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Children’s vulnerability to advertising: an overview of four decades of research (1980s–2020s)

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ABSTRACT

Children’s vulnerability to advertising has been the subject of social and political debate for many years. In comparison with adults, children (up to 12 years old) are thought to be more vulnerable when confronted with advertising and, consequently, more sensitive to its impact. The rationale behind this common assumption is that advertising literacy has not fully developed in children, and that they are therefore less capable of recognizing the temptations of advertising and evaluate it in a critical manner. In this article, we discuss how the topic of children as vulnerable consumers has been addressed in advertising research over the past four decades (since the 1980s), particularly in the International Journal of Advertising (IJA). Specifically, we discuss the state of research on the unintended effects of advertising and children’s advertising literacy and defences. Finally, we propose a research agenda including upcoming trends that need to be addressed in future research on children’s vulnerability to advertising.

Introduction

Children’s vulnerability to advertising has been the subject of social and political debate for many years. Besides concerns over the undesirable effects of advertising on the wellbeing of children, there are also discussions regarding the ethical aspects of advertising targeted at children (Bandyopadhyay, Kindra, and Sharp 2001; Nairn and Fine 2008; Snyder 2011). The biggest concern is that children (up to 12 years old) are not yet capable of critically evaluating advertising. In comparison with adults, children are thought to be more vulnerable when confronted with advertising and, consequently, more susceptible to its effects. The rationale behind this assumption is that as children’s advertising literacy (i.e. understanding of and critical attitudes toward advertising) has yet to fully mature, they are less able to defend themselves against its persuasive appeal (Hudders et al. 2017; Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011).
As a result, advertising targeting children is often perceived as unfair. These issues of fairness are even more severe in the contemporary media environment, which is characterized by subtle advertising formats that are integrated in entertainment (e.g., influencer marketing, advergames). Children have great difficulty recognizing the commercial nature of these practices (Hudders et al. 2017). Moreover, they are unaware of the fact that personal information from, for example, their social media accounts is used by advertisers for commercial purposes, which has raised concerns regarding privacy (Miyazaki, Stanaland, and Lwin 2009; Reijmersdal et al. 2017).

In this article, we discuss how the topic of children as vulnerable consumers has been addressed in advertising research over the past four decades (since the 1980s), particularly in the International Journal of Advertising (IJA). Specifically, we discuss the state of research on the undesirable effects of advertising and children’s advertising literacy and defences. Finally, we propose a research agenda including upcoming trends that need to be addressed in future research on children’s vulnerability to advertising.

The literature search was done by making use of the international academic database Business Source Premier via Ebscohost. The focus of the literature search was particularly on articles published in the International Journal of Advertising (IJA) but also included relevant articles from the other two key Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI)-ranked journals in the advertising domain (Journal of Advertising and Journal of Advertising Research). Keywords were identified to select the literature that specifically focused on children and advertising. We employed the keywords ‘(child*) AND (Adver*)’. This search process yielded 239 academic articles. Articles were only included if they met the following predefined criteria: (1) articles are published in one of the 3 selected journals, (2) articles are published between January 1980 and August 2022, (3) articles examine or discuss children up to 12 years old, and (4) articles address one or more of the following research topics: undesirable advertising effects, advertising literacy, advertising defences, empowerment of children as consumers of advertising (with three subdomains: parental advertising mediation, advertising and media literacy education, and advertising disclosures). All articles were inspected by reading titles and abstracts to determine if they met the proposed criteria. After this screening, 43 articles from the IJA and 21 from the other advertising journals (JA and JAR) were included (see Appendix A, supplementary material).

**Literature review**

**Undesirable advertising effects**

Research on the undesirable effects of advertising has been on ongoing trend in advertising research since the start of the 1980s. In these years, the primary focus was on the undesirable effects of alcohol and tobacco advertising on children. The IJA made a relatively large contribution to this topic compared to the other advertising journals (see Appendix A). The undesirable effects of alcohol and tobacco advertising received significantly less attention in IJA and other advertising journals in the past decades, most likely because this type of advertising targeting children is nowadays forbidden in many countries.

Since the beginning of the current millennium, the focus of research on the undesirable effects of advertising has been primarily on the promotion of unhealthy foods.
In the past 20 years, more than 15 articles regarding this topic were published in IJA, which is far more than in the other advertising journals (see Appendix A). Together, these publications showed convincing evidence for the effects of unhealthy food advertising on children’s food preferences, purchase behaviour and requests, and consumption.

Two other undesirable advertising effects that are discussed in the advertising literature, albeit a lot less frequently, are parent-child conflict and materialism (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2003; De Jans et al. 2019). Both in IJA and in the other advertising journals, there are hardly any articles that focus on materialism and parent-child conflict as an undesirable effect of advertising (see Appendix A). This study showed that advertising persuades children to pester their parents for advertised products. However, when parents cannot or don’t want to comply to these requests this can lead to parent–child conflicts (McDermott et al. 2006).

**Children’s advertising literacy**

Advertising literacy, also referred to as persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), includes a wide range of knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to critically process advertising. It has at least three dimensions: conceptual, attitudinal, and moral advertising literacy. Conceptual advertising literacy includes the recognition and understanding of advertising (e.g. the understanding of advertising’s selling intent and persuasive tactics). Attitudinal advertising literacy includes a general disliking and sceptical attitude toward advertising, and moral advertising literacy includes perceptions of the fairness and appropriateness of advertising (Hudders et al. 2017; Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011). Children differ in the extent to which they are advertising literate. Depending on children’s individual characteristics (e.g. age, but also personal interests), advertising literacy (or certain parts of it) is more developed in certain children than in others.

An extensive and long-established body of research has focused on the development of children’s advertising literacy (De Jans et al. 2019; John 1999; Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005; Young 1990). This research shows that advertising literacy gradually increases with age and develops from simple to more sophisticated knowledge and beliefs about the nature and working of advertising. Traditionally, research applied the developmental stages of Piaget (Piaget 1929) and information processing theory (Roedder 1981) to explain children’s development of advertising literacy according to age. According to this view, the development of advertising literacy depends mainly on children’s cognitive abilities, including children’s ability to acquire, encode, organize, and retrieve information (John 1999). At a later stage, research started to apply insights from more contemporary developmental theories, such as the Theory-of-Mind (ToM), to explain how children’s abilities to see perspectives beyond one’s own are related to their understanding of the persuasive nature of advertising (Moses and Baldwin 2005). According to this view, the development of advertising literacy depends mainly on children’s ability to understand and take into account another individual’s mental state.

Young (1990) was one of the first to pay attention to children’s advertising literacy in IJA. In his article, he explored the development of advertising literacy in children regarding traditional television advertising. He concluded that most children seem to
have developed the ability to understand the purpose of television advertising when they reach adolescence. In addition, he also argued that family and peers significantly influence the effects of advertising and that peer group influences are therefore an important area of research. Since 2000, the development and effects of children’s advertising literacy has become an increasingly important research topic in IJA (see Appendix A). The other advertising journals had already been focusing on children’s development of advertising literacy since the 1980s and 1990s (see Appendix A). In those years, research focused mainly on the extent to which younger children (e.g. preschoolers) recognize and understand television advertisements. Findings showed that children under the age of 6 generally do not yet truly understand the difference between television programs and commercials.

The most recent studies on children’s advertising literacy focused mainly on contemporary advertising formats, such as brand placement in entertainment media and influencer marketing (Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016; Neyens, Smits, and Boyland 2017; Uribe and Fuentes-Garcia 2017; Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave, and Ponnet 2017; De Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018). These studies show that in comparison with television commercials children of all ages find it far more difficult to recognize these more contemporary advertising formats as a form of persuasion. An important explanation for this is that these forms of advertising are integrated into editorial content or entertainment (e.g. an influencer video or post, a movie, or a game), whereas this is not the case with television commercials. In influencer posts on social media, the commercial message is in general entirely woven into the post itself. As a result, there are fewer identifiable commercial characteristics, and consequently children find it more difficult to recognize these forms of advertising. If children don’t recognize contemporary advertising messages as such, it is far more difficult for them to understand the commercial nature of those messages.

**Children’s advertising defences**

Traditionally, most child and advertising theories assume that the main defence against advertising is a cognitive one and, therefore, advertising literacy can function as a filter when processing advertising messages. In this so-called cognitive defence view, children who possess the necessary advertising literacy will use this literacy to critically process the ads they encounter, making them less susceptible to its effects (Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011).

According to the Processing of Commercialized Media Content (PCMC) model (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010), the retrieval and application of advertising literacy requires the most elaborate level of information processing: critical systematic processing. At this level, an awareness of the persuasive nature of the message is involved, with the recipient actively retrieving and applying the relevant advertising knowledge as a defence against persuasion. The likelihood of critical systematic elaboration is determined by the recipient’s ability and motivation to process a message.

In the contemporary commercial media environment, several factors may withhold children from processing advertising at the most elaborate level. In their critical essay in IJA, Nairn and Fine (2008) argued that contemporary advertising does not persuade children explicitly, but affects them by non-conscious, non-rational means, mainly through
the highly enjoyable content. Importantly, this affective nature of contemporary advertising, combined with children's immature cognitive skills, makes it difficult to engage in critical systematic processing. Specifically, to activate and use their advertising literacy, children need to have the cognitive control to stop and shift their attention away from the emotionally appealing advertising message and then enact a cognitive script to help evaluate the message critically. This process is also referred to as the 'stop-and-think response' (Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011) and is closely linked to children's executive functions, a set of mental processes that aid in the monitoring and control of emotion, thought, and action that only reach adult levels until late adolescence.

Since the publication of Nairn and Fine's essay in IJA in 2008, a growing body of empirical research, both in IJA and in the other advertising journals, has focused on children's processing of advertising and specifically on the role of advertising literacy as a defence against advertising's effects (see Appendix A). The results of these studies underline the difficulties children have processing advertising on an elaborate critical level and to activate and use their advertising literacy as a defence, especially when it comes to embedded advertising formats, such as advergames, brand placement, and social media profile targeting.

**Empowering children as critical consumers of advertising**

One way to empower children as critical consumers of advertising is by increasing their critical thinking skills and coping mechanisms through advertising literacy training, for example through educational programs in schools. In IJA, Austin (2006) was one of the first to advocate the need for advertising and media literacy programs so that children can better resist the influence of advertising. Despite the call for more research on the effect of media education on children's advertising defences, there is relatively little research in IJA and the other advertising journals that examined this (see Appendix A). However, this handful of studies did show that such advertising literacy training programs can be effective in enhancing children's understanding of advertising. For example, the study by Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic (2016) in IJA showed that a short training could result in significant increases in children's understanding of selling intent, understanding of persuasive tactics, and awareness of the commercial source of advergames.

However, as indicated before, it is very plausible that children do not autonomously or spontaneously activate and use their advertising literacy when they encounter advertising. Therefore, to strengthen children's advertising defences, it may not be enough to increase their advertising literacy. Children also need to be stimulated to activate and use their advertising literacy (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010; Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016; Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011). Parents could play an important role in this respect. With active mediation, parents can enhance a child's advertising defences, by triggering them to think about the nature of the advertising message and be more critical towards it. Parental communication about advertising has received quite some research attention over the past decades, both in IJA and in the other advertising journals (see Appendix A). However, as the more recent studies showed, due to a lack of knowledge of more contemporary advertising formats, parents are less able to recognize
advertising messages their children encounter during online play, and therefore do not or less often apply mediation (Newman and Oates 2014; Spiteri Cornish 2014; Ahn 2022; Evans, Carlson, and Grubbs Hoy 2013).

Another way to increase children advertising defences is to provide a disclosure alongside the advertising message. Examples of advertising disclosures in embedded advertising are ‘paid partnership with brand X’ or ‘#ad’. To help media users, children and adults alike, to recognize when media content is commercial in nature, advertising-related guidelines and regulations in Europe and the United States even prescribe the use of a distinct disclosure to make advertising recognizable. Disclosures in contemporary, embedded advertising formats are assumed to empower children because they may activate their advertising literacy. Specifically, the disclosure can facilitate recognition of the commercial nature of an advertising message and trigger children to evaluate the advertisement in a more critical manner. However, research shows that the extent to which a disclosure actually makes advertising more transparent to children and triggers their advertising literacy is depended on several factors (see Appendix A). For example, research in IJA by De Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe (2018) suggest that the better an advertising disclosure stands out, the more likely it is that the disclosure is effective.

Future research
To understand how to empower children as critical consumers and boost their advertising defences, future research should focus on at least three questions. First, what does it mean to be a critical consumer in the contemporary commercialized online world? As AI and other emerging technologies will play an increasingly important role in children’s digital lives in the coming years, it is particularly important to understand the behaviours and actions that will help them engage critically and safely with the new forms of advertising and other commercial practices associated with those technologies, such as virtual advertising in the metaverse (Taylor 2022). These new advertising formats come with increased risks, for example regarding the disclosure of personal data. To what extent are children able to recognize and understand AI-driven advertising formats? Are they aware of its potential risks for their privacy and safety? What are children’s attitudes toward AI-driven advertising techniques?

Second, what drives children’s advertising’s defences? What factors hinders and facilitate children to critically cope with advertising? Having this knowledge is key when trying to foster advertising defences, because it indicates what it takes to stimulate the desired coping behaviours. It is often assumed that knowledge of advertising is an important facilitator of children’s advertising defences. However, earlier research has shown that understanding advertising does not automatically enable children to critically cope with type of advertising. A specific challenge for research in the field of advertising literacy and defences in the coming years is therefore to identify what other factors than knowledge of advertising can be effective in facilitating children’s advertising coping behaviour. For example, what other types of literacies, such as AI and data literacy are needed for children to be able to effectively cope with advertising, specifically AI-driven advertising techniques such as profiling and behavioural advertising techniques? And to what extent do children’s individual (e.g. personality traits) and
situational (e.g. SES) characteristics determine their advertising coping behaviour? These insights are not only important for our theoretical understanding of children’s advertising defences, but also have great social relevance because they can help better tailor the content of interventions to fit to the needs of particular audiences and situations. This is important as standardized one-size-fits-all approaches in intervention design have been shown to lack effectiveness (Rozendaal and Figner 2020)

Third, what intervention strategies and measures are successful in strengthening children’s advertising coping behaviour? In answering this question, it is important to focus on a broad spectrum of intervention strategies and measures, ranging from interventions that target the individual (e.g. through education or training programs) to interventions that focus on the context (e.g. regulations that prescribe clear advertising disclosures). Although research on advertising disclosures has increased in the past few years, relatively little is known about the boundary conditions of disclosure effects on enhancing transparency. Such insights are necessary to advance our understanding of disclosure effects and to develop and test theories that can explain and predict these effects (see Van Reijmersdal & Rozendaal). With respect to advertising education, future research could focus on which educational strategies are most effective in stimulating advertising defences in children. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the longer term, and possibly delayed, effects of advertising literacy education on children.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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