

A Reevaluation of the Attentional Inertia Concept

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ABSTRACT

Anderson's theory about children's attention behavior during television viewing hypothesizes that attention behavior is affected by (a) positive feedback (the inertia hypothesis), and (b) the degree to which a child understands the television program. During an experiment neither component of Anderson's theory was upheld. It was found that children's attention behavior is patterned and stable over time; children either have short or long attention spans. The implications for advertisers are examined. © 1992 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

In recent years, advertisers have expressed both pessimism and optimism concerning the effectiveness of television commercials. They express pessimism for two main reasons: The continuing segmentation of populations makes it difficult for advertisers to reach their target audience with any specific media vehicle, and newly available technology permits viewers to zap commercials with ease, which means that the audience is no longer captive (Bigman, 1986). Advertisers become more optimistic, however, whenever they can find some way to attract and manage the viewer's attention. Hope may come in the form of studies that indicate that improving the quality of commercials can result in increased viewer attention (Aaker & Myers, 1987).

In this article, unfortunately, we will be striking a pessimistic note. After researching children's television viewing patterns we have found that a substantial segment of viewers tend to systematically shift at-