

Discuss the reductionism/ holism debate in relation to research into the impact of advertising on children. (15 marks)

The reductionism debate argues that behaviour which can be reduced down to simple concepts is more useful and helps with our understanding of underlying reasons for such behaviour. In contrast the holism debate suggests that behaviour is the result of a combination of factors acting together as a whole. The research into the impact of advertising on children can be seen to be reductionist in its approach to data analysis. For example, in the Johnson and Young (2002) study data is analysed using a content analysis. This method creates individual categories in order to explore the causal factors involved in gender stereotyping in children's advertising. In their study in order to learn about the broad themes and specific discourse styles they coded several aspects of behaviour, such as verb elements. These were words used to describe gender imaging, such as action, competition, destruction and control. This is reductionist because it aims to identify which individual factors are concerned with gender bias in adverts. In another study, by Thompson and Zerbinos (1995), they also use a reductionist approach in their content analysis of children's television adverts. They were able to reduce gender stereotyping down to how sex roles are presented in these adverts for children, with male lead roles significantly outnumbering female. Another way, the research into advertising on children can be seen to be reductionist is that it aims to reduce explanations down to single factors which are fundamental in promoting gender bias in children's advertising. Johnson and Young (2002) focused on the categories used to consider the product groups aimed at children through advertising. They classified the adverts into one of five categories; food items, toys, public service announcements, recreational facilities and movie promotions. This allowed them to explore the differences across the sample groups. This reductionist approach is useful and gives an indication of which type of categories are implicated in a greater proportion of gender stereotypical tv adverts for children. In addition, Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) in their study of 175 episodes explored 41 different cartoon programmes to look for how male and female characters portrayed gender stereotypical roles and were able to reduce it down to simpler types. In contrast adopting a holistic approach during research into advertising on children, may be more useful and realistic. It examines all the contributing factors to gender stereotyping in children's tv programmes and adverts. Johnson and Young (2002) studied many contributing factors in their content analysis to investigate gendered voices in children's advertising. They also did this across a wide sample of children's programmes over the autumn of 1996/ 1997 and again in 1999. Three different programme sources were used to ensure that the sample included advertisements from a broad range of cartoon programmes. This holistic approach gives them a greater insight into the factors contributing to gender stereotyping over a time period. This gives us a more valid understanding of the many factors underlying gender bias in advertising.

