Advertising literacy and children’s susceptibility to advertising

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Chapter 1

Introduction, Dissertation Outline, and Conclusions

Introduction

Children today are faced with an environment that has become increasingly saturated by advertising (Calvert, 2008; Schor, 2005). The commercial world offers them important opportunities in terms of entertainment, learning and cultural experience, but there are also significant concerns about the undesired consequences for their well-being, including materialistic attitudes, parent-child conflict, and dietary behavior (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Moore, 2007). The issues surrounding children’s immersion in this pervasive commercial environment are further complicated by the fact that many child advocates and scholars have long expressed concerns about the appropriateness and fairness of advertising targeted at children. The primary concern is that children, until they reach adolescence, are less able to view advertising in a critical light. Compared to adults, children are thought to be considerably more helpless while being exposed to advertising and, therefore, more susceptible to its persuasive influence (see Kunkel et al., 2004). The long-held reasoning behind this notion is that children’s advertising-related knowledge (e.g., understanding of advertising’s intent and tactics) has yet to fully mature. This advertising-related knowledge has
often been referred to as *advertising literacy* (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Young, 1990).\(^1\)

Two important assumptions predominate in the debate on the fairness of child-directed advertising: (1) children have a lower level of advertising literacy than adults, and (2) advertising literacy reduces children’s susceptibility to advertising effects (see Kunkel et al., 2004; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006). However, although both assumptions are widely taken for granted, they lack a strong scientific foundation. Therefore, the main aim of this dissertation is to investigate the validity of these two assumptions. It is important to determine the extent to which the assumptions are supported by academic research, because they play a decisive role in the societal and political debate on children and advertising.

Based in large part on these assumptions, many Western societies have implemented policies, either to protect children from advertising by advertising restrictions, or to increase their advertising literacy through interventions, such as advertising education programs (Gunter, Oates, & Blades, 2005). For instance, some European countries, such as Norway and Sweden, do not permit any television advertising to be directed toward children under 12 years of age, and no advertisements at all are allowed during children’s programs. In addition, other countries, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, provide considerable amounts of state subsidy for the development of advertising education programs (e.g., Media Smart; Media Rakkers), assuming that these programs will empower children to become critical and skilled consumers.

\(^1\) In the literature, several different terms have been used to refer to children’s advertising-related knowledge, including: cognitive advertising defenses (e.g., Rossiter & Robertson, 1974), persuasion knowledge (e.g., Wright, Friestad & Boush, 2005), and advertising literacy (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Young, 1990). Throughout this dissertation, we will use ‘advertising literacy’ to describe children’s advertising knowledge, as this is currently the most prevalent term in the academic, societal, and political debate on children and advertising. As may be apparent from the original titles of the chapters in this dissertation, we have used several of the above mentioned terms in the published, accepted and submitted papers. For the sake of clarity, all terms have been changed into advertising literacy.
Introduction

Assumption 1: Children Have a Lower Level of Advertising Literacy than Adults

The first assumption that characterizes the child and advertising debate is that children have a lower level of advertising literacy than adults. However, in the debate as well as in the advertising literature, it remains completely unclear what it means to have an adult level of advertising literacy. Remarkably, there is a paucity of theorizing about adult understanding of advertising (cf., Wright, Friestad, & Boush, 2005). Moreover, the few theoretical models that can be found in the literature typically represent idealized levels of advertising literacy, and have not addressed adults’ actual literacy levels (Roberts, 1982; Friestad & Wright, 1994). It is important to empirically investigate the level of adult-like advertising literacy, because it is unlikely that all adults have perfect or ideal advertising understanding. Unfortunately, empirical investigations of adult-level advertising literacy and, more importantly, comparisons between adult and child levels are completely missing (Wright et al., 2005). Therefore, as yet, no conclusions can be drawn about the difference in advertising literacy level between children and adults.

Assumption 2: Advertising Literacy Reduces Children’s Susceptibility to Advertising

The second assumption that characterizes the child and advertising debate is that advertising literacy makes children less susceptible to advertising effects. Traditionally, most child and advertising theories assume that the main defense against advertising is a cognitive one and, therefore, advertising literacy can function as a filter when processing advertising messages. In this so-called ‘cognitive defense view’, children who have the necessary advertising literacy will use (i.e., retrieve and apply) this literacy to critically process an advertising message while being exposed to it, making them less susceptible to its effects (Brucks, Armstrong, & Goldberg, 1988; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Rossiter & Robertson, 1974). However, the child and advertising literature does not provide convincing evidence that advertising literacy actually decreases children’s susceptibility to advertising effects. Only few studies have focused on the effectiveness of advertising literacy in reducing children’s advertising susceptibility, and the results are far from unequivocal (Chernin, 2007;
Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Ross et al., 1984). Moreover, the latest insights on psychological development and advertising processing suggest there are important theoretical shortcomings to the cognitive defense view (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010; Moses & Baldwin, 2005; Nairn & Fine, 2008). Specifically, these insights suggest that even if children have the necessary advertising literacy in place, it does not necessarily follow that they will actually enact this literacy as a defense.

The Aim and Focus of This Dissertation

The aim of this dissertation is to expand the literature on children’s advertising literacy by providing theoretical and empirical insights on (a) the development of children’s advertising literacy into adult-like levels, and (b) the role of advertising literacy in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising effects. It thereby focuses on 8- to 12-year-old children, traditional television advertising, and four components of advertising literacy (i.e., advertising recognition, understanding selling intent, understanding persuasive intent, and understanding persuasive tactics).

Eight- to Twelve-Year-Old Children

This dissertation focuses on children in the age of 8 to 12 years because it is generally assumed that the most important developmental changes in children’s advertising literacy occur between these ages (John, 1999). It has even been assumed that children’s advertising literacy reaches an adult-like level between the ages of 8 and 12 years (see Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). In addition, information processing theories suggest that even if children in this age group have the necessary advertising literacy in place, they may still lack the cognitive abilities to retrieve this literacy when confronted with advertising and to apply it as a critical defense (Moses & Baldwin, 2005; Roedder, 1981). This may have major consequences for the role of advertising literacy in reducing 8- to 12-year-old children’s susceptibility to advertising effects.

Television Advertising

During the past few years, important changes have taken place in children’s commercial media environment. Although child-directed advertisers still focus
most of their expenditures on traditional television advertising, they are rapidly adopting new advertising practices (e.g., branded websites, advergames, product placement in games; Calvert, 2008; Moore, 2004, Schor, 2005). These advertising practices are fundamentally different from traditional television advertising and pose new challenges for young people’s advertising processing. Although insights into children’s advertising literacy with regard to these new advertising practices are of great importance, this dissertation focuses on traditional television advertising (i.e., commercials). The rationale for this choice is that, although researchers have been studying children’s television advertising literacy for close to 40 years, there are still some fundamental questions regarding the development of this literacy and its role in the persuasion process that have been left unanswered. This dissertation aims to address these questions and to expand and deepen the existing knowledge on children’s television advertising literacy. These in-depth insights are necessary to provide a basis for research investigating children’s ability to recognize, understand and cope with new advertising practices.

Four Components of Advertising Literacy

Several theoretical models provide insight into the advertising-related knowledge that children should acquire to be advertising literate (Friestad & Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Roberts, 1982; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974). However, these models nearly all focus on different types of knowledge, and, therefore, do not provide a univocal conceptualization of advertising literacy. Despite this, all models assume that advertising literacy develops from very simple to more complex and abstract types of knowledge. In addition, most models agree that the ability to differentiate advertising from other media content (i.e., advertising recognition), and the ability to understand the nature and intent of advertising are the two most fundamental components of advertising literacy.

To date, an extensive body of research has investigated children’s recognition and understanding of television advertising (for reviews see John, 1999; Kunkel et al., 2004). However, most studies examining children’s understanding of advertising have only focused on the rather basic understanding that advertising tries to sell products (i.e., understanding selling intent). The above-mentioned models suggest that, to have a full grasp of advertising, children should also acquire two more sophisticated types of
understanding: first, the understanding that advertising attempts to influence consumers’ behavior by changing their attitudes and cognitions about a product (i.e., understanding persuasive intent), and, second, the understanding that advertisers use specific tactics to change consumers’ attitudes, cognitions, and behaviours (i.e., understanding persuasive tactics).

**Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation consists of four empirical studies and one theoretical essay, which are presented in the next chapters. All papers are either published, accepted, or submitted for publication. The content of the chapters in this dissertation is equal to the published, accepted or submitted papers. Being self-contained, each chapter has its own abstract, introduction, discussion and reference list. This section provides a short summary of each chapter. Chapter 2 and 3 focus on the assumption that children have a lower level of advertising literacy than adults, and chapter 4, 5, and 6 on the assumption that advertising literacy makes children less susceptible to advertising effects.

**Chapter 2: Advertising Recognition and Understanding of Advertising’s Intent**

The second chapter includes a survey study examining the development of children’s advertising literacy into adult-like levels. This study focused on three advertising literacy components: advertising recognition, understanding selling intent, and understanding persuasive intent. Several earlier studies have investigated children’s levels of recognition and understanding of advertising (for a review see John, 1999; Kunkel et al., 2004), but none of these studies has empirically compared these levels to an adult benchmark. The aim of this study was to fill this gap in earlier research by investigating and comparing children (8-12 years; \(N = 294\)) and adults’ (>18 years; \(N = 198\)) advertising recognition and understanding of its intent. In addition, this study aimed to improve on earlier research by optimizing conceptual as well as methodological approaches to children’s understanding of advertising’s intent. More specifically, advertising’s selling intent is explicitly distinguished from advertising’s persuasive intent, and the research measures took into account the language and memory retrieval capacities of 8- to 12-year-old children.
The findings showed that around the age of 10, most children had reached an adult level of advertising recognition. However, at age 12, children had still not acquired an adult-like understanding of advertising’s selling and persuasive intent. Finally, the results also showed that children developed the understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising noticeably later than the understanding of advertising’s selling intent. Although children showed a growing understanding of the selling intent as from the age of 8, their understanding of persuasive intent only showed a significant increase at an age of 10 or 11.

Chapter 3: Understanding of Advertisers’ Persuasive Tactics

The study reported in the third chapter was an extension of the one presented in Chapter 2. This survey study also examined the development of children’s advertising literacy in adult-like levels thereby focusing on the fourth component of advertising literacy: understanding of advertisers’ persuasive tactics. To date, only sporadic research attention has been devoted to children’s understanding of how advertisers attempt to change their attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors, that is: which tactics advertisers use to elicit certain effects (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994). Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate children’s understanding of six popular tactics used by advertisers to elicit certain advertising effects, including ad repetition, product demonstration, peer popularity appeal, humor, celebrity endorsement, and premiums. To create a norm for correct understanding, 34 experts (i.e., advertisers of child products) were asked to fill out a survey in which they had to indicate what kind of effects (e.g., ad or product recall, learning, and liking) they intend to elicit by using each of the six tactics. Subsequently, children’s (8-12 years; N = 209) understanding of advertisers' intended effects of these tactics was investigated and compared to an adult sample (>18 years; N = 96).

The findings of this study showed that children’s understanding of advertisers’ tactics increased progressively between the ages of 8 and 12, showing a significant increase around age 10. The age at which children reached an adult level of understanding differed by tactic. Children’s understanding of ad repetition, peer popularity appeal, and premiums reached an adult level from the age of 10. However, product demonstration turned out to be the most difficult to understand, all children scored significantly lower than adults. Finally, the
results showed that for celebrity endorsement 10- to 12-year-olds displayed a better grasp of advertisers’ intentions than adults did.

Chapter 4: Advertising Literacy and Children’s Advertised Product Desire

The fourth chapter focuses on the assumption that advertising literacy reduces children’s susceptibility to advertising effects. Although this assumption is widely accepted in both the academic and societal debate on children and advertising, supportive empirical evidence is lacking. This survey study aimed to fill this gap by investigating whether children’s (8-12 years; \(N = 296\)) advertising literacy (i.e., advertising recognition, understanding selling intent, understanding persuasive intent) can reduce the effect of television advertising exposure and their desire for advertised products. In other words, it was the aim to investigate whether children’s level of advertising literacy moderated the relation between advertising exposure and desire for advertised products.

The study yielded three important findings. First, children’s recognition of advertising and their understanding of its selling intent did not make them less susceptible to the persuasive influence of advertising. More specifically, recognition of advertising and understanding of its selling intent were not effective in reducing the relation between advertising exposure and their desire for advertised products. Second, understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising did reduce the relation between advertising exposure and children’s desire for advertised products, but only among the older children in the sample (ages 10-12). Third, for the younger children, understanding of advertising’s persuasive intent had an opposite effect, that is, it increased the exposure-product desire relation. In other words, young children with a better understanding of persuasive intent were more susceptible to advertising’s persuasive influence. An explanation for this counterintuitive finding, is that for children with higher levels of advertising literacy, it may be easier to process the persuasive content of advertising messages. Given the assumption that children younger that 10 years do not yet use their advertising literacy to think critically about a these messages, this may result in stronger advertising effects.
Chapter 5: Cognitive and Affective Advertising Defense Mechanisms

The fifth chapter also focuses on the assumption that advertising literacy reduces children’s susceptibility to advertising effects. The study described here aimed to reveal the role of children’s defense responses (i.e., critical thoughts) in the process of persuasion. More specifically, this study examined if children (8-12 years; \( N = 163 \)) produce defense responses while being exposed to a television commercial and how these responses can lead to reduced susceptibility to its effects. In this study, susceptibility to advertising is conceptualized as children’s attitude toward the advertised brand. A conceptual model of children’s advertising defenses was developed, including two hypothesized paths to reduced attitudes toward the brand: a cognitive and an affective path. The cognitive defense path in this model explains how cognitive defense responses (i.e., critical thoughts based on prior knowledge, for instance advertising literacy) can reduce children’s attitude toward the advertised brand by enhancing their skepticism toward the commercial. The affective defense path explains how affective defense responses (i.e., critical thoughts based on affect) can reduce children’s attitude toward the advertised brand by decreasing their liking of the commercial. In addition, the hypothesized paths were compared for two thought-elicitation methods: think-aloud (i.e., verbalizing thoughts while concurrently viewing a commercial) and thought-listing (i.e., retrospectively providing verbal reports of thoughts while viewing a commercial).

The findings of this study showed that both cognitive and affective defense mechanisms can play an important role in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising effects. In addition, the results demonstrated that the effectiveness of the defense paths in reducing susceptibility differed between children in the thought-listing and the think-aloud group. Specifically, for children in the think-aloud group both the cognitive and affective defense path were successful in reducing susceptibility, whereas for children in the thought-listing group only the affective defense path was effective. This indicates that the two thought-elicitation methods differentially affected the way children processed the commercial, in that, compared to thought-listing, the think-aloud method stimulated children’s level of cognitive processing. In other words, prompting children to tell what they were thinking while viewing the commercial may have functioned as a cue that increased their motivation and ability to critically process the commercial.
Chapter 6: Rethinking the Concept of Children’s Advertising Literacy

The final chapter of this dissertation provides a critical theoretical reflection on the role of advertising literacy in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising. More specifically, in this essay the widely adopted cognitive defense view is challenged. This view assumes that children who have acquired the necessary advertising literacy will use this literacy to critically process the ads they encounter, making them less susceptible to its effects. Based on the findings of the studies presented in chapter 4 and 5 and the latest insights on psychological development and advertising processing, it is argued in this essay that the affect-based nature of contemporary advertising in combination with children’s immature cognitive abilities keep them from autonomously employing their advertising literacy as a critical defense against advertising. Therefore, the current theoretical conception of advertising literacy, in which it is primarily defined as a cognitive construct, needs to be revisited. A new three-dimensional conceptualization of advertising literacy is proposed, including (1) conceptual advertising literacy – conceptual knowledge of advertising (e.g., understanding advertising’s intent and tactics), (2) advertising literacy performance – retrieving and applying conceptual advertising literacy while processing advertising, and (3) attitudinal advertising literacy – general critical attitudes toward advertising (e.g., skepticism and disliking of advertising). Based on this new conceptualization, it is recommended that future research pays more attention to the stimulation of advertising literacy performance and the role of attitudinal advertising literacy.

Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this dissertation was twofold. The first aim was to investigate the development of children’s advertising literacy into adult-like levels, and the second aim to examine the role of advertising literacy in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising effects. In doing so, this dissertation not only expands and deepens the existing theoretical and empirical insights on children’s advertising literacy, but also contributes substantially to the societal and political debate on children and advertising. When debating the fairness of child-directed advertising, a crucial first step is to obtain an accurate picture of children’s level of advertising literacy and of how this literacy is related to their advertising susceptibility. This section provides the main conclusions and implications for
future theorizing and research. In addition, the practical implications for the ongoing societal and political debate are discussed.

Assumption 1: Children Have a Lower Level of Advertising Literacy than Adults

The insights presented in the first part of this dissertation (chapter 2 and 3) lead to two main conclusions and implications for future theorizing and research on the development of children’s advertising literacy. First, the age of 10 marks an important shift in children’s advertising literacy. This dissertation demonstrated that children’s more sophisticated understanding of advertising, that is their understanding of advertising’s persuasive intent and of advertisers’ persuasive tactics, increases considerably around age 10 (Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2010a; in press). This important shift can be explained by the major changes that occur in children’s socio-cognitive capabilities around that age, more specifically, in their ability to take into consideration others’ perspectives and to reason on an abstract level (Gunter et al., 2005; John, 1999). That is, to understand advertising’s persuasive intent and tactics, children should have an appreciation of second-order mental states (i.e., the insight that advertisers attempt to change one’s mental states, for instance, attitudes and cognitions about the product or ad; Moses & Baldwin, 2005). Such an appreciation requires the ability to understand that advertisers have other perspectives and interests than one’s own and the ability of inferential “if-then” reasoning. This type of reasoning is necessary to link the use of certain persuasive tactics (e.g., if an ad is very funny...) to a certain intended outcome (“...then the makers of the ad want to make me like the ad better”).

Second, the age at which children reach an adult-like level of advertising literacy depends largely on the sample that is used as a benchmark for comparison. For instance, this dissertation demonstrated that, when a university student sample is used as an adult benchmark, children have still not acquired an adult-like understanding of advertising’s selling and persuasive intent at age 12 (Rozendaal et al., 2010a). However, when a sample is used that is more representative for the adult population, the conclusion is that children have reached an adult-like understanding of persuasive tactics – which is, as argued above, conceptually related to the understanding of persuasive intent – around the age of 10 (Rozendaal et al., in press). These findings emphasize that there is
no uniform level of adult advertising literacy. Like children, adults can differ considerably with respect to their advertising literacy level. Due to differences in overall intellectual abilities or economic advantages, university students are likely to have a higher level of advertising literacy than the general adult population. Therefore, using an university student sample will result in a higher benchmark level for children’s advertising literacy.

An important question is: Which adult benchmark should we use to compare children’s level of advertising literacy against? From a consumer education point of view, the normative standard for children’s advertising literacy should be rather high, because the aim is to educate children to become independent, skilled and critical consumers. Comparing children with a highly educated sample may be most appropriate here, as from all demographic groups highly educated people probably most closely represent the idealized adult level of advertising literacy that is discussed in the theoretical literature. However, from a public policy point of view, other criteria may determine the normative benchmark to which children’s level of advertising literacy should be compared. In many Western countries, several regulatory policies exist aimed at protecting the general population from being exposed to and influenced by certain kinds of advertising. In addition to these general advertising policies, some countries (e.g., the Netherlands, United Kingdom) have also implemented policies especially designed to protect children (European Advertising Standards Alliance, 2010). Such policies are often guided by the assumption that children differ in their knowledge of and reactions to advertising from the general adult population, and, therefore, need special protection (Bandyopadhyay, Kindra, & Sharp, 2001). Comparing children with an adult sample that is representative of the general population may be most appropriate here, because insights on the actual differences between children and the general adult population can help policy makers assess whether policies that treat children as a special advertising audience are necessary and accurate.

This dissertation was the first to empirically investigate and compare children’s and adults’ level of advertising literacy, and can provide a starting point for future research. First, this dissertation focused on four important components of advertising literacy, including advertising recognition, understanding selling intent, understanding persuasive intent, and understanding tactics. However, there may be other types of knowledge, such as the understanding that persuasive messages are biased, that children should acquire
to be advertising literate. Further research is needed to investigate whether the patterns observed for the components investigated in this dissertation hold for other components of advertising literacy as well. Second, more research is needed on the level of advertising literacy of different population groups. For instance, future research should investigate and compare the level of advertising literacy of people over the life span (e.g., adolescents, elderly people) and of people with different social backgrounds (e.g., educational level, income, ethnic background). As argued before, adults may differ substantially in their advertising literacy levels, which, in turn, may influence the way they are affected by advertising. Finally, future research should investigate how the results of this dissertation hold for advertising in new media. It is likely that children (and adults) will have greater difficulty recognizing and understanding these new advertising practices.

Assumption 2: Advertising Literacy Reduces Children’s Susceptibility to Advertising

The insights presented in the second part of this dissertation (Chapter 4, 5, and 6) lead to three main conclusions and implications for future theorizing and research into the role of advertising literacy in children’s susceptibility to advertising. First, and most importantly, the cognitive defense view should be reconsidered. This dissertation demonstrated that there are important limitations to the effectiveness of advertising literacy in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising effects (Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2009; 2010b). Due to the combination of immature executive functioning and emotion regulation skills and the nature of persuasion in child-directed advertising, children have major difficulty in using their conceptual advertising literacy as a defense against advertising (Rozendaal, Lapierre, Buijzen, & Van Reijmersdal, 2010). Even though children possess all the necessary cognitive advertising knowledge (i.e., conceptual competence) they are not yet able to autonomously retrieve and apply this knowledge when exposed to advertising (i.e., performance).

However, conceptual advertising literacy can be successful in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising when they are triggered to use that literacy. This dissertation showed that an intervention that triggers children to think about what they see and hear while viewing a commercial, can effectively reduce their advertising susceptibility (Rozendaal et al., 2010b). These findings indicate
that thought-triggering comments during advertising exposure can facilitate children’s ‘stop and think’ response and, with that, their advertising literacy performance. Future research should further investigate the conditions under which children in different developmental age groups are able to retrieve their conceptual advertising literacy and use it as a defense against advertising.

Second, more attention is needed for the attitudinal dimension of advertising literacy. Existing research has predominantly focused on the role of conceptual advertising literacy (e.g., understanding of advertising’s intent) in children’s susceptibility to advertising effects. However, general critical attitudes towards advertising, such as disliking and skepticism of advertising, may potentially play an enormous role in shaping how children respond to persuasive appeals. That is, children who hold more critical attitudes toward advertising in general may respond more negatively when exposed to a specific advertising message which, in turn, can make them less susceptible to its effects (D’Alessio, Laghi, Baiocco, 2009; Derbaix & Pecheux, 2003; Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). In this dissertation it was shown that children’s negative affective responses while viewing a television commercial reduced their susceptibility to its effects (i.e., affective defense mechanism). Moreover, it was shown that affective defense mechanisms can lead to reduced advertising susceptibility even when children are not motivated or able (for instance through limited cognitive abilities) to process an advertising message elaborately (Rozendaal et al., 2010b). Future research should further examine how children’s attitudinal advertising literacy can be successful in altering their responses to persuasive messages.

Third, most earlier research on the efficacy of advertising literacy has focused on the direct relation between one or more advertising literacy variables and advertising effects. However, the mechanisms underlying this relation have received far less research attention. In our view, it is important to not only focus on the outcomes of advertising literacy, but also understand the specific ways that this literacy may influence the persuasion process. This dissertation demonstrated that both cognitive and affective mechanisms play an important role in defending against persuasion (Rozendaal et al., 2010b). However, to further validate the assumption that cognitive and attitudinal advertising literacy operate via different mechanisms (i.e., high versus low elaboration), we need more insight into the psychological process through which children with varying levels of these literacy dimensions are persuaded.
Future research should reveal if and how advertising literacy and interventions aimed to stimulate this literacy can change the persuasion process in children. By doing so, these studies could draw on the more developed adult persuasion and information processing literatures (cf. Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal & Owen, 2010). Moreover, incorporating the findings and theories from the adult literature (while also keeping in mind the tremendous developmental differences between children and adults) into the child literature would represent an enormous step forward for the field. As it stands now, there have been virtually no tests of these theories with children (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006).

Practical Implications

This dissertation also has important implications for the ongoing societal and political debate about children and advertising. As noted earlier, in many Western societies public and political attention is increasingly drawn toward methods reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising, including advertising education programs aimed at increasing children’s advertising literacy. Although earlier studies have found that such interventions can successfully stimulate advertising literacy (Brucks et al., 1988; Donohue, Henke, & Meyer, 1983; Feshbach, Feshbach, & Cohen, 1982; Hobbs & Frost, 2003; Roberts et al., 1980), these efforts do not necessarily enable children to defend themselves against advertising. This underlines the importance for policy makers to develop educational interventions based on scientific insights into children’s processing of advertising, and, as argued by Wright et al. (2005), the need to examine experimentally the effectiveness of such interventions.

Reformulating the goal of advertising interventions. It has often been assumed that the main objective of interventions aimed to increase children’s advertising literacy is to immunize children against advertising (Eagle, 2007; Gunter et al., 2005). However, it is an illusion to think that advertising interventions can make children resistant to advertising effects. After all, this would imply that adults, who presumably have the necessary advertising literacy and requisite cognitive functioning to employ defenses, are not susceptible to persuasive advertising messages. Although interventions may not immunize children against advertising effects, they do have the potential to alter the way
children process advertising and thereby reduce the chance they are unfairly persuaded.

But what is fair? Fair persuasion may involve two things: (1) a child should be aware of the advertising message and its intent, and (2) the advertising message shouldn’t overwhelm children’s cognitive and affective resources so they have the opportunity to critically evaluate the message (i.e., ability to retrieve and apply their advertising literacy while being exposed to advertising). Therefore, the primary goal of advertising interventions should be to reduce unfair persuasion by increasing children’s recognition and understanding of different types of advertising messages and by stimulating and facilitating children’s ability and motivation to use their advertising literacy to critically process advertising messages (cf., Harris, Brownell, & Bargh, 2009).

Reformulating the focus of advertising interventions. The focus of advertising interventions should be reformulated in four ways. First, interventions should be tailored to the content and structure of child-directed advertisements. That is, interventions should focus more on the subtle and indirect persuasive tactics used by advertisers. Showing children examples of these tactics and explaining to them why those tactics are there may advance the moment ‘change of meaning’ occurs (cf., Friestad & Wright, 1999), that is, the age at which children come to realize that some aspects of an advertising message (e.g., a couple of happy children playing with the advertised product) are intentional attempts of advertisers to persuade them. Second, interventions should not only focus on the conceptual dimension of advertising literacy (e.g., understanding intent and tactics), but also its attitudinal dimension (e.g., disliking). This dissertation showed that the latter is more effective in influencing the persuasion process (Rozendaal et al., 2010b). Therefore, in addition to explaining the concept of advertising, interventions should explicitly question its entertainment value in order to install less favorable attitudes toward advertising.

Third, more attention is needed for thought-triggering interventions during advertising exposure, as these interventions can be effective in reducing children’s advertising susceptibility (Rozendaal et al., 2010b). For instance, parents and others involved in the daily care of children could provide them with comments encouraging them to think about what they see and hear while watching television commercials. Finally, interventions should make a distinction between different persuasive messages (e.g., public service announcements
versus toy commercials). Children should be taught that not all persuasive messages are deceptive, but that its credibility depends largely on the source and the type of product advertised. Nevertheless, all persuasive messages should be assessed critically.

Reconsidering regulatory policies. Advertising literacy interventions alone are not enough. To reduce unfair persuasion there is also a need for clear policies that restrict and regulate advertising practices that overwhelm children’s cognitive and affective resources. Existing restrictive policies to protect children from advertising, which primarily focus on traditional advertising practices (e.g., television commercials), rely heavily on the age at which they are able to recognize and understand the intent of advertising. These policies are based on the belief that the age of 8 marks an important shift in children’s advertising literacy, which in this context is often defined as the rather basic understanding that advertising tries to sell products (i.e., understanding selling intent). However, the findings of this dissertation suggest that the age of 10 may be a more appropriate criterion for restrictive policy decisions. Before this age, most children have not yet acquired an adult level of the more sophisticated types of understanding children need to have a full grasp of advertising (i.e., understanding advertising’s persuasive intent, understanding advertisers’ tactics).

In addition, insights on children’s ability to use their advertising literacy as a defense against advertising effects should gain a more prominent role in policy decision making. As was shown in this dissertation, children under the age of twelve are unlikely to spontaneously retrieve and apply their advertising literacy while being exposed to an advertising message, unless they are triggered to do so. Policy makers could help children defend themselves against advertising by designing regulations requiring advertisers to insert cues that stimulate children’s ability and motivation to use their advertising literacy as a critical defense against advertising. Further research should reveal what kind of cues can be effective in triggering children’s use of their advertising literacy in a natural context of advertising exposure.
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