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DOI

[10.4324/9781003118824-38](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003118824-38)

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Routledge International Handbook of Children, Adolescents, and Media

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Citation for published version (APA):

Rozendaal, E., Buijzen, M., & van Reijmersdal, E. A. (2022). Persuasive Messages and the Development of Advertising Literacy in Children and Adolescents. In D. Lemish (Ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Children, Adolescents, and Media* (2nd ed., pp. 302-310). (Routledge international handbooks). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003118824-38>

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PERSUASIVE MESSAGES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADVERTISING LITERACY IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Esther Rozendaal, Moniek Buijzen, and Eva A. van Reijmersdal

Over the last two decades, children and adolescents' commercial media environment has changed dramatically. Driven by technological innovation, advertisers have rapidly adopted new advertising techniques, including brand placement in video games and influencer marketing on social media (Buijzen et al., 2010; Calvert, 2008; De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2020). Typically, new advertising practices rely on affect-based mechanisms and are often embedded within program or editorial content (Calvert, 2008; Wright et al., 2005), which may have important consequences for young people's processing of advertising. In this chapter, we review the state of the art of the international research literature on young people and persuasion, focusing specifically on today's commercial media environment. We focus on four important themes: (1) persuasion processes, (2) persuasion and resistance, (3) advertising literacy, and (4) advertising disclosures.

Child and Adolescent Processing of Persuasive Messages

Drawing upon the rich theoretical and empirical work on adult persuasion processes, Buijzen et al. (2010) developed a framework for children and adolescents' Processing of Commercial Media Content (PCMC). Similar to dominant adult persuasion models (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1996), the PCMC framework assumes that persuasion can occur through several processes. Under some conditions, people process a persuasive message systematically and carefully (referred to as the systematic process) and at other times, they rely on simple cues or shortcuts, using low-effort mechanisms to respond to a message (the heuristic process). In addition, a third even less elaborate process was distinguished, the automatic process, which is characterized by a primacy of automatic, affective, and subconscious reactions.

The three persuasion processes are characterized by varying levels of cognitive elaboration in response to a message – that is, the recipients' level of processing of the available information in the immediate persuasion context (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). Cognitive elaboration, in turn, relates to the recipients' motivation and ability to process the message effortfully (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Systematic, heuristic, and automatic persuasion processing may each lead to attitude formation or change, which may in turn affect consumer behavior. However, the

specific mediating mechanisms via which attitude change may occur differ in accordance with the processing route taken.

Systematic persuasion processing is based on relatively extensive, deliberate and effortful cognitive elaboration. For systematic processing to occur, people must be highly motivated and able to process all available information. For youth, it is relevant to distinguish between two levels of systematic processing. At the most elaborate level, critical systematic processing, an awareness of the persuasive nature of the message is involved, with the recipient actively applying the relevant persuasion knowledge or advertising literacy. Children who do not yet possess the relevant persuasion knowledge and information processing skills are unlikely to reach this level of processing. At a less elaborate level, noncritical systematic processing involves high awareness of the message or brand, without awareness of its persuasive intent. In the systematic process, persuasion mechanisms leading to attitude change involve active learning mechanisms and formulation of cognitive responses, such as pro-and counter-argumentation to message claims and deliberation over the message source (Petty et al., 2005).

Heuristic persuasion processing is characterized by a moderate level of cognitive elaboration. Compared to the systematic process, the recipient uses merely moderate to low motivation and ability to process the message. Within the heuristic process, the recipient looks for an easy way to form an overall evaluation of the product or brand, relying on relatively simple and low-effort decision strategies. Consequently, advertising defenses are less likely to affect this type of processing compared to systematic processing (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006). The mechanisms leading to persuasion involve relatively passive learning and information retrieval mechanisms, such as social learning and consumer cultivation (Shrum et al., 2005). Current marketing practices rely heavily on this type of processing, given the increased focus on emotion- and entertainment-based strategies in persuasive messages rather than information and rational argumentation.

Finally, in automatic persuasion processing, advertising exposure leads to attitude change without explicit attention to or awareness of the persuasive communication (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999): Recipient motivation and ability to process are not required. Advertising defenses are unlikely to be activated, because recipients are often unaware that they are being targeted. Highly embedded and stealth forms of marketing rely on this type of processing. Explicit recall of the persuasive message and the advertised product or brand will be low, yet implicit brand memory and attitude changes can be detected, for example through implicit recognition and association tests (Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007).

In the automatic persuasion process, persuasion occurs through implicit and affect-based learning mechanisms, such as evaluative conditioning (i.e., pairing a brand with affective stimuli such as celebrity endorsers or pleasant pictures) and affect transfer (i.e., the positive affect associated with the media experience transferring to the brand). In this process, brand exposure leads to more fluent processing when the brand is encountered again. This facilitated processing fluency leads to a sense of familiarity, which in turn may result in positive affect toward the brand. For example, the positive affect associated with an entertaining advergame (i.e., an online game designed to promote a brand) becomes transferred to the brand outside conscious awareness (van Reijmersdal et al., 2012).

Persuasion and Resistance in the Commercialized Media Environment

The effects of advertising on children and adolescents have often been divided into two general types: intended effects (e.g., children's brand preferences, purchase requests, consumption) and unintended effects (e.g., materialistic orientations, parent-child conflicts, unhealthy eating

habits). The most important precursor of both types of effects is advertising-induced change of attitude toward the product or brand. Because each level of processing can lead to attitude change, systematic, heuristic, and automatic processing may each lead to intended and unintended effects.

However, even though the level of processing may not affect the type and strength of the persuasion outcome, it may have consequences for the occurrence of children's resistance to persuasion. Resistance, in the child and advertising literature mostly referred to as advertising defenses, dovetails with the concept of advertising literacy (knowledge and understanding of advertising). As indicated above, the retrieval and application of advertising-related knowledge requires the most elaborate level of 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 defense against persuasion.

In short, for resistance to occur, children should process the message at the most elaborate level (Buijzen et al., 2010; Rozendaal et al., 2011). The likelihood of critical systematic elaboration is determined by the recipient's ability and motivation to process a message, which in turn is predicted by the characteristics of the message, its context, and the recipient (Petty et al., 2005). In the current commercial media environment, several factors may withhold children from processing persuasion at the most elaborate level. Importantly, the nature of contemporary advertising, combined with children's limited consumer experience and cognitive skills, makes it difficult to engage in critical systematic processing.

Elaboration Difficulties Associated with the Commercial Media Environment

Two characteristics of today's commercial media environment may limit young people's motivation and ability to process a message on the critical systematic level: the affect-based nature and the integration of persuasive messages within the medium context. First, content analyses have revealed that the advertisements young people are most likely to see do not employ classic informational appeals. Rather than presenting arguments or discussing the benefits associated with owning the product, child-directed advertising employs emotional appeals, fast-paced editing techniques, and dynamic formal features (Wicks et al., 2009).

With regard to emotion-based advertising, there are several tactics that marketers frequently rely upon. First, there is the consistent focus on fun and play in advertisements, with scenes filled with happy and excited children. Second, child-directed advertising often employs popular media characters that children feel a great deal of affinity and loyalty towards, including well-known celebrities such as *SpongeBob Squarepants* and *Pokémon*. Third, many nontraditional advertising techniques rely on the mechanism of processing fluency, evaluative conditioning, and affect transfer, such as advergames that are merely designed to evoke happy and aroused feelings, which are then transferred to the advertised brand.

Such affect- and emotion-based persuasion mechanisms all link to lower-level processing, in particular automatic processing. Thus, the emotional content will distract children from using relevant advertising knowledge as a critical defense. In other words, the affect-based nature of children and adolescents' commercial media environment is likely to limit their motivation and ability to process an advertising message elaborately and, accordingly, to retrieve and apply their conceptual advertising knowledge as a defense.

The same difficulties apply to integrated advertising formats, in which the persuasive message is embedded within the medium context. Buijzen et al. (2010) distinguished between three types of message-context integration. First, format integration refers to the level of integration between the message format and the editorial context. Examples include advertorials in

magazines or websites which are designed to resemble editorial articles or website content. Second, thematic integration refers to the conceptual fit or congruence between the persuasive message and its context. This may include, for example, placement of ads around thematically congruent content, such as placement of the *Bridgestone* brand logo in a car racing game, or an advertisement for *Barbie* dolls and toys in the *Barbie* magazine.

Third, narrative integration refers to the semantic or conceptual relevance of the persuasive message within the narrative of the surrounding media context. For example, children's programs based on brands, such as *Bratz* and *Pokémon*, can each be seen as program-length commercials for the corresponding action figures and other brand extensions, including toys, magazines, and music. The level of integration between the persuasive message and its context is likely to have important consequences for the persuasion process. Crucially, integration links to the ability to recognize the message and its persuasive intent (Friestad & Wright, 1994). When the persuasive message is highly integrated with the editorial context, its persuasive nature will be recognized less easily, which in turn is unlikely to lead to critical systematic processing.

In sum, due to their affect-based and integrated nature, nontraditional advertising messages rely heavily on low levels of message elaboration and, therefore, children are unlikely to retrieve and apply their advertising knowledge as a critical defense (Buijzen et al., 2010; Owen et al., 2013). Indeed, findings of several studies confirm that children's knowledge of nontraditional advertising formats does not influence the actual or intended effects of these formats (Owen, et al., 2013; van Reijmersdal et al., 2012).

Elaboration Difficulties Associated with Maturation

In addition to the difficulties that are related to the commercial media environment, young people's motivation and ability to process an advertising message on a critical systematic level will be further limited by their relatively immature advertising and consumer skills (e.g., advertising literacy, marketplace experience, brand memory, and consumption autonomy). For example, critical systematic processing requires domain-specific knowledge which these children often still lack.

In addition, children's immature cognitive abilities are likely to limit their motivation and ability to process persuasive messages at the critical systematic level. Specifically, to actually enact their advertising knowledge as a defense, children will need to master the "stop and think" response, which involves the cognitive control to stop and recognize the persuasive nature of the message, and to think about the persuasive message in some considerable depth to help defend against it. Young people's ability to "stop and think" may depend upon the development of two cognitive abilities: executive functioning and emotion regulation, which do not fully mature until mid-adolescence (Lapierre & Rozendaal, 2019). Rozendaal et al. (2011) have argued that without the development of these two 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 critical evaluation of advertising (i.e., the "think" part of "stop and think"), and thus engage in critical systematic persuasion processing.

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 functioning involves a set of skills that develop throughout childhood. Specifically, three aspects of executive functioning are relevant for critical systematic processing: inhibitory control (the ability to withhold or delay a pre-planned response and to interrupt a process that has already started), attentional flexibility (the ability to fluidly shift attention under cognitively

or affectively taxing conditions), and working memory (the part of memory that keeps information immediately accessible for the planning and completion of complex tasks).

When translating these insights to the ability for critical systematic processing, it is plausible that young people with immature executive functioning will have a difficult time using advertising knowledge as a defense while processing advertising (Hoek et al., 2020a). Specifically, because children are less able to control inhibitions, they will be more likely to immediately respond to the perceptually salient and appealing features of the message. Then, because these children have a hard time shifting and controlling their attention, they will be unable to shift their attention away from the affect-based message to focus on their advertising knowledge. Finally, due to their immature working memory abilities, children under the age of 12 will be unable to process the persuasive message and, at the same time, retrieve and apply their advertising knowledge as a critical defense.

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). This can include subduing or amplifying negatively or positively valenced emotions. With so much of the content in contemporary advertising centered on emotional cues, it is suggested that children’s ability to process these messages depends on their ability to modulate emotional responses to the message (Lapierre & Rozendaal, 2019). Children with less of an ability to control affect via emotion regulation are more likely to be overwhelmed by emotional cues, such as happy children or popular media characters. Yet, as children mature and develop the ability to use effective emotion regulation strategies, they become less likely to get caught up in the message’s emotional appeal. During adolescence (ages 12–18), they become capable of controlling the emotional impulses that are evoked by the advertisement and become more likely to process the message on the critical systematic level.

Advertising Literacy in the Commercialized Media Environment

Current insights in youth’s persuasion processing call for a revision of the conceptualization of advertising literacy. In the child and advertising literature, advertising literacy is generally defined as knowledge of advertising intent and tactics (for an overview see Rozendaal et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2005). However, this focus on conceptual knowledge might be too narrow. In the broader context of media, literacy has been defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of contexts” (Christ & Potter, 1998, p. 7). In other words, the concept of literacy should not only entail the ability to identify and understand media messages, but also to deal with those messages critically. Drawing on progressing insights into persuasion processing, we have demonstrated in this chapter that conceptual advertising knowledge alone does not automatically result in the ability to critically deal with the current commercial media environment.

There is a need for a reconceptualization of advertising literacy that contends with the changes in the commercialized media environment. Specifically, Rozendaal et al. (2011) proposed to extend the current conceptualization of advertising literacy (i.e., focusing on conceptual advertising literacy) with two dimensions. First, advertising literacy performance takes into account the actual use of conceptual knowledge of advertising while being exposed to it. The insights presented in this chapter suggest that even if children have the necessary conceptual advertising knowledge in place, it does not necessarily follow that they actually retrieve this knowledge when confronted with advertising and apply it as a critical defense. Therefore, the theoretical distinction between conceptual advertising literacy (i.e., having

advertising knowledge) and advertising literacy performance (i.e., retrieving and applying advertising knowledge) should be emphasized more strongly.

Second, attitudinal advertising literacy includes low-effort, attitudinal mechanisms that can be effective in reducing children's advertising susceptibility under conditions of low elaboration. Assuming that children primarily process advertising on a less elaborate level, they might need attitudinal rather than cognitive defenses. For example, general critical attitudes toward advertising (e.g., disliking of advertising) have been shown to automatically generate negative affect when processing a specific advertisement, which, in turn, is transferred to the advertisement and advertised brand (Zuwerink & Devine, 1996). This suggests that general critical attitudes might be more successful in altering children's responses to advertising messages. For critical attitudes to function as an attitudinal defense, children are less dependent on executive functioning and emotion regulation skills because they operate via a less cognitively demanding mechanism. Thus, 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 (Rozenaal et al., 2012).

In addition, Hudders et al. (2017) proposed that a moral dimension of advertising literacy should be distinguished. Moral advertising literacy reflects individuals' ability to develop thoughts about the moral appropriateness of specific advertising formats and comprises the general moral evaluations individuals hold toward these formats and toward advertising in general, including its persuasive tactics. Hudders et al. argue that the possession of a set of moral dispositions toward advertising and its various techniques is more relevant than ever, considering the fact that the bulk of contemporary advertising formats can in many cases be described as covert marketing.

Increasing Transparency Through Advertising Disclosures

Because integrated advertising – also referred to as “native advertising” – embeds commercial messages into entertaining and seemingly noncommercial content, children and adolescents often fail to identify its persuasive character (van Reijmersdal & Rozenaal, 2020). This lack of transparency jeopardizes consumers' right to know when they are being subjected to advertising. Moreover, if children do not recognize the persuasive character of sponsored content, they are unlikely to activate their advertising literacy, and defend themselves against its persuasive appeal. To help media users to determine when digital content is sponsored, guidelines and regulations are being developed in Europe and the U.S. (European Commission, 2018; Federal Trade Commission, 2015). The key issue is that integrated advertising should be made recognizable by using distinct disclosures, such as “paid partnership with brand X” on Instagram and “This video is created in collaboration with brand X” on YouTube.

Several studies conducted in Western countries, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, have experimentally investigated the effects of disclosures of sponsored content on minors (e.g., De Jans et al., 2018; De Jans & Hudders, 2020; Hoek et al., 2020b; van Reijmersdal et al., 2017, 2020). These studies showed mixed effects of disclosures regarding enhancing minors' recognition and understanding of sponsored content. Furthermore, a meta-analysis of disclosure studies in several mainly Western countries found that disclosure had smaller effects on recognition of sponsored content as being advertising among minors than among adults and disclosures also led to less resistance among minors in terms of negative brand attitudes (Eisend et al., 2020). In a study by Rozenaal et al. (2021) in the Netherlands, children indicated to hardly pay attention to textual disclosures, which is likely to explain the lack of effects of disclosures on advertising recognition found in some previous studies. The study also revealed

confusions regarding the formulations “collaboration” and “paid collaboration,” which may explain why some studies found effects whereas others did not. If children do not notice or understand the meaning of a sponsorship disclosure (due to vague or complex formulations), their opportunity to process and make sense of the disclosure is low. As a result, the disclosure will be less effective in triggering children’s advertising literacy and critical coping strategies (van Reijmersdal et al., 2020).

Setting the Agenda for Future Research

Based on the extended four-dimensional definition of advertising literacy (conceptual advertising literacy, advertising literacy performance, attitudinal advertising literacy, moral advertising literacy), we propose four focal points for the research agenda. First, future research should focus on advertising literacy performance by investigating the conditions under which children retrieve their conceptual advertising literacy and use it as a defense against advertising. Second, future research should further examine if and how children’s attitudinal and moral advertising literacy can alter children’s responses to persuasive messages. Third, there is a need to understand the specific ways in which literacy affects the persuasion process, for example investigating the assumption that conceptual, attitudinal, and moral advertising literacy operate via different mechanisms (i.e., high versus low elaboration).

Finally, future research should reveal if and how interventions aimed to stimulate advertising literacy, such as advertising disclosures, can change the persuasion process in children. Scholars could draw from the more developed adult persuasion and information processing literatures. Incorporating 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 and would, at the same time, offer compelling tests of how these theories apply to developmental contexts.

SEE ALSO Chapter 16 by Chan and Chapter 5 by Buckingham and Willett in this volume.

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