# EXPLANATIONS FOR THE PERSUASIVENESS OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING

One reason TV itself is an effective medium for persuasion is that for at least some people it is 'a part of the family', and acts as a news provider, an entertainer, and a provider of security. People see TV as 'good company when alone', and a medium which provides a 'shared sense of belonging' (as with Soap Opera plots). That said, **Comstock & Scharrer (1999)** found that far from being a captive audience, 80% of viewers leave the room when advertisements come on, and the majority of people fast forward advertisements when watching a recorded programme.

Some people even sleep when the TV is on…

A great deal of research has tried to explain the persuasiveness of television advertising. The **Hovland-Yale model** and the **Elaboration-Likelihood model** of persuasion can both be used to explain the persuasiveness of television advertising, and could form the basis of an examination answer. Here, though, we will look at other phenomena which can explain why television advertisements are persuasive.

Notice, though, that to determine how effective a TV advert has been, researchers typically measure how much viewers *like* a product after viewing an advert for it, or they measure their *intention* to buy the product. However, for an advert to be effective, it should lead to an *actual purchase* of the product being advertised. This is a major problem with research in this area – what is being measured is not actual *behaviour*, but a related *attitude* that may, or may not, lead to a purchase.

## 'Hard sell' and 'Soft sell' advertising

TV adverts have long been used as a means of trying to persuade viewers to buy a particular product or service. Elsewhere, we have examined the idea of 'central route processing' and 'peripheral route processing'. Advertisers refer to this distinction as 'hard sell' and 'soft sell':

**Hard sell** The viewer is presented with factual information about a product, often in an aggressive way

**Soft sell** The advert is oriented more towards the viewer than the product, and emphasises moods and associations. For example, some adverts will suggest an aspirational lifestyle (e.g. a particular car will make you feel young, or buying frozen foods from Iceland will turn a mundane meal into a special occasion).

Both of these kinds of adverts can be effective, but their effectiveness seems to depend on the person who sees it. People who are '**high self-monitors**' (they regulate their behaviour so that that are perceived favourably by others) are more influenced by soft sell adverts. By contrast, '**low self-monitors**' (people who are less image conscious) are more influenced by hard sell adverts (**Snyder & De Bono, 1985**).

This finding has led to the development of **psychographics**, where the advert is tailored to the profile of a particular target group (e.g. young and male) and/or when the kind of programme being shown appeals to a particular demographic (e.g. adverts for legal companies on daytime TV).

Interestingly, the *type of programme* may also have an effect on an advertisement's impact. **Bushman (1998)** found that both violent and humorous programmes were associated with low levels of recall for advertisements, presumably because the emotion they elicit blunts the attention viewers can give to the adverts.

## Product endorsement

Television advertisements may be effective when the product is endorsed by a celebrity. Around 20-25% of advertisements use product endorsement. One reason it is effective is because some people form what are called **parasocial relationships** with celebrities, that is, a 'friendship' with a celebrity they have never met. **Giles (2003)** argues that since we believe that our real friends would never mislead us, we

believe that our celebrity 'friends' would also never deceive us. Thus, celebrities are seen as being *trustworthy* and *reliable*.


Would you trust this man?

However, in a study of the persuasiveness of over 5,000 TV commercials, **Hume (1992)** concluded that celebrity endorsement did not enhance the persuasive communication of advertisements. This may be because it depends on who the celebrity is and what the product is. In other words, effectiveness depends on the **credibility** and **expertise** of the source with respect to the product being endorsed.

This is supported by a study conducted by **Martin et al (2008)**. They found that student participants were more convinced by a TV endorsement from a *fictional fellow student* when buying a digital camera than by an endorsement from a celebrity. The researchers believe that young people like to make sure their product is fashionable among people who resemble them, rather than approved by celebrities.

**Product placement**

**Product placement** (PP) first appeared on television in the 1960s. It is a form of advertising in which an advert is placed in a non-advertisement context, such as a film. PP is often not disclosed at the time, and aims to reach niche audiences. Well-known examples include the film 'Golden Eye' (BMW Z3). The effectiveness of PP is measured in terms of increased sales.

Everybody wins with PP. Film makers charge a fee which offsets some of their costs, whilst manufacturers might see massively increased sales. Some manufacturers do not pay a fee, but exchange products and

services, as in the film 'The Day The Earth Stood Still', which features Apple computers in many scenes.

Product placement

In the UK, legislation was introduced in March 2011, allowing PP in entertainment and sports, but not in children's programmes, current affairs, consumer affairs, and religious programming. PP is not allowed for tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and foods/drinks high in sugar/salt. Note that placement is allowed, but endorsement is not.

Related phenomena include **reverse placement**, in which real-life products are created to match those seen in a fictional setting, and **virtual placement**, in which a product is inserted after filming using CGI. **Product displacement** is when a manufacturer objects to the use of its products, and things like logos have to be edited out of a film (often at great cost).

**Advertising literacy**

Advertising literacy (AL) is a person's understanding that adverts are:

(a) distinct from the television programmes they are shown between
(b) intended to persuade us to change our behaviour in some way


Advertising literacy develops at a young age

Understanding that adverts have a persuasive intention is strongly correlated with age, such that at age 5 only 75% of children understand this whereas by age 9, 100% do (**Robertson & Rossiter, 1974**).

It is a commonly accepted belief that advertising to young children increases the degree to which they 'pester' their parents and others for products they have seen on TV (especially around November when Christmas 'begins'). **Pine & Nash (2001)** studied the relationship between the amount of commercial TV watched by children and the number of advertised items on their letters to Santa. They found that:

(1) There is a direct correlation between how much commercial TV children watch and the number of goods on their lists for Father Christmas
(2) The above is especially true for children who tend to watch TV on their own than for those who watch it with their parents

> Finding (2) suggests that parents can play a mediating role in minimising pester power. Because there was no relationship between exposure to specific adverts and subsequent gift requests, finding (1) suggests that children who watch more TV simply become more materialistic as a result of exposure to adverts (i.e. they simply want more of everything rather than a specific thing).

However, it is impossible to disentangle the effects of TV from other things that might increase a child's awareness of different toys, such as the influence of peers. After all, children talk to each other, and some of these conversations are almost certainly linked to adverts ('Did you see the ad for…?'). This would suggest an indirect rather than a direct effect of television.

> Interestingly, Pine and Nash found significantly fewer requests among Swedish children than among American children. Although there are several explanations for this cultural difference, the fact that TV adverts aimed at under-twelves are banned by law, is probably important…

**Sex role stereotyping**

In TV adverts, men are typically shown in stereotypical roles of authority and dominance (i.e. they are portrayed as product authorities rather than merely product users) and, when shown attempting non-traditional gender roles such as cooking or cleaning, are often depicted as incompetent. Women, by contrast, are typically portrayed as product users rather than

product authorities. These gender stereotypes reinforce the traditional role of women as caretakers, wives or subordinates. Consequently, gender-stereotyped TV adverts could be argued to be effective because they promote acceptance of current social arrangements no matter how biased or inappropriate these representations are.


Despite what the above might suggest, television advertisements are not always effective. **Nolo (2000)** reports that the Anchor Steam Brewing Company of San Francisco sold 103,000 barrels of beer in 1995 with no advertising campaign. The California Raisin Advisory Board ran a television campaign which cost $40 million annually. Its adverts were incredibly popular, involving clay animation dancing raisons backed by the Marvin Gaye song 'I heard it through the grapevine'. After four years, the campaign was stopped with sales lower than before the campaign had started.

**Health campaigns as 'advertisements'**

Research suggests that TV can be an effective tool in health promotion, even if it is part of fictional drama. For example, **Valente et al. (2007)** looked at the impact of a minor storyline in *ER* over three episodes. The storyline involved an African-American male teenager who presented at the emergency room with burns from a workplace injury. He was discovered to have hypertension and was advised to eat more fruit and vegetables and to take more exercise. Data were collected from a sample of viewers before and after they had seen the programmes.

The researchers found that the storyline had a small but significant effect on self-reported behaviour change and some impact on knowledge, attitudes and practices related to the topics covered, suggesting that so-called *education-entertainment (E-E)* programmes can be effective.

In Britain, **Hawton, et al (1999)** investigated the impact of a potentially fatal paracetamol overdose on short- and long-term knowledge related to paracetamol poisoning. They used an episode of *Casualty* which depicted a

man suffering potentially fatal liver damage following an untreated paracetamol overdose. One week after the episode was broadcast, questionnaires were sent to nearly 3,000 members of the BBC TV Opinion Panel measuring their knowledge of the delayed toxic effects of paracetamol overdose and maximum safe days before seeking help.

Significantly more of those 1,000 or so who had seen the episode correctly identified paracetamol as having hepatotoxic effects (85% versus 45%). When the same participants' knowledge was re-tested after 32 weeks, the figures were 73% versus 50%.

> *Casualty* seems to be especially effective. **Philo & Henderson (1999)** investigated an episode which highlighted the issue of unnecessary hospital attendance. They found that a large proportion of those who had seen the episode, and who had previously attended A & E, said they would not attend again *with the same complaint*.

Note that there has been debate over whether audiences are able to tell the difference between 'fact' and 'fiction' in TV programming. **Philo (1999)** argues that although audiences are able to distinguish between what is 'factual' and what is 'fictional', medical programmes such as *Casualty* are a source of 'hard information' for many people. Such programmes are seen by many as inherently trustworthy and informative, and can have a profound effect on real-life behaviour.

The ***Health Development Agency*** **(2007)** has reported a number of significant changes in health-related attitudes and behaviour that could be directly attributed to TV health campaigns:

**Alcohol:** Increased knowledge about 'units' (up by 300% between 1989 and 1994), and people's assessment of their own drinking (up by 5% between 1990 and 1994)

**HIV/AIDS:** A decrease in the belief that people with HIV 'only have themselves to blame' (down from 57% to 36% between 1987 and 1996), and an increase in the belief that condoms protect against HIV (up from 66% to 95% between 1986 and 1997)

**Skin cancer:** Increase in the belief that sun tan lotion is important (25% to 28% between 1995 and 1996), and an increase in the number using a sunscreen when sunbathing in this country (34% to 41% between 1995 and 1996)

According to **French (2004)** television can be effective:

(1) **When wide exposure is desired** (TV offers the widest exposure, albeit at a cost)

(2) **When the time frame is urgent** (TV offers the best opportunity for reaching either large numbers of people or particular target groups within a short time frame)

(3) **When the behavioural goal is simple** (Something like immunisation is more easily stimulated through TV than a more complex behaviour such as stopping smoking)

As with TV adverts, though, health campaigns via TV are *not* always successful. For example, **Robertson, et al. (1974)** examined the effect of a TV campaign promoting the use of seat belts in the USA. Six different adverts were shown via cable television to 7,000 viewers, and these were repeated 943 times over a nine-month period. Other cable viewers did not see any of the adverts.

To assess the campaign's effectiveness, daily observations of seat-belt use were made of car users in the city and the licence numbers of the vehicles were taken. This allowed the researchers to see which seat-belt users had seen the campaign. The adverts had absolutely no effect whatsoever on seat-belt use.