

**Children's Advertising Literacy in a New Media Environment: An Introduction to the AdLit  
Research Project**

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**Short summary**

Nowadays, children are confronted with a massive amount of advertising, not only through traditional formats but also through a wide range of (new) formats such as advergames, advertiser-funded programming, mobile advertising, social media advertising, native advertising, etc. Advertisers use these new formats to attract children's attention in an overly cluttered advertising environment and to persuade them more effectively. What all these formats have in common, however, is that they persuade children implicitly or 'under the radar'. Contrary to traditional formats, new ad formats fully integrate media content into commercial content, actively engage the user with the commercial content and have different aims than traditional advertising, such as the distribution of the commercial content among friends and the collection of personal information.

These characteristics make it more difficult for young consumers to detect advertising and to understand its persuasive intent, also referred to as advertising literacy (e.g., Rozendaal et al., 2011). As children already have more difficulties to understand the commercial intent of traditional advertising than adults (Wright, Friestad & Boush, 2005), partly due to still developing cognitive capacities and consumer experience (Piaget, 1929), these recent developments have raised concerns among parents, policy makers, educators, societal organizations and the advertising industry about how to ethically target these young consumers. Some of them suggested to ban certain new media (e.g., tablets) for children, or to strictly regulate new advertising formats. However, as advertising spreads across country borders, the application of (national) legislation is increasingly challenged.

Moreover, the complete banning of advertising out of children's lives is not only practically unattainable, it is also undesirable since it will make them even more vulnerable for persuasion at a later stage. According to consumer socialization theory, socialization can help children develop into critical and conscious consumers who adopt conscious consumption patterns. They can learn the skills, attitudes and knowledge necessary to make adequate consumer decisions (Ward, 1974).

Therefore, children are seen as a target audience in need of empowerment in order to cope with persuasive messages which may evoke negative effects (such as higher levels of materialism, unhappiness,...) when they are inefficiently processed. The current paper presents the approach of the AdLit interdisciplinary research project (funded by the IWT) which investigates how children can be empowered for, and protected against, persuasion at an unconscious level (due to their lack of knowledge and critical attitude) by these new advertising practices. The combination of a strong demand driven approach relying on needs and insights of

relevant stakeholders in the field (i.e., advertising industry, broadcasting channels, societal organizations, the educational field and policy makers) and the experience and knowledge of six research groups from different disciplines, paved the path to develop the current project. The project has three general research questions:

1. What level of advertising literacy do minors have for the different new advertising formats, considering age differences and social contextual variables (i.e., parenting, peer influence, socio-economic household situation)?
2. How can minors' advertising literacy be improved?
3. How can a future-proof regulatory framework that aims to empower minors be constructed?

The current paper investigates how different disciplines (communication sciences, law, marketing and pedagogy) approach the topic of children's advertising literacy in a new media environment. Legal research on this topic, for instance, is strongly dependent on input from social sciences to develop efficient regulation (e.g. with regard to differentiation in regulation according to age). At the same time, results from research into the applicability of and gaps in the existing legal and self-regulatory framework can feed into recommendations on the legal or regulatory feasibility of certain strategies (such as for instance the use of cues). In addition, the project will include the impact of both individual (i.e., age) and social contextual variables (e.g., socio-economic household situation, parenting styles and peer influence). We take these variables into account because the diversity in age, socio-economic household situation, parenting style, or peer influence may explain potential differences in advertising literacy among minors.