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## Special Issue Nr. 43: Advertising Literacy. How Can Children and Adolescents Deal with Persuasive Messages in a Complex Media Environment?

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### Editorial: Advertising Literacy

#### How Can Children and Adolescents Deal with Persuasive Messages in a Complex Media Environment?

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Advertising is a ubiquitous part of our day-to-day lives. We are confronted with persuasive messages via different channels, in different situations, and with varying degrees of transparency on a daily basis (Naderer et al. 2020). The blurring of different media genres and reference frameworks in a complex media environment poses challenges to all recipients (Borchers and Woelke 2020; van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal 2020). But these challenges are particularly hard to master for children and adolescents (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994; Buijzen, van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010; Lapierre 2019; Hudders et al. 2017; Rozendaal et al. 2011) who are an important target group for advertisers (John 1999; Naderer 2021). Companies specifically target children and adolescents because they are the future consumers. Moreover, as children are largely unbiased towards brands and are still developing their product preferences, they are particularly receptive to advertising measures (Buijzen, van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010). Finally, children and adolescents already have a notable spending capacity, since they significantly impact their parents' purchasing behavior and are able to select products while shopping with their parents (Wilson and Wood 2004).

Recognizing, understanding, and evaluating advertising messages is a crucial challenge for children and adolescents, since their cognitive abilities are still developing (Buijzen, van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010; John 1999; Lapierre 2019) and because they lack experience with persuasive messages (Boush et al. 1994). The necessary skills for competently coping with advertising messages are captured by the concept "advertising literacy" (Rozendaal et al. 2011; Young 2003). Advertising literacy, however, should not be regarded as a detached skill set, but as part of comprehensive media literacy (Livingstone and Helsper 2006; Nelson 2016). In this context, advertising literacy is linked to various challenges: to decipher processes of media (content) production; to competently act as communicator and recipient in the media environment; and to detect which persuasive strategies are employed to which aims (Naderer 2021; van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal 2020).

These skills are confronted with new challenges, as the media environment changes and persuasive messages become increasingly entangled with entertaining and journalistic content (Borchers 2017). The articles in this special issue shine a light on some of these challenges:



Considering young consumers' understanding of advertising messages in different media environments **Claudia Lampert, Anne Schulze and Stephan Dreyer** discuss how children, and adolescents comprehend advertising in an online environment based on a mixed-methods study design that includes a qualitative and a quantitative reception study. The authors illustrate how challenging it is for children to adequately transfer concepts of offline and traditional advertising formats to their understanding of online advertising. The study particularly addresses the need for future research to analyze how children can adequately deal with more personalized online advertisements.

**Michael Haas and Anna Keller** add to the perspective of new advertising outlets by diving deeply into the understanding of such advertising formats that are communicated and presented by a new form of technology, specifically smart speakers (Kudina 2019). In their article, they present a definition of smart speakers and discuss which role these speakers play in the lives of children and families in general. The authors particularly outline the high degree of user competence that is necessary to adequately understand and utilize this technology. Finally, they address what pedagogical approaches are necessary to promote advertising literacy in this area.

Two further contributions consider an advertising format that showcases the blurring boundaries between persuasive and entertaining content particularly well: influencer marketing. During the last few years, social media influencers (hereafter: influencers) have become huge idols for children and adolescents and this is why influencer marketing is highly relevant for a young audience (Hudders et al. 2020). However, influencers' seamless intertwining of organic and sponsored content that combines brand presentations with sometimes intimate, sometimes proficient, sometimes funny, but always authentic episodes makes it specifically hard for their young audience to competently cope with persuasive messages. Research on advertising literacy has identified influencer marketing as a relevant advertising format for examination (e.g. Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2020; de Jans, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2018; van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019), yet many influencer-related issues have hitherto remained unaddressed.

**Claudia Riesmeyer, Pauline Sawatzki, and Amelie Hagleitner** add to this body of literature by examining the persuasive understanding of adolescents with regard to the visual self-presentation of influencers and the connection to commercial brand presentations. Their results indicate that influencers self-presentations are important benchmarks for almost all interviewed adolescents. The participants indicated that they followed one or more influencers on Instagram and were inspired by the advertised products. Furthermore, they recognized influencers' commercial interest and presentation strategies.

In the second contribution on this topic, **Jessica Kühn and Claudia Riesmeyer** examine influencer marketing from the perspective of influencers. Turning conventional research designs upside-down, they investigated the advertising literacy not of followers but of influencers themselves. Specifically, their study demonstrates that influencers are aware of the different roles they fulfill for their followers, most importantly the roles of persuasive agents and role models. Influencers use their target knowledge about their followers to create sponsored messages that followers perceive as authentic. The study also highlights the importance of the effort that influencers invest in building relationships with their followers.

Finally, **Ines Spielvogel** raises the issue of helpful advertising disclosures from a regulatory perspective. Advertising disclosures are an important component in regulatory initiatives because they can help recipients to identify persuasive messages (Eisend et al. 2020) and support the consumers' right to decide whether they wish to engage with the persuasive content or not (Cain 2011). Ines Spielvogel presents a conceptual framework on how advertising disclosures should be designed in order to effectively support children to identify persuasive contents and adds conceptually to existing effect studies on advertising disclosures and children (e.g., de Jans et al. 2018; Spielvogel, Naderer, and Matthes 2020).

Taken together, this special issue collects five innovative studies that address the challenges that today's integrated advertising environments pose for children and adolescents in their journey to becoming proficient and thus advertising literate consumers. In following their target group's evolving engagement with media, advertisers rapidly find their ways into new and emerging media environments that are popular among children and adolescents. Their "colonization" (Jhally 2006) of media contexts constantly leads to the creation of new advertising formats such as influencer marketing and advertising via smart speakers. Examining how children and adolescents cope with such new formats, developing measures for empowering them or regulations for protecting them, critically reviewing whether the existing concepts are still appropriate for new media environments or should be adapted - these are all ongoing tasks for researchers interested in children's and adolescents' advertising literacy. While acknowledging that there are many more issues that could and should be addressed when studying young consumers' advertising literacy (e.g. de Jans et al. 2019), we are hopeful that this special issue will be successful in closing some of the pressing research gaps and thus will make its modest contribution to the field.

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