INTRODUCTION

Research on the effects of advertising to children has generally been based on one of two paradigms: the paradigm of the empowered child and that of the vulnerable child. In the empowered child paradigm, children are viewed as skilled and street-wise consumers capable of critically processing and evaluating commercial messages. The vulnerable child paradigm, in contrast, assumes that children lack the cognitive skills to protect themselves against advertising messages. It is believed that children are more susceptible than adults to the seductive influences of commercials. Empirical studies drawn from these two paradigms are distinguished by a focus on different types of advertising effects (intended vs. unintended effects), come from different academic disciplines (marketing vs. communication science), and are driven by different research motives (marketing vs. policy recommendations).

The Empowered Child Paradigm
Research based on the empowered child paradigm has generally focused on the intended effects of advertising. Intended advertising effects refer to the effects of advertising as anticipated by advertisers, marketers, and manufacturers of children’s products. Research into the intended effects has focused on three dependent variables: children’s brand awareness, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions. Over the past decades, intended advertising effects have received ample research attention, mostly from marketing researchers. This body of research has usually been driven by questions about how to reach the child market in the most effective way.

An explanation for this keen commercial interest in reaching the younger generation is that children are considered to represent three different markets (McNeal, 1992). First, children are a primary market, a market in their own right. They have considerable amounts of money to spend on their own needs and wants. Second, children are also a future market. Research has demonstrated that children develop brand loyalty at an early age, and that favorable attitudes toward brands last well into adulthood (McNeal, 1992). Finally, children are an important market of influencers. Not only do they give direction to daily household purchases, such as
snacks, sweets, and breakfast products, as they get older, they also have a say in their parents' choice of a restaurant, a holiday destination, and a new car (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; McNeal, 1992).

Since James McNeal (1969) recognized children as a consumer market, manufacturers, marketers, and advertisers have become increasingly interested in investigating and developing strategies to reach the child consumer. Current marketing researchers have gathered a wealth of knowledge about children's advertising-induced consumer behavior. However, since much of this research has been conducted on behalf of manufacturers of children's products, most of their methods and findings are not accessible to academics, either because they are not published or because the costs of obtaining the reports are prohibitive.

The Vulnerable Child Paradigm

Research based on the vulnerable child paradigm has usually investigated to what extent advertising is harmful to children and whether children should be protected from these possibly harmful effects. This research has usually focused on the unintended effects of advertising, which are the secondary, usually negative, effects of exposure to advertising. Research into the unintended advertising effects has predominantly focused on three dependent variables: materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness. The unintended effects of advertising have received most research attention from developmental psychologists and communication scholars.

The bulk of research on the unintended effects of child-directed advertising was conducted in the mid to late 1970s in the US. Research interest in the topic was ignited, in large part, by public concern and debate about the possibly harmful advertising effects (Macklin, 1998). Over the past three decades, the dramatic increase in child-directed advertising in many western countries has stirred a growing sense of children's vulnerability to advertising. This growing concern, in turn, regularly gives rise to public and political debate about advertising to children. However, despite the continuing public debate, research interest in the topic has gradually waned. Since the 1980s virtually no scholarly research has addressed the unintended effects of child-directed advertising, either in the US or in Europe.
This Dissertation

The aim of this dissertation is to revitalize the research on the effects of advertising aimed at children. This line of research needs extension for several reasons. First, most Western societies have become increasingly child- and consumer-oriented in the past two decades, and this development has been accompanied by considerable changes in children's commercial media environments (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). Second, the child-rearing and family communication styles of today's families are considerably different from those of the early 1970s. In contrast to earlier generations, children's opinions are now taken more seriously and their participation in decision-making processes is often encouraged (Torrance, 1998). These changes in family communication styles may have led to higher levels of parent-child communication around television advertising, and, thereby, to a diminished vulnerability of children to advertising effects.

A third reason to extend the line of research investigating advertising effects on children is that studies of this type were all conducted in the US. In Europe, the topic of child-directed advertising has received little or no research attention. Because advertising directed at children regularly provokes both public and parliamentary debate in Europe, this lack of research is remarkable. Over the past two decades, several European countries have implemented policies that restrict and sometimes even ban television advertising aimed at children. These national policies, in turn, have regularly stirred debate on a European Union-level to tighten the rules and regulations pertaining to child-directed advertising. However, the lack of up-to-date European research means that the current public and political debate about children's advertising is primarily based on findings that are over 20 years old and research conclusions based exclusively on US audiences.

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of five articles, which were written between 1998 and 2002 by the author and the advisor of this project, Patti M. Valkenburg. All of the articles deal with television advertising directed at children. The contents of the chapters in this thesis are identical to those of the published articles and the manuscripts submitted for publication. Therefore, similar to the articles, each chapter starts with an abstract and has its own list of references. In addition, references in one chapter to
another chapter appear as references to the articles. Being self-contained, each article starts with an introduction of its own.

The dissertation covers three areas of research that are essential for expanding our knowledge and understanding of child-directed advertising. The first two chapters deal with the content of advertising aimed at children. They investigate the appeals and the types of humor advertisers use to reach the child market. Chapter 3 focuses on an intended effect of advertising, namely, the impact of advertising on children's Christmas wishes. The final two chapters address the unintended, and undesired, effects of advertising on children. In a review of research (Chapter 4) and a parent-child survey (Chapter 5), the effects of advertising on materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness are investigated.

Main Conclusions
Having completed this research project, what do we know about advertising and children? Three conclusions seem warranted based on the findings of this dissertation. First, advertising aimed at children considerably corresponds to the wants, tastes, and preferences of children that have been identified in the literature. Our two analyses of the content of children's advertising suggest that advertisers seem to be very well informed about how to reach children in different age and gender groups.

Our second conclusion is that advertising aimed at children is highly effective. One of the main intentions of advertisers is to persuade children to subject their parents to purchase requests. Our survey study investigating children's advertising-induced Christmas wishes shows that television advertising broadcast in the December period has a considerable impact on children's gift requests, especially on those of the youngest children.

A third conclusion that can be drawn from the research conducted in this project is that advertising also has unintended, undesired, effects on children. Our parent-child survey study corroborates findings from studies conducted in the US during the 1970s by showing that advertising can create materialistic values in children, indirectly enhances parent-child conflict and, to a lesser extent, may lead to disappointment and life dissatisfaction in children. However, an important finding of this final study is that parents are able to mitigate the negative effects of advertising by talking with their children about the purpose of advertising and about consumer matters.
Description of the Projects

Chapter 1 presents a content analysis of television commercials aimed at children and teenagers (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000a, 2002a). The study identifies the appeals that characterize commercials aimed at male and female children and teenagers. An advertising appeal is the specific strategy chosen by an advertiser to relate to certain tastes and preferences of a target group. Investigating the appeals in advertising allows us to both reveal the advertisers' implicit or explicit hypotheses about how to reach different target groups and make predictions about the effectiveness of commercials aimed at different audience groups. By attempting to reveal the advertising content that is likely to lead to a favorable attitude toward the commercial, content analysis can be a useful instrument to improve our understanding of advertising effectiveness.

The study reported in the second chapter involves a content analysis that identifies the different types of humor used in commercials aimed at children, teenagers, and adults (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2001, 2002c). Similar to the analysis of appeals in advertising, content analysis of humor types in advertising can be an important tool for predicting and understanding advertising effectiveness. Research on the mechanisms of advertising influence has repeatedly shown that an important antecedent of the effectiveness of an advertising message is the enjoyment triggered by its content. By comparing the use of different types of humor to the humor preferences in different age and gender groups, content analysis can help our understanding of advertising effects and audience responses.

The third chapter reports a correlational study of the relation between television advertising and children's Christmas wishes (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000b, 2000c). The study extends on US research conducted in the 1970s that investigated the extent to which children's gift ideas are determined by television commercials. The study was conducted in December because child-targeted advertising reaches a peak in this period, and because children are generally eager to list their preferred St Nicolaas and Christmas present choices. Three hypotheses were investigated: (1) children who are frequently exposed to advertising more often ask for advertised products than children who are less frequently exposed, (2) younger children make more requests for advertised products than older children do, and (3) boys make more requests for advertised products than girls do. The study showed that children's gender and age, as well as their level of exposure to advertising were significant predictors of their requests for advertised products.
The fourth chapter presents a review of research on three unintended effects of advertising: materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2002b, in press). Although parents, educators, and policy makers share a concern about the potentially undesirable effects on children, there is no consensus about what these effects are, and whether they are supported by empirical evidence. The main aim of the review study reported in Chapter 4 is to identify and analyze the existing hypotheses on the negative effects of television advertising, and to examine the extent to which these hypotheses are supported by empirical research. The chapter postulates a model of the hypothesized relations between television advertising and the three unintended effects that have received research attention. The empirical support for each hypothesis in the model is then assessed by means of vote-counting analysis.

The empirical study reported in the fifth and final chapter (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2002d) is designed to test the model put forward in Chapter 4. The study investigates whether—and if so, how—the relations between advertising exposure, materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness are supported by survey data obtained from parent-child dyads. In addition, the study explores how certain moderating variables—such as age, gender, and parent-child consumer communication—moderate the unintended effects of television advertising. Our findings showed that advertising was positively related to materialism, parent-child conflict, disappointment, and dissatisfaction about life. Parent-child consumer communication and parental mediation of advertising were the most important moderators of the unintended effects of advertising.

REFERENCES


