

## The Wizard of Ads

by [Mark Derewicz](#)

How do kids perceive advertisements tailored specifically to them?

Advertising companies spend millions to make their products as appealing as possible, often to kids. UNC undergraduate Katherine McIlwain wondered how well that works.

As part of her senior thesis, McIlwain gathered eight mothers and their kids—seven-year-olds and nine-year-olds—and asked them about their diets and television habits.

The mothers told McIlwain that they weren't worried about advertisements influencing their children. "They said that they make the decisions about what to buy," McIlwain says. They didn't think particular ads stuck with kids. And, they said, no matter what Count Chocula might say, they're the ones—not the children—who have final say.

But the mothers also told McIlwain that particular ads might be more persuasive when their kids get a bit older—when children generally have more freedom about where they go, what they think, and what they eat. And by that time, who knows what messages from their younger days will have stuck with them.

When McIlwain questioned the kids, she found that the seven-year-olds couldn't articulate which specific ads



*Photo by Donn Young*

they liked or if they had ever told their moms that they wanted a particular food based on a certain ad.

"But when I asked them about specific brand mascots, such as the Trix rabbit, they could recite the commercials verbatim," McIlwain says. All they needed was a little cue, and they'd unleash a torrent of verbiage straight from the brains of the ad wizards.

Then McIlwain asked the kids what they thought the ads were trying to communicate. The seven-year-olds struggled with this. They told her that the ads were just trying to be funny or make them hungry.

The nine-year-olds, on the other hand, told McIlwain that the ads featured appealing characters to make their stuff look like fun and better than it actually is. Bingo.

It doesn't necessarily matter, though, that nine-year-olds have figured out the game. Like adults, kids can be persuaded. They *want* to be persuaded. It's the job of advertisers to figure out how best to do that. And soon, it will be McIlwain's job, too.

After she graduates this month she'll move to Chicago to work at Ogilvy and Mather, a large advertising firm with a client list that includes Coca-Cola,

Nestlé, Ikea, IBM, Nike, DuPont, Pfizer, LG Electronics, and the Department of Homeland Security.

"Yes, I'll be going to the dark side," she jokes. "I'll be conducting research for specific clients. My entire job description is: figure out the best way to target the audience with certain ads."

Right now she doesn't know which client she'll be working with. "I might be tasked with how to best target children," she says. And she might consider the product to be less than wholesome.

How will she feel about that?

"Not good," she says. "It'll be an ethical dilemma, but I've decided I'll have to cross that bridge if I come to it."

What she really wants to do is put in a good five or ten years as a professional ad executive and then go to graduate school. "I think the ability to do the kind of research I want to do will be augmented if I'm on the other side for a while," she says. "To know how kids are being advertised to, I might have to advertise to them, myself."

May the force be with her.

Katherine McIlwain graduates this May with a bachelor's degree from the [School of Journalism and Mass Communication](#). She presented her research at the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Celebration of Undergraduate Research hosted by the [Office for Undergraduate Research](#).