A Qualitative Approach to Unravel Preschoolers’ Advertising Literacy for YouTube

Advertising: In-Depth Interviews with Children and their Parents

Watching YouTube videos has taken a prominent place in the lives of preschool children aged three to five years old. However, YouTube features an array of different advertising formats ranging from pre-roll ads to influencer marketing (Cramer-Flood, 2021). These formats are integrated into the media content, making it hard to differentiate between commercial and media content. This is especially the case for preschoolers, as they are assumed to lack sufficient advertising literacy (i.e. the ability to recognize and understand, critically reflect, and morally evaluate advertising) (Hudders et al., 2017). As these skills refine with age, influenced by social development (e.g. Theory of Mind [ToM], the ability to think about others’ thoughts and feelings) and cognitive development (e.g. memory), preschoolers are considered vulnerable to the impact of advertising (Hudders et al., 2017; Moses & Baldwin, 2005).

However, studies on how preschoolers process digital advertising are scarce and mostly experimental of nature. So, it remains unclear what exactly underlies these children’s advertising literacy (e.g., on what ad features do they base their advertising recognition on) and whether this differs across formats.

Therefore, the current study takes on a qualitative approach to explore preschoolers’ advertising literacy. Through in-depth interviews with parent child-dyads, we examine what underlies preschoolers’ advertising literacy and whether it differs in response to different ad formats (i.e. TV-commercial, YouTube pre-roll ad, and YouTube influencer marketing). In addition, we examined whether their advertising literacy is related to 1) social development and 2) parental perceptions and practices, as both have been shown to influence children’s susceptibility to advertising (see for example Watkins et al., 2017). By relying on parent-child dyads we not only aimed to compensate for preschoolers' limited verbal skills but also gained
information about variables of which young children have little knowledge of (e.g. parental mediation style). To discover possible differences in advertising literacy related to age, we included both preschool and primary school children in our sample.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 35 parents (age ranging from 30 to 46, $M = 38.06, SD = 4.21$) and 40 children (age ranging from four to seven, $M = 5.28; SD = 1.06$), to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: Are young children (age 4-7) able to recognize and understand TV commercials, YouTube pre-roll ads, and YouTube influencer marketing?

- **RQ2**: On which advertising features do young children base their advertising recognition and understanding?

- **RQ3**: How do young children evaluate TV commercials, YouTube pre-roll ads, and YouTube influencer marketing in terms of morality?

- **RQ4**: Is there a difference in advertising literacy between preschool-aged children (4-5) and primary school children (6-7)?

- **RQ5**: Is there an association between children’s ToM skills and their advertising literacy?

- **RQ6**: How is children’s advertising literacy for traditional and digital advertising formats related to the employed parental mediation style?

**Procedure**

Children watched a total of three different advertising formats, i.e. TV commercial, YouTube pre-roll, and YouTube influencer marketing (see Appendix I for screenshots of the different formats). They viewed one ad at a time, after which their ad recognition, understanding of selling intent, and affective and moral evaluation of the ad were explored before moving on to the next commercial. All questions were tailored to the target age group by providing limited
visual answer options to aid the children in formulating an answer. In addition, social skills were measured by two Theory of Mind tasks.

Interviews with the parents tackled three main areas. First, parents were asked about their family media use and general handling of their child’s media exposure (i.e. mediation style). Second, we explored parents’ encounters, attitudes, and understanding of YouTube advertising, followed by questions about their perception of their child’s encounters with advertising on YouTube and advertising literacy. Lastly, the parents were asked about their specific mediation style and their attitude regarding advertising in general.

**Results**

Interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12 software for qualitative data analysis. Analysis was handled through a grounded theory approach, moving through stages of open (developing as many categories as possible) to axial (reducing and clustering the categories) to selective coding (selection of core categories).

Analysis revealed that preschool children can recognize and to some extent also understand both TV commercials and YouTube pre-roll ads, but struggle with YouTube influencer marketing (*RQ1*). This difference could be explained by the notion that their recognition and understanding are based on perceptual features of an ad, such as a voice-over, short duration, or the presence of a skip button on YouTube, all of which are absent in YouTube influencer marketing (*RQ2*). Advertising literacy was found to refine with age, as the primary school children showed better recognition and a more thorough understanding of TV commercials and pre-roll ads than preschoolers (*RQ4*). However, in our study, this difference could not be related to the development of social skills (*RQ5*). Following this, we found no moral evaluations of advertising neither for preschool children nor for primary school children (*RQ3*). Lastly, through combining the child and parental interviews, we revealed an association between preschoolers’ advertising literacy and the employed parental mediation style. More
specifically, the stricter the parents control for media exposure, the worse the children were at recognizing and understanding advertising and vice versa (RQ6).
References


Appendix I

1. TV commercial

2. YouTube pre-roll ad
3. YouTube influencer marketing