

PANEL PROPOSAL:

CHILDREN AND A CHANGING WORLD OF ADVERTISING

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## CHILDREN AND A CHANGING WORLD OF ADVERTISING:

### EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF CONTEMPORARY COMMERCIAL COMMUNICATION ON THE ADVERTISING LITERACY OF MINORS

#### **GENERAL PANEL ABSTRACT:**

Advertisers are continuously searching for new ways to persuade children. Among others, they adopt practices such as fully integrating commercial content into media content and actively engaging children with the commercial content. This poses a challenge for children's advertising literacy. As they lack the cognitive skills and abilities to critically process advertising, children often do not comprehend commercial messages in the same way as more mature audiences, and, hence, are very susceptible to advertising influence. This is especially the case for new advertising formats, where commercial messages are often embedded in fun and entertaining media content such as a video clip or a digital game. As a result, the distinction between content, information and advertising becomes blurred. Minors are then faced with the challenge to recognize this type of advertising, and to understand its persuasive intent. Moreover, contemporary advertising formats pursue different advertising goals than traditional formats, like for example gathering personal data to adjust future persuasive communication. This raises concerns with respect to the appropriateness and ethicality of using these advertising techniques when targeting minors.

Taking the changes in today's (digital) commercial communication into account, the current panel sheds a light on the concept of advertising literacy from four different angles.

First, a much-needed overview of the concept of advertising literacy is provided, emphasizing a clear distinction between dispositional (i.e. general) and situational advertising literacy (i.e. at the time of actual advertising exposure). Next, the focus lies on the question how children cope with new advertising formats, and how this ability can be improved.

Second, advertising literacy is examined from a methodological point of view. To date, research in the topic of advertising literacy yields far from univocal results. These inconsistencies lie in the large diversity of operational definitions and measurement instruments. Therefore, an overview is given of the various measurement methods used in previous research, and recommendations are given for practitioners and scholars in terms of what methods are most appropriate to use for measuring advertising literacy.

Third, new trends in commercial communication directed towards minors are examined from a regulatory point of view. As the use of converged technologies and hybrid advertising formats blur the lines between commercial and editorial content, questions are raised concerning the applicability of the current regulatory framework. Depending on the advertising format, different laws in various law domains or self/co-regulatory obligations may be applicable. In this contribution, an overview of current existing regulatory obligations at the European Union level is provided. Further, a critical assessment is made of the applicability of these regulatory instruments to converging, digital advertising formats.

Finally, the use of new advertising formats aimed at minors is looked at from both the advertisers' and the parents' point of view. In order to do so, the results of an online survey measuring the perception of advertising professionals and parents are discussed. The opinions of both parents and advertising professionals are compared, and differences in opinions regarding advertising aimed at children versus teenagers is identified and discussed.

## **ABSTRACTS FOR INDIVIDUAL PRESENTATIONS:**

### **PRESENTATION 1: CHILDREN'S PROCESSING OF NEW ADVERTISING FORMATS: HOW TO IMPROVE CHILDREN'S DISPOSITIONAL AND SITUATIONAL ADVERTISING LITERACY?**

Compared to traditional advertising formats, contemporary advertising is characterized by a more subtle, less intrusive commercial nature. Commercial messages are now frequently integrated in or merged with highly entertaining and fun media content, which distract the users from systematically and critically processing the content. This makes it difficult for consumers, especially young consumers with limited advertising literacy, to evaluate the persuasion attempt critically.

Not only do children have a limited general knowledge of advertising (i.e. *dispositional* advertising literacy), they also have difficulty to actually apply this knowledge when confronted with advertising (i.e. *situational* advertising literacy). To be able to activate their advertising literacy when confronted with (new forms of) advertising, children need certain coping skills, as well as a number of cognitive, emotion regulation and moral capacities. As studies focusing on strategies to improve the situational advertising literacy of children remain scarce, the current presentation will focus on the interrelationships between dispositional and situational advertising literacy to investigate how children can be assisted in their recognition and critical processing of (new) advertising formats.

We hereby refer to Friestad and Wright's (1994) 'if-then' procedure (i.e. "*if people are made aware of a persuasion attempt, they then have to figure out how to effectively manage their response to this attempt*") in order to reflect on how we can help children to 1) realize that they are confronted with advertising in order to 2) be able to process it in a critical manner. However, for children, this second step may not follow automatically from the first step when confronted with new advertising formats. Research shows that recognition of advertising does not automatically lead to a critical evaluation. Therefore, we reflect on how these two steps can be linked successfully and automatically. A suggestion proposed by this paper is the use of automatic and implicit tactics such as persuasive intent priming and implementation intentions to improve children's associative network and learn them to cope with advertising. Besides reflecting on specific strategies that can be used to improve children's dispositional and situational advertising literacy, this presentation will also reflect on children's processing of advertising formats and the challenges for their advertising literacy in the contemporary advertising environment.

## PRESENTATION 2: CONSIDERING ADVERTISING LITERACY FROM A METHODOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW: PAST PRACTICES AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The concern that minors do not comprehend commercial messages in the same way as do more mature audiences, and hence, are highly susceptible to advertising influence has led to a substantial body of research focusing on minors' development of advertising literacy and their susceptibility to persuasion attempts. Yet, the results of these studies yield mixed results and are far from univocal. These inconsistencies lie in the fact that the majority of these studies have used different operational definitions of advertising literacy. Put differently, the literature is not entirely straightforward in what instruments provide the most valid and reliable measurement of advertising literacy.

Based on this line of reasoning, the first key purpose of this article is to give an overview of the various quantitative measurement methods used in previous research and discuss their applicability and validity. In past advertising literacy research, many studies used a variety of quantitative measures to assess advertising literacy among children. These measurements require children to express their understanding in their own words, or by choosing from a set of answer options (e.g. semantic differential or Likert scales, set of pictures, etc.) presented verbally, visually or in written form. In the context of this manuscript, four principal quantitative methods will be reviewed: the (structured) interview, verbal self-report, visual self-report and game-play. In addition, a clear distinction will be made between situational and dispositional advertising literacy measures, a distinction barely addressed in past research. However, disentangling the abovementioned inconsistency in measurement methods cannot be accomplished by simply reviewing past studies and classifying them according to measurement technique. Instead, the research community investigating the topic of advertising literacy has to look forward towards future research with more systematic unity in the employment of quantitative measurement tools. Therefore, the second key purpose of this manuscript is to formulate helpful recommendations for practitioners and scholars in terms of what methods are, according to us, most appropriate to use for measuring advertising literacy, offering them useful guidance in their quest for a suitable instrument. These recommendations will be approached by a (cognitive) developmental perspective since research methods that involve children as respondents depend primarily on age. The latter will be achieved by defining certain age groups and discuss the most effective or suitable method for each group.

### PRESENTATION 3: REGULATING ADVERTISING AIMED AT CHILDREN IN THE DIGITAL ERA: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE OR TOO MUCH, TOO SOON?

Advertising has always been regulated to a certain extent, either through legislation or alternative regulatory instruments, such as self- and/or co-regulation. The protection of vulnerable viewers or media users, of which children and teenagers are a prime example, is one of the rationales which usually inspires such regulation. Traditionally, and certainly with regard to legislation, rules (may) differ according to the medium through which advertising is communicated. However, as advertising strategies increasingly include cross-media campaigns, the use of converged technologies and hybrid formats which blur the lines between commercial and editorial content, questions are raised as to the applicability of the current legislative framework. The same ad which is aimed at minors on television may be subject to other rules when it is distributed on an online platform such as YouTube. An advergame which goes viral through a social network may fall within the scope of different laws in various law domains, depending on its format and content. This paper will provide an overview of current existing legal obligations at the European Union level in three main fields: audiovisual media services, electronic commerce and consumer protection. The relevant provisions of the applicable regulatory instruments will be identified, and described. In a second part a critical assessment will be made of the applicability of these instruments to converging, digital advertising formats. Gaps as well as possible overlap will be exposed, in order to evaluate to what extent the policy goal of protecting children is realized today with regard to these formats.

#### PRESENTATION 4: THE APPROPRIATENESS OF NEW ADVERTISING FORMATS AIMED AT MINORS: INVESTIGATING THE ADVERTISERS' AND PARENTS' POINT OF VIEW

One of the main characteristics of contemporary advertising formats is the fact that commercial messages are often embedded in fun and entertaining media content, blurring the lines between content, information and advertising. Especially for minors, who have limited advertising literacy, it is a challenge to recognize this type of advertising, and to understand its persuasive nature and the techniques used. Moreover, advertising formats are aimed at gathering personal data to adjust future persuasive communication. This raises concerns with respect to the appropriateness and ethicality of using these advertising techniques when targeting minors.

In the present study, the perception of advertising professionals and parents concerning the use of novel advertising formats targeting minors was investigated by means of an online survey (88 advertising professionals and 172 parents).

In the first section, nine different vignettes were presented describing new advertising formats used to target minors in both offline and online environments. The respondents were asked to indicate from which age on they perceived the type of advertising described in the vignette as ethically and morally acceptable as well as from which age on minors can understand the persuasive nature and from which age on minors need to be notified about the commercial nature of the advertising format. Subsequently, ethical and legal aspects concerning advertising aimed at minors were addressed. Respondents were asked whether legal or self-regulating organizations should regulate commercial communication towards children and teenagers as well as through which organizations (governmental or educational) advertising literacy in minors should be improved. The judicial aspects covered topics such as data protection and data collection through advertising formats.

The second section of the survey was specifically aimed at either advertising professionals who advertise towards minors, or parents. Advertising professionals were asked which forms of advertising they use towards which specific target group(s) (children and/or teenagers) and whether or not the organization they work for collects personal data about minors. Parents were asked about their parental mediation style when their children are confronted with advertising in their everyday media consumption.

The survey makes a distinction between two groups of minors, namely children (6-12 years) and teenagers (13-18 years). Both age groups differ from each other regarding the Belgian school system. Children from six years till the age of twelve years attend primary school and children between thirteen and eighteen years old attend secondary school. The data have been collected and are currently analyzed.

The results of this study provide insights into the extent to which (new) advertising formats are seen as unethical and problematic or are associated with a negative perception regarding

their use towards children and teenagers. Innovative contribution of this study is that the answers of both parents and advertising professionals are compared, which allows us to investigate differences in perceptions and opinions between both groups and to stimulate debate. Furthermore, differences in opinions regarding advertising aimed at children versus teenagers can be identified and discussed.