Advertising literacy and children’s susceptibility to advertising

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Chapter 6

Rethinking the Concept of Children’s Advertising Literacy

Abstract

It is widely assumed that children who have acquired the necessary advertising-related knowledge (i.e., advertising literacy), will use this knowledge as a defense against advertising. We challenge this cognitive defense view. Based on recent findings and insights on psychological development and advertising processing, we argue 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. We propose a new three-dimensional conceptualization of advertising literacy, including (1) conceptual advertising literacy – conceptual knowledge of advertising, (2) advertising literacy performance – using conceptual advertising literacy while processing advertising, and (3) attitudinal advertising literacy – general critical attitudes toward advertising. Based on this new conceptualization, we recommend that future research pays more attention to the role of advertising literacy performance and attitudinal advertising literacy.

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1 An extended version of this chapter is submitted for publication as: Rozendaal, E., Lapierre, M. A., Buijzen, M., & Van Reijmersdal, E. A. (2010). Toward a three-dimensional approach of children’s advertising literacy. A version of this paper has been awarded with a Top Paper Award at the National Communication Association (NCA) Conference.
Chapter 6

Introduction

Child advocates and scholars have long expressed concerns about the appropriateness and fairness of advertising targeted at young children. The primary concern is that children, until they reach a certain age, are less able to view advertising messages in a critical light and, therefore, are 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 and critical viewing skills have yet to fully mature. Traditionally, most child and advertising theories assume that the main defense against advertising is a cognitive one and, therefore, advertising-related knowledge, or ‘advertising literacy’ (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Young 1990), can function as a filter when processing advertising messages. In this so-called cognitive defense view, children who have acquired the necessary advertising literacy will use this to critically process the ads they encounter, making them less susceptible to its persuasive influence (e.g., Brucks, Armstrong, & Goldberg, 1988; Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Although the cognitive defense view is widely adopted in both the academic and societal debate on children and advertising, there are valid reasons to challenge it. That is, the empirical research does not provide us with convincing evidence that a higher level of advertising literacy leads to a decrease in children’s susceptibility to advertising effects (e.g., Chernin, 2007; Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007; Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2009), which suggests that children do not actually use their advertising literacy as a defense. This can be explained by the latest findings and insights on psychological development and advertising processing, which indicate that there are important theoretical shortcomings to the cognitive defense view (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Moses & Baldwin, 2005; Nairn & Fine, 2008).

In this essay, we give explanations for the lack of empirical evidence in support of the cognitive defense view and introduce a new approach to the role of advertising literacy in children’s susceptibility to advertising effects. More specifically, we argue that the current theoretical conception of advertising literacy, in which it is primarily defined as a cognitive construct, needs to be revisited. We propose a new three-dimensional conceptualization of advertising literacy, including (1) conceptual advertising literacy – conceptual knowledge of advertising (e.g., understanding of advertising’s intent and tactics), (2) advertising
literacy performance – using (i.e., 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). In addition, we offer specific directions for future theorizing and research.

Challenging the Cognitive Defense View

There are important empirical and theoretical reasons to challenge the idea that children who have acquired the necessary advertising literacy will use this literacy to critically process the ads they encounter which will make them less susceptible to its effects. First, we will discuss the state of the empirical evidence for this cognitive defense view and, then, we will elaborate on its theoretical shortcomings.

Empirical Evidence for the Cognitive Defense View

Two separate lines of research on the effectiveness of advertising literacy exist: the first focuses on the direct relation between children’s advertising literacy and their susceptibility to advertising effects (i.e., advertised product desire and preference) and the second concentrates on the effectiveness of advertising interventions in reducing children’s advertising susceptibility, assuming that interventions stimulate their advertising literacy. The five studies that have investigated the direct relation between children’s advertising literacy and its effects yielded mixed results (Chernin, 2007; Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Ross et al., 1984; Rozendaal et al., 2009). For example, Robertson and Rossiter (1974) found a negative relation between understanding advertising’s intent and advertised product desire, whereas the findings of other studies did not yield evidence for an empirical relation (Chernin, 2007, Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007; Ross et al., 1984). In addition, Rozendaal et al. (2009) found that of the three advertising literacy variables they investigated – advertising recognition, understanding selling intent, and understanding persuasive intent – only understanding persuasive intent reduced children’s desire for advertised product.

Three studies investigated the effectiveness of advertising interventions in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising (Chernin, 2007; Christenson, 1982; Feshbach, Feshbach, & Cohen, 1982). In general, advertising interventions seek to instill advertising literacy in children by teaching them about
advertisements (e.g., advertising training in the classroom). Although several studies have demonstrated that advertising interventions can successfully stimulate children’s advertising literacy (Brucks et al., 1988; Chernin, 2007; Donohue, Henke, & Meyer, 1983; Feshbach, Feshbach, & Cohen, 1982; Hobbs & Frost, 2003; Roberts et al., 1980), the evidence for a relation between such interventions and the effect that advertising has on children is less convincing.

For instance, Feshbach et al. (1982) exposed children to a training session on advertising’s intent and advertisers’ persuasive tactics and found that children who had attended the training session rated advertised products as less desirable than did children in the control group and were less likely to prefer advertised products. In contrast, Christenson (1982), who investigated the effect of a public service announcement that explained the intent of advertising and questioned its truthfulness on children’s preferences for advertised products, found that exposure to the announcement did not affect children’s preference for the advertised products compared to competitors. Similarly, Chernin (2007) showed that children who were assigned to her instructive video about advertising’s intent, the bias in advertising, and advertisers’ persuasive tactics preferred the advertised product as much as the children in the control condition did.

In sum, both types of research have yielded mixed results and, therefore, do not provide strong evidence in support of the cognitive defense view. This underlines the need for a clearer theoretical understanding of the role of advertising literacy in children’s susceptibility to advertising effects.

Theoretical Shortcomings of the Cognitive Defense View

What is wrong with the cognitive defense view? We contend that the major shortcoming of this view is that it disregards the important distinction between conceptual competence (i.e., having conceptual advertising literacy) and performance (i.e., retrieving and applying conceptual advertising literacy). Even if we grant that children have the necessary conceptual knowledge about advertising in place, it does not necessarily follow that they will actually enact this knowledge as a critical defense against the persuasive appeal of advertising (Brucks et al., 1988; John, 1999; Moses & Baldwin, 2005). That is, the likelihood that children will use their conceptual advertising literacy as a defense largely depends on their motivation and ability to process an advertising message on an
elaborate level (cf., Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010; Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In their model of young people’s advertising processing, Buijzen et al. (2010) have argued that a high level of message elaboration is necessary for the retrieval and application of relevant advertising knowledge. This implies that for conceptual advertising literacy to become a defense, the recipient’s motivation and ability to process the advertising message should be relatively high. However, we argue that the affect-based nature of contemporary advertising, combined with children’s immature cognitive skills, limit their motivation and ability to attain this highest level of message elaboration.

Affect-based advertising. Recent content analyses have shown that the majority of the advertisements produced for children rely heavily upon emotionally evocative cues. For instance, many of children’s advertisements focus on the popularity involved in using the product or the magical transformation that takes place when children use the product. These advertisements also use tactics to fill their messages with perceptually pleasing audiovisual elements and feature loud music, rapid camera cuts, bright colors (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2002; Page & Brewster, 2007, 2009). In addition, children’s advertisements frequently contain popular media or trade characters that children feel a great deal of affinity and loyalty towards (Connor, 2006; Lapierre, Vaala & Linebarger, 2010). These powerful emotional appeals will distract children from using relevant advertising knowledge as a critical defense (cf., Harris, Brownell, & Bargh, 2009; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Nairn & Fine, 2008). Finally, because of the highly involving nature of most advertised products, children’s desire to conform to the message may be much stronger than their desire to defend against it (Harris et al., 2009). In other words, the affect-based nature of contemporary advertising formats limits children’s motivation and ability to process an advertising message elaborately and, accordingly, to retrieve and apply their conceptual advertising literacy as a defense (i.e., advertising literacy performance).

The same issues raised here also apply to non-traditional advertising formats, such as brand placements in movies and video games, and advertising in online environments. In fact, since non-traditional advertising tends to be more embedded within entertainment vehicles and relies on more subtle persuasion processes (i.e., evaluative conditioning), conceptual advertising literacy may be
even less efficacious with these types of advertisements (Owen, Lewis, Aty & Buijzen, 2009). Due to their embedded and subtle nature, non-traditional advertising messages rely heavily on low levels of message elaboration and, therefore, children are unlikely to retrieve and apply their advertising literacy as a critical defense (i.e., advertising literacy performance; Buijzen et al., 2010).

Children’s immature cognitive abilities. In addition, children’s ability to process an advertising message on an elaborate and critical level will be further limited by their immature cognitive capacities. To actually enact their conceptual advertising literacy as a defense, children will need to have the cognitive control to stop and recognize the persuasive nature of the message. Second, children will need to think about the persuasive message in some considerable depth. We refer to this process as the ‘stop and think’ response, because it requires that children shift their attention away from the advertisement (i.e. stop) and then selectively enact or think about a cognitive script to help defend against the advertisement (see Lapierre, 2009). However, due to a lag in the development of their cognitive abilities, children are not yet able to ‘stop and think’ about advertising messages. Therefore, we argue that the highly distracting and affect-based nature of contemporary advertising in combination with children’s immature cognitive abilities inhibit them from processing advertising elaborately and retrieving and applying their conceptual advertising literacy as a critical defense (i.e., advertising literacy performance).

Children’s ability to employ their advertising literacy is dependent upon the development of two specific cognitive competencies which allow for the ‘stop and think’ response: (1) executive functioning and (2) emotion regulation. Without the development of these abilities children will not be able to exercise adequate control of cognitions (i.e. the ‘stop’ part of ‘stop and think’) which would allow for the critical evaluation of advertisements (i.e. the ‘think’ part of ‘stop and think’). The physiological literature contends that the development of both executive function and emotion regulation are tied quite closely to the neurological maturation of the prefrontal cortex, as this section of the brain plays a primary role in both regulating cognition and aiding with complex cognitive skills and does not reach adult levels of functioning until middle to late adolescence (Welsh, Pennington & Grossier, 1991; Zelazo & Cunningham, 2007). As such, we contend that the main reason why advertising literacy is not
successful with children is due to this lag in the development of these cognitive abilities.

**Executive functioning.** Executive functioning is defined as the ‘higher order, self-regulatory, cognitive processes that aid in the monitoring and control of thought and action’ (Carlson, 2005; p. 595). Executive function is not a singular construct or skill but a set of skills that aid in carrying out purposeful goal directed thought (see Moses & Baldwin, 2005). As Moses and Baldwin have noted, the development of executive function should be closely linked to message processing in young children. More specifically, three aspects of executive function can override the implementation of advertising literacy as a cognitive defense. These aspects are (1) inhibitory control (e.g., Carlson, Moses & Claxton, 2004), (2) attentional flexibility (e.g., Kerr & Zelazo, 2004), and (3) working memory (e.g., Welsh, Pennington & Grossier, 1991).

First, inhibitory control involves the ability to withhold a pre-planned response, interrupt a process that has already started, avoid interference and delay a response. Those children who have not developed inhibitory control struggle with exerting cognitive control over certain actions and thoughts when faced with complex stimuli (Carlson et al., 2004). The second aspect, attentional flexibility, is the ability to fluidly shift attention under cognitively or affectively taxing conditions. Children with less mature attention flexibility have a more difficult time sorting through complex decisions, especially those that feature strong affective components (Kerr & Zelazo, 2004). Finally, executive function is the development of working memory capacity. Working memory is that part of memory, which keeps information immediately accessible for the planning and completion of complex tasks and is what allows us to complete ordinary multi-tasking operations without becoming overwhelmed (Welsh et al., 1991). Research investigating children’s working memory capacity shows that less cognitively mature children are unable to keep increased amounts of information in mind, which means that they are more likely to become cognitively overwhelmed as the information load increases (Luciana & Nelson, 1998).

When translating these insights to children’s ability to cope with advertising, we expect that children with immature executive functioning will have a difficult time processing advertising messages on an elaborate level and using their conceptual advertising literacy as a defense. Specifically, because children are less able to control inhibitions they will be more likely to respond to
the perceptually salient and pleasing parts of the message. Then, because these children have a hard time shifting and controlling their attention, they will be unable to adequately attend to and process the central (and less perceptually salient) components of the message (e.g., persuasive intent). Finally, due to their immature working memory capabilities, younger children will be unable to keep all of the message components in mind and, at the same time, retrieve their advertising literacy and apply it as a critical defense.

*Emotion regulation.* Emotion regulation is defined as ‘the behaviors, skills and strategies, whether conscious or unconscious, automatic or effortful, that serve to modulate, inhibit and enhance emotional experiences and expressions (Calkins & Hill, 2007, p. 160)’. During the early to middle elementary school years, children gradually learn how to manage both positive and negative emotions in a socially appropriate manner. The child’s ability to regulate their emotional reactions is closely tied to their ability to control cognitions and not let emotional situations overwhelm them. Less cognitively mature children are unable to ‘override’ their emotional impulses, while more mature children are able to perform significantly better (Carlson & Wang, 2007; Simonds, Kieras, Rueda & Rothbart, 2007). As Simonds and her colleagues (2007) found in their test of children’s ability to cope with disappointing gifts, the children who were able to enact an appropriate emotional response to receiving the gift (e.g., smiling and saying ‘thank you’ for the gift) were the oldest children in the sample (10 years old). These children were the only ones who were consistently able to proactively control their response and enact an appropriate cognitive script rather than just subduing an emotional impulse.

With so much of the content in contemporary advertisements centered on emotional cues, one would expect that children’s ability to process these messages depends on their ability to modulate emotional responses to the message. Children with less of an ability to control affect via emotion regulation will be overwhelmed by these emotional cues. The presence of excited and happy children or popular brand characters in the advertisements could over-stimulate children and their inability to modulate their affective responses should lead them to continue concentrating on the emotionally pleasing aspect of the advertisement. Yet, as these children mature and develop the ability to use effective emotional modulating strategies, they will become less likely to get caught up in the message’s emotional appeal. Instead, they will be more capable
of controlling the emotional impulses that are evoked by the advertisement and will be less likely to connect emotionally with the commercial message.

Reconceptualizing Children’s Advertising Literacy

What does this ultimately mean for the role of advertising literacy in children’s susceptibility to advertising effects? When considering the nature of contemporary advertising in combination with children’s immature cognitive abilities, the evidence suggests that children who are still maturing lack the motivation and ability to retrieve and apply their conceptual advertising literacy as a defense while processing an advertising message (i.e., advertising literacy performance). More specifically, because younger children are overwhelmed by the highly distracting and affect-based elements contained within the advertisement and restricted by their executive functioning and emotion regulation capabilities they are unable to stop and think about what the advertisement is trying to accomplish. As such, these children are less likely to process an advertising message on an elaborate level (which is a prerequisite condition for advertising literacy performance), and more likely to process the message on a less elaborate or peripheral level. This implies that they will rely on simple cues or shortcuts, using low-effort mechanisms to respond to a message (Buijzen et al., 2010). The peripheral cues present in the advertisement (i.e., fun music, attractive characters, and images of children playing) will then largely dictate whether children are persuaded by the message.

Assuming that children primarily process advertising on a less elaborate level, they might need attitudinal rather than cognitive defenses. That is, a general critical attitude toward advertising, which is the predisposition to respond in a consistently less favorable manner to advertising in general (Lutz, 1985), may be more successful in altering children’s responses to advertising messages. For general critical attitudes (e.g., skepticism and disliking of advertising) to function as an attitudinal defense, children are less dependent on their executive functioning and emotion regulation skills because they operate via a less cognitively-demanding mechanism. Specifically, when processing a specific advertisement, general critical attitudes toward advertising may automatically generate negative affect that is transferred to the advertisement and advertised brand (i.e., affect transfer; Lutz, 1985; McKenzie & Lutz, 1986; Zuwerink & Devine, 1996). In other words, attitudinal defenses can be successful in reducing
children’s advertising susceptibility, even when they are not motivated and able to process an advertising message elaborately (Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2010).

Based on the insights presented in this essay, we argue that the current theoretical conception of advertising literacy, in which it is primarily defined as a cognitive construct, needs to be revisited. First, the theoretical distinction between conceptual competence and performance should be emphasized more strongly. Second, general critical attitudes toward advertising should be included. Therefore, we propose a new three-dimensional conceptualization of advertising literacy. Specifically, it includes (1) conceptual advertising literacy – conceptual knowledge of advertising, (2) advertising literacy performance – the use of conceptual advertising literacy while processing advertising, and (3) attitudinal advertising literacy – general critical attitudes toward advertising. Each dimension consists of several components, which we based on four theoretical models that contributed substantially to our understanding of the concept of advertising literacy (Friestad & Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Roberts, 1982; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974). Specifically, we identified four components of conceptual advertising literacy (i.e., recognition of advertising; understanding selling intent; understanding persuasive intent; understanding persuasive tactics), two components of advertising literacy performance (i.e., retrieval of advertising literacy; application of advertising literacy), and two components of attitudinal advertising literacy (i.e., skepticism toward advertising; disliking of advertising). An overview of the three dimensions, including their specific components and definitions is depicted in table 1.
### Table 1 A Three-Dimensional Conceptualization of Children’s Advertising Literacy

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual advertising literacy</td>
<td>1. Recognition of advertising</td>
<td>The ability to differentiate advertising from other media content (e.g. television programs, editorial web content).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Understanding selling intent</td>
<td>The ability to understand that advertising tries to sell products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Understanding persuasive intent</td>
<td>The ability to understand that advertising attempts to influence consumers’ behavior by changing their mental states, for instance their attitudes and cognitions about a product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Understanding persuasive tactics</td>
<td>The ability to understand that advertisers use specific tactics change consumers’ attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising literacy performance</td>
<td>5. Retrieval of advertising literacy</td>
<td>The ability to retrieve relevant advertising-related knowledge from memory while processing an advertising message.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Application of advertising literacy</td>
<td>The ability to apply retrieved advertising-related knowledge to an advertising message (i.e., construct defense responses) while processing the message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudinal advertising literacy</td>
<td>7. Skepticism toward advertising</td>
<td>The tendency toward disbelief of advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Disliking of advertising</td>
<td>A general negative attitude toward advertising.</td>
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Theoretical Implications and Future Research

The insights presented in this essay lead to four implications for future theorizing and research. First, and most importantly, the cognitive defense view should be reconsidered. As has been argued in this essay, 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. Even though children possess all the necessary advertising knowledge (i.e., conceptual competence) they are not yet able to access and apply this knowledge when exposed to advertising (i.e., performance). Future research should focus on how children’s advertising literacy performance can be stimulated. Recent studies provide tentative evidence that children’s conceptual advertising literacy can be successful in reducing children’s susceptibility to advertising when they are triggered to use that literacy (Buijzen, 2007; Rozendaal et al., 2010). Future research should further investigate the conditions under which children 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 toward advertising, such as disliking and skepticism, may potentially play an enormous role in shaping how children respond to persuasive messages (Buijzen, 2007; Rossiter & Robertson, 1974; Rozendaal et al., 2010). Future research should further examine if and how children’s attitudinal advertising literacy can be successful in altering children’s 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 in which this literacy affects the persuasion process. For example, to validate our assumption that conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy operate via different mechanisms (i.e., high versus low elaboration), we need more insight into the 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. These studies could draw on the more developed adult persuasion and information processing literatures. 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 (cf., Buijzen et al., 2010; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006).

Finally, more insight is needed on the relation between conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy. It is generally assumed that conceptual advertising literacy makes children more skeptical and negative toward advertising. Although prior research has found conceptual knowledge of advertising (i.e., understanding advertising’s intent) and skepticism to be correlated (Robertson & Rossiter, 1974), much remains unclear about the direction and moderating conditions of this relation. For example, children may understand the concept of advertising without also questioning its credibility. However, it is also possible for children to be skeptical without having a full conceptual understanding of advertising (Chernin, 2007; Ward et al., 1977). Future research should clarify this issue.

As today’s children grow up in a fundamentally commercialized media environment, it is of great theoretical and societal importance to understand if and how advertising literacy can be successful in helping children to defend themselves against advertising’s persuasive influence. As such, the three-dimensional conceptualization of advertising literacy introduced in this essay, can provide a useful starting point for future theorizing and research on the role of advertising literacy in children’s advertising susceptibility.

References


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psychoeducational training in two elementary school-age groups.  


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