

Can Disclosures Aid Children's Recognition of TV and Website Advertising?

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1 Introduction

For decades, child-directed advertising has been the subject of debate and research. In addition to advertising on traditional media, children are increasingly exposed to sophisticated forms of advertising on new media (Calvert, 2008; WHO, 2016). Advertising not only affects children's cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors towards brands and products, but – according to Kasser and Linn (2016) – also “harms” them by triggering “a materialistic value orientation, unhealthy eating, distorted body image, aggressive behavior, and substance use” (p. 132). Many parents, teachers, and other caretakers, as well as policy makers and researchers wish to protect children from these adverse effects (Oates, Newman, & Tziortzi, 2014). For this reason, much attention goes out to promoting children's advertising literacy.

According to Rozendaal and colleagues (2011) children's advertising literacy consists of three dimensions: *conceptual* advertising literacy – the ability to recognize advertising and understand advertising's true intentions; *attitudinal* advertising literacy – perceiving bias in, being skeptic toward, and disliking of advertising; and, finally, advertising literacy *performance* – activating conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy and using resistance strategies such as selective exposure and counter arguing (Rozendaal, Oprea, & Buijzen, 2016). Children's advertising literacy on all three dimensions has been expected (cf., Buijzen et al., 2010) and found to increase with age (Oprea & Rozendaal, 2015).

Most advertising literacy research is rooted in the Persuasion Knowledge Model of Friestad and Wright (1994). According to this model, persuasion knowledge (i.e., advertising literacy) develops throughout childhood. Children first learn to recognize advertising from other content based on perceptual cues; learn to recognize advertising's true intentions second; and learn to engage critical thinking and use resistance strategies third. Several researchers have tried to connect these developments to specific ages (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2004; Oates, Blades, & Gunter, 2002; Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2010). However, these developments may not only be age, but also platform specific. Despite children being increasingly targeted by embedded marketing online, researchers are still limited in their knowledge of children's responses to advertising in new media (Oates et al., 2014).

This study aims to provide new insight into the development of children's persuasion knowledge, by determining whether children's recognition of advertising differs across both age *and* platforms. It builds on the works of Blades, Oates and Li (2013) who investigated children's recognition of television and Internet advertising among samples of 6- to 12-year-old British and Chinese children, and found that children's ability to recognize television advertising is better than their ability to recognize Internet advertising. Though of vital importance to the field, this study has two shortcomings. First, the difference in recognition between television advertising and Internet advertising, and the differences in ad recognition between children of different ages was not formally tested. Second, the authors created their own mock websites as stimulus material, limiting the external validity of their work.

To address the shortcoming from previous research, we study children's recognition of television and Internet advertising using real-world examples. In doing so, we will focus on children's recognition of advertising, because correct recognition of advertising is a prerequisite for conceptual advertising literacy, attitudinal advertising literacy, and advertising literacy performance. We formally test for age and platform differences in children's recognition of advertising order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Does children's recognition of advertising differ between television and Internet advertising?

RQ2: Does children's recognition of television advertising (RQ2a) and Internet advertising (RQ2b) improve with age?

Finally, as a new endeavor, we investigate whether advertising disclosures can aid children's recognition of advertising. A recent mapping of international, European and national self- and co regulatory frameworks revealed the need for empirical research on the effectiveness of disclosure cues (Verdoodt, Lambrecht and Lievens, 2016). Various countries have implemented policies stating that advertising should be recognizable as such for children. These policies require advertisers to use disclosures, but generally do not contain specific guidelines for the characteristics of the disclosures themselves (for instance on their content, timing or duration; see Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2016; Matthes & Naderer, 2016). Nevertheless, the characteristics of a disclosure cue can affect its effectiveness. More specifically, a disclosure's design might affect its perceptual prominence and, in other words, its attention-grabbing potential (Buijzen, van Reijmersdal, and Owen, 2010). In this study, we want to determine whether disclosures aid children's ad recognition, whether high-prominent disclosures do

so better than low-prominent disclosures, and whether the effect of the disclosures differs across platforms and ages:

RQ3: Does a high-prominent disclosure aid children's recognition of television advertising (RQ3a) and Internet advertising (RQ3b) more than a low-prominent disclosure?

RQ4: Is the effectiveness of high-prominent and low-prominent disclosures on children's recognition of television advertising (RQ4a) and Internet advertising (R4b) dependent on age?

The outcomes of this research could inform the debate on child-directed advertising and help shape platform- and age-appropriate policies aiding children's recognition of advertising content.

2 Theory

2.1 *Children's Recognition of Television and Internet Advertising*

Children's processing of advertising can differ according to the format in which the advertising is presented (Vanwesenbeeck, 2016). In this study, we focus on 'traditional' forms of advertising on television and the Internet. For television, we focus on children's recognition of spot advertisements, which are typically displayed in commercial blocks between programs. Each country has its own legislation on the number and length of commercial blocks broadcasters are allowed to air per hour (see Hawkes & Lobstein, 2011). Within a country, the legislation may differ per broadcaster type. For instance, in Belgium – where this study was conducted – publicly funded broadcasting stations are only allowed to air advertising to a limited extent and under specific circumstances. Privately funded broadcasting stations are allowed to air advertising, but only for 12 minutes per hour. Regular programs may be interrupted as many times as a broadcaster wants; movies and news affairs shows once every 30 minutes; and children's programs not at all – for children's programs, commercial blocks can only appear at the beginning or ending of a show (Vlaamse Regulator voor de Media, 2016).

For the Internet, we focus on traditional banner advertising. Typically, governmental laws do not restrict online advertising towards children. Industry self-regulation has led to vows on restricting advertising for unhealthy foods (see WHO, 2013), but not to a restriction of the number of advertisements that may be included on children's websites. A study by Neyens and Smits (2016) demonstrated that despite the self-regulatory EU Pledge, food websites tend to use

numerous marketing cues, even when marketing unhealthy foods. A content analysis by Cai and Zhao (2013) showed that two-thirds of children's websites contain banners. Banners can take different sizes and be located at various locations on the screen. On average, children's websites contained 11.8 unique banners. Generally, two of these were located on the homepage. The ten others were situated on the content pages.

Children spend about 20 per cent of their television time being exposed to advertising, and the figures provided by Cai and Zhao (2013) suggest that this share may be even higher when children consume Internet media. Several scholars have published articles with enticing titles to express their worries about the amount of advertising children are exposed to on television and online (e.g., "Children and TV advertising: Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide" by Strasburger, 2001 and "No Escape: Marketing to Kids in the Digital Age" by Chester & Montgomery, 2008). However, little is known about the extent children themselves are aware of this extensive amount of advertising.

Few studies look into children's recognition of online advertising (Ali et al., 2009; Wollslager, 2009) and even less have compared recognition of TV advertising with online advertising (Oates et al., 2014). Yet, online marketing strategies are fundamentally different from TV advertising. First, online advertising might be more difficult to recognize because banner advertising often appears peripheral to actual internet content and because, apart from the location, few other perceptual cues are present (Ali et al., 2009). Second, banner advertisements are also less uniform in their formats compared to the typical TV advertising block and may take different forms on different websites due to the lack of in-depth regulations on online advertising (Wollslager, 2009). Finally, compared to watching television, processing internet advertising demands more cognitive resources. The latter aligns with the PCMC model ('young people's processing of commercial media content') which assumes that children have limited capacity to process persuasive messages (Buijzen et al., 2010). In short, the amount of cognitive resources left to process a persuasive message depends on how much a child needs to process the context in which the persuasive message is presented.

Applied to our study, the PCMC model suggests that children have more cognitive resources to process TV commercials, since TV commercials are presented in distinct blocks, separated from the context. In contrast, Internet advertising is more integrated within the context (i.e., the website). This suggests that children should use cognitive resources to process the non-commercial context, leaving less cognitive resources available for processing the advertising. As a result, correct recognition of Internet ads might further be impaired. Given the abovementioned reasons, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Children more easily recognize television advertising than Internet advertising.

Children's advertising processing has often been connected to their consumer socialization. Applying the insights of development psychology, an extensive overview by John (1999) formulated three different stages in which children learn consumer skills. At first, children (3-7 years) recognize advertising based on perceptual characteristics (Ali et al., 2009). Older children (7-11 years) learn to recognize advertising intent. At around 11 years of age, children reach the reflective phase, in which they learn about advertising tactics and further improve the skills learned in the previous phase.

Advertising literacy is an important part of these consumer skills. In short, as children grow older, they gain more advanced advertising skills to deal with and critically process advertising messages (John, 1999). Related, the abovementioned PCMC model suggests that older children have more cognitive resources available to process persuasive content (Buijzen et al., 2010). Given the insights about children's consumer socialization and the PCMC model, we can expect:

H2: Children's ability to recognize television advertising improves with age.

H3: Children's ability to recognize Internet advertising improves with age.

2.2 *Effectiveness of Disclosures for Television and Internet Advertising*

Like adults, children do not always activate their advertising literacy while being exposed to advertising (Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2010). To enhance children's awareness and critical thinking, several scholars and policy makers have called for the use of disclosure cues – much like it has been proposed for adults when it comes to subtle marketing (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012). Still, few studies have focused on the effect of disclosures on advertising recognition (Lammers & van Reijmersdal, 2013). In addition, the few studies that did, were aimed at establishing the effectiveness of disclosures for recognizing non-traditional formats such as sponsored content (i.e., product placement) in the case of television and advergames in the case of the Internet (e.g., An & Stern, 2010).

In an experiment amongst an adult population, researchers established that a disclosure indeed enhanced advertising recognition of sponsored programs (Boerman et al., 2012). Another study by Lammers and van Reijmersdal (2013) found that a disclosure in an advergame can have a positive effect on brand recognition (i.e., remembering the advertised brand), since a disclosure signals the presence of advertising. A disclosure cue works through priming and aims at activating advertising knowledge, which should lead to enhanced elaboration

(Lammers & van Reijmersdal, 2013). Such effects are mostly found for very prominent cues. Indeed, a mere disclosure logo does not typically attract a lot of attention or activate persuasion knowledge, in contrast to a (more prominent) disclosure sentence (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2015; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013). Not only for adults, but also for children, disclosure or warning cues are expected to help differentiate between content and advertising (Cai & Zhao, 2010).

Disclosures have a different status for the typical TV advertisement compared to an Internet banner ad. As discussed above, TV ads are already more obvious to recognize given that they are grouped in a block of ads, set aside from the actual content. Hence, one could argue that the TV ad block itself already constitutes a soft disclosure cue in itself. Adding a disclosure to such a setting should further increase the activation of persuasion knowledge. Hence, disclosure may particularly aid children's recognition of television advertising.

In addition to studying the effect of disclosures across media, we also make a distinction between high-prominent (i.e., blatant placement, easy processing) and low-prominent (i.e., subtle placement, difficult processing) disclosure cues. In particular, we investigate whether a high-prominent disclosure cue is more effective in enhancing advertising recognition compared to a low-prominent disclosure cue, as is the case for adults (Boerman et al., 2015; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013). This leads to the following hypotheses concerning the effects of both the type of disclosure cues (high-prominent versus low-prominent) and the advertising medium:

H4: This effect of disclosure cues will be stronger for TV advertisements than for Internet advertisements.

H5: The more prominent the advertising disclosure is, the better children's recognition of advertisements.

Above, we suggested that the assumed increased recognition due to disclosures is based on these disclosures' attention-grabbing nature. If so, then one can expect that the cognitive development of children and the related development of cognitive literacy would impact the effects of these disclosures. We, therefore, explore whether age moderates the hypothesized effect of disclosures on advertising recognition for both television and Internet advertisements (cf. RQ4a and RQ4b). Given that there is no prior research available, to our knowledge, with regard to this relation, we refrain from specifying hypotheses.

3 Method

In order to investigate the research questions above, we conducted a nested experiment with a 2 (medium) by 3 (disclosure type) by 4 (age group) factorial design. The first two factors were within-subjects factors, meaning that children were exposed to both television and Internet advertising, and to advertisements without disclosures, with low-prominent disclosures, and with high-prominent disclosures. The third factor, age, was a between-subjects factor.

We aimed to sample children from the last year of preparatory school (5-6 year olds), and the first (6-7 year olds), third (8-9 year olds) and fifth year (10-11 year olds) of primary school. Two schools participated and after approval from the schools' director and teachers, informed consent letters were given to the parents. Children could participate if at least one parent provided active consent. This resulted in a sample of 188 children, age 5 to 11. More specifically, the sample breaks down to these four groups: 31 children in preparatory school (18 girls), 53 in first year primary school (22 girls), 39 in third year (19 girls), and 65 in fifth year (32 girls). Our study was granted IRB approval by the Ethical Committee of the University of Antwerp (registration number: SHW_15_12_03). Like their parents, all children were explained that they could end or withdraw their participation at any time.

The data collection occurred in group sessions under the supervision of a female researcher. Each child took a seat behind an individual laptop and received a verbal instruction about the tasks that needed to be completed next. More specifically, each child was informed that he or she was about to view a couple of TV clips and Internet screenshots. Directly after seeing a video or screenshot the child had to indicate whether it contained advertising, by pressing a green button ('Yes') or a red button ('No') on the screen. To practice the use of the buttons, children were given three trial questions first (i.e., "Which button do you press for 'Yes'?", "Which button do you press for 'No'?", and "Are you currently at school?"). As soon as the actual experiment started, children were requested to put on headphones.

All stimuli and measures were presented digitally. Each child viewed 12 TV clips and 12 Internet screenshots. These were presented in a randomized order: Children either saw the TV clips first and the Internet screenshots second, or vice versa. Within the set of TV clips and Internet screenshots, the order of the fragments was randomized too: All children were presented with six fragments containing no advertising, two containing advertising without a disclosure, two containing advertising with a low-prominent disclosure, and two containing advertising with a high-prominent disclosure – yet the order of these fragments differed.

The no-advertising TV clips were sampled from popular TV programs from national television (Ketnet). The advertising TV clips were child-directed televi-

sion commercials, broadcast on other (commercial) TV stations. All TV clips auto-started once they appeared on the computer screen. The screenshots of the webpages were sampled from websites that were popular among Belgian children between the ages of five and eleven (as indicated in the report of Apes-taartjaren, 2014). The content of the disclosures was based on current practices. For the TV clips, the low-prominent disclosure consisted of the word “*Advertentie*” [“Advertisement”] appearing in the upper right of the screen, and the high-prominent disclosure of the sentence “*En nu komt er reclame*” [“Now there is a commercial break”] appearing in the center of the screen in the six seconds leading up to the commercial. For the Internet screenshots, the low-prominent disclosure consisted of the word “*Advertentie*” placed vertically in the left of the banner, and the high-prominent disclosure of the word “*Advertentie*” placed horizontally in the right of the banner. The vertically placed disclosure is more difficult to read than the horizontally placed disclosure.

4 Results

4.1 Children’s Recognition of Television and Internet Advertising

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the number of recognition mistakes per media condition and disclosure type. On average, children made the fewest mistakes in recognizing TV advertisements ($M = 0.89$). Children recognized TV ads more correctly than Internet ads ($M = 2.32$; confirming H1; $t(187) = 10.26$; $p < .0001$). Interestingly, they made more mistakes against the no-ad TV clips (where they falsely presumed they did contain advertisements; $t(187) = 4.86$, $p < .0001$). Likewise, they made more mistakes with regard to the no-ad Internet screenshots compared to Internet ads ($t(187) = 2.17$, $p = .03$).

Children’s recognition of advertisements increased with age ($r = .206$, $p = .01$). Interestingly, this significant correlation between age and correct recognition was solely attributable to the improved recognition of TV advertisements (confirming H2; $r = .32$, $p < .0001$). Age did not correlate with Internet advertisement recognition (rejecting H3; $r = .03$, $p = .73$). The strongest age improvements, however, were found for the correct recognition of content that did not have advertisements ($r_{TV} = .47$; $r_{Internet} = .39$; both $p < .0001$).

Table 1: Number of recognition mistakes per media condition (6 items per cell) and disclosure type (2 items per cell)

	TV		Internet	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
No advertisement	1.67	2.06	2.78	1.90
Advertisement	0.89	1.33	2.32	1.64
High-prominent disclosure	0.30	0.54	0.73	0.76
Low-prominent disclosure	0.28	0.55	0.81	0.74
No disclosure	0.31	0.60	0.79	0.68

4.2 Effectiveness of Disclosures for Television and Internet Advertising

To test the effect of the disclosure cues, we subjected the data to a repeated measures ANOVA. As within-subjects variables we thus had the type of disclosure (no, high-prominent, low-prominent) and the medium (TV, Internet) and as between-subjects variables we included participant age. Although the disclosure cues generated a significant main effect ($F(2,185) = 5.25, p = .006$), pairwise *t*-tests confirmed that there were no significant differences between media types or disclosure cue conditions (rejecting H4 and H5; all $t < 1$). We also specifically tested whether the presence of any disclosure would facilitate the recognition of an ad, but this did not occur (i.e., low- and high-prominent disclosure conditions versus no disclosure condition; $t(187) = .72, p = .47$). Following up on RQ4, we tested whether disclosure effects are age-dependent. General ad recognition improved with age (cf. supra), but the disclosure cue effect did not interact with age ($F(1,186) = .558, p = .46$). Both no-disclosure ad recognition ($r = .2$) and disclosure ad recognition ($r = .17$) had similar age-related improvements.

Based on the observation that children seemed to be overly suspicious (cf. supra: more errors in recognizing non-ad content), we further explored this in a subsequent repeated measures ANOVA. Specifically, we used each child’s correct recognition rate for non-ad stimuli as a covariate. Doing so did not result in a main effect for that covariate ($F(1,186) = 1.31, p = .255$) suggesting that the correct recognition of ad stimuli and non-ad stimuli is relatively independent. Moreover, it did not alter the conclusions with regard to the effect of medium and disclosure type (or their interaction effect) on recognition.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

Only few studies compared children's developmental paths of advertising recognition across different advertising formats (for an exception, see Oates et al., 2014). This study provides further insights into the differences in children's recognition of TV advertisements and banner advertisements. As we expected, children's recognition of banner advertisements was notably lower compared to children's recognition of TV advertising. This supports the assumption that, for children, processing Internet advertising demands more cognitive resources, and that, as a consequence, children are less able to recognize advertising as commercial content. The results of our study also lend support for the assumption that advertising recognition increases with age. It should be noted, however, that this age effect is not applicable for Internet advertisement recognition because even older children did not show improved banner advertisement recognition.

Unlike TV advertising, children apparently do not learn over time how to recognize Internet advertising. For TV advertising, children first learn to recognize commercials based on perceptual cues. These cues are not present online, making it more difficult for children to learn how to recognize online advertising. Moreover, whereas TV advertising typically is a separate piece of content, Internet advertising mostly occurs adjacent to actual non-advertising content.

For TV advertising, both low-prominent and high-prominent disclosure cues had a limited effect on children's recognition of TV advertising. One possible explanation might be that, due to the already high level of recognition, the presence of a disclosure cue does not influence recognition. In other words, our finding suggests a ceiling effect with regard to the recognition of TV advertising. For internet advertising, a different picture emerges. On average, children only recognized about 60% of the ads. Still, the disclosure cues did not really influence the correct recognition of these ads. Again, this might be attributed to the embedded nature of the online advertisements.

This study supplements previous studies by using real-life advertisements and realistic disclosure cues. Despite conscientious preparation, this study is of course subject to limitations. First, this study was conducted in the classroom environment which ensured that we had a sufficient sample required for our experiment. Still, as a consequence, the study's setting was less natural. Second, we opted to investigate one type of Internet advertising, namely banner advertising. Nevertheless, other types of online advertising such as advergames are even more embedded into the online content and can be even more difficult for children to recognize. Further work should investigate and compare children's recognition of different types of internet advertising.

Regardless of its limitations, the results of our study have implications for educational purposes and for future research. First, within the educational curriculum, attention should be given to recognizing Internet advertising. In other

words, schools should provide children with the necessary tools to develop the skill to recognize online advertising. This should not only be directed at young children, but also at children in their final years of primary school, as even this age group did not recognize Internet advertising adequately. Future research could pay attention to interventions that could increase children's recognition of TV advertising. Second, research should further investigate the role of disclosure cues. As younger children are still learning how to read, a disclosure cue like "Advertentie" ["Advertisement"] might be too difficult. Future research should consider using other disclosure cues, to test whether children can be alerted to the presence of an advertisement in another, more clear way.

6 References

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