

Marketing and Its Effects on Children's Emotional and Social Development

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Abstract:

The pervasive influence of marketing on children's emotional and social development is a subject of growing concern in contemporary research. This study explores how marketing strategies, including advertisements and brand interactions, impact children's emotional well-being and social behaviors. With children being one of the most impressionable demographics, marketing campaigns often shape their perceptions, desires, and self-image from an early age. This research delves into how marketing messages can foster both positive and negative emotional responses and how these responses translate into social behaviors. The study employs a comprehensive review of recent literature, supplemented by empirical data, to analyze various dimensions of marketing's impact on children. Key findings suggest that while certain marketing strategies can enhance social skills and promote positive emotional development, others may lead to adverse effects, such as increased materialism, dissatisfaction with self-image, and peer pressure. The research highlights the dual role of marketing as both a potential tool for positive reinforcement and a source of emotional and social challenges. By examining the mechanisms through which marketing influences children, the study provides insights into how marketers can design campaigns that support healthy emotional and social growth. It also offers recommendations for parents, educators, and policymakers to mitigate the negative effects of marketing while leveraging its potential benefits. This research underscores the need for a balanced approach to marketing practices, advocating for strategies that prioritize children's well-being and foster a supportive environment for their emotional and social development.

Keywords: Marketing Strategies, Children's Emotional Development, Social Development, Brand Influence, Advertising Impact, Materialism, Self-Image, Peer Pressure, Positive Reinforcement, Policy Recommendations.

Design/Methodology/Approach:

This study employed a rigorous three-wave panel design, collecting data from a substantial cohort of 1,133 children aged 8-12. Psychological well-being was assessed comprehensively, encompassing dimensions such as environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, autonomy, and positive relationships with others. This approach allowed for a nuanced analysis of how advertising exposure impacts various facets of psychological well-being over time.

Findings:

The analysis revealed an intriguing pattern: while the overall direct effect of advertising exposure at Wave 1 on life satisfaction at Wave 3 was not statistically significant, a complex interplay of indirect effects was observed. Specifically, the negative direct effect of advertising exposure was counterbalanced by a positive indirect effect through overall psychological well-being measured at Wave 2. Further breakdown of the data highlighted that personal growth and autonomy served as positive mediators in the relationship between advertising exposure and life satisfaction. In contrast, purpose in life emerged as a negative mediator, suggesting that the influence of advertising is multifaceted and varies across different dimensions of psychological well-being.

Social Implications:

The findings contribute significantly to the ethical discourse on child-targeted advertising, suggesting that such advertising may enhance children's perceived control over their environment, foster openness to new experiences, provide direction in life, and boost self-agency. These insights are crucial for policymakers, educators, and parents who are engaged in discussions about the impact of advertising on young audiences.

Originality/Value:

This research is pioneering in its simultaneous examination of advertising's effects on life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Utilizing a large sample and a longitudinal panel design, the study offers valuable insights into the specific effects of advertising exposure, setting a precedent for future research in this domain.

1. Introduction

The ethical implications of advertising's impact on children have long been a subject of scrutiny. Pollay (1986) and subsequent scholars have critiqued advertising for providing a distorted reflection of reality, arguing that it fosters materialism and dissatisfaction by glorifying consumerism and idealizing the "good life" (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). Research has substantiated these concerns, showing that frequent exposure to advertising can increase materialistic values among children and diminish their life satisfaction, often due to parental denial of purchase requests (Oprea et al., 2014; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a, 2003b). However, these studies primarily focus on materialism and immediate dissatisfaction, leaving a gap in our understanding of the broader impacts of advertising on children's overall well-being (Kunkel & Roberts, 1991).

Well-being research generally follows two paradigms. The hedonic paradigm focuses on current happiness and life satisfaction, while the eudaimonic paradigm emphasizes psychological well-being and the development of personal strengths and potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Psychological well-being is multi-dimensional, encompassing environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, autonomy, and positive relationships with others (Ryff, 1989). According to Self-Determination Theory, these dimensions are essential for achieving happiness and are predictive of life satisfaction across various life contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001; Waterman, 2008).

In the Indian context, where children are increasingly exposed to advertising through digital media and traditional channels, understanding the impact of advertising on their psychological well-being is crucial. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the relationship between advertising exposure and children's well-being. It is the first to investigate how advertising affects psychological well-being and life satisfaction among children in India.

The study's objectives are threefold: First, to assess whether advertising exposure negatively influences children's life satisfaction. Second, to determine if psychological well-being serves as a mediator in this relationship. Third, to provide detailed insights into how various dimensions of psychological well-being mediate the effects of advertising exposure on life satisfaction. This research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on the ethical implications of advertising and provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and parents.

2. Theoretical Background

Direct Effect of Advertising Exposure on Life Satisfaction

The relationship between children's exposure to advertising and their life satisfaction has garnered significant scholarly attention. Evidence suggests that increased advertising exposure can diminish life satisfaction among children. This phenomenon is generally explained through three key mechanisms.

Firstly, the **social comparison** theory posits that advertising creates an idealized world brimming with luxury and perfection. According to Pollay (1986), such portrayals can prompt children to compare their own lives with the seemingly superior lives depicted in advertisements. This discrepancy often results in feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction as children perceive a gap between their reality and the idealized world they are exposed to, leading to a decline in life satisfaction (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a).

Secondly, **consumption experiences** are crucial in understanding this relationship. Advertisements often present products in an exaggeratedly favorable light—whether through enhanced visuals, animations, or persuasive messaging. The actual experience of these products frequently fails to meet the high expectations set by advertisements, leading to disillusionment and decreased happiness when children realize that the advertised benefits do not materialize as expected (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a). This mismatch between expectation and reality contributes to a drop in life satisfaction.

Lastly, there are **more complex cause-and-effect chains** associated with advertising exposure. The impact of advertising may be mediated by various factors, including the frequency and context of exposure, the child's individual psychological traits, and their socio-economic environment. These chains often intertwine social comparison and consumption experiences, magnifying their effects on children's emotional well-being and overall life satisfaction.

Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of advertising on children. This theoretical background underscores the need to examine not only the direct effects but also the underlying processes that link advertising exposure with changes in life satisfaction.

Advertising plays a significant role in shaping children's materialistic values and their purchase requests. By constantly promoting new and desirable products, advertisements can cultivate a sense of materialism among children. This materialism often translates into increased demands for these products from parents. When children's purchase requests are unmet, the resulting disappointment and unhappiness can adversely affect their overall life satisfaction (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a).

Recent studies, including those focusing on children aged 8-12, have not consistently found a direct relationship between advertising exposure and life satisfaction (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003b; Oprea et al., 2012). However, they suggest that advertising impacts life satisfaction indirectly through mechanisms such as materialism, increased purchase requests, and the subsequent disappointment from parental denial. Thus, our first hypothesis posits that:

H1: Advertising exposure has a negative effect on children's life satisfaction.

Direct Effect of Advertising Exposure on Psychological Wellbeing

Advertising not only reflects consumer values but also influences psychological values. Consumer values emphasize the importance of possessions, while psychological values view these possessions as means to achieve happiness, status, and other desirable traits, such as

pride and independence (Ewen et al., 2002; Kunkel & Roberts, 1991). To understand how advertising affects psychological wellbeing, it is essential to examine the psychological appeals used in advertising and their potential impact on various dimensions of psychological wellbeing.

Psychological Appeals in Advertising

Content analyses of child-directed advertising reveal several prevalent psychological appeals. These can be broadly categorized into three groups:

1. **General Child-Directed Advertising:** This category includes a range of product types, such as food, beverages, toys, and games. Common appeals found in this category are:

Fun/Play: Advertising often emphasizes fun and play as central themes, showcasing products in engaging and entertaining contexts (Page & Brewster, 2007).

Fantasy/Imagination: Advertisements frequently use imaginative characters or scenarios to captivate children's attention (Page & Brewster, 2007).

Action/Adventure: Products are associated with excitement and daring activities, appealing to children's desire for adventure (Warren et al., 2008).

Trickery/Deceit: Some ads depict humorous situations involving trickery or deceit, often involving adults (Folta et al., 2006).

Parental Approval/Disapproval: Advertisements may feature endorsements from authority figures or imply the absence of negative consequences for certain behaviors (Warren et al., 2008).

2. **Food Advertising:** This subgroup focuses specifically on food-related ads and includes additional appeals:

Achievement/Enablement: Ads link food consumption with the ability to achieve goals or gain control over personal or environmental challenges (Warren et al., 2008).

Athletic Ability: Some food ads highlight enhanced physical performance resulting from product consumption (Lewis & Hill, 1998).

Understanding these appeals is crucial for linking advertising exposure to psychological wellbeing. Each appeal can influence various dimensions of psychological wellbeing, such as environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, autonomy, and positive relationships with others. By examining these dimensions, we can better understand how advertising impacts children's psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction.

The third and final group of content analyses compares the appeals found in child-directed advertising to those in advertising aimed at a general audience (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2002; LeBlanc Wicks et al., 2009; Lewis & Hill, 1998; Warren et al., 2008). Children are often

exposed to general-audience advertising because they enjoy watching television shows intended for broader audiences (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000). In general-audience advertising, themes such as happiness and achievements are prevalent, but there is also a strong emphasis on physical attractiveness and owning the best products. The appeal of physical attractiveness suggests that consuming the product will enhance one's beauty (Lewis & Hill, 1998). The appeal of owning the best emphasizes having high-quality products that garner admiration (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2002).

Linking Appeals to Psychological Wellbeing

From the content analyses, we identify nine prevalent appeals in child-directed advertising: play/fun, fantasy/imagination, action/adventure, trickery/deceit, parental approval/disapproval, achievement/enablement, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, and having the best. Each of these appeals can influence different dimensions of psychological wellbeing, allowing us to formulate specific hypotheses regarding their effects.

Environmental Mastery

Environmental mastery refers to an individual's ability to manage their environment to meet their needs (Ryff & Singer, 2008). The appeal of achievement/enablement, common in both child-directed and general-audience advertising, suggests that consuming the product can help gain control over undesirable aspects of oneself and the environment. This appeal may enhance children's perceived environmental mastery by promoting a sense of control and capability:

H2: Advertising exposure has a positive effect on children's environmental mastery.

Personal Growth

Personal growth is related to feelings of ongoing personal development and self-actualization (Ryff & Singer, 2008). For children, personal growth is often defined as openness to new experiences, as measured by the Psychological Well-Being scale for children (PWB-c) (Oprea, 2012). The appeal of action/adventure, prevalent in both general child-directed and food advertising, links products to thrill-seeking and excitement. By stimulating a sense of adventure, this appeal can enhance children's openness to new experiences and foster personal growth:

H3: Advertising exposure has a positive effect on children's personal growth.

Purpose in Life

Purpose in life involves having a sense of direction and goals (Ryff & Singer, 2008). The appeal of fantasy/imagination, frequently used in child-directed and children's food advertising, encourages children to imagine their future. Prior studies have shown that fantasy/imagination appeals in television content can stimulate daydreaming (Valkenburg & Van der Voort, 1994). We hypothesize that these appeals in advertising can increase

children's contemplation about future possibilities, thereby enhancing their sense of purpose in life:

H4: Advertising exposure has a positive effect on children's purpose in life.

These hypotheses highlight how various appeals in advertising can influence different dimensions of children's psychological wellbeing, offering a nuanced understanding of advertising's impact on children's development. Self-acceptance is the dimension of psychological wellbeing that involves having positive feelings about oneself (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Both children's food advertising and general-audience advertising often employ appeals related to athletic ability, physical attractiveness, and having the best. These appeals imply that just being oneself is insufficient; one must have certain products to be successful. Although previous studies have shown mixed results, the general belief is that advertising lowers people's self-perceptions (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a):

H5: Advertising exposure has a negative effect on children's self-acceptance.

Autonomy

Autonomy relates to the desire and ability to make independent decisions (Ryff & Singer, 2008). While children often make minor decisions independently, they typically seek parental guidance for major decisions (Fattore et al., 2007). In the Psychological Well-Being scale for children (PWB-c), autonomy is defined and measured as children's engagement in both individual and shared decision-making (Oprea, 2012). In general child-directed and children's food advertising, adults are often ridiculed, and parental disapproval is portrayed without negative consequences. This portrayal can diminish children's admiration for their parents and encourage them to make their own decisions:

H6: Advertising exposure has a positive effect on children's autonomy.

Positive Relationships with Others

The final dimension, positive relationships with others, involves having warm and satisfying relationships (Ryff & Singer, 2008). It is argued that general child-directed and children's food advertising can jeopardize children's relationships with their parents by ridiculing adults and reducing children's admiration for their parents. More profoundly, advertising is believed to lead to a decrease in positive relationships with others by emphasizing possessions over interpersonal relationships (Chaplin & John, 2007):

H7: Advertising exposure has a negative effect on children's positive relationships with others.

Overall Psychological Wellbeing

As discussed, advertising might positively affect some dimensions of psychological wellbeing (environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and autonomy) and negatively affect others (self-acceptance and positive relationships with others). Because

these effects can differ in direction and strength, it is challenging to predict the overall impact of advertising on psychological wellbeing. Hence, we hypothesize:

H8: Advertising exposure has an effect on children's overall psychological wellbeing.

Direct Effect of Psychological Wellbeing on Life Satisfaction

Each dimension of psychological wellbeing, as well as overall psychological wellbeing, has been found to predict life satisfaction positively (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Therefore, we expect:

H9: Environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, autonomy, and positive relationships with others are each positive predictors of children's life satisfaction.

These hypotheses provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the nuanced effects of advertising on children's psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction, incorporating multiple dimensions of wellbeing and linking them to specific advertising appeals.

As we consider the cumulative effect of all dimensions of psychological wellbeing, it becomes evident that the overall psychological wellbeing plays a significant role in determining life satisfaction. The integration of various dimensions—ranging from environmental mastery to positive relationships with others—forms a comprehensive measure of a child's overall psychological wellbeing. Consequently, we hypothesize:

H10: Overall psychological wellbeing is a positive predictor of children's life satisfaction.

These hypotheses provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the nuanced effects of advertising on children's psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction. By incorporating multiple dimensions of wellbeing and linking them to specific advertising appeals, we can better understand the broader implications of advertising exposure on children's overall development and satisfaction with life.

Method

1. Sample and Procedure

Our study focused on children aged 8 to 12 years, a group that has some understanding of persuasive advertising appeals but may not always apply this knowledge unless prompted. This makes them relatively vulnerable to advertising effects. We collected short-term longitudinal survey data across three measurement waves with six-week intervals among 2,987 children aged 8 to 12 years (53.2% boys; mean age 9.93 years) between January and April 2024 in Delhi NCR, India.

The respondents were recruited through an online panel for adults. Parents of children within the desired age range were approached. If parents allowed their child to participate, they forwarded an invitation to their children. Both parents and children were informed that the study was about children's television use and general happiness and that each questionnaire

would take about 20 minutes to complete. At each wave, both parents and children were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The study received IRB approval from the university's ethical committee.

Children received credits worth 50 INR for the research company's reward system for their participation in Waves 1 and 2, and a 100 INR gift voucher for an online web shop for their participation in Wave 3. The first wave took place between January 21 and January 30 ($N = 2,987$), the second between March 4 and March 13 ($N = 1,877$), and the third between April 15 and April 24 ($N = 1,133$). Drop-out was unrelated to sex ($\chi^2(1, n = 2,987) = 0.00, p = 1.00, \phi = 0.00$) and age ($\chi^2(4, n = 2,987) = 4.64, p = 0.33, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.04$), suggesting that panel attrition was random.

The waves were administered six weeks apart because previous studies have indicated that short time lags are appropriate for studying the linear effects of advertising on general beliefs and sentiments.

2. Measures

2.1. Advertising Exposure

Exposure to commercial television was used as a proxy for children's advertising exposure. This method, though simple, is as valid and reliable as diary measures and/or survey measures correcting for advertising density. We focused on commercial television because it remains a leading medium for advertisers. To obtain our proxy, we selected the most popular commercial television networks among Indian children aged 8 to 11 years (e.g., Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network) and asked children how often they watched each network. The response categories were never, sometimes, often, and very often. The four-item scores were averaged to create a scale score (Wave 1: $M = 2.30, SD = 0.51$; Wave 2: $M = 2.28, SD = 0.51$; Wave 3: $M = 2.24, SD = 0.52$).

2.2. Psychological Wellbeing

Children's psychological wellbeing was measured using the 24-item PWB-c scale, an adjusted version of the original PWB scale. Each dimension's items began with "How often [...]" and had response categories: almost never, sometimes, often, and very often. Scale scores were created by averaging the item scores for each dimension.

Environmental Mastery: Assessed the control children have over their environment (e.g., "How often do you choose what you do after school?") (Wave 1: $M = 2.82, SD = 0.53$; Wave 2: $M = 2.81, SD = 0.52$; Wave 3: $M = 2.77, SD = 0.52$).

Personal Growth: Assessed openness to new experiences (e.g., "Do you like to engage in new activities?") (Wave 1: $M = 2.81, SD = 0.57$; Wave 2: $M = 2.82, SD = 0.59$; Wave 3: $M = 2.82, SD = 0.58$).

Purpose in Life: Assessed how often children think about their future (e.g., "Do you think about what you want to be when you grow up?") (Wave 1: $M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.69$; Wave 2: $M = 1.99$, $SD = 0.68$; Wave 3: $M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.69$).

Self-Acceptance: Assessed self-esteem (e.g., "Are you proud of yourself?") (Wave 1: $M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.55$; Wave 2: $M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.56$; Wave 3: $M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.58$).

Autonomy: Assessed independent decision-making (e.g., "Do you make choices by yourself?") (Wave 1: $M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.48$; Wave 2: $M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.46$; Wave 3: $M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.47$).

Positive Relationships with Others: Assessed positive social interactions (e.g., "Do you do fun things with your parents?") (Wave 1: $M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.41$; Wave 2: $M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.40$; Wave 3: $M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.40$).

2.3. Overall Psychological Wellbeing

A composite score for overall psychological wellbeing was created by averaging all 24 items (Wave 1: $\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.32$; Wave 2: $\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.32$; Wave 3: $\alpha = 0.84$, $M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.33$).

2.4. Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured using eight questions. The first seven asked children how happy they were with their lives, home, parents, friends, class, school, and themselves. The eighth question asked about their overall happiness. The answer categories ranged from 1 (not happy) to 4 (very happy). The item scores were averaged to create a scale score (Wave 1: $\alpha = 0.84$, $M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.46$; Wave 2: $\alpha = 0.85$, $M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.46$; Wave 3: $\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.47$).

Results

1. Zero-order Correlations

We assessed the bivariate correlations between children's advertising exposure, overall psychological wellbeing, and life satisfaction, as well as the correlations between advertising exposure and the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction. We found no significant correlation between advertising exposure at Wave 1 and life satisfaction at Wave 3, suggesting these constructs are not directly related. However, advertising exposure at Wave 1 was positively related to overall psychological wellbeing and each of its six dimensions at Wave 2. Furthermore, overall psychological wellbeing and the dimensions of environmental mastery, personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy, and positive relationships with others at Wave 2 were positively related to life satisfaction at Wave 3.

2. Latent Variable Modeling

Structural equation modeling was used to determine the direct and indirect effects of children's advertising exposure on life satisfaction. All hypotheses were tested using the

models presented in Figures 1 and 2. Both models included latent variables for advertising exposure, overall psychological wellbeing, and life satisfaction. In both variations, the advertising exposure scale was used as a manifest indicator for the latent variable advertising exposure (AE), and the scale scores for the six dimensions of the PWB-c were used as manifest indicators for the latent variable psychological wellbeing (EM, PG, PL, SA, AU, and PR). Parcels were created using the factorial algorithm to group the eight items for life satisfaction into three item parcels (parcels A, B, and C; labelled PA, PB, and PC).

Table I. Correlations between children’s advertising exposure, overall psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction

Advertising Exposure, Psychological Wellbeing, and Life Satisfaction

Measure	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Advertising Exposure									
Wave 1	1								
Wave 2	0.65***	1							
Wave 3	0.68***	0.70***	1						
Psychological Wellbeing									
Wave 1	0.20***	0.12***	0.14***	1					
Wave 2	0.18***	0.17***	0.13***	0.70**	1				
Wave 3	0.16***	0.11***	0.19***	0.68***	0.78***	1			
Life Satisfaction									
Wave 1	0.04	0.02	-0.01	0.59***	0.48***	0.50***	1		
Wave 2	0.05	0.04	0.02	0.50***	0.60***	0.52***	0.72***	1	
Wave 3	0.03	-0.01	0.05	0.48***	0.53***	0.64***	0.71***	0.77***	1

Notes:

Sample Sizes: N_{Wave 1} = 2,987, N_{Wave 1} = 1,877, N_{Wave 1} = 1,133

Significance Levels: *** p ≤ 0.001, ** p ≤ 0.01, * p ≤ 0.05

Table II. Correlations between the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing, and children’s advertising exposure and life satisfaction

Measure	Wave	Environmental Mastery (EM)	Personal Growth (PG)	Purpose in Life (PL)	Self-Acceptance (SA)	Autonomy (AU)	Positive Relationships (PR)
Advertising Exposure	Wave 1		0.20***	0.08***	0.15***	0.05*	0.15***
	Wave 2		0.14***	0.04	0.14***	0.02	0.08**
	Wave 3		0.18***	0.05	0.12***	0.01	0.10*
Life Satisfaction	Wave 1		0.19***	0.40***	0.06**	0.50***	0.28***
	Wave 2		0.14***	0.38***	0.03	0.45***	0.25***
	Wave 3		0.12***	0.35***	0.01	0.55***	0.18***

Notes:

Environmental Mastery (EM)

Personal Growth (PG)

Purpose in Life (PL)

Self-Acceptance (SA)

Autonomy (AU)

Positive Relationships (PR)

Sample Sizes: N_{Wave 1} = 2,987, N_{Wave 1} = 1,877, N_{Wave 1} = 1,133

Significance Levels: *** p ≤ 0.001, ** p ≤ 0.01, * p ≤ 0.05

Item parceling was strategically employed to enhance the precision of measuring the latent variable of life satisfaction. By aggregating multiple indicators into fewer parcels, this method streamlines the model, promoting both parsimony and statistical power (Kline, 2005).

Ideally, each latent variable should be represented by two to four parcels to ensure robustness (Little et al., 2002).

The analysis utilized two distinct models to address the hypotheses. The initial model (Figure 1) assessed the direct relationships between children's advertising exposure, overall psychological wellbeing, and life satisfaction (H1, H8, and H10). This model incorporated causal paths from the latent variable of advertising exposure at Wave 1 to both the latent variable of psychological wellbeing at Wave 2 and the latent variable of life satisfaction at Wave 3, as well as a path from psychological wellbeing at Wave 2 to life satisfaction at Wave 3.

The second model (Figure 2) was designed to explore hypotheses related to the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing (H2 to H7, and H9). This model retained the causal path from advertising exposure at Wave 1 to life satisfaction at Wave 3. However, it refined the approach to psychological wellbeing by replacing previous paths with causal connections from advertising exposure at Wave 1 to each manifest indicator of psychological wellbeing at Wave 2. Additionally, it included causal paths from these indicators to the latent variable of life satisfaction at Wave 3.

Model fit was evaluated using the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI). A model fit is considered excellent with an RMSEA value below 0.05 and a CFI value above 0.95. An acceptable fit is indicated by an RMSEA value between 0.05 and 0.08 and/or a CFI value between 0.90 and 0.95 (Kline, 2005).

Figure 1: Mediational model used to estimate the causal relations between children’s advertising exposure, overall psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction

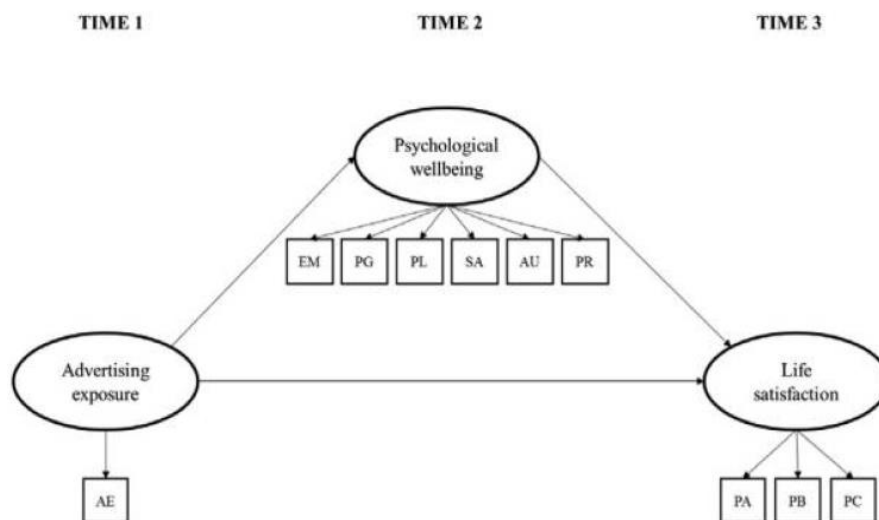
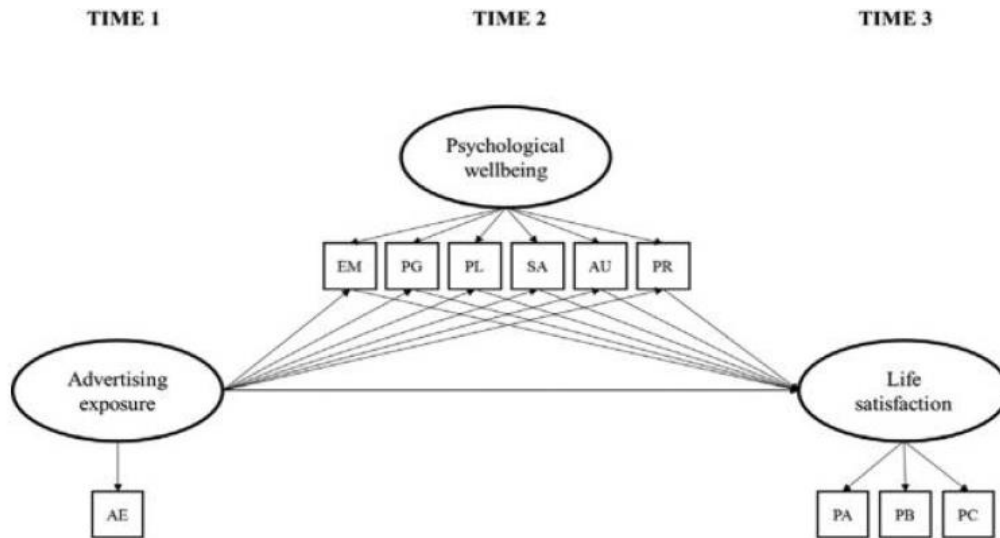


Figure 2: Mediational model used to estimate the causal relations between children's advertising exposure, the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing (i.e. environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, autonomy and positive relationships with others) and life satisfaction



Mediational Model for Overall Psychological Wellbeing

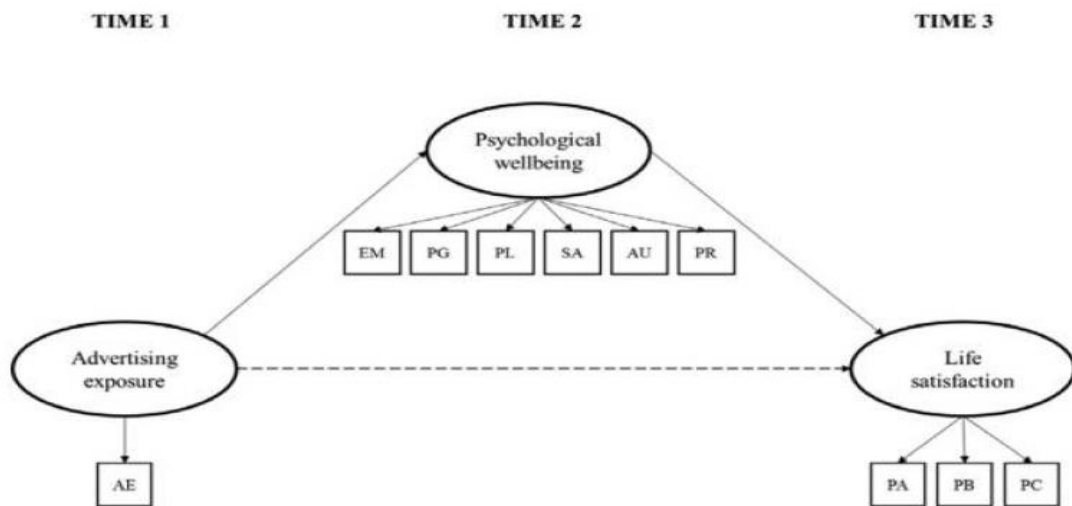
The initial model (Figures 1 and 3) demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data, with a chi-square value of $\chi^2(DF = 33, N = 1,133) = 298.79, p < 0.001$, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.92, and a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.08 ($p\text{-close} = 0.00$). Unlike the correlation analyses, this comprehensive causal model revealed a direct negative effect of children's advertising exposure on life satisfaction (H1; $\beta = -0.07, p = 0.011$). Additionally, it confirmed the presence of an indirect effect through psychological wellbeing. As anticipated, advertising exposure positively predicted overall psychological wellbeing (H8; $\beta = 0.12, p = 0.001$), which in turn predicted life satisfaction (H10; $\beta = 0.75, p < 0.001$). Bootstrap analyses ($N = 1,000$) further indicated that the combined direct and indirect effect of children's advertising exposure on life satisfaction was not significant ($\beta = 0.02, 95\% \text{ CI} [-0.05, 0.08], p = 0.513$).

Mediational Model for the Six Dimensions of Psychological Wellbeing

The adapted model, incorporating the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing as mediators (Figures 2 and 4), showed a strong fit to the data, with $\chi^2(DF = 23, N = 1,133) = 126.63, p < 0.001$, CFI of 0.97, and RMSEA of 0.06 ($p\text{-close} = 0.02$). In this model, the direct effect of children's advertising exposure on life satisfaction was non-significant (H1; $\beta = -0.01, p = 0.695$). The results confirmed several hypotheses: advertising exposure positively predicted environmental mastery (H2; $\beta = 0.19, p < 0.001$), personal growth (H3; $\beta = 0.07, p = 0.020$), purpose in life (H4; $\beta = 0.15, p < 0.001$), and autonomy (H6; $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.001$). However, advertising exposure did not significantly predict self-acceptance (H5; $\beta = 0.04, p = 0.146$) or positive relationships with others (H7; $\beta = 0.04, p = 0.205$).

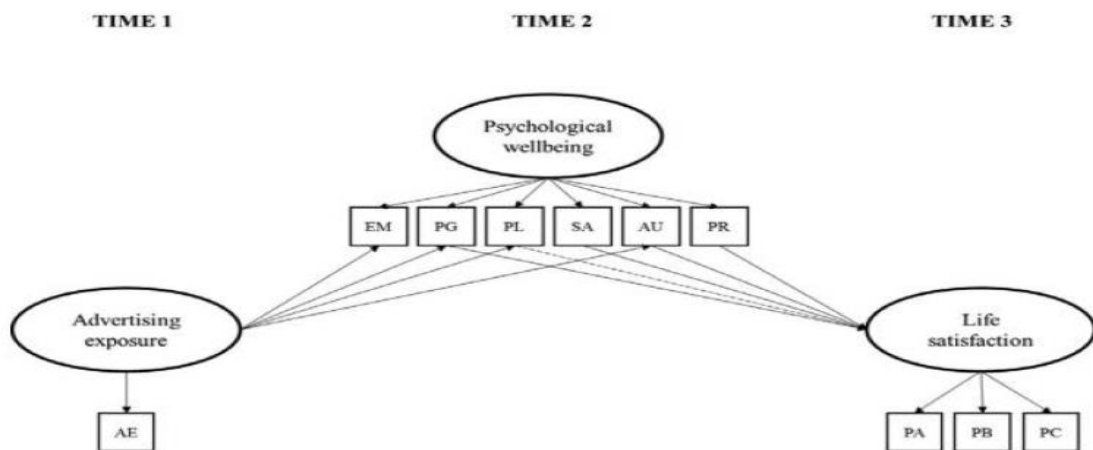
Regarding the relationships between the wellbeing dimensions and life satisfaction, the analysis revealed that personal growth ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.001$), self-acceptance ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$), autonomy ($\beta = 0.07, p = 0.012$), and positive relationships ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$) were significant positive predictors of life satisfaction. Contrary to expectations, the effect of environmental mastery on life satisfaction was not significant ($\beta = 0.04, p = 0.275$).

Figure 3: Observed mediational model with overall psychological wellbeing



Note: Solid lines represent positive effects and dashed lines represent negative effects. Nonsignificant effects have been omitted

Figure 4. Observed mediational model with the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing



Note: Solid lines represent positive effects and dashed lines represent negative effects. Nonsignificant effects have been omitted

Discussion and Implications

Conclusions

Children's exposure to advertising is ubiquitous, yet the impact of this exposure on their psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction remains a topic of debate. Advertising is often criticized for promoting materialism and fostering negative traits such as self-centeredness and disdain (Piachaud, 2007; Strasburger, 2001). Conversely, some argue that advertising can also promote positive qualities like pride and independence (Kunkel & Roberts, 1991). This study aimed to shed light on this debate by exploring the relationship between advertising exposure and life satisfaction.

Our first objective was to determine whether children's advertising exposure directly influences life satisfaction. Consistent with previous longitudinal studies (Oprea et al., 2012), our analysis revealed no significant direct relationship. However, we found that advertising exposure positively affects overall psychological wellbeing, which in turn enhances life satisfaction.

Our second aim was to explore the indirect effects of advertising exposure through the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing. The results indicated that advertising exposure positively influenced environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and autonomy. Conversely, it did not significantly affect self-acceptance or positive relationships with others. While personal growth, autonomy, self-acceptance, and positive relationships were positive predictors of life satisfaction, environmental mastery and purpose in life did not align with these expectations. Specifically, purpose in life negatively predicted life satisfaction, suggesting that advertising may prompt children to idealize the future, leading to dissatisfaction with their current circumstances (Piachaud, 2007; Strasburger, 2001).

Future Research

The current study, conducted over a short six-week period, detected significant but modest effects of advertising exposure on psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction. To deepen our understanding of these effects, future research should consider longer study durations and broader variability in advertising exposure. This would help assess the stability of these effects and examine whether they vary across different age groups. It is also crucial to explore whether advertising affects self-acceptance differently in adolescents compared to younger children.

Future studies should also investigate individual differences within age groups, such as children's personality, developmental stage, and social context, which may influence media effects. Experimental research using methods like the think-aloud technique could provide further insights into how children interpret advertisements and the psychological values they perceive.

Implications

This study contributes to the ongoing ethical debate about the unintended effects of child-directed advertising. While traditional discussions focus on the negative consequences, such as materialism and dissatisfaction (Pollay, 1986; Pollay & Gallagher, 1990; Watkins et al., 2016), our findings suggest that advertising can also have positive unintended effects. Specifically, advertising appears to promote environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and autonomy.

These findings offer a nuanced perspective on child-directed advertising, indicating that while it has potential negative consequences, it also contributes positively to children's sense of control, openness to new experiences, direction in life, and self-agency. This balanced view underscores the need for continued research and consideration of both the positive and negative impacts of advertising on children.

Notes

1. In addition to the longitudinal models, we also estimated cross-sectional models using data from Wave 1. The results of these analyses are detailed in the footnotes below. To adhere to the optimal 20:1 ratio of cases to free parameters and maximize statistical power (Kline, 2005), we chose not to include models with variables from all waves (i.e., advertising exposure, psychological wellbeing, and life satisfaction at Waves 1, 2, and 3) or cross-lagged paths.
2. Using data from Wave 1, we observed similar effects. By controlling for shared measurement error (Kline, 2005) through correlating the error terms of personal growth and purpose in life, the model achieved an acceptable fit: $\chi^2(DF = 33, N = 1,133) = 278.17, p = 0.00, CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.08$ with p-close = 0.00. Advertising exposure was found to predict life satisfaction (H1; $\beta = -0.14$) and overall psychological wellbeing (H8; $\beta = 0.15$), with overall psychological wellbeing predicting life satisfaction (H10; $\beta = 0.91$). All effects were statistically significant at $p = 0.000$.
3. Analysis of Wave 1 data yielded comparable results. The model, without any modifications, demonstrated a good fit: $\chi^2(DF = 23, N = 1,133) = 183.08, p = 0.00, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.08$ with p-close = 0.00. Advertising exposure was found to predict life satisfaction (H1; $\beta = -0.07, p = 0.002$) and positively predicted environmental mastery (H2; $\beta = 0.21, p = 0.000$), personal growth (H3; $\beta = 0.08, p = 0.009$), purpose in life (H4; $\beta = 0.14, p = 0.000$), and autonomy (H6; $\beta = 0.13, p = 0.000$). However, it did not significantly predict positive relationships with others (rejecting H7; $\beta = 0.07, p = 0.024$) or self-acceptance (rejecting H5; $\beta = 0.05, p = 0.090$). Each dimension of psychological wellbeing was found to predict life satisfaction, with the following effects: environmental mastery ($\beta = 0.07, p = 0.003$), personal growth ($\beta = 0.15, p = 0.000$), purpose in life ($\beta = -0.07, p = 0.004$), self-acceptance ($\beta = 0.40, p = 0.000$), autonomy ($\beta = 0.13, p = 0.000$), and positive relationships ($\beta = 0.35, p = 0.000$).

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