

# ADVERTISING TO ADOLESCENTS: AN EXAMINATION OF SKEPTICISM

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## ABSTRACT

*Various studies have been done to further understand adolescent skepticism, its antecedents and consequences, and the affect of skepticism on the processing of advertising and persuasion attempts among adolescents. Given the substantial purchasing power and advertising dollars currently spent on this group, further understanding of this group is imperative. There appears to be a gap to bridge between marketing literature and developmental literature in dealing with this issue. This paper conceptualizes skepticism as a result of a developmental stage more than its current role as a dependent variable within the advertising and persuasion research context. A brief discussion of literature in the area of adolescents and advertising, and extant research on adolescent skepticism toward advertising is included. The conceptualization of the Skepticism-Dogmatic axis and its relation to advertising to adolescents is posited. Findings of previous studies are discussed with respect to findings of skepticism in adolescents. In light of previous findings and the obvious relevance of studying adolescents in terms of the characteristics of their developmental stages, this paper advances the idea that inclusion of developmental factors is should be an element of consideration in any future research which examines marketing to adolescents.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that an average child will have spent almost 20,000 hours exposed to television programming by the age of 18 years (Kline, 1993). A significant portion of that programming time is devoted to advertising. Indeed, twenty-five years ago it was found that America's most naive viewers were exposed to between 22,000 and 25,000 commercials per year (Weisskoff, 1985). A 2006 policy statement from *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, indicates the current number of television commercials children are exposed to annually has doubled to over 40,000 plus an undisclosed number of internet ads (*Pediatrics*, Committee on Communications, 2006).

In addition to the pervasive nature of advertising in the lives of adolescents, also adding practical importance to this issue is the economic impact of the group. Marketers and advertisers also spend a large amount of resources marketing to the adolescent target market. The current body of literature regarding adolescent attitudes toward advertising is sparse at best, despite the staggering \$200B in current U.S. purchasing power of the pre-teen/adolescent market (Kadaba, 2009). Additionally, advertisers spend \$1.5B annually attempting to reach this market. With so many dollars being spent annually on this group, it is important that research in this area should be well-developed and rigorous. Current research regarding adolescents and pre-teens' response to advertising, with one or two exceptions, leaves out a very important dimension of the adolescent psyche: their developmental stage and the impact this has on researchers' ability to accurately assess adolescents' response to advertising.

Some might consider it unsettling that we know so little regarding how children think, feel, and develop knowledge with respect to such a controversial but pervasive influence. Several bodies of literature examine children's capabilities to cogitate, perceive, and understand the world around them. Stage-

dependent cognitive development theories such as Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development (Piaget, 1970; Piaget, 1972; and Siegel & Cocking, 1977), Perner's and Wellman's Theories of the Mind (Perner, 1988; Wellman, 1988; Wellman, 1990), and Boyes and Chandler's Theory of Epistemic Development (Boyes & Chandler, 1992) suggest that the development of knowledge, insight, and perceptual abilities are limited by a child's level of cognitive development. However, in business, marketing, and advertising literature, children's cognitive and epistemic development is rarely taken into consideration. This paper seeks to underline the importance of taking these factors into consideration through an examination of both existing empirical research on advertising to adolescent children and skepticism as a characteristic of adolescents' cognitive and epistemic development.

This paper is organized as follows. An introduction of extant literature is broken into two parts; an examination of the empirical research on adolescent skepticism toward advertising and a brief examination of epistemic development theory. Next a juxtaposition of the empirical studies and developmental theory is used to suggest that the empirical results suggest the developmental stage(s) of the adolescent subjects might be an underlying cause of the outcomes of the reviewed studies. Lastly, limitations of this paper and suggestions for future research are discussed.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Of interest in the current study is the relationship between cognitive development, epistemic development, and skepticism toward advertising in adolescent children. Specifically, conceptualized in this research is the relationship between levels of skepticism exhibited toward advertising and the epistemic stage of skepticism-dogmatism in adolescents. Several studies including Isaksen and Roper (2008); Lee, Murphy, and Neale (2009); Martin and Kennedy (1993); and Moschis (1979) have examined the consumer behavior of adolescents and various related factors. Additionally, much research exists regarding skepticism toward persuasive attempts in adults (Batra and Ray, 1986; Beltramini & Evans, 1985; and Lessne & Didow, 1987). The antecedents and consequences of consumer skepticism have been studied (Chylinski, Chu 2010). Various factors have been studied in relation to their contribution to levels of adult skepticism toward advertising, including product category and consumer self-esteem (Prendergast, Liu, & Poon 2009). However, as has been widely posited and accepted, children's behavior varies widely from behavior exhibited by adults (Rossiter, 1979; Donohue, Henke, & Donohue, 1980; Belk, Mayer, & Driscoll, 1984; Gorn & Florsheim, 1985; Macklin, 1985; Roedder & Whitney, 1986; Armstrong, & Brucks, 1988; Beale & Belgrad, 1990; and Moore 2004).

### Adolescent Skepticism and Advertising

Extant literature on adolescents and advertising consists of several studies (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Brucks, Armstrong, & Goldberg, 1988; McCallum, 1978; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; and Tolson, 2002) on children and adolescents. However, few studies focus on the adolescent group's unique developmental characteristics.

An early study in this area, McCallum (1978) examined skepticism in the context of Inoculation Theory where children were shown short anti-smoking films in an attempt to increase skepticism toward smoking. This research, done in the context of de-marketing an undesired behavior and might be considered more in line with changing attitudes toward a product category than a measure of skepticism. However, results indicated that adolescents "inoculated" with anti-smoking knowledge exhibited a statistically significant increase in skepticism from those children not inoculated by the anti-smoking films (McCallum, 1978).

Brucks, Armstrong, and Goldberg (1988) also examined children's ability to counter argue against advertising, thus decreasing their own persuasibility and increasing skepticism toward advertising. In this

study, Brucks et al. (1988) provided empirical support that children diminish the credibility of advertisers, i.e. exhibit increased levels of skepticism, in order to avoid being duped. However, Brucks et al. (1988) also found that skepticism did not appear to negatively affect children's attitudes toward the product being advertised.

A seminal study in adolescent skepticism, Boush, Friestad, and Rose (1994) examined children's skepticism toward television advertising and knowledge of advertiser tactics. Boush et al. (1994) studied how knowledge of advertisers' tactics affected the attitudes of adolescents toward advertising claims. Results indicated that skepticism among adolescents about advertising is multidimensional, composed of a mistrust of advertisers' motives and disbelief in advertising claims. Boush et al. (1994) also suggested that adolescent skepticism precedes a more sophisticated knowledge structure and that an adult view of advertising is not gained by the end of adolescence—the oldest subjects in the study were middle school aged-children.

Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) examined the effect of socialization on skepticism toward advertising in adolescents. Their study concluded that socialization has a strong, positive relationship to the level of skepticism exhibited by teenagers. Thus, this study provided additional empirical support for the idea that adolescents and early teens exhibit increasing levels of skepticism as they become more socialized. Singleton Tolson (2002) examined differential levels of advertising knowledge among children. One finding of this study was the fact that the level of skepticism abruptly increased for twelve-year old children, with the highest levels exhibited by the 13 to 16 year olds group.

Given these studies, the extant adolescent advertising literature does indicate that varying levels of skepticism have been found in adolescents and increases between 12 and 15 years of age. Varying factors are posited to contribute to the levels of observed skepticism. Boush et al. (1994) posited that skepticism is multi-dimensional and increases with exposure to and knowledge of advertising. Brucks, et al. (1988) also posited that exposure to and experience with advertising increased skepticism. Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) advanced the theory that teens exhibit more skepticism as socialization increases, while Tolson (2002) recommended further study into the measurement and causes of skepticism in adolescents.

#### Developmental Skepticism in Adolescents

In accord with the research previously identified, there appears to be a simple explanation for the presence of sustained and increasing skepticism in children between 12 and 15 years of age. Drawing from cognitive and epistemic development theory, skepticism is more of a symptom of progression from one developmental stage to the next than an effect of some other factors interacting with the adolescent psyche.

Epistemic theory relates differential perspectives of the nature of "truth." There are various schools of thought regarding the nature of truth and knowledge: whether it can be verified, is affected by perspective, or can be truth simply based on legitimization. However, the development of epistemic outlooks in children is a literature within itself. Dealing with the differences in epistemic development among children of different ages has been related to cognitive development theories. In fact Boyes and Chandler (1992) advanced the Theory of Epistemic Development. This theory sets forth four developmental stages of children with respect to their perspectives on truth and knowledge. The epistemic developmental stages are related to cognitive stages of development and the ability of children to think abstractly.

In their study, Boyes and Chandler (1992) delineated the characteristics of the 12 to 15 year olds in their description of Level Two: The Dogmatism-Skepticism Axis of their developmental framework. The stated hallmark of reaching Level Two is the attainment of formal operational ability—the ability to

understand abstractions and make increasingly sophisticated linkages and generalizations. This ability triggers the evolution of various childhood uncertainties into “generic doubts” about the general nature of truth and knowledge. Subsequently, these early teenagers come to recognize subjective content in the acquisition of knowledge and realize a relative characteristic to the nature of truth (Chandler, 1988). This often leads to bouts of “epistemological anarchism” (Feyerabem, 1976 cf. Chandler, 1988, p.409), when “...one is forced to reject all beliefs and reason, and look upon no opinion ever as more probable or likely than another (Hume, 1938 cf. Boyes & Chandler, 1992, p. 284). In response to the psychological discomfort inherent in an epistemological anarchism, adolescents choose to adopt one of two extremes on the “dogmatism-skepticism axis” (Boyes & Chandler 1992).

Table1: Summary of Boyes and Chandler’s Theory of Epistemic Development

Age	Epistemic Stage	Hallmarks
4 to 7	Naïve Realism	Knowledge is a result of information and experiences
7 to 11	Defended Realism	Competing knowledge claims result from differential exposure to information
12 to 15	Dogmatism-Skepticism	Differences in opinion result from subjective bias Subjectivity in knowledge Relativity in what is held to be the “truth”
<b>After 15 to adulthood</b>	Post-skeptical Rationalism	Rational decision-making can occur without access to the unmitigated truth

*This table provides an abbreviated summary of the stages of the Theory of Epistemic Development as set forth in Boyes and Chandler (1992). Children are theorized to have varying perspectives of the definition of “knowledge” and “truth” depending on their cognitive and psychological maturity. More information on each stage including the relationships to stages of cognitive development theory can be found in the full paper.*

In the attainment of Level Two: Dogmatism/Skepticism Axis, 12 to 15 year olds go through what is commonly referred to as the adolescent identity crisis. During this well-documented crisis, adolescents are compelled to adopt an orientation of either dogmatism or skepticism. Adopters of the dogmatic end of the continuum commonly make “unexamined commitments to religion or scientism” in search of the “unmitigated truth” (Boyes & Chandler, 1992). On the other hand, skeptics take the stance that since no source of absolute truth is available, “all authority is undermined and all hope for rational consensus is lost.” Therefore, everyone should be allowed to do as they please as individuals (Boyes & Chandler, 1992).

In moving from absolute acceptance of knowledge to unmitigated skepticism or dogmatism, children’s outlook on persuasive attempts must also change. Regardless of the choice between dogmatism and skepticism, the common thread is that since all knowledge is humanly constructed, then all human knowledge is subjective. Chandler and Boyes wrote (1992):

“...the new talents for higher order abstraction and reflexive thought that constitute formal operational thought orient young adolescents in such a way that they have few alternatives but to peer into this pit [calling into question the existence of unmitigated, objective truth] of potential relativism. It is the specter of such generic or unassuageable doubts, we have argued, that prompts and guides a process of epistemic development aimed at eventually allowing young persons to act with confidence in a newly created world of wholesale uncertainty” (p. 283).

It is well documented that religious views (Desmond, Morgan, & Kikuchi, 2010) sexuality (Leonard & Scott-Jones, 2010), views on politics and war (Blair, 2010) and other important aspects of children’s lives change as they enter adolescence (Boyes & Chandler, 1990, 1992). It would stand to reason that one of the effects of this epistemic outlook is that advertising, persuasive attempts, and most other abstract and theoretical constructs are met with dogmatism or skepticism. At some point after age 15, late teenagers enter the Post-skeptical Rationalism stage in which they exhibit increased competence

in the areas of reasoning and logic. This leads to their ability to act and make decisions even when the nature of truth and knowledge is uncertain (Boyes & Chandler, 1992).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

As discussed in the literature review, several empirical studies have been done and found significant levels of skepticism in adolescent subjects. Various operationalizations, and antecedents and consequences have been posited in explanation of adolescent's demonstrated cynicism toward persuasive efforts. Based on the advertising literature as outlined, adolescent skepticism has been shown to vary with mistrust and disbelief of advertising claims (Brucks et al., 1988), increase with socialization (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998), and be inversely related to ages between 13 and 16 years. One is hard-pressed to find any literature in which skepticism was examined in the 12 to 15 year age group and was found not to be present.

On the other hand, child development literature is very clear on one point with respect to adolescents. Children between the age of 12 and 15 are generally subject to the adolescent identity crisis, brought on by an epistemic shift. The hallmark of this shift is the appearance of dogmatism or skepticism toward ideas when it is not fully apparent whether or not the truth of the ideas might be subject to interpretation.

The goal of this manuscript is to underline what might seem to be obvious. A very simple alternative to the multivariate model of skepticism is found in child development literature. There might be less relevance in attempting to determine which variables, antecedents, and consequences account for the most variance in regression models than examining the epistemic maturity level of the adolescent subjects. The adolescent group is by definition skeptical and/or dogmatic. Adolescent skepticism is delineated in accepted developmental psychological, cognitive, and epistemic development theory as a known stage of development. In fact, many of us with children understand the concept of the "adolescent identity crisis" on many different levels.

Given the vast child development literature, it is suggested that future research on children--adolescents in particular—with respect to advertising, consumer behavior, or any aspect of marketing—take into account that they are indeed children. Thus, we cannot examine them separate from the issues that make them different than our adult subjects.

## CONCLUSIONS

As previously stated, tweens' \$200B spending power and the \$1.5B spent on this group by marketers increases the relevance of future research on adolescents and advertising. It is also clear that future research on adolescent reactions to advertising will result in significant unclear results if cognitive and epistemic development is not taken into consideration. Additionally, skepticism and dogmatism are both a reaction to the adolescent relativist view, are closely related, and may also affect measurement of skepticism toward advertising and persuasive attempts. Therefore research into development of skepticism/dogmatism measurement scales for use on children might also be instructive in this area. Future empirical studies on advertising to children which measure or even take into account the psychological or epistemic development of adolescent subjects in their reactions to or belief in advertising would also serve to clarify this issue.

In light of the pervasive research in child developmental psychology, future research—including scale development, conceptual, and empirical research on children—should be conceptualized and validated not only based on marketing literature, but with developmental considerations in mind.

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