per week (Broadcasting 1976). Not all of the commercials that children watch advertise child-oriented products; in fact, approximately 40% of the amount was spent watching programs produced for adults. Studies have shown, however, that younger children pay more attention to commercials broadcast during children's programming than do older children (age 9-10) who paid more attention to commercials during prime time viewing (Ward, Levinson and Wackman 1971). Apparently commercials broadcast during children's programming are designed to capture the younger child's attention by the use of cartoon characters, music, subjective camera angles and editing.

It was with these advertising practices in mind that the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and the National Advertising Division of the Better Business Bureau (NAD) developed codes for children's advertising with sections which state the need for "positive disclosures" or "disclaimers" to be broadcast within an ad. These voluntary codes, coupled with FTC cases and court interpretations on deception in advertising, have caused the use of disclaimers in children's advertising to become very common, especially in certain product categories.

### A BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A number of studies have been conducted to determine the effects of television and television advertising on child audiences. Fewer studies have looked specifically at the impact of disclaimers in negating misleading or deceptive impressions gained when viewing the ad. Barcus (1975) per-

formed a content analysis of children's weekend television commercials in 1975 and found that 22% of the commercials had an audio disclaimer, 11% had a visual disclaimer and only 8% had both an audio and visual disclaimer. A study by Atkin (1975) found that the least used disclaimer format (both audio and visual) was the most effective presentation in order to correct a misleading impression in the ad.

Liebert et al. (1977) found that the current terminology level used in advertising to children renders them somewhat ineffective in helping the child correct a misleading impression formed by watching an advertisement. They also found that using a modified form of the disclaimer, such as "you have to put it together," instead of "some assembly required," was understood much more often. They also found that 10-year-olds were more than twice as likely to understand the disclaimer "partial assembly required" than 5-year-olds. This indicates the maturity level found with age helps to increase the effectiveness of disclaimers as presently worded.

In another study, Stern and Resnik (1978) found that disclaimers as presently worded do not correct the misperception caused by the visual impression formed by a commercial. Children ages 3 to 6 were not able to understand a disclaimer whose purpose was to correct a misleading impression created by the visual impact of the commercial.

Studies have also shown that a child's vulnerability to advertising is an inverse relationship with age. Since experience and maturity increase with age, it is reasonable to expect older children to better understand commercials and be less receptive to product claims. A study conducted by Rossiter and Robertson (1974) found maturity level of be the most significant factor in a child's ability to assess advertisements.

The use of audio and visual disclaimers are instituted on a voluntary basis by advertisers to correct the possibility of misperceptions in their ads and to protect them from possible charges of deception.

### Purpose of the Study

This study will attempt to analyze several factors related to disclaimers appearing in ads during children's programming. Where possible, comparisons will be made with the Barcus (1975) study, although statistical comparisons will not occur since the two samples are quite dissimilar in configuration. This decision not to statistically compare the results of the two studies stems from the basic difference between Barcus' data base (weekend only) and this expanded sample (weekday and weekend). To verify the difference between weekend and weekday ads as they relate to disclaimers, a chi-square was run (see Table 1) on the current data which proved significant at  $p < .005$ .

TABLE 1  
COMPARISON OF WEEKDAY AND WEEKEND TV ADS  
ON THE BASIS OF THEIR DISCLAIMER STATUS

	Weekday	Weekend
Contains a Disclaimer	80	290
Does Not Contain a Disclaimer	183	423

$$\chi^2 = 8.58, 1 \text{ df}, p < .005$$

This shows that weekpart and disclaimer status are significantly related. Given that as the case, comparisons between the two studies would be like comparing apples and oranges.

No one has sought to determine if any changes have been made since Barcus' (1975) studies. The authors felt a need to update and more deeply investigate the area of disclaimers and so this study was conducted to research the role, incidence and characteristics of disclaimers in children's television advertising. This study looked at weekday as well as weekend commercials and incorporated a much larger sample base (976 commercials) than any other related content study has heretofore undertaken.

#### METHOD

A disclaimer is defined as a statement or disclosure made with the purpose of clarifying or qualifying misleading or deceptive statements made within an advertisement. Common examples of disclaimers include: "each sold separately," "part of this nutritious breakfast," and "some assembly required."

#### Program Selection

Videotape recordings were made of major network programming (ABC, CBS, NBC) during a six-week period during January-February, 1980. Two weeks of children's programming were taped for each network on a randomly-rotating basis. Each children's program for the specific week and selected network was taped for later analysis. The videotapes of the programming included the commercial advertisements, network program announcements and public service announcements. This analysis did not consider network program announcements as commercials; therefore, they were not analyzed.

#### Analysis of Commercials

The videotapes of the programming (63 hours total) were viewed by an observer who studied each of the commercials and analyzed them according to criteria established by the authors. Each commercial was categorized by product category, after which a determination was made as to whether the commercial included a disclaimer. If the commercial did not contain a disclaimer, the assistant timed the length of the commercial, noted the time of day, whether it was weekday or weekend programming, and recorded which network broadcast it. If a commercial used a disclaimer, a determination was made as to its form - whether audio, visual or both audio and visual. The "both" category only occurred if the same message was shown and spoken at the same time. If a different verbal message was spoken at the same time a different visual message showed on the screen,

it was counted as two separate disclaimers. Other information about the disclaimer which were recorded include actual length of the disclaimer in seconds; position of the disclaimer within the ad according to beginning, middle or end; and the terminology level used, whether adult or child. Additionally, the actual terminology of the disclaimer was written out for each disclaimer, and due to common phraseology of many responses, it was possible to group like phrases into several categories. In total, of the 63 hours of programming, there were 976 commercials taped and analyzed for the evidence of disclaimer content. Because the nature of the information to be analyzed was of a factual rather than a judgmental nature, only one observer was utilized, and therefore no reliability measures are offered.

#### RESULTS

##### Incidence

Of the 976 commercials analyzed, 367 contained a disclaimer (some commercials contained more than one disclaimer). Table 2 details this finding:

TABLE 2  
INCIDENCE OF DISCLAIMERS IN COMMERCIALS

	Number of Responses	Percent of Total
No Disclaimer	609	62.4%
Disclaimer for Product	350	35.9
Disclaimer for Premium	12	1.2
Disclaimer for Both	<u>5</u>	<u>.5</u>
TOTAL	<u>976</u>	<u>100.0%</u>

Over one-third of all commercials contained a disclaimer. Most were disclaimers for a product, while only 1.2% were for a premium offering and only .5% utilized a disclaimer for both product and premium. This corresponds with the low incidence of premium offers in the commercials. The Barcus (1975) study found that 41% of his weekend sample contained disclaimers and that 47% of the cereals product category utilized premium offers and that of the total commercial announcements studied, 17% utilized premiums. The large difference between the two studies could be attributed to varying definitions of premiums. Any minor differences, however, could not account for that great a difference. It may be possible that the incidence of premium offers is cyclical or seasonal and may be affected on a regional basis. No definite answers, however, are forthcoming from the data obtained in this study.

##### Form

The next aspect of disclaimers analyzed was the form of the disclaimer, whether audio, visual or both audio and visual. Table 3 details the responses:

TABLE 3  
FORM OF DISCLAIMERS

	Number of Responses	Percent of Total Disclaimers	Percent of Total Ads
Audio	222	60.5%	22.7%
Visual	111	30.2	11.4
Audio and Visual	34	9.3	3.4
TOTAL	367	100.0%	

Of the total number of commercials with disclaimers present, 60.5% employed an audio form of disclaimer. They were more than twice as frequent as the visual disclaimer (30.2%) and it is interesting to note that only 9.3% of the commercials using disclaimers utilized both audio and visual format, the format deemed most effective in producing understanding. These results offer some similarities to the Barcus (1975) results. The proportion of audio only and visual only disclaimers in the entire sample of ads were nearly identical to the Barcus figures. The proportion of ads containing a combination audio-visual disclaimer was much higher in the Barcus study (8% of the total sample) in comparison with the current figure representing 3.4% of all ads sampled. Therefore, the combined audio-visual mode of disclaimer communication is being used less now, eight years after it was determined to be the most effective in producing understanding in children (Atkin 1975).

Position of Disclaimer

An overwhelming number of disclaimers (61.6%) appeared at the end of the commercial. The remaining disclaimers appeared in the middle of the ad (22.1%) and at the beginning (16.3%). These findings (see Table 4) would appear to be consistent with the primacy-recency literature which recommends that later placement would bring about greater recall and learning.

TABLE 4  
POSITION OF DISCLAIMER IN AD

	Number of Responses	Percent of Total
Beginning	60	16.3%
Middle	81	22.1
End	226	61.6
TOTAL	367	100.0%

Length and Language of Disclaimers

The overwhelming majority of disclaimers were 2-3 seconds in length (83.6%) and were contained in mostly 30-second commercials. In this study, 100% of the disclaimers used adult language. Not one disclaimer was presented in language that most young children could understand. As pointed out in Liebert et al. (1977), a greater percentage of older children (over 8 years of age) can understand the adult terminology. Younger audiences, however, are vulnerable; therefore, disclaimers using adult language have not served their intended purpose of facilitating understanding.

Product Categories Using Disclaimers

The information in Table 5 supports the hypothesis that breakfast foods and toys make heavy use of disclaimers, however, confectionary products were found not to use disclaimers. The proportion of confectionary ads in the total sample is much smaller than in Barcus' (1975) study, while the incidence of breakfast ads is much more prominent now than in the past. It is interesting that 81.7% of the commercials using disclaimers were in the breakfast products

TABLE 5  
PRODUCT CATEGORY USING DISCLAIMERS

Product Category	No Disclaimer	Disclaimer	% of Category Using Disclaimers
Public service	162	0	0%
Toys	44	61	58.1
Confectionary	114	0	0
Breakfast	39	300	88.5
Health care	48	0	0
Clothing	9	0	0
Restaurant	50	6	10.7
Soft drinks	3	0	0
Other foods	34	0	0
Other	106	0	0
TOTAL	609	367	100.0

category, indicating the need to correct the impression given to children that the cereal products are sufficiently nutritious by themselves. They made use of disclaimers such as "part of this nutritious breakfast," "part of a complete breakfast," and "fortified with 10 essential vitamins and minerals," to correct the impression that cereal alone was a sufficient and nutritious breakfast. 58% of the toy commercials made use of a specific category of disclaimer. "Sold separately" was the disclaimer response occurring in 98.4% of the commercials for toys. None of the toy commercials contained disclaimers designed to counteract misleading impressions formed by watching the toy operate in the best possible environment. The most common overall disclaimer phraseology was "part of this nutritious breakfast," followed by "fortified with 8/10 essential vitamins and minerals" and "sold separately." These three responses represented 89.1% of the total disclaimers (see Table 6).

TABLE 6  
ACTUAL TERMINOLOGY USED IN DISCLAIMERS

	Number of Responses	Percent of Total
Part of this nutritious breakfast	145	39.5%
Fortified with 8/10 vitamins/minerals	122	33.2
Sold separately	60	16.4
Part of this complete breakfast	19	5.2
Brushes not included	13	3.5
Others	8	2.2
TOTAL	367	100.0%

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A synopsis of this study's highlights reflect several findings in the area of disclaimers. It was found that disclaimers appear in just over one-third of all children's commercials. The breakfast products category constitutes the major user of disclaimers, with toy products a distant second. Regarding the disclaimer itself, all of the sample utilized adult terminology in a time frame of 2-3 seconds. The majority of disclaimers are inserted at the end of a commercial and occur in an audio format. The greatest concentration of commercials was found in weekend programming which contained a heavy concentration of breakfast and toy commercials. Finally, it was discovered that there are only a few basic groups of similarly worded disclaimers that can be differentiated according to product category.

## Implications

From an evaluative standpoint, it appears that advertisers are still missing the boat by using disclaimers with adult language that is less apt to be understood, and by using sub-optimal (audio only or visual only) modes of communication to convey the message. Are disclaimers, then, used to fulfill their primary purpose of reducing misleading impressions or, in fact, are advertisers using them to satisfy industry and government pressures? Whichever the motivation, it is entirely conceivable that the presence of disclaimers can make children vulnerable to advertising influence.

The use of a disclaimer itself suggests that some aspect of an ad is inconsistent and/or needs qualification. Where this phenomenon occurs, ads might be considered misleading when disclaimers are absent. When disclaimers are present and use difficult to understand (adult) language and sub-optimal (audio or video only) formats, the full meaning of the message could produce even higher levels of misperception or confusion by the child viewer. Given the empirical evidence supporting the language level and format of the disclaimers which were used, it is safe to say that the advertiser is capable of making attempts. Children are even more vulnerable to their influence. Clearly, this would imply that the use of disclaimers benefits advertisers more than the needs of the child-oriented viewing audience.

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