

Original Article

The Susceptibility of Children to Advertisements: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Children are very much susceptible to advertisements which is why this topic has been the most debatable subject for many years. If we compare children with adults, children who belong to the analytical stage (according to Piaget's theory of cognitive development), i.e. 7 to 11 years, are considered to be very susceptible to advertising and consequently very responsive to it. The reason for the vulnerability is that children could not understand the intent of advertisers as advertising literacy is very low in children. This paper is all about how children are susceptible to advertising, which has been discussed over the years; for that, we have taken into account the research papers from 1990 to 2023. We have focussed on the unintentional impact of advertising upon children and their cognitive knowledge and defence mechanism for advertising. In the end, we have discussed the scope for future research, which has not been addressed to date on children's susceptibility to advertising.

Keywords: Advertising literacy, Advertising defence, Children, Susceptibility.

I. INTRODUCTION

The susceptibility of children to advertising has always been the most debatable subject over the years. From the concern over the unlimited harmful impacts of advertisements on the health of children, there has also been research which focussed on ethical consideration of advertising to children (Sharp, Kindra, and Bandyopadhyay 2001; Nairn and Fine 2008; Snyder 2011).

The children in their analytical stage (7 to 11 years) have limited cognitive abilities such as reasoning or discernment. This makes them more susceptible to becoming the victims of the advertisers and easily convinced by the intent of advertisers than adults. The main reason behind this is that children's literacy and understanding of advertising are not yet developed properly and, hence, fail to protect themselves from the deceptive intent of advertising (Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011; Hudders et al. 2017).

According to CCPA (Central Consumer Protection Authority), advertising to children is not considered morally good. Despite being considered unfair nowadays, every other advertiser is targeting their marketing strategies exclusively for children. Due to integrated marketing, children are exposed to the same advertisements again and again on different media platforms, get easily lured by them, and fail to identify the true nature and purpose of advertisements (Hudders et al. 2017). Children who are exposed to different media platforms are at big risk that their identity and personal information can be misused because the advertisers know that the children are less prudent, and hence, this raises their safety concerns (Miyazaki, Stanaland, and Lwin 2009; Reijmersdal et al. 2017).

In this paper, we have discussed how children as consumers are susceptible to advertising and how this topic has been studied over the years. In this article, we will discuss the harmful effects of advertising and advertising literacy among children as they do not have the ability to understand the intent of advertisements; the end, we have discussed the scope for future research related to the susceptibility of children, and we will also address the forthcoming trends of advertising to children.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the analysis of available previous literature that exists in the area of susceptibility of children to advertising over the years with the aim to analyze the increment or decrement in the effect of advertising with the help of advertising literacy and defence mechanisms deployed by children. For this article, a systematic review of the literature was done from the years 1990 to 2023, especially the articles taken out from the International Journal of Advertising (IJA) and some other important articles from different journals. To identify and find relevant research papers, several keywords were identified to find out the literature targeting advertising to children.



The keywords that we have identified are Advertising and Children. When we applied these keywords, a total of 226 articles were generated from the results. Only those articles were included in this review paper for those who met a few benchmarks: (1) those Articles which are published in reputed journals, specifically the International Journal of Advertising (IJA), (2) articles included for review which were published from 1990 to 2023, (3) article those have targeted advertising to children from 7 to 11 years of old, and (4) research papers those have targeted these topics: negative effects of advertising on children, children understanding advertisers intent, defences mechanism from advertising and education of children towards advertising also the role of parents in it.

Titles and abstracts were examined to see if they fulfilled the predefined criteria for the selection of research papers in my review paper. After examination and reading the titles and abstracts, 43 research papers from the International Journal of Advertising (IJA) and 21 research papers were selected from other different journals.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A) *Negative Effects of Advertising on Children*

Research on the negative effects of advertising has been a persistent focus in advertising studies since the early 1980s. The detrimental effects of alcohol and tobacco advertising on youngsters were the main focus at this time. The International Journal of Advertising contributed significantly to this topic compared to other advertising journals. In recent decades, the negative effects of alcohol and tobacco advertising have received much less attention in the International Journal of Advertising and other advertising journals, likely because such advertising aimed at children is now banned in many countries.

Since the start of the current millennium, research on the negative effects of advertising has mainly concentrated on the promotion of unhealthy foods. Over the past 23 years, the International Journal of Advertising has published more than 15 articles on this topic, significantly more than other advertising journals. Collectively, these publications provide compelling evidence of the impact of unhealthy food advertising on children's food choices, buying behaviour, appeals, and consumption.

Conflict between parents and their kids and materialism are two additional detrimental effects of advertising that are mentioned in the literature considerably less frequently. (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2003; De Jans et al. 2019). There are relatively few publications discussing materialism and parent-child conflict as detrimental effects of advertising in the International Journal of Advertising and other marketing journals. This study showed that youngsters are encouraged to badger their parents for things that are advertised. However, when parents are unable or unwilling to fulfil these requests, it can result in parent-child conflicts (McDermott et al. 2006).

B) *Children Understand Advertisers' Intent.*

Advertisement understanding, also known as persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), encompasses a broad spectrum of understanding, attitudes, and skills necessary for critically evaluating advertising. Advertising literacy is comprised of three main components, namely conceptual, psychological, and moral. The ability to recognize and comprehend advertising, including its persuasive methods and selling message, is known as conceptual advertising literacy. Moral advertising literacy refers to judgments about the propriety and fairness of advertising, whereas attitude advertising literacy covers a general distaste and skepticism against advertising. (Hudders et al. 2017; Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011). Children vary in their levels of advertising literacy. Depending on individual characteristics such as age and personal interests, some aspects of advertising literacy are more advanced in some kids than in others.

A large and widely recognized body of research has focused on how children's advertising literacy develops (De Jans et al. 2019; John 1999; Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005; Young 1990). This study shows that as people age, their level of advertising literacy increases, moving from fundamental to more sophisticated understandings and perspectives regarding the nature and operation of advertising. Traditionally, research has relied on Piaget's developmental stages (Piaget 1929) and information processing theory (Roedder 1991) to describe the age-related changes in children's advertising literacy. According to this viewpoint, children's cognitive abilities—including their capacity to gather, encode, organize, and retain information—are the primary determinants of their development of advertising literacy (John 1999). Subsequent studies started utilizing ideas from more modern theories of development, such as the Theory of Mind (ToM), to explain how children's comprehension of the persuasive power of advertising is related to their capacity to examine viewpoints different from their own (Moses and Baldwin 2005). According to this viewpoint, children's ability to understand and take into account the mental state of another person is the primary factor in their growth of advertising literacy.

Young (1990) was one of the first to publish in the International Journal of Advertising with an emphasis on advertising for kids' literacy. In his paper, he looked at how children's advertising literacy changes in relation to conventional television advertising. He came to the conclusion that by adolescence, the majority of kids seemed to understand the significance of television advertising. Furthermore, he contended that peer group influences are an important subject for additional investigation since they have a major impact on the effects of advertising, much like family and peers do. The International

Journal of Advertising has seen an increase in study attention on the growth and effects of children's advertising literacy since 2000. In the meantime, since the 1990s, numerous advertising publications have focused on the development of children's advertising literacy. During that period, research primarily examined how younger children, such as preschoolers, recognize and comprehend television advertisements. The results showed that kids younger than six usually do not understand the difference between television shows and advertisements.

Children's advertising literacy has recently been the focus of studies mainly on contemporary advertising forms, like celebrity endorsements and placements of brands in entertainment media (Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016; Neyens, Smits, and Boyland 2017; Uribe and Fuentes-García 2017; Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave, and Ponnet 2017; De Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018). These studies reveal that children of all ages find it significantly more challenging to identify contemporary advertising formats, such as brand placements and influencer marketing, as persuasive compared to traditional television commercials. A key reason for this is that these advertising formats are embedded within editorial content or entertainment, such as influencer videos, movies, or games, unlike traditional television commercials, which are clearly separate from the content. The commercial message is usually completely interwoven into the content of influencer postings on social media. Because of this, kids may find it more difficult to recognize these ads as advertisements since they lack some distinctive commercial characteristics. It is even more difficult for kids to comprehend the commercial goal of modern advertising communications when they are unable to identify those messages.

C) Defences Mechanism from Advertising

Most ideas about children and advertising have always assumed that cognitive defenses are the main line of defense against advertising. As a result, while interpreting advertising messages, advertising literacy serves as a filter. According to the cognitive defense theory, kids who are sufficiently literate in advertising will apply this understanding to assess the advertisements they see critically, reducing their susceptibility to their impact. (Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011). The Processing of Commercialized Media Content (PCMC) model (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010) suggests that accessing and applying advertising literacy demands the most complex level of information processing: critical systematic processing. At this point, the recipient must actively retrieve and apply pertinent advertising knowledge as a defense against persuasion in order to recognize the persuasive intent of the communication. The likelihood that the recipient will analyze the message critically and systematically depends on how capable and motivated they are to do so.

In the current commercial media landscape, various factors may prevent children from processing advertising at the most advanced level. In their critical essay in the International Journal of Advertising, Nairn and Fine (2008) contended that modern advertising does not directly persuade children but influences them through subconscious, non-rational methods, primarily by leveraging highly engaging content. Crucially, the emotional appeal of modern advertising, coupled with children's underdeveloped cognitive abilities, makes it challenging for them to engage in critical systematic processing. Children must possess the cognitive control to refocus their attention from the emotionally compelling advertisement and then use a cognitive approach to critically evaluate the message in order to engage and utilize their marketing literacy. According to Rozendaal, Buijzen et al. (2011), this procedure is referred to as the "stop-and-think response" because it has a tight connection to kids' executive functions. These are a group of mental processes that help manage and regulate emotions, thoughts, and actions. They typically develop to adult levels only in late adolescence. Since Nairn and Fine's essay in the International Journal of Advertising in 2008, an increasing amount of empirical research has emerged, both in the International Journal of Advertising and other different advertising journals, focusing on how children process advertising and the role of advertising literacy as a defence against its effects. The results of these studies show how difficult it is for kids to engage their advertising literacy as a defense mechanism and process advertising at a critical and sophisticated level, especially when it comes to embedded advertising formats like brand placements, social media persona aiming for, and advertgames.

D) Educating Children Towards Advertising also the Role of Parents in it.

Enhancing children's critical thinking abilities and coping strategies through advertising literacy instruction, like educational offerings in institutions of learning, is one way to help them become critical consumers of advertising. In the International Journal of Advertising, Austin (2006) was among the first to support media literacy initiatives and advertising in order to prepare kids better to fend against the effects of advertising. Despite the call for further research on the impact of media education on children's defences against advertising, relatively few studies in the International Journal of Advertising and other advertising journals have explored this topic. These few studies have, however, demonstrated the efficacy of advertising literacy training programs in raising children's awareness of advertisements. For instance, a study published in the International Journal of Advertising by Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic (2016) showed that children's comprehension of selling intent, their ability to identify persuasive strategies, and their knowledge of the commercial origins of advertisement games could all be significantly improved with even a short training.

However, as was already noted, it is quite likely that when kids are exposed to advertisements, their advertising literacy is not something they naturally or instinctively activate and apply. Thus, merely enhancing children's advertising literacy may not be sufficient to strengthen their defences against advertising. Children must also be encouraged to actively apply and utilize their advertising literacy (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010; Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016; Rozendaal, Buijzen, et al. 2011). In this process, parents can have a significant influence. By actively mediating, they can fortify a child's resistance to advertising by provoking them to consider the content of the message and view it with more skepticism. Over the past few decades, research on parental communication about advertising has been a major emphasis of the IJA and other advertising publications. However, recent studies have shown that parents, due to their limited knowledge of modern advertising formats, often struggle to identify the commercials their kids play with online, resulting in a decrease in the use of mediation (Newman and Oates 2014; Spiteri Cornish 2014; Ahn 2022; Evans, Carlson, and Grubbs Hoy 2013).

Another approach to strengthening children's advertising defences is to include a disclosure of the advertising message. Advertising-related laws and rules in Europe and the US require the use of a clear declaration to make marketing easily identifiable in order to help both adults and children distinguish when media material is commercial. It is believed that disclosures in contemporary embedded forms of advertising provide children more influence by enhancing their marketing literacy. Specifically, these disclosures can help children identify the commercial nature of an advertising message and encourage them to assess the advertisement more critically. However, studies show that a number of variables affect how effective disclosure is at increasing children's understanding of advertising and promoting their marketing literacy. For instance, a study in the *International Journal of Advertising* by De Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe (2018) suggests that the more prominent an advertising disclosure is, the more likely it is to be effective.

IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

To enhance children's ability to be critical consumers and strengthen their advertising defences, future research should address at least three key questions. First, what does it mean to be a critical consumer in today's commercialized online environment? As AI and other emerging technologies become more influential in children's digital lives, Understanding the actions and approaches that will allow them to interact critically and safely with emerging forms of advertising and business practices connected to these technologies—like virtual advertising in the metaverse—is essential (Taylor 2022). There are more hazards associated with these new advertising forms, such as the potential for personal data to be disclosed. To what degree are kids able to identify and comprehend AI-powered advertising formats? Do they know about the possible threats to their safety and privacy? How do they feel about AI-powered advertising campaigns?

Second, what influences children's defences against advertising? What factors help or hinder their ability to handle advertising critically? Understanding these aspects is crucial for enhancing advertising defences, as it reveals what is needed to encourage the desired coping behaviours. It is frequently assumed that knowledge about advertising significantly enhances children's defences against it. However, previous research has indicated that merely understanding advertising does not necessarily equip children to critically handle all types of advertising. Determining what extra elements, outside of the awareness of advertising, can help kids deal with advertising will be a major task for future studies on advertising literacy and defenses. For example, what other types of literacy, like data and AI literacy, are required for kids to handle advertising, especially AI-driven strategies like behavioral and profiling advertising? Furthermore, how much do unique qualities of children (e.g., personality traits) and situational factors (e.g., socioeconomic status) influence their advertising coping behaviours? Comprehending these variables is imperative for the advancement of theoretical understanding regarding children's defenses against advertising, as well as their societal significance. This insight can help tailor interventions to the specific needs of different audiences and situations, as standardized, one-size-fits-all approaches have proven to be ineffective (Rozendaal and Figner 2020).

Third, Which intervention strategies and measures are effective in enhancing children's ability to cope with advertising? It is essential to consider a wide range of intervention approaches, including those aimed at individuals (e.g., through educational or training programs) as well as those targeting the broader context (e.g., regulations requiring clear advertising disclosures). Despite the growing research on advertising disclosures in recent years, there is still limited understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of disclosures in improving transparency. As noted by Van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, these discoveries are essential for expanding our knowledge of disclosure effects and for creating and evaluating ideas that can explain and forecast how these effects function. Future studies on advertising education could look into the best teaching methods for bolstering kids' defenses against advertisements. Furthermore, to evaluate the long-term and perhaps delayed consequences of teaching children advertising literacy, longitudinal studies are required.

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