Adolescent Skepticism toward TV Advertising and Knowledge of Advertiser Tactics

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A longitudinal study of middle school students examined adolescents' skepticism toward advertising and their beliefs about the persuasive tactics advertisers employ. Comparisons across grade levels and over the course of the school year indicated that knowledge about advertiser tactics developed in the direction of adult understanding. Skeptical attitudes toward advertisers' motives showed no differences across grade levels; however, students generally became more disbelieving of advertising claims as the school year progressed. The level of skepticism toward advertising was high and was positively related to having a more adult understanding of advertising tactics.

T

here are good reasons for marketers to be interested in what young people think about advertising. First, there is the sheer number of advertising exposures. Current estimates place the number of TV commercials seen by an average child between the ages of 2 and 11 at approximately 40,000 per year (Comstock and Paik 1991). Second, the 30 million 4-12-year-olds in the United States spend approximately $6.2 billion per year, while the approximately 28 million teenagers spend another $55 billion per year (Sellers 1989). In addition to their own spending, children and adolescents influence many other household purchase decisions (Foxman, Tansuhaj, and Ekstrom 1989).

With few exceptions (e.g., Ward and Robertson 1972) past research on the attitudes and beliefs that young people have about advertising has concentrated on children ages 2–8, and generally has been concerned with whether children need protection from advertisers' persuasive attempts (Robertson and Rossiter 1974, 1976; Rossiter 1979; Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977). In a comprehensive review of the effects of TV advertising on children, Adler et al. (1980) found that only children ages 2–11 were studied. The issue of how older children might respond to advertising is rarely examined (Linn, Delucchi, and de Benedictus 1984), perhaps because researchers have assumed that the processes that determine the consumer behavior of adolescents are similar to the processes that apply to adults. However, because adolescence is an unusually dynamic stage of cognitive and social development, it seems inappropriate to assume that adolescents' cognitive processes, beliefs, and attitudes are the same as either the adults or younger children that have been studied.

The purpose of the present study is to examine how, over time, young people who are moving into and through adolescence think and feel about television advertising. More specifically, our focus will be on adolescents' beliefs about the tactics that advertisers use to persuade them and their overall attitude toward advertisers' motives and claims. As a secondary issue, we will examine how these advertising attitudes and beliefs relate to two other individual differences, self-esteem and consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence, which have been related to persuasibility in past research. This research may be of interest from (1) the marketing perspective of communicating with a specific target market, (2) the public policy perspective of protecting or educating children and youth, and (3) the theoretical perspective of cognitive development.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Our investigation of the development of advertising attitudes and beliefs is grounded in the basic literature on the acquisition of cognitive skills and in the idea...
that people develop a "schemer schema" (Wright 1986),
that is, beliefs about the tactics that advertisers and
marketers use to try to persuade them. The development
of these persuasion-related knowledge structures is par-
tially dependent on changes in information-processing
abilities. Roedder (1981) reviewed many early child-
hood developments as they relate to consumer tasks.
However, the adolescent years also compose a period
of rapid change that contributes to the acceleration of
consumer and advertising knowledge.

Cognitive development researchers have generally
found that substantial changes occur between late
childhood and early adolescence (ages 11 to 14), with
smaller developmental differences occurring between
late adolescence and adulthood (Keating 1990). The
question of whether the changes in adolescent cognitive
processes are precipitated and enabled by neurological
development (Thatcher, Walker, and Guidice 1987),
structural shifts in underlying logic (Piaget 1963),
increases in knowledge and experience (Glaser 1984),
or some combination of these factors is unresolved and
beyond the scope of this article. However, there is gen-
eral agreement that, from early adolescence on, thinking
tends to move from concrete to abstract, from single
issue to multidimensional, from absolute to relative,
and becomes increasingly self-reflective (e.g., being
aware of what one does or does not know; Keating
1990). More specifically, empirical research has found
that adolescents are better than children (and not as
good as adults) in their ability to allocate attention
(Manis, Keating, and Morrison 1980), take a variety of
perspectives (Selman 1980), make valid inferences
(Moshman and Franks 1986), and develop decision-
making competence (Mann, Harmoni, and Power
1989).

However, there may also be a dark side to the in-
creasingly complex content and structure of adoles-
cents' mental models. Some of these developmental
changes in cognitive processes have been shown to pre-
cipitate what has been called "epistemic doubt" (Boyes
and Chandler 1992). This view argues that adolescents
may become extremely skeptical as their own beliefs
change and as they come to realize that truth may be
relative, and that factual knowledge does not necessarily
lead to a certain conclusion.

In the consumer socialization domain, research has
shown that the cognitive dynamism of adolescence ex-
tends to beliefs and attitudes about consumer behavior.
For example, cross-sectional studies in which adoles-
cents were used as subjects have reported that older
adolescents have greater consumer affairs knowledge,
are better able to differentiate product attribute infor-
mation in advertisements, and have less favorable at-
titudes toward advertising than do younger adolescents
(Moschis and Churchill 1979; Moschis and Moore
1979). On the other hand, there are some skills and
beliefs that are likely to be formed by the time a person
reaches adolescence (Moschis 1987). For example,
Mayer and Belk (1982) found that impressions about
consumption stereotypes of sixth to eighth graders were
similar to those of college students and older adults. In
a similar way, Moschis and Moore (1979) reported that
consumer role perceptions were formed prior to ado-
lescence. In summary, past research suggests that, as
children move into adolescence, they have already de-
veloped a basic understanding of advertisers as persua-
sive agents and some general attitudes toward advertis-
ing. However, we know virtually nothing about their
understanding of specific advertising tactics, whether
such beliefs change during adolescence, or how these
beliefs relate to more general attitudes of skepticism
about advertising.

Previous research on the development of consumer
knowledge (Roedder and Whitney 1986) suggests that
children develop increasingly sophisticated and com-
plex knowledge structures as they grow older. It is these
knowledge structures, which contain beliefs about the
tactics and effects being sought by advertisers, that edu-
cators wish to affect through educational programs
designed to help kids become "critical consumers" of
mass media content (see, e.g., Plohoft and Anderson
1982). Assuming that knowledge of advertiser tactics
can be assessed by measuring respondents' understand-
ing of which tactics are most appropriate for eliciting
which effects, we may expect that

**H1:** Knowledge about advertiser tactics will de-
velop in the direction of adult knowledge
during early adolescence.

The existing evidence concerning changes in attitudes
toward advertising during adolescence is somewhat
mixed. However, in summarizing studies of age-related
differences in advertising attitudes, Moschis (1987)
proposed that adolescents develop greater resistance to
persuasive stimuli and develop a greater discontent with
marketing practices as they get older. Therefore, the
combination of a propensity toward general skepticism
and an increase in the number of accumulated expe-
riences that may demonstrate the difference between
what advertisers promise and what products deliver will
lead to increasingly skeptical attitudes toward advertis-
ing during adolescence.

**H2:** Skepticism toward advertising will increase
with age during early adolescence.

In addition, we might expect that the development
of the more adult-like persuasive schema discussed
above would be accompanied by the development of
increasingly skeptical attitudes toward advertising.

**H3:** Advertising skepticism will be positively re-
lated to knowledge about advertiser tactics.

Past research suggests that two general traits, self-
esteeem and consumer susceptibility to interpersonal
influence, may be useful in putting adolescent skepti-
cism into perspective. Self-esteem involves feelings of
self-worth and belief in one's own abilities. Longitudinal studies have shown that, developmentally, self-esteem shows overall improvements from grade 7 through grade 12 (Harter 1990; O'Malley and Bachman 1983). However, the critical period of early adolescence has been associated with declines in self-esteem, which reach a low point between the ages of 12 and 13 (Rosenberg 1986). Self-esteem was among the first individual difference variables to be studied in relation to conformity (Hovland and Janis 1959) and persuasibility (McGuire 1968), and it was found to be negatively related to both. One reason for this relationship is that those who are low in self-esteem lack the self-confidence to rely on their own beliefs and judgment and therefore fall back on the judgment of others. We propose that a predisposition to doubt advertising claims reflects the self-confidence to challenge advertisers' persuasive attempts rather than to believe whatever is presented. Therefore, we expect that

H4: Self-esteem will be positively associated with advertising skepticism.

Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) define consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (CSII) as a "willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions" (p. 473). This domain-specific type of conformity is a derivation of McGuire's (1968) concept of influenceability. The CSII scale has a normative dimension, which may be described as a desire to comply with the expectations of others, and an informational dimension, which is the tendency to learn about products by observing or seeking information from others. Both dimensions of CSII were found to correlate positively with attention to social comparison information (Lennox and Wolfe 1984) and negatively with Eagly's (1967) measure of self-esteem. Bearden and Rose (1990) reported that subjects high in attention to social comparison information are more likely to comply with normative pressures in a consumer context. We propose that mass media sources, such as advertising, may represent a type of normative influence to which adolescents who are high in CSII might attend. Empirical support for this view comes from recent findings (Boush et al. 1994) that trust in advertising is positively related to consumer conformity (e.g., agreement with statements like "I buy brands that will make me look good in front of my friends"). Therefore, we expect that

H5: Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence will be negatively related to advertising skepticism.

METHOD

Respondents

Respondents were students at two middle schools (grades 6–8) in a medium-sized city in the Pacific Northwest. Unless otherwise indicated, data reported here are for the 426 students whose responses could be matched for the two administrations of the questionnaire.

Procedure

Respondents completed a written questionnaire administered to groups of 25–30 students during the 20-minute "advisor" period with which they begin each school day. The questionnaire was administered twice, once during the first and last weeks of the school year. This allowed for the measurement of change over time, as well as cross-sectional analysis by grade. The questionnaire contained items designed to assess beliefs about advertiser tactics, attitudes toward television advertising, self-esteem, and CSII. Respondents also indicated their grade level, gender, and approximate number of hours of television watched in an average week.

Measures

Knowledge about Advertiser Tactics and Effects. We were concerned in this study with beliefs about what advertisers are trying to accomplish when they use particular tactics. Although such beliefs do not cover the entire range of knowledge about advertising, they reflect one important domain: the perceived intentions of the persuasive agent. Beliefs about advertiser tactics were assessed by asking respondents to rate six different tactics in terms of how hard advertisers were trying to accomplish eight different effects. For each tactic, the following question was asked: "When TV ads [insert tactic], how hard is the advertiser trying to [list of effects]?" Respondents rated each effect on a scale from 1, "not trying hard at all," to 5, "trying very hard." A "don't know" option also was provided. The six tactics were (1) "show a popular TV, music, or movie star," (2) "are funny," (3) "show how a product works," (4) "use cartoon characters," (5) "compare one product to another," and (6) "show kids who are a lot like you and your friends." The eight effects were (1) "grab your attention," (2) "make you want the product," (3) "help you learn about the product," (4) "make you like the ad," (5) "make you like the product better," (6) "get you to remember the ad," (7) "get you to believe what the ad says," and (8) "get you to think that having their product will make you feel good." These effects reflect distinctions between cognitive and affective components of advertising and between attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the product. They were generated from an earlier study in which adults described possible effects that advertisers try to accomplish when they were shown actual advertisements.¹

¹ The tactics and effects were generated in a study in which 10 men and 10 women, 21–55-years-old, half of whom had a college edu
A measure of "knowledge about advertiser tactics" for each subject was computed from 12 pairwise comparisons of responses involving four different tactics (show a popular TV, movie, or music star, be funny, show how a product works, and compare one product to another) and three different effects (grab your attention, help you to learn about the product, make you like the ad). The reasoning behind the knowledge measure was that some tactics logically would be more likely to be associated with some effects than with other effects. For example, an ad that shows how a product works is more apt to be intended to help the viewer learn about the product than to make the viewer like the ad, while the reverse may be true of the use of a celebrity spokesperson. Therefore, if a respondent rated product demonstrations higher than use of a celebrity spokesperson for helping one to learn about the product, it was considered an "adult belief," and increased their score by 1. Rating the use of a celebrity spokesperson as better than a product demonstration as a tactic for helping viewers to learn about the product decreased their score by 1, and giving the two tactics the same rating for eliciting the effect (or answering "don't know" to either tactic) left the score unchanged. Not every pairwise comparison was used, because there was not sufficient intuitive or theoretical justification for adults to believe that some tactics were significantly more likely than others to be associated with a particular effect. Given the way in which this variable was operationalized, knowledge about advertiser tactics scores could vary from -12 to +12. Note that a score of zero essentially reflects no differentiation between tactics that are most likely to elicit particular effects, while a negative score reflects differentiation, but in the opposite direction from an adult layperson's schema about advertising.

Skepticism toward Television Advertising. Attitude toward advertising is defined as a general predisposition in the processing of advertising messages. We were especially concerned with attitudes reflecting skepticism toward advertising—that is, whether respondents approach advertisements with an informed discerning mind or are predisposed to reject or to believe whatever is shown on television. Fundamental to this kind of discernment are four concepts: (1) that the advertiser and viewer have different interests, (2) that advertisers intend to persuade, (3) that persuasive messages are biased, and (4) that biased messages require different processing strategies than do other messages (Brucks, Armstrong, and Goldberg 1988; Roberts 1983). Assessment of attitude toward advertising began with items that were described by Rossiter (1977) and replicated by Riecken and Samli (1981). Because of the particular interest in advertising skepticism, items were added to assess an understanding that advertisers have different motives than viewers and are therefore biased, that advertisements vary with respect to truthfulness, and that advertisements are different from other television programming. The purpose of these items was to assess the degree to which the subjects could differentiate between their own interests and those of the advertiser and the degree to which they discriminated between truthful and untruthful advertising, rather than categorizing all advertising as the same. Respondents rated their level of agreement on five-point scales.

Self-Esteem and CSII. Global self-esteem items were adapted from Rosenberg (1965). The three-item scale represents optimism, self-confidence in one's own abilities, and self-acceptance. Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence was assessed by using three of the items developed and validated by Bearden et al. (1989). The items reflect both normative and informational aspects of the construct. More specifically, the first two items had the highest item-to-total correlations on the informational dimension, and the third item had the highest item-to-total correlation on the normative dimension in Bearden et al.'s (1989) evaluation of the CSII scale. A pretest of a group of 33 sixth through eighth graders resulted in changes in question wording in the CSII items from the original reference to "others" to "my friends." Both self-esteem and CSII items used
a five-point (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) scale.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Beliefs about Advertiser Tactics. First, we looked at respondents' beliefs about which effects advertisers are trying to elicit when they employ a particular tactic, such as use of a celebrity spokesperson. Next, we compared three commonly used advertiser tactics across grade levels to see whether age groups differ in their perceptions of which tactics are best for accomplishing particular effects. Finally, we computed the measure of knowledge about advertiser tactics that was described earlier. A later section will report tests of hypotheses related to changes in these beliefs.

Table 1 shows the mean rating for each of the eight possible effects on each tactic, as measured in September (time 1) and then June (time 2). Note that a number of means, such as those for "make you want the product" and "make you like the product better," are consistently similar, and that respondents generally gave "help you to learn about the product" a low rating across most tactics. Looking across tactics in Table 1 shows that some tactics were considered more likely to be used for eliciting a particular effect. For example, the tactics with the highest rating for grabbing your attention are use of a celebrity, humor, and cartoon characters, while the tactics most closely associated with helping you to learn about the product are showing how the product works and comparing one product to another.

The perceived effects of three selected advertiser tactics, shown in Table 2, are compared for grades 6–8 and for undergraduate business students (see n. 3). The college business students were drawn from a different population than the middle school students, and their ratings are presented for comparison because they represent a reasonably informed group of young adults, who, therefore, are likely to have more developed knowledge about advertising tactics. The three tactics selected (use of celebrity spokesperson, humor, and direct product comparison) were chosen because they are commonly used and represent a fairly broad spectrum of tactics. To the extent that more extreme ratings reflect stronger beliefs, older students had stronger beliefs concerning whether some particular tactics are designed to elicit particular effects. Note, for example, ratings of the perceived intended effects of showing a popular TV, music, or movie star. Eighth graders, and particularly business undergraduates, believed more strongly than sixth and seventh graders that such a tactic is designed to grab one's attention and get one to like and remember the ad, but they still rated the tactic low on helping one to learn about the product.

Knowledge about Advertiser Tactics. The computation of a scale to measure knowledge about tactics was based on pairwise comparisons between tactics that were intended to evoke particular effects. The scale created by these pairwise comparisons had high internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .85). The correlation between measures of knowledge at the two times, which reflects the stability of both the measure and the characteristic over time, was significant ($r = .46, p < .0001$). The number of missing and "don't know" responses also was calculated for each respondent across all effects for all tactics as a measure of uncertainty about the

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*Note:* Means rating is based on a five-point scale (5 = trying very hard and 1 = not trying hard at all).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How hard is the advertiser trying to:</th>
<th>Show a popular TV, music, or movie star</th>
<th>Are funny</th>
<th>Show how a product works</th>
<th>Use cartoon characters</th>
<th>Compare one product to another</th>
<th>Show kids who are a lot like you and your friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grab your attention</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you want the product</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help you learn about the product</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you like the ad</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you like the product better</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get you to remember the ad</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get you to believe what the ad says</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get you to think that having their product will make you feel good</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Descriptive analyses for all eight tactics tested are available from the authors on request.*
TABLE 2
BELIEFS ABOUT INTENDED EFFECTS OF ADVERTISER TACTICS COMPARED ACROSS GRADE LEVELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Show a popular TV, music, or movie star</th>
<th>Are funny</th>
<th>Compare one product with another</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How hard is the advertiser trying:</td>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>Grade 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grab your attention</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you want the product</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help you learn about the product</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you like the ad</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make you like the product better</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get you to remember the ad</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get you to believe what the ad says</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get you to think that having their product will make you feel good</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD across effects</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—Means rating is based on a five-point scale (5 = trying very hard and 1 = not trying hard at all).

The table sample is described in note 3.

intended effects of advertiser tactics. As expected, this measure of uncertainty was negatively correlated with knowledge about tactics at both time 1 (r = -.20, p < .0001) and time 2 (r = -.26, p < .0001). The proportions of “don’t knows” were similar across all the tactic-effects judgments.

Skepticism toward Advertising. The measures of skeptical attitudes toward television advertising are shown in Table 3. The underlying structure of advertising attitudes was assessed by using principal components analysis. The first factor in the unrotated solution accounted for only 25 percent of total variation, which indicates that the construct is not unidimensional. A promax rotation was employed to facilitate factor interpretation, and two factors were retained on the basis of a scree test. (A promax rotation was chosen because the factors were expected to be correlated.) The two factors are reflected in the scales in Table 3, disbeliev in ad claims and mistrust of advertiser motives. Note that one aspect of the factor solution may simply reflect a measurement artifact, as all the items reflecting disbelief in ad claims are reversed from those reflecting mistrust of advertiser motives. However, the difference between mistrust about advertiser motives and disbelief in ad claims is conceptually plausible. The disbelief items seem to reflect perceptions of the truth of advertising claims, while the mistrust items all have to do with suspicion of advertiser motives. Overall, the mean ratings reveal a high level of skepticism about advertising. The internal reliability of each scale was assessed by using Cronbach’s alpha (Cronbach 1951), and the reliabilities of the scales were acceptable for time 2 but were somewhat low for time 1. The correlations across time were significant both for mistrust of advertiser motives (r = .18; p < .0003) and disbelief in advertising claims (r = .29, p < .0001).

Self-Esteem and CSII. Self-esteem and CSII measures are shown in Table 4. Principal components analysis on the combined measures yielded a simple structure solution. Note, however, that some of the reliability coefficients fall below the acceptable range (Nunnally 1978). As with attitudes toward advertising, the scales were more reliable on their second administration than on their first. Overall, respondents were higher than the scale midpoint in self-esteem and were near the midpoint in CSII. The correlations across time were significant both for self-esteem (r = .31, p < .0001) and for CSII (r = .28, p < .0001).

Tests of Hypotheses
Changes in Knowledge about Advertiser Tactics over Time. We expected that knowledge about advertiser tactics would increase with age, as was reflected in both differences across grade levels and throughout the school year (Hypothesis 1; see Table 5.) The linear trend in the increase in knowledge about advertiser tactics across grade levels was tested by using multivariate polynomial contrasts. The positive linear trend was significant (F(2, 420) = 3.63, p < .027), which supports Hypothesis 1.

The within-subjects comparison afforded by a longitudinal study permitted a more powerful test of changes in knowledge over time than was afforded by comparisons across grades. Multivariate repeated measures ANOVAs were used to test both the effect of time within subjects of advertising knowledge (T1 [September] vs. T2 [June]) and the grade and time interaction. Knowledge about advertiser tactics increased significantly throughout the school year (F(1, 421) = 6.16, p < .013), which again supports Hypothesis 1. In addition, there was a significant interaction between time and grade (F(2, 421) = 6.18, p < .002). Follow-up Scheffé i-tests show that knowledge about advertiser tactics in-
increased between September and June for sixth \((t = 4.08, p < .000)\) and eighth \((t = 2.82; p < .006)\) graders, but not for seventh graders, whose knowledge of advertising tactics remained stable.

Taken together, the significant changes across grades and over the course of the school year suggest that knowledge about advertiser tactics develops in the direction of adult knowledge during early adolescence.

**Changes in Advertising Attitudes over Time.** We hypothesized that just as adult-like beliefs about advertising tactics would change over time, skepticism toward advertising would also increase (Hypothesis 2). As described earlier, analysis of advertising skepticism is complicated by the finding that it seems to be composed of disbelief of advertiser claims and mistrust of advertiser motives. The linear trends across grade levels in disbelief of advertising and mistrust of advertiser motives were tested by using multivariate polynomial contrasts. The linear trend was not significant for disbelief in advertising claims \((F(2, 419) = 2.12, p < .121)\) or for mistrust of advertiser motives \((F(2, 417) = 1.30, p < .272)\). Multivariate repeated measures ANOVAs were used to test both the effect of time (T1 vs. T2) within subjects and the grade and time interaction. Disbelief in advertising claims increased significantly \((F(1, 420) = 6.68, p < .01)\) throughout the school year. However, there was no significant change in mistrust of advertiser motives \((F(1, 418) = 3.44, p < .065)\). Time and grade interactions were not significant for disbelief in advertising claims \((F(2, 420) = 1.22, p < .30)\) or for mistrust of advertiser motives \((F(2, 419) = 1.60, p < .20)\).

Overall, Hypothesis 2 did not receive strong support. The results point to a high and relatively stable level of advertising skepticism in this age group (see Tables 3 and 5). However, there was an indication that, while they did not change with respect to the extent of their mistrust of advertiser motives, adolescents became more disbelieving of advertising claims throughout the school year.

**Relations among Constructs.** We predicted that skepticism toward advertising would be positively related to knowledge about advertising tactics (Hypothesis 3) and self-esteem (Hypothesis 4) and would be negatively related to CSII (Hypothesis 5). These predictions were tested by using Pearson correlations. Both components of skepticism, mistrust of advertiser motives and disbelief in advertising claims, were significantly correlated with the measure of knowledge about advertiser tactics at both time 1 and time 2, which provides clear support for Hypothesis 3. More specifically, the correlation between mistrust in advertiser motives and knowledge was .15 at time 1 \((p < .004)\) and .31 at time 2 \((p < .001)\), and the correlation between disbelief of advertising claims and knowledge of tactics was .18 at time 1 \((p < .001)\) and .23 at time 2 \((p < .001)\). Self-esteem was significantly and positively related to mistrust of advertiser motives at both time 1 \((r = .24, p < .001)\) and time 2 \((r = .48, p < .001)\) and was significantly and positively related to disbelief of advertising claims at both time 1 \((r = .19, p < .001)\) and time 2 \((r = .21, p < .001)\), which supports Hypothesis 4. The evidence relating to Hypothesis 5 was mixed, with the relationship between CSII and advertising skepticism's being complicated by the multidimensional nature of skepticism. Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence was negatively related to disbelief in adver-
TABLE 4

SELF-ESTEEM AND CONSUMER SUSCEPTIBILITY TO INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(\bar{x})</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>(\bar{x})</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-esteem:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel good about myself as a person</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can do many things well</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am looking forward to the future</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make sure that I buy the right product, I often look to see what products my friends use and buy</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends about the product before I buy it</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I buy products, I usually buy those brands that I think my friends will approve of</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE.—Means rating is based on a five-point scale (5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree).

\(a\) Alpha for time 1 is .59; alpha for time 2 is .73.

\(b\) Alpha for time 1 is .62; alpha for time 2 is .67.

In the current study, it seems that adolescents are still in the process of developing knowledge about advertiser tactics during this life stage. As may be seen from the comparison with undergraduate business students, an adult understanding of advertiser tactics still has a lot of room to grow after the middle school years. In addition, the current results suggest that negative or mistrustful predispositions toward advertising are well established as early as grade 6. This pattern of development, where skeptical attitudes preclude more sophisticated knowledge structures, suggests that adolescent consumer schemas about advertisers’ persuasive attempts start with general attitudes and then are filled in with more specific beliefs. Perhaps such general attitudes are acquired from parents, or other social role models, before children fully understand their cognitive basis. However, it is important to note that this study is only a starting point and did not examine the specific cognitive mechanisms through which adolescents acquire knowledge about advertisers’ tactics (see Friestad and Wright 1994).

**Implications for Advertising and Public Policy**

In the current study, skeptical attitudes toward advertising were generally stable, while knowledge of advertiser tactics increased significantly. One plausible implication for educators is that improving students’ understanding of the way advertising works may have more potential for creating discerning consumers than has changing students’ general attitudes. Adolescents are perhaps already about as mistrustful of advertising as they can reasonably be. Exhortations to “not believe everything you see on TV” are, therefore, less likely to produce changes in the processing of advertising claims than is a more careful analysis of advertisements that lays bare the persuasive device.

Skeptical attitudes toward advertising were positively related both to a more adult understanding of advertiser tactics and to higher levels of knowledge about advertising. In sum, the current study suggested that adolescents and adults may not differ significantly in their understanding of advertising. However, adolescents are still in the process of developing knowledge about advertiser tactics during their life stage.
tactics and to self-esteem. Therefore, a second implication of the current study is that self-reported skepticism of television advertising (i.e., disagreement with the standard Roper Poll statement: "You can depend on getting the truth from most television advertising") is probably "good" from a public policy perspective. That is, skepticism may indicate that adolescents have the confidence to rely on their own judgment and the discernment necessary to separate advertising truth from advertising hype. Public policy toward deceptive advertising relies strongly on this kind of discernment to punish deceptive advertisers and reward truthful ones (Ford, Smith, and Swasy 1990).

One aspect of this discernment is at least a rudimentary belief system about the tactics used in persuasive attempts. Past research has established that an awareness of commercial persuasive intent develops in early childhood; however, research has never before indicated when a belief system concerning advertiser tactics develops. As Brucks et al. (1988) reported, advertising knowledge is insufficient to produce cognitive defenses. That is, there is no guarantee that having such knowledge protects one from persuasive attempts, because it has to be accessed at the right time and must be capable of triggering appropriate coping responses, such as counterarguments (Roedder 1981). Although beliefs about advertiser tactics are not sufficient for spontaneous elicitation of coping responses, their absence would mean that such knowledge would not be available to help respond to persuasive attempts. Discernment regarding advertiser tactics and effects therefore seems likely to be necessary for at least some kinds of coping responses. The current study shows some evidence of discernment regarding advertiser tactics and effects as early as the sixth grade. However, judging again by the comparison between their knowledge and that of college students (and assuming that such knowledge can be taught), adolescents may benefit substantially from further education aimed at understanding advertisers' tactics.

Limitations

Several caveats are in order regarding the current study. First, it is important to note that we did not assess respondents' reactions to specific ads, but rather their generalized beliefs about advertisers' tactics and intentions. Second, the sample employed in the present study does not purport to represent the U.S. population. Consequently, the specific levels of the constructs, such as advertising skepticism, cannot be generalized for the entire population. However, relatively homogeneous subsamples of a population have value in establishing theoretical relationships among constructs (Calder, Philips, and Tybout 1981), and there is nothing about this particular sample to invalidate those relationships.

Third, in order to control the length of the questionnaire, the self-esteem and CSII constructs were represented by a small subset of the items necessary to measure their entire range. These short scales sometimes had low reliabilities, particularly at their first administration. These relatively low reliabilities may have obscured some relationships in the data. In addition, the measures of advertising tactics and effects employed here also represent only part of the total domain of advertising knowledge. Although using scale subsets is a common practice, the domain of the construct is not fully represented.

Final Remarks

Despite the limitations, our study revealed some interesting aspects of adolescent attitudes toward television advertising. One of the main strengths of the
method, which holds substantial promise for research in consumer socialization, was the longitudinal perspective. In addition, we provided an expanded measure of advertising skepticism and an original way to assess knowledge of advertisers' persuasive tactics. The current study also provided strong evidence that an attitude of skepticism toward advertising is linked both with personality variables and with knowledge about specific advertiser tactics.

A number of directions for future research are suggested by the limitations of the current study. First, it would be of interest to look further into the beliefs about advertiser tactics held by people of varying ages, for example, to learn how representative samples of young adults (other than college students) or senior citizens would score on the "knowledge" measure. A second direction for future studies would be to explore the extent to which skepticism toward advertising and knowledge of advertisers' tactics influence the way adolescents respond to specific advertisements. Third, researchers may wish to examine whether interventions in which adolescents are taught about specific advertiser tactics lead to the development of more critical and discerning consumers. These studies would need to be done in both laboratory and field settings. Finally, as suggested by a reviewer, it would be interesting to discover how knowledge about advertising is attained, what factors enhance or obstruct learning, and whether some types of tactics are grasped more easily than others.

The current study indicated that adolescents have a high baseline level of skepticism and that their beliefs about the intended effects of advertisers' tactics seem to be developing in the direction of adult knowledge. It remains for future research to examine the advertising cues and situational variables that trigger the use of this knowledge or the generalized skepticism of which adolescents seem capable.

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