

**CHILDREN AND A CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT:
INVESTIGATING
PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE FOR INTEGRATED ADVERTISING FORMATS**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the persuasion knowledge of children of integrated advertising formats, more precisely of product placement, advertiser funded programming (AFP) and advergames. Based on qualitative research with 42 children (between 4-12 years old) the results show that children have difficulties recognizing and understanding the persuasive intention of the integrated commercial content. Especially for product placement this seemed to be hard, for all age groups. The ad recognition and understanding of AFP was highest. For advergames the results show that children could recognize the ad embedded in the game, but had problems in understanding the underlying commercial intention of it.

INTRODUCTION

Compared to earlier generations, today's children are overwhelmed by an increasing amount of commercial messages. As a result, advertisers are adopting alternative advertising techniques in order to break through this ad clutter and capture their attention (Calvert, 2008; Moore, 2004). One of these techniques is the integration of the persuasive message *into* the media content itself. By doing so, the involved audience gets exposed to the advertisement during the natural process of watching a movie or program, playing a game etc. (Cebrzynski, 2006). The integrated nature of this technique does not only make it impossible for viewers to skip the ads, it also implies that they are exposed to the commercial message and the media content at the same time. This results in blurred boundaries between advertising, entertainment and information (Raney et al., 2003).

Despite the considerable and ongoing changes in advertising techniques targeting children, little is known about *how* children process these new formats. Especially the role of persuasion knowledge is unclear. For decades, children's understanding of the persuasive intention of commercial messages has been one of the most important topics in the study of children's advertising processing. One of the most common theoretical explanations to describe this process is the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM, Friestad & Wright, 1994, 1995). According to the PKM, persuasion knowledge is the knowledge that consumers develop about marketers' motives and tactics. This knowledge helps them to identify how, when and why marketers are trying to influence them. As a result, people are able to critically process the ad and 'cognitively defend' themselves against its persuasive influences. With young children, however, this knowledge is not yet fully developed. The Cognitive Development Theory of Piaget (1929) states that the persuasion knowledge of children evolves along with their cognitive development, based on age. Hence, it is assumed that these young consumers have difficulty understanding the nature and motives of advertising, making them highly vulnerable to its persuasive appeal (Gunter, Oates & Blades, 2005; Kunkel et al., 2004).

These theories, however, are merely based on traditional advertising research. Since, the traditional, linear advertising formats no longer dominate the media environment children live in as today's media environment is characterized by integrated advertising formats. This trend demands a re-evaluation of the insights concerning the development of children's persuasion knowledge. Hence, the main purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the persuasion

knowledge of children when exposed to various new advertising formats which are embedded into different media contents. Three different advertising formats, namely product placement in a television program, an advertiser funded television program and an advergame, are used to examine the proposed research questions. Furthermore, children from three different age groups (4-6, 7-8, 9-12 year) participated in this qualitative study to investigate at which age the persuasion knowledge is developed for each of these formats.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Persuasion knowledge

Various theoretical models argue that a cognitive defense mechanism against advertising includes different skills which can be acquired during childhood (Friestad & Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Moses & Baldwin 2005). The main skills concerning persuasion knowledge are considered to be the ability to distinguish advertising from non-commercial media content (i.e. advertising recognition) and the ability to understand advertising's underlying persuasive or commercial intent (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2001; John, 1999; Kunkel et al., 2004; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2008). The latter refers to children's understanding that advertising is meant to convince and move consumers to buy the product. However, this is a very broad concept which can be divided in two separate skills, namely: understanding the sales intent of advertising (this means that children are aware of the fact that advertisers want to make them buy something) and understanding the persuasive intent of advertising and the methods used to persuade consumers (this means that children understand that advertisers also try to influence their behaviors and attitudes indirectly, by changing their attitudes, desires and beliefs concerning a product or a brand). In sum, this implies that persuasion knowledge consists of 3 important skills.

Development of Persuasion Knowledge

Traditional research concerning children's persuasion knowledge mainly relies on frameworks developed by cognitive psychologists (e.g., Piaget, 1929), together with theories of social (Selman, 1980) and personality development (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007). In this respect, children's understanding of advertising tactics and intentions develops together with their cognitive capacities and their information processing skills, and thus with age (John, 1999; Moses & Baldwin, 2005). In general, four different phases in children's development of persuasion knowledge can be distinguished.

During early childhood (younger than five), children generally do not recognize nor understand the intent of advertising. Around the age of eight (middle childhood), the majority of children are able to recognize the difference between advertising and program content, and they also begin to understand the persuasive intent of advertising (Young, 2003). At this point, the child realizes that some aspects of a commercial message are not 'simply there' but may be an advertiser's deliberate attempt to persuade them. However, a detailed comprehension of persuasive intent does not fully mature until the age of 12 (late childhood). Finally, as they become adolescents (around the age of 16), their advertising-related skills and knowledge reach adult-like levels, making them able to process advertising in a critical way.

Although there is a successive amount of research providing insight in the development of children's cognitive advertising defenses, these studies focus only on traditional TV advertising, failing to keep up with recent changes in young people's media environment.

Persuasion knowledge and integrated advertising forms

Integrating commercial messages into the media content is one of these techniques which is becoming more and more popular. This integration can, however, be done in a variety of

forms. In this study, three different formats are discussed: product placement, advertiser funded TV programs and advergames. Although these formats are different, they all integrate the commercial message into the media content. This may have important implications for the persuasion knowledge of children.

Compared to traditional advertising, recognition of the persuasive intent is expected to become even more difficult when the persuasive message is *integrated into* media content (Livingstone, 2009). First of all, the integrated products or brands are often being used in their natural settings (Stephen & Coote, 2005), what makes them harder to recognize as advertising. Also, due to the integrated nature, children have to process the ad and the media content (TV program or video game) simultaneously. This may be cognitively more demanding than watching traditional advertising, since children have to divide their attention between both information sources. Since children are rarely familiar with these alternative advertising formats (limited advertising experience), understanding of their persuasive intent is expected to be even more difficult. In addition, these integrated advertising formats are often perceived as fun by children since they are deliberately integrated into an entertaining or interactive (e.g., a computer game, TV show, etc.) content. Advergames, for example, often link a brand to rewarding stimuli, making them highly popular with children (Nairn & Fine, 2008). Taking all this into consideration, together with the fact that children's ability to process information is limited (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal & Owen, 2010) and that the activation of persuasion knowledge requires a certain amount of cognitive capacity (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000), we expect that children who recognize the ad do not necessarily understand the persuasive intent of the integrated advertising forms. The following research questions are posed:

RQ1: Do children recognize advertisements when they are integrated into the media content? What is the impact of age on this recognition? Does this recognition differ for the various integrated advertising formats?

RQ2: Do children understand the persuasive intent of the advertising formats when the persuasive message is integrated into the media content? What is the impact of age on this recognition? Does this understanding of the persuasive intent differs for the various integrated advertising formats?

METHOD

Respondents, stimuli and procedure

The results in this study were obtained by 30 in depth interviews with children between 4 and 12 years old. To further elaborate on these findings, 9 additional focus groups were conducted. The interviewees were pupils from four geographically dispersed Flemish schools. Based on Piaget's theory (Roediger et al., 2001) the interviewees were divided in three age groups: 4-6, 7-10 and 11-12 years old. In both the interviews and the focus groups, we confronted children with several advertising formats. The stimuli consisted of an advergame for McDonalds, a fragment from a TV program (a craft program for children) containing product placement ('Pritt' a glue stick often used by children) and a fragment of an AFP (a TV show set in a popular amusement park, with the park being an important part of the storyline). After each exposure to an advertising format, the child(ren) were asked several questions in order to measure their level of persuasion knowledge with respect to that specific advertising format. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for later analyses.

Measures

For both the in-depth interviews and focus group interviews, a questionnaire (with fixed response options) was used to guide the data-collection using visual icons and pictures in the

survey (cf. Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007). For each question, the response options were presented on a card so that children could point out the answer. Following Friestad and Wright (1994), the three main aspects of persuasion knowledge are measured. The children's ability to distinguish media content from commercial content (recognition) is measured by presenting them a range of ten different brands and asking whether they had seen any of these brands in the stimulus. In each set of brands, only the brand of the advertised product was coded as correct. The second element, understanding of the persuasive intent, was measured asking two questions 1) '*what is the purpose of the program, why was it made?*', with the response options 'buy the product', 'like the brand', 'be happy', 'see a fun program' or 'I don't know'; and 2) '*who created this program?*', with the following response options: 'the brand', 'the researcher', 'the teacher', 'the TV channel' or 'I don't know'.

RESULTS

Ad recognition

The results reveal differences between the various formats concerning ad recognition. In particular, results show that only 4 out of 30 children recognized the brand correctly after seeing the product placement fragment, while 25 out of 30 children recognized the brand correctly after seeing the AFP and 19 out of 30 children recognized the correct brand after seeing the adverage. This implies that children had the most difficulty spotting the brand when it is integrated in a television program. Although almost all the children indicated that they indeed saw glue in the program, they did not consciously notice the brand and thought it was part of the program: "*They need that product, because it is a craft program*" (boy, 11 years old). When comparing the three different age groups, results show that brand recognition in the product placement format is low in all age groups. The brand in the adverage, in contrary, is better recognized when children grow older. As such, the youngest respondents had trouble recognizing the brand, although it was prominently placed in the adverage. The older respondents recognized the brand immediately, even the more subtle brand connections: "*McDonalds, I noticed the 'M' on the tennis racket*" (girl, 9 years). Finally, the brand recognition within AFP is the highest for the youngest and oldest respondents.

Commercial intent

In general, we can conclude that it was difficult for the children to understand the commercial intent of the persuasive message: "*It is made because otherwise we could not play games*" (girl, 5 years). The answers concerning the commercial intention of each format differ considerably between the three formats. In particular, while 15 out of 30 children think that playing a funny game is the main purpose of the adverage, and 20 out of 30 children think that watching a nice TV program is the main purpose of the product placement fragment, only 9 out of 30 children think that watching a nice TV program is the main purpose of AFP.

Accordingly, 17 out of 30 children figured out correctly that the commercial intent of the **AFP** is to buy or like the integrated products. However, while the oldest children knew the program was made to make them buy something, younger children replied that the program was made '*so that they would have something to watch*'. Also, the two youngest groups were convinced that the TV program was made by the researchers or a camera man, while the oldest children knew this was made by the advertiser.

Only in 4 of the 30 cases children correctly understood the commercial intent of the **product placement fragment**. Important to note is that children from the first and second age group did not notice the commercial message. They did not mention the brand and when asked if the program wants to sell them something, they all answered that this is not the case. In the oldest

group, some children indicated that they saw a brand. They mentioned that the TV channel probably *‘works together’* with that brand, and that they were paid to show the brand. Although not all the children recognized the placement, most of them seemed to know that this is a common practice in TV programs (as they mentioned some other examples of product placement, e.g., DHL in ‘Baantjer’).

The commercial intent of *the advergame* is correctly understood in 8 of the 30 cases. When asked why the game was made, the two youngest groups mainly replied that it was made so that they could play a funny game on the internet, while the oldest group indicated that it is to convince them to visit McDonalds and spend money there. Accordingly, when asked who made the game, the youngest children replied ‘you’ meaning the researcher or ‘*the computer man*’. Some children from the second age group replied ‘*McDonalds*’ but they were not sure. The oldest children, on the other hand, all answered ‘*McDonalds*’ right away. This implies that the youngest groups had no idea of the commercial intent of the game. When asked if the game tries to sell them something, they were all convinced that this is not the case. One respondent from the second age group replies ‘*I don’t understand why McDonalds is pictured in that game. That’s for eating, why is it in a game? That is strange.*’.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, FURTHER RESEARCH

The main aim of this paper is to gain insight into children’s persuasion knowledge of integrated advertising formats. Until now, studies on children’s persuasion knowledge are based on traditional media and up till now it was not clear whether these insights also apply for new, integrated advertising formats. Since persuasion knowledge theory dominates and shapes the academic and public debate about children and advertising, the current study qualitatively investigated children’s persuasion knowledge of various integrated advertising formats. Results show that previous insights cannot just be applied for alternative advertising formats, because we noticed a lot of differences between children’s persuasion knowledge of integrated advertising formats versus traditional media. In particular, although children around the age of eight generally recognize ad content and understand the persuasive intent of it, our results show that this is not the case for integrated advertising formats. For these formats, we noticed that most children have difficulty to recognize ad content and understand the persuasive intent. However, children of the oldest age group (11-12 years) appear to be more capable of recognizing both ad content and persuasive intent than the two younger groups (4-6 years and 7-10 years). Moreover, we can conclude that ad recognition and understanding of persuasive intent differs between the different integrated formats. In particular, children have more difficulty to recognize ad content and persuasive intent of product placement than of AFP. Important to note is that for AFP, ad recognition was very high in the first age group. This might be explained by the fact that the brand connection was very obvious and very frequently mentioned in this fragment, while it was less obvious in the fragment used for both older age groups. These results are important for policy makers and advertising literacy education. As many children did not understand the commercial intent of persuasive messages that are integrated into media content, it is important to adjust existing advertising literacy programs. Despite these contributions, further research on children’s persuasion knowledge of integrated advertising formats is needed. First, the current study is a qualitative study and the results are based on interviews and focus groups with 66 children. Future research, should investigate children’s persuasion knowledge of integrated advertising formats in a large scale quantitative study. Second, future research should investigate the relation between children’s persuasion knowledge of these integrated formats and their effectiveness, also taking into account additional integrated formats such as infomercials.

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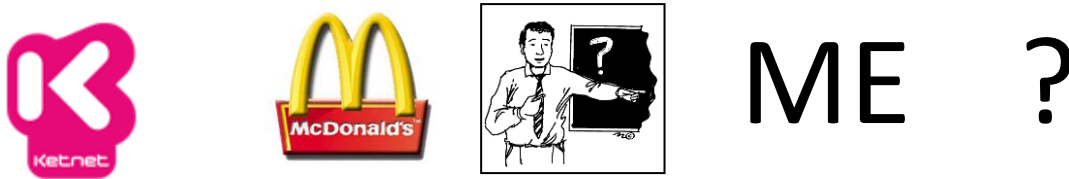
APPENDIX 1: example of the questionnaire used for each of the advertising formats

Format 1: McDonalds Advergame

1. Did you see one of these things in the game?



2. Who do you think made this game?



Ketnet
(TV channel)

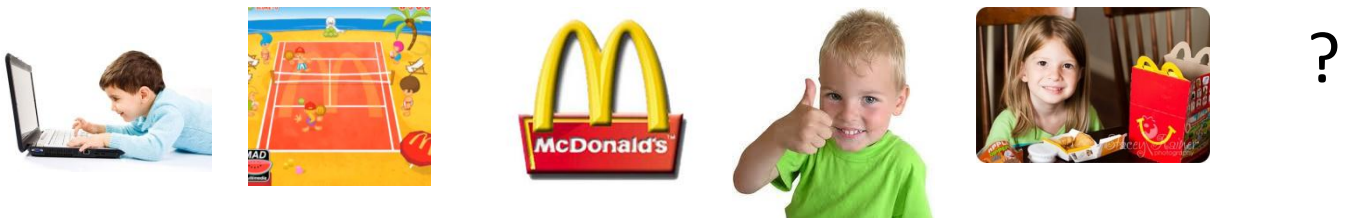
McDonalds

The teacher

The researcher

Someone else

3. What is the purpose of this game? Choose the answer that you think is correct:



Teach me how to
use the computer

To play a fun game

To make me like
McDonalds

To make me happy

To visit McDonalds or
ask mom or dad to go
there

I don't know