
Ethics and the promotion of consumer brands to children: Marketing public relations in the UK toy industry

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Toys represent children's chief non-food desires, but there has been little research on the impact of public relations campaigns to promote toys to children. This study addressed two key related issues. First, it assessed the impact of marketing public relations messages on children. Second, it raised questions about the ethics of using marketing public relations to promote toys to children. We used focus groups with children in different age ranges, interviews with toy industry public relations practitioners, and a survey of members of the public. The results suggest that contrary to expected age association, the influence of public relations messages does not necessarily decrease with age. We also found, through adapting and applying Austin and Pinkleton's levels of public relations impact, that there appear to be two ethical realities, one in industry, and one in society. We suggest a revision of Austin and Pinkleton's model to reflect an ethical paradigm whereby an assessment of social, not industry, ethical reality determines practitioners' judgement of ethical effect.

Introduction

On Saturday April 10, 2004, *The Sun* newspaper reported that 7-year-old Joseph Adams bid nearly £750,000 for a Power Ranger toy on eBay. The dramatic headline, "JOE, 7, BIDS £3/4m FOR POWER RANGER ON EBAY", suggests that despite children's inability to understand the concept of money, they are still targeted with and susceptible to promotional messages that establish and reinforce a desire to go out and buy. Children are identified by marketers as immensely powerful consumers. Such potential profitability has highlighted childhood as an economic construct (Day, 2000; Elkind, 1981; Holland,

1992), and accompanied an aggressive move towards marketing to young people (Gunter & Furnham, 1998).

Since children differ in their ability to process consumer information, many serious ethical issues are raised by such promotion (Solomon, Bambossy, & Askegaard, 2002). While there is research (though conflicting) into the psychological capabilities of children (Acuff, 1997; Clarke, 1988; Day, 2000; Desmond, 2003; Hansen, Rasmussen, Martenses, & Tufte, 2002; Johnston, 1994; McNeal, 1999; Solomon et al., 2002) there is little, if any, research considering the specific impact of child-focused marketing public relations techniques such as articles and promotions in children's magazines, celebrity endorsement, and event sponsorship. Our research uses a multi-method approach to investigate how susceptible children are to such tactics and messages and, therefore, whether public relations professionals and parents should be concerned about their impact.

The context for this article is the role public relations can play within marketing communications. Therefore, our focus is on communication between public relations practitioners and consumers, rather than public relations in a broader sense as multi-stakeholder relationship management. There is a general consensus in the marketing communication literature that, within this specific context, public relations is primarily a powerful promotional tool (Armstrong & Kotler, 2005; De Pelsmacker, Geuens, & Van den Bergh, 2005; Dibb, Simkin, Pride, & Ferrell, 1994; Fill, 2002; Ries & Ries, 2002). Two key elements to marketing public relations are salient to our study. First, the promotion and defence of

products (Armstrong & Kotler, 2005; Harris, 1993), and, second, interaction with consumers. By using publicity and hype, and developing stories, marketing public relations can help enhance the profile and credibility of products. While the potential power of marketing public relations techniques to persuade consumers inevitably raises questions of ethics, this is especially so when those consumers are children.

Children and marketing public relations

As early as the 1940s, marketing towards young people became more aggressive (Clarke, 1988). An expanding global economy from the 1950s and demographic and cultural changes from the 1980s meant research into the economic power and targeting of children was given greater emphasis (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). Clarke (1988) and Lindstrom (2004) have referred to the 'child consumer'. A large proportion of such research is United States (US)-based; however, the children's market in the United Kingdom (UK) is also substantial. Mintel (1990) estimates that in 1979, 17% of the UK population was represented by 5-to-15 year olds, who collectively held a direct spending power of over £600 million. Since the 1960s the potential profitability of children as a market has become a key focus for marketing and public relations practitioners, especially within the toy industry (McNeal, 1999; Mintel, 1990). Toys represent children's chief desires, accounting for up to 55% of their non-food purchases (Mintel, 1990) and 54% of their first purchase desires. As such, attitudes to toy products and concepts of brand, advertising, and promotion are indicative of a child's consumer education more broadly.

The ethics of media effects on children has caused public concern throughout history. In his dialogues, Plato advocated the censorship of bad fiction to insulate children from undesirable influences (Day, 2000). Packard (1981) talks of the psycho-seduction of children and the dissatisfaction with the amount of commercialism children are subjected to. Indeed, early theoretical work regarding the use

of promotional messages when targeting children (primarily advertising based) has been embedded in the Fordist or mechanistically modernist conceptualisation (Lee, 1993). Critics typically theorise such a market as a "politically oppressive and culturally authoritarian force that threatens to turn active citizens in to passive consumers" (Zwick, Dennegri-Knott, & Schroeder, n.d., p. 1). It has been argued that marketing public relations messages, and media amplification of these, can act as monolithic forces rendering the consumer incapable of resisting (Nava, Blake, Macrury, & Richards, 1997).

Foucault's (1984) 'Economy of Knowledge', points to the selectivity and manipulation of media messages by marketing public relations practitioners, and highlights the potential impact of these messages on vulnerable members of the public (Brassington & Pettitt, 2000). In the toy industry, there has arguably been a shift from "consumer driven, where the customer decided what he [sic] wanted, to being a consumer-communication business" (Pecora, 1998, p. 49). Although there are a range of perspectives on the extent of media power over adults, for children exposed to the consumer world, the ability to recognise the purpose behind marketing messages and distinguish them from other information is usually thought to be low (Pecora, 1998, p. 154), raising particular concern regarding the ethics of promotional activity to this audience. There seems little disagreement that the media are influential in some way in shaping the child audience's worldview. Clarke (1988) demonstrates how media campaigns are increasingly infiltrating children's lives.

Austin and Pinkleton (2001) discuss eight levels of public relations impact (awareness, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, short-term behaviour, sustained behaviour, and values) that result from public relations campaigns. These are progressively more difficult to achieve, leading them to believe that the final level, a values-orientated impact, is typically an unrealistic goal (Austin & Pinkleton). The persuasive messages of

marketing public relations create awareness and acceptance amongst children (McNeal, 1999). The effects of media messages are not clearly known (Rotzoll & Haefner, 1990), thus the theoretical debate suggests a continuum, on which the emancipated consumer (typically the youngest), the critical consumer, and the sovereign consumer (Zwick et al., n.d.) constitute subjective positions influenced by a number of factors, most notably age.

Child Psychology

Age-related cognitive developments from birth to adolescence contribute to the development of decision-making, consumer knowledge and understanding (Hansen et al., 2002). The ability of children to make mature 'adult' consumer decisions increases with age (Solomon et al., 2002). Piaget's (1975) theory of cognitive development identifies three stages of cognitive ability: pre-operational (3–7 years); concrete-operational (7–11 years); and formal-operational (after age 11). The last stage develops abstract reasoning, which aligns with the information processing abilities known as limited, cued and strategic (Solomon et al., 2002) and with Selman's (1980) stages of consumer socialisation (perceptual, analytical and reflective). These stages indicate that the under-developed cognitive defences of younger children are more vulnerable to persuasive appeals. Younger children (aged 6–8) exist in a pre-operational stage of cognitive development (Hansen et al., 2002) in which pre-logical thought is driven by emotional stimuli (Acuff, 1997). An egocentric focus enables information to be infiltrated in a linear fashion in which the dual consideration of both perspectives is replaced by a perceptually bound audience with limited reasoning power (Selman, 1980). The mediational deficiencies of the limited processors 'centrate' on aspects of the media messages and accept the message content without question (Acuff, 1997; Hansen et al., 2002; Solomon et al., 2002) and are thus the most susceptible to (marketing public relations') messages. Bettinghaus and Cody (1987, p. 66) suggest that "no one is more susceptible to persuasion than the 3–7 year old". Children of

this age have been likened to a captive, powerless audience (Day, 2000) which is "ripe for the plucking" (Clarke, 1988, p. 85).

In contrast, older, more strategic consumer processors have cognitive filters in place to protect them from promotional messages (Hansen et al., 2002). The progress that occurs as a function of age provides reflective socialisation, in which the ability to analyse and evaluate media content (Acuff, 1997) gives way to more sophisticated information processing and evaluation of consumer decision-making processes (Fill, 2002; Hansen et al., 2002). In contrast to the perceived ignorance of younger children, the sceptical over-12s have developed fuller meta-cognitive functions and can creatively challenge current thinking, seeing beyond black and white (Acuff, 1997). In this model, by age 12, children can typically analyse and evaluate media content as hypothetical stimuli.

However, some theorists believe increased knowledge does not necessarily correlate with decreased susceptibility (Desmond, 2003). Clarke (1988) suggests children are aware of the purpose of persuasive media messages at a very early age. Children as young as 20 months are able to apply their own stringent evaluation methods and screening systems (Leonhardt, 1997). Their lack of critical thinking skills, short and often sporadic attention span is often detrimental to the acts of persuasion and thus protects them from influence (Johnston, 1994). McNeal (1999) argues that a child's ability to understand persuasive messages is distinguished around the age of 2, while Pecora (1998) discusses such consumer recognition at the age of 5, with full adult consumer abilities to comprehend persuasion techniques and make appropriate inferences not witnessed until the age of 8 or 9 (Johnston, 1994; Pecora, 1998). Yet Gunter and Furnham (1998) correlate ideas of consumption to those under the age of 4.

An area of confusion exists. While some theorists (Acuff, 1997; Day, 2000; Fill, 2002; Hansen et al., 2002; Solomon et al., 2002) are in agreement that young children lack the

cognitive skills and the life experiences necessary to evaluate messages—“they can’t tell when they are being pitched to” (Clarke, 1988, p. 196)—other commentators differ in their perception of when children attain the interpersonal skills required to understand and respond to media messages in a mutually beneficial way. There is little empirical evidence to depict at what age this cognition develops. As a result, Butterfield (1999) suggests demographics are an increasingly blunt tool when predicting consumer behaviour. Message effects are hard to assess within differing levels of literacy (Solomon et al., 2002). Indeed, Christenson (1982) believes children’s cognitive defences create little or no evaluation preferences for promoted products. While many issues in the theoretical debate are still being debated, there is certainly widespread awareness in the literature that a child’s age has some effect on their susceptibility to marketing communication messages, including marketing public relations.

Ethics

Since children differ in their ability to process consumer information, many serious ethical issues are raised when promotional messages try to appeal to them directly (Solomon et al., 2002). Ethics is often delineated into two paradigms: Kant’s deontological perspective, and the teleological perspective of Bentham and the utilitarians (Parsons, 2004; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Kant’s duty-based approach to ethics states that actions have intrinsic moral value (White, 1993). Actions are either morally good (truthful, respectful, right, fair), or morally bad (dishonest, manipulative, wrong, unfair) (Heath, 2001; McQuail, 2000). Kant’s categorical imperative suggests public relations practitioners are duty bound to act in accordance with the moral law (public good) and not personal inclination of profit maximisation (Garrett, 2004; Heath, 2001; White, 1993). In contrast, Bentham’s utilitarian approach to ethics is measured in terms of actions’ effects on other people, rather than the acts themselves (Berry, 2000; Day, 2000; Grunig, 1992). In this

approach, the greatest good for the greatest number of people represents the most ethical outcome (White, 1993).

For the organisation, ethics is essentially about the decision-making process (Bowen, 2002) used by the public relations practitioner. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) suggest ethics and ethical behaviour are central to understanding public relations practice. There is a consensus that unethical practices by the public relations industry have affected its reputation (Day, Dong, & Ronibs, 2001; Heath, 2001; Kitchen, 1997; Parsons, 2004; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995). However, there is disagreement on the role of public relations in creating an organisation’s ethical approach. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest public relations should be the conscience of an organisation, stopping it from using unethical practice. As a result, Bowen (2002) suggests the existence of particular factors within an organisation can determine whether it takes an ethical approach when dealing with its publics. In theory, these factors can be identified and then recreated. However, some commentators suggest public relations cannot be the conscience of an organisation because its role is essentially to help the survival of the organisation (L’etang, 1996). Supporting this, Walle (2003) suggests public relations does not have a notion of service to the community. Our contribution with this article is to add to this debate and to emphasise ethical practice, no matter whose interests are served.

Methodology

A review of the literature suggests contradictions exist regarding:

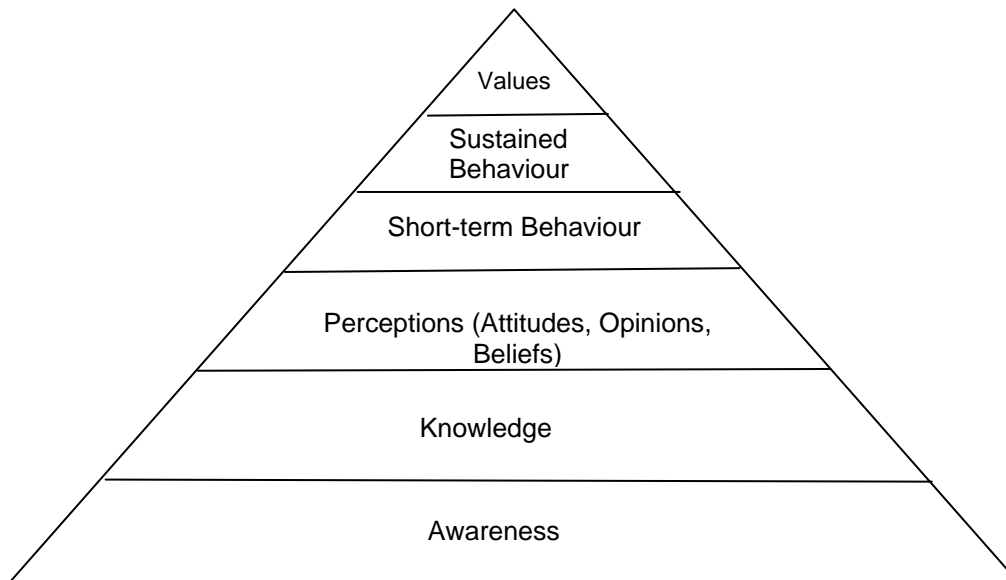
- the potential impact of promotional messages;
- the age at which children are susceptible to promotional messages;
- the ethical stance of using public relations to target children.

This article aims to identify the ethical dimensions of promoting consumer brands to

children. We analyse the level of effect, adapted from Austin and Pinkleton (2001) (Figure 1), that marketing public relations

messages appear to have on children of various ages and determine their ethical association.

Figure 1: A Pyramid of Effects (adapted from Austin & Pinkleton, 2001)



To guide our study we posed two key questions:

- What level of effect do marketing public relations campaigns have on children of various ages?
- How ethical are marketing public relations campaigns aimed at promoting toys to children?

We triangulated our data by examining three separate sample groups: children; toy industry marketing public relations practitioners; and a wider cross-section of the public. The data collected from each sample were gathered by different methods.

Children and Focus Groups

We conducted focus groups with three age categories (6–8, 9–11, and 12–14) to compare and contrast the effects of exposure to marketing public relations campaign messages. Such age

categories were used to avoid the limited literacy capabilities of the under 6s and the social acting emphasis of the older teenagers (Pecora, 1998; Solomon et al., 2002).

Ethnographic, observational methodologies have predominated in historical research with children (Christensen & James, 2000), yet focus groups may yield as much rich data as long periods of ethnographic fieldwork (Bloor, Frankland, Tim, & Robson, 2001).

Each focus group was exposed to examples of the most influential child-focused marketing public relations strategies: magazines; celebrity endorsement; and event sponsorship (Bettinghaus & Cody, 1987; Zollo, 1999). Participants were asked questions correlating with Austin and Pinkleton's (2001) adapted pyramid of effects measurement tool, in order to observe opinion formation. As Morgan (1988) concludes, focus groups are useful when investigating what participants think and why.

We used Participatory Response Analysis (PRA), which is conducive to research with children due to its focus on activity, innovation, and fun (Christensen & James, 2000). PRA allows variances due to age (as a construct of children’s ability to participate) to be minimised. Children communicate well through mediums other than verbal (Alderson, 1995; James, 1995) and thus alternative forms of communication were utilised (including the drawing of toys to initiate discussions and represent sustained behaviour). Visual aids were used to assess the additional influencing variables and to provide integral focusing exercises (Bloor et al., 2001).

Parental Opinion Scales

We also sought to ascertain adult public opinion on the ethics of toy-based public

relations, specifically the opinions of parents of children in the age range we were studying. Many ethical theories, based on assumptions of what is morally right or wrong, are centred on individual perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions. The subjectivity and intangibility of such factors, combined with their multi-dimensional stance, means direct measurement is virtually impossible (Preece, 1996). We obtained 500 survey responses from parents who voluntarily completed a survey.

Toy industry public relations professionals

We interviewed three public relations practitioners in the toy industry to complement and develop the other findings. The interviewees were selected from a broad spectrum of the sector (see **Table 1**).

Table 1: Key Informant Profiles

Interviewee	Position
Key Informant 1	Marketing Manager for toy company
Key Informant 2	Editor of a leading toy industry trade magazine
Key Informant 3	Public Relations Executive and Publishing Assistant specialising in licensed children’s products.

Children’s views of toy promotion

The youngest children (aged 6–8 years) were significantly affected by public relations messages, showing a marked impact within levels of sustained behaviour (see **Table 2**) and in their drawings 1 week after interview. According to Piaget’s (1975) theory of cognitive development, the pre-operative stage was evident with the clear appearance of pre-logical thought, highlighted by the automatic acceptance of media messages. For example, when asked by another member if Badge It! sponsored all the football associations outlined, Tim replied with confidence, “Yeah,

Premiership league, Euro” despite having never seen this sponsorship.¹ Information was processed in accordance with the linear fashion sent by the messenger, suggesting the environmental stimuli of the public relations messages served to impact this age group at a significant level (Hansen et al., 2002) This contradicts Desmond’s (2003) belief that children of this age are as sophisticated as teenagers, and supports the greater body of knowledge suggesting younger children lack the cognitive skills and life experience necessary to evaluate messages.

¹ All research subjects’ names have been changed to protect privacy.

In accordance with Selman’s (1980) stages of consumer socialisation (Hansen et al., 2002), the impulsive nature of the limited processors show mediational deficiencies as the children failed to use the information collected in a rational way (e.g., Ruth: “I want one”). This reinforces the perceptual stage in which the egocentricity of the 6–8 year olds disallows alternative points of view, highlighted by various references to Badge It!’s “cool” status (by Ruth, Luke, and Josie). Children tended to ‘centrate’ on the toy or specific feature of the public relations

messages, for example, FIFA (Tim), or Ruth’s continuous reference to Pony badges. While their short attention span was apparent (e.g., Luke), it was not at the detriment of the message impact as Acuff (1997) suggests; children of this age have not established the perceptual filters required to delineate persuasive intent. Younger children’s cognitive defences are not yet sufficiently developed to filter out persuasive appeals (Solomon et al., 2002). For example, Josie said, “You can make your own badges, that’s really cool”

Table 2: Level of Effects Outlined in the 6–8 Years Category

Level of effect	Correlating comments from transcript C1
Awareness	Badge It!
Knowledge	Is it Girls Aloud’s favourite thing, miss? You can make your own badges, that’s really cool. It makes badges. You can put them on your guitar like Busted did.
Perceptions	Like Badge It! David Beckham, Girls Aloud, Busted. Is FIFA sponsored by Badge It! Yeah.
Short-term behaviour	I do, I want one. Can we have a go on it? When I needed a badge. See it on TV, do you want it more? Yeah.
Sustained behaviour	It’s football crazy, Badge It! mad (integrates Badge It!) Lots and lots.
Values	

A significant increase in cognitive defences was witnessed (see **Table 3**) in the progression from this age group to those aged 9–11. Most significantly, there is an absence of data in the latter levels of effect, demonstrating the limited impact of public relations messages on this age group.

The 9–11 year-old group were able to consider stimuli in a more complex fashion. In this information evaluation stage, a flexible approach to decision-making was witnessed and

consideration of intent and motive was apparent, as highlighted by members who believe, “They just get paid lots of money for it” (Chloe). The analytical focus outlined in Selman’s (1980) stages provided reasoning abilities to complement perceptions (e.g., Josie concludes, “it’s not always true”), which enables children of this age to identify persuasive intent and demonstrates the growth, outlined by Piaget (1975) and Selman (1980), of perceptual and analytical skills required for more effective consumer socialisation.

Table 3. Level of Effects Outlined in the 9–11 Years Category

Level of effect	Correlating comments from transcript C2
Awareness	Badge It!
Knowledge	You can make badges that you wear. Only when prompted did they recollect public relations messages, then used in almost teacher-like fashion, reeling off list, trying to get it right.
Perceptions	
Short-term behaviour	
Sustained behaviour	
Values	

This age correlation continued throughout the 12–14 years category. The strategic information processing ability of this age group enabled members to question messages and creatively challenge the systematic point of view within the media messages. Such realism is encapsulated by Jake who suggests:

“you see all this stuff and then when you see them in real life they don’t actually wear any badges do they?”

Such scepticism was apparent amongst this age group in which knowledge of alternative resolutions provided a cognitive defence against promotional messages, with phrases such as, “that’s just an advertisement” (Jake), and “to get you to buy them” (Joe), thus reducing the ethical ‘risk’ of promotional material (Hansen et al., 2002). The cognitive development, as outlined in Barenboim’s (1981) psychological comparisons stage, provided an increased

sophistication in the information search and information evaluation stage of the process in which the formal operators (Piaget, 1975) viewed content as a hypothetical stimuli and processed messages using more adult-based thoughts and reflective, practical reasoning. For example:

“if it did something different that would be good, but if you’ve already got one then what’s the point!” (Jake)

In addition, the selective attention given to specific material, for example, Jake’s consideration of the extreme sports piece, created a barrier to additional media messages.

Despite this growth in cognitive abilities, the oldest age group were significantly influenced by the public relations messages they were exposed to (see **Table 4**, over the page), which we suggest is due to external not psychological pressures.

Table 4: Level of Effects Outlined in the 12–14 Years Category

<i>Level of effect</i>	Correlating comments from transcript C3
Awareness	Yes – all aware of what Badge It! is.
Knowledge	“You can customise your clothes and bags and stuff” (direct relation to PR messages). Discussion of what you can do, photos of friends (link to PR messages)
Perceptions	All like Badge it! Re celebrity endorsement : “Because, um, you know it’s cool then, isn’t it?” “It seems more important than the other stuff.”
Short-term behaviour	Fads Desire to play with it.
Sustained Behaviour	Mixed reaction, some long-term some short-term, but general consensus that they would be loyal users of brand.
Values	

The egotistical nature of older children drives a need for acceptance and identity. In line with Shultz’s (1995) need to belong and Maslow’s (1987) safety and esteem needs, messages that appeal to self-actualisation and social needs have a greater impact. In their search for social acceptance, the conformity filter outlined by Acuff (1997) was extremely prevalent within this age category, with numerous references to peer acceptance. Such social desires are summarised by Belinda who concludes that:

“If you have it, that means you fit in and you’re not, like, the odd one out or something.”

Despite the apparent deviance of one group

member, such ‘social acting’ was made apparent with contradictory statements such as, “Everyone has one, they’re so cool” (Jake), demonstrating an internal desire to conform but an unwillingness to accept this fact.

The orthodox view is that teenagers place the influence of peers above their parents and media (Acuff, 1997; Hansen et al., 2002). While practical implications suggest this is true with regard to parents, the media remain significant influences, as **Figure 2** shows. Thus the impact of public relations messages cannot be neglected, for they are part of a complex and diverse information search and evaluation process.

Figure 2: Purchase Influence among Focus Group Members aged 12–14

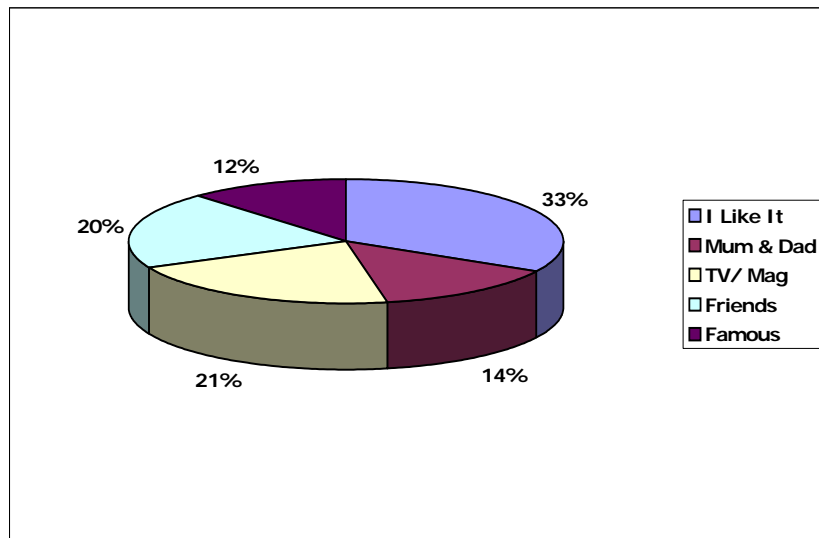
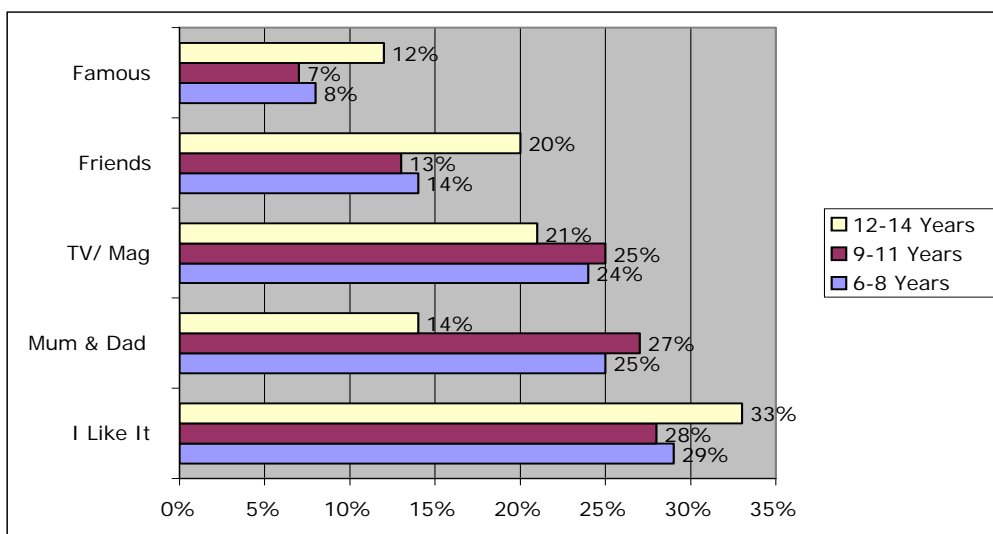


Figure 2 demonstrates how the reflective group uses the awareness of information sources in a flexible manner (Hansen et al., 2002) and evaluates them in a more mature, informed process. This is demonstrated by the fact that no one information source dominates the discussion. A variety of influences are used throughout the process (as opposed to the significant influence of one or two information

sources in the two other age categories). Indeed, the diversity of external influences within this age category, compared with the greater levels of simplicity amongst younger age groups, is outlined in **Figure 3**, reinforcing the belief that the effect of PR messages on this age category is heightened by the interplay of a myriad of external factors, not present in the younger age groups.

Figure 3: Purchase Influence across Focus Group Categories



Whilst little impact was identified within the mid-age category, occasional references to such messages were apparent. For example, Josie

refers to the purchase of Badge It! following its review in a magazine, suggesting there is a direct correlation between media reviews and

perceptions. Such discrepancies can be explained by a desire to aggressively push away from childish concepts (Acuff, 1997), including toys, and view them as socially ‘wrong’. This is clearly highlighted when Josie mocks Mark (“What do you do then, play with your toys?!”) and again when it is concluded, “I don’t really like toys”, despite the enthusiasm placed on the topic earlier. Such social acting is driven by the conformity filter outlined by Acuff, in which a desire to be socially ‘adult’ through logic and reasoning abilities replaces internal desires for youthful concepts.

Piaget’s (1975) pre-adolescents stage is focused on the emerging self, in which members

strive for adulthood at the neglect of childhood concepts. As such, it cannot be concluded that public relations messages have little impact, rather that such conformity filters have greater significance amongst this age category. Such suggestions are reinforced by the active and significant role of parents who are seen as role models in this critical transition phase. Moore and Stephens’ (1975) assumption that parents have an important role in the information gathering stage of the process is confirmed through numerous parental references throughout the discussion including: “Mum and Dad just say ‘Oh, they don’t really do that’” (Mark), and “My dad says” (Luke).

Figure 4: Purchase Influence among Focus Group Members aged 9–11

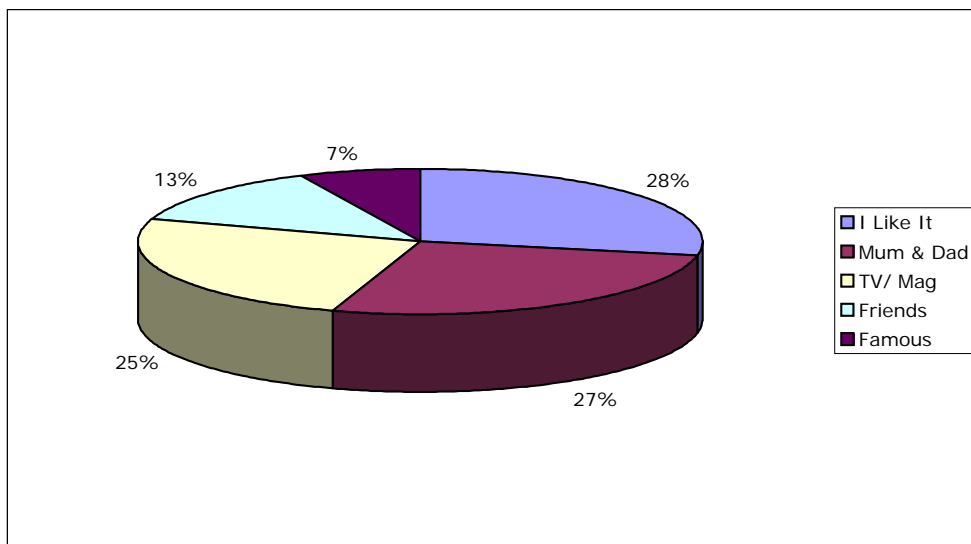
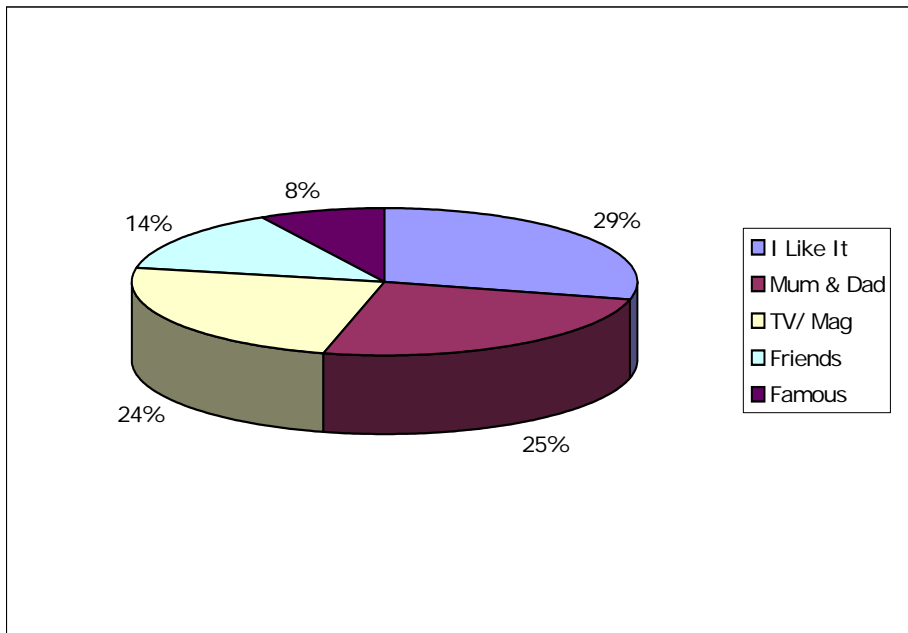


Figure 4 explains the external influences on this age group and shows the significance of parental impact, only slightly less influential than a child’s own personal desire for a product. Parental integration is also identified by industry expert, Key Informant 2, who states “parental guidance does play an important role”. Thus the parental ‘gatekeepers’ (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995) serve to negate the influence of promotional messages.

In contrast, **Figure 5** demonstrates that over three-quarters of the purchase influences among

the 6–8 age category are derived from just three areas. This suggests immediate reference sources dominate purchase influence, of which a large proportion (almost a quarter) involve the media, which are used primarily to inform and support initial desires. For example, “look on TV to see if it’s good” (Andy). Such limited information search and evaluation abilities (Acuff, 1997; Fill, 2002, Hansen et al., 2002; Solomon et al., 2002) reduce reasoning power (Selman, 1980), and suggest that its impact is of greater significance amongst this age group than those with greater external contributions.

Figure 5: Purchase Influence among Focus Group Members aged 6–8

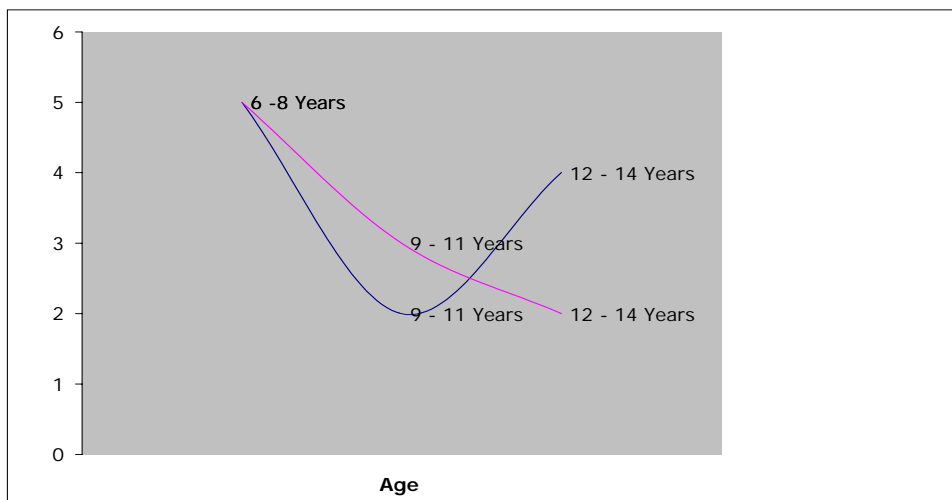


Piaget’s (1975) theory of cognitive ability and Selman’s (1980) stages of consumer socialisation both assume that the effect of promotional messages decreases as a child’s cognitive abilities increase. Indeed, Hansen et al. (2002) conclude that age development parallels children’s perceptual and analytical processes of consumer socialisation. However, a comparative analysis of our results suggests, somewhat surprisingly, that while the youngest age group (6–8 years) show a marked level of impact, the actual influence of public relations

messages decreases amongst the mid-age, with cued information processing abilities, and increases again amongst the strategically based, formal operational stage of 12 to 14 year olds.

Figure 6 demonstrates how the decreasing curve outlined by the theoretical underpinnings is, when using the percentage influence data collected from our research study, practically replaced by a concave curve in which the impact of public relations messages is significant amongst the lowest and highest age groups.

Figure 6: Comparative Study of Effects



Our findings support Christenson’s (1982) view that children have low cognitive defences in general for promoted products. However, as the data above suggest, the youngest age group are most influenced by public relations messages. The reason is likely to be that younger children have limited cognitive abilities and thus simply decode messages linearly (in the way that they are encoded). Such hypodermic needle effects (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) are not apparent in the older age group, suggesting some age correlation, although its exact impact is not sufficiently defined.

Promoting to children – the importance of ethics

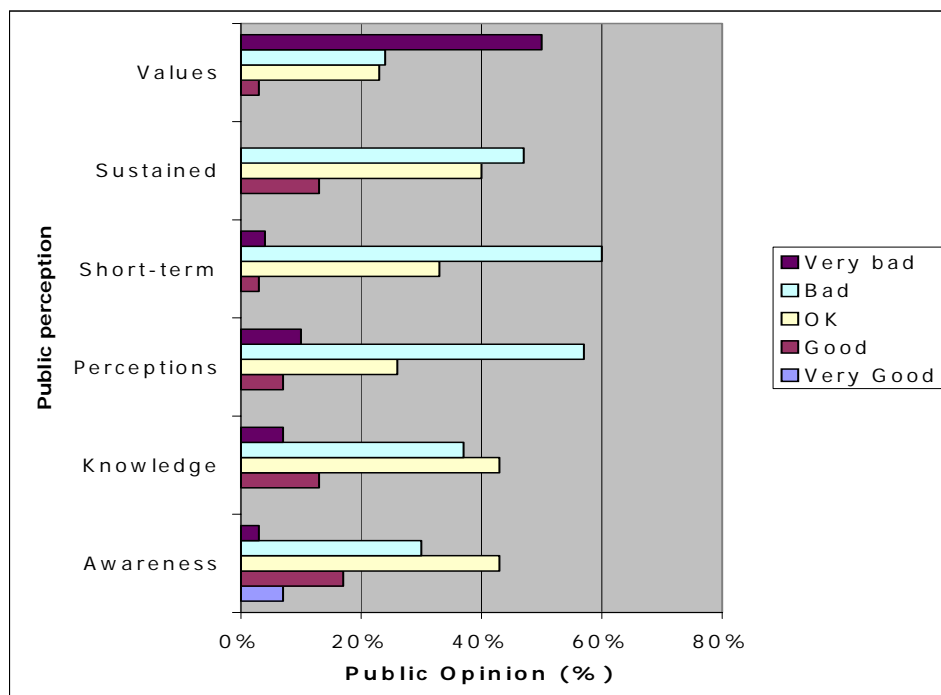
A conflict emerged between the data collected from public relations practitioners and our wider public survey sample on the ethical implications of economic expedience and social responsibility, or public interest (Pecora, 1998).

The industry experts clearly associated themselves with a teleological ethical paradigm, in which a neo-liberal, capitalist society, based on profit maximisation, drives promotional activity and justifies impact in relation to the bottom-line mentality (Pecora, 1998). This was illustrated throughout the interviews by frequent references to profit-based need. Such opinion can be summarised by archetypical statements such as:

“It’s an open market.” (Key Informant 2)
 “I don’t see that there’s anything morally wrong with it.” (Key Informant 3)
 “At the end of the day, I’m employed to make sure that our toys sell.” (Key Informant 1)

In contrast, the parental opinion surveys regarding the ethical implications demonstrate a marked concern. **Figure 7** outlines parents’ views towards the ethical perspective of public relations messages to children.

Figure 7: Ethical Perceptions of Public Relations Impact



As this suggests, parents’ perceptions are typically negative and thus deemed unethical in all areas of consideration, progressing in a

similarly negative way as the level of impact increases (with moderate allowance for raising awareness). Indeed, such subjectivity is noted

by one industry expert (Key Informant 1) who concludes:

“I suppose you could say targeting children is unethical but that’s who our end market is at the end of the day, a child, we have to make a profit, so is it wrong to target who your market is?”

The majority of concern outlined in **Figure 7** related to the oppressive and manipulative power of the media to shape a child’s perspective (Clarke, 1988) and, more specifically, the creation of a materialistic value orientation. Over 50% of our wider public audience expressed concerns about the potential of public relations to influence a child’s value orientations. Indeed, within the children’s focus groups, numerous references were made which suggested Fromm’s (1979) “to have” culture, indicating that materialist values exist, including:

6–8 category:

Andy – “I don’t like that he’s got a Playstation.”

Luke – “I’ve got the best cars.”

Tim – Various “I want” statements.

9–11 category:

Jake – “I’d say everybody else has got one.”

Belinda – “Cos if you have it that means you fit in and you’re not like the odd one out or something.”

12–14 category:

Belinda and Ben – “because if it’s in and trendy, everyone will have it”.

While these values cannot be attributed directly to promotional messages, the level of impact here suggests there is some correlation and thus pervasive impact. Despite children’s desire (particularly in the younger category) to solely accumulate toys (Acuff, 1997), emphasising a number orientation rather than one of materialism, the findings are strong enough to raise some ethical concern. Industry experts again justify their role within this materialistic culture, responding with the belief that if they weren’t doing it, “someone else

would” (Key Informant 1). Thus is the nature of the free-market economy; children are viewed as an economic construct and promotional messages are justified with the belief that “that’s who our market is at the end of the day, a child, so is it wrong to target who your market is?” (Key Informant 1). Such opinion supports the belief that “it is not a crime to try and influence the consumption desires of children” (Robinson, cited in Day, 2000, p. 40).

At present two realities exist and as such, no definitive conclusion can be made as to the ethical impact of promotional messages aimed at children. Activities cannot be deemed unethical if they simply pose an alternative paradigm to subjective opinion. The research suggests we are some way off Murphy’s (1991) mixed motive approach and thus the toy industry needs to act, or at the very least, bring its actions more in line with parental expectations of social responsibility, when targeting children.

Conclusions

The child-centred focus group data suggests that the age group most influenced by marketing public relations messages is children aged 6–8, probably due to their limited cognitive ability and consumer knowledge. In contrast to the expected age association outlined by Piaget (1975), Selmen (1980), and Barenboim (1981), however, the influence of consumer communication messages does not necessarily decrease with age. Of course, the complexities of influence do not provide a determining level of impact and thus the specific effect of public relations activities cannot be easily isolated and defined.

Industry interviews suggest that in the pursuit of profit maximisation, the actions of the toy industry are justified as ethical. In contrast, the survey of wider public opinion identified that such promotional activities were perceived to be unethical. In order to increase ethical perceptions, industry experts must recognise the gap between these two sets of ethical expectations and act, or at least be perceived to act, in a more socially desirable way.

In this particular study, no definitive correlation was found between age and public relations impact. Such incompatibility does not invalidate any promotional ‘effect’ as such, rather it suggests that perceptual filters, such as social conformity, parental influence and accumulation desires, play a variety of roles in influencing children’s decision-making abilities. In future research a systems theory approach to the impact of marketing public relations would be beneficial (Brilhart, Galanes, & Adams, 2001), as the interrelationships between the child and the various external influences cannot be predicted by message inputs alone.

We propose that practitioners’ tolerance towards, or indeed perceived ignorance of, what parents may consider unethical behaviour may be explained by a ‘paradox of reward’; that is, the bottom-line mentality of neo-liberalist profit maximisation, in which the pursuit of career goals subsumes altruistic aims. Of course, our survey of parental perceptions of unethical behaviour may have been influenced by additional factors, including:

- media messages, in which the media portray current promotional messages as inherently bad
- a parental response bias that may have driven an inherent protectionist response to issues involving/concerning children
- the self-selected nature of the sample

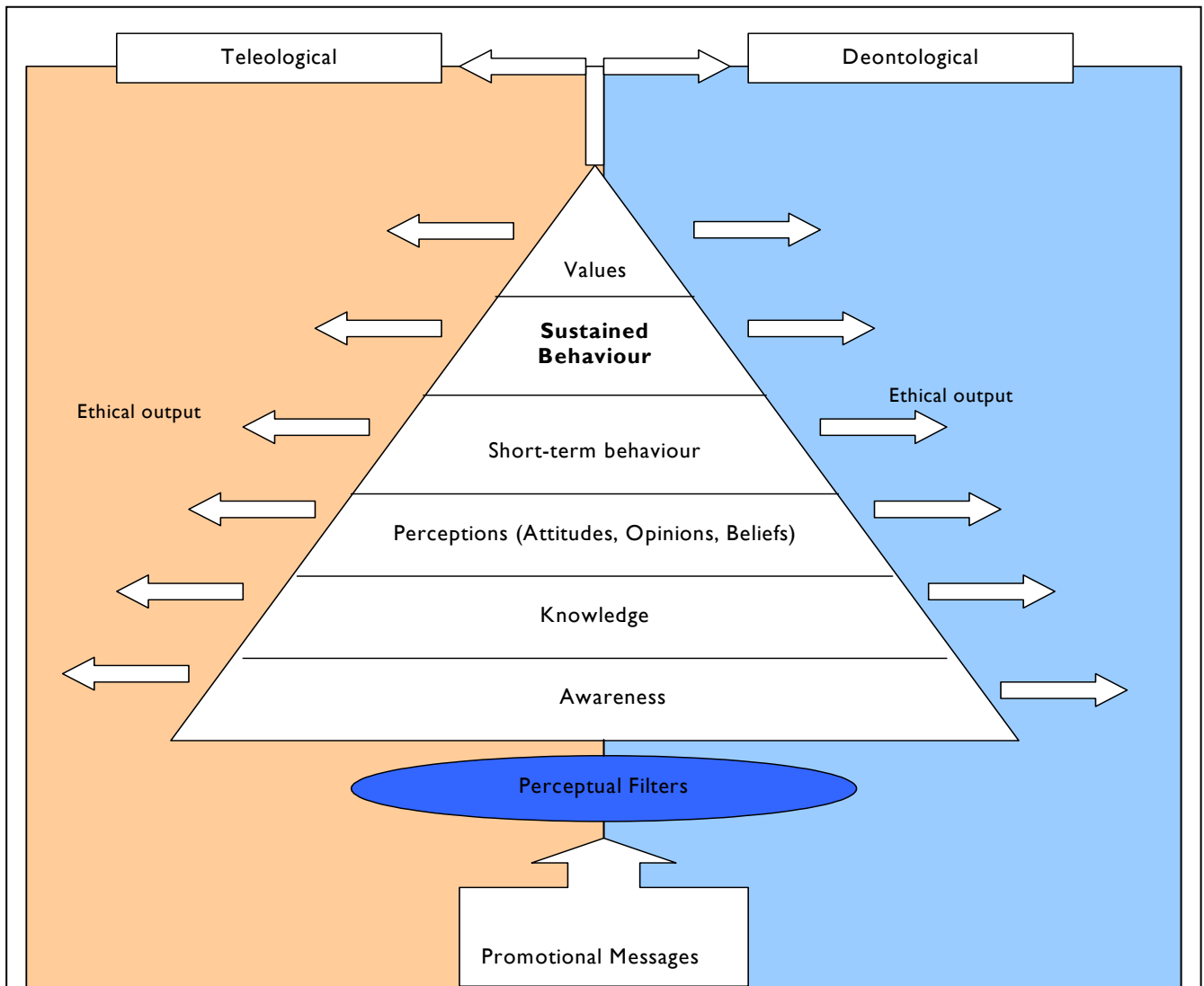
Regardless of these limitations, we believe we have highlighted a legitimacy gap of which key toy industry practitioners themselves appear unaware. In the toy industry, the drive for satisfaction appears to be one-sided rather than embodying McNeal’s (1999) drive for mutual satisfaction. Industry satisfaction is apparent,

yet the fulfilment of consumer satisfaction remains uncertain. If all levels of marketing public relations impact are deemed immoral and thus unethical by public standards when children are the target audience, how can practitioners justify their actions? It is important to note that not all public relations activity is unethical.

In short, there are two ethical realities, which at present are not mutually satisfied. As such, the ethical implications of each level of effect can only be determined separately, from the perspective of each paradigm, as **Figure 8** (over the page) demonstrates. To assess the ethical outcome of promotional messages aimed at children, a myriad of perceptual filters need to be taken into account. Ultimately, the assessors’ own ethical reality will determine their judgement of the final ethical effect.

This study has explored some of the complex issues central to consumer communication within the toy industry, but our results remain inconclusive. While parental opinion appears to veer towards judging any promotional activity targeting children as inherently unethical, the un-quantifiable levels of impact and various perceptual filters that exist within the consumer system deem any definitive conclusions impossible at this stage. Our investigation poses as many questions as it does potential answers, thus further investigation is required. We do, however, believe it is important to draw attention to an area of growing, if not urgent, research need. A distinct divide between industry and social perspectives on the issue of ethics precludes a state of mutual understanding and acceptance. If marketing public relations is truly to be practised ethically, practitioners need to be aware of ethical expectations beyond their own subjective paradigm.

Fig: 8: An ethical assessment of the PR impact within two realities.



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